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Approved For Release 2007/02/08 : CIA-RDP83B01027R000200030028-3

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Washington, D. C. 20505

[redacted]

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Copy No.  
19 January 1979

ALERT MEMORANDUM

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MEMORANDUM FOR: National Security Council

SUBJECT: China-Vietnam-USSR

Attached for your information is an alert memorandum on China-Vietnam-USSR. The Chinese appear to be completing a deployment of forces and a propaganda groundwork that will enable them to take military action against Vietnam at a time of their choosing. There are formidable political objections to such action but considerations of prestige appear to play an important part in Chinese calculations. Should the Chinese initiate action, a drive into Vietnam followed by relatively rapid withdrawal is the most likely option. Action could occur even before Vice Premier Deng's visit to the US. Soviet response to a Chinese attack on Vietnam will be contingent on the extent and severity of the Chinese action.



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Attachment:

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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

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National Intelligence Officers

Copy No.  
19 January 1979

ALERT MEMORANDUM

CHINA-VIETNAM-USSR

Since our Alert Memorandum of 5 January, which warned of possible direct Chinese military action against Vietnam, China has continued its military buildup along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier. The manner of the buildup, its timing and the mix of forces involved suggest offensive rather than defensive preparations. Chinese propaganda is building a case that the Vietnamese are intruding on Chinese territory, and Chinese officials abroad are spreading the word that China is prepared to "strike hard" in retaliation for Vietnamese troublemaking. A few officials have asserted that China is deliberately seeking an occasion to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson." In sum, the Chinese appear to be completing a deployment of forces and a propaganda groundwork that will enable them to take military action against Vietnam at a time of their choosing. [redacted]

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There are formidable political objections to such action. The Chinese must weigh the impact of military action on Sino-US ties and the risk of undermining domestic support in the US for the normalization arrangements just worked out. China must also consider possible Soviet reaction to any action against Vietnam, as well as the effectiveness of the Cambodian resistance. Considerations of Chinese prestige and a desire not to be considered a "paper tiger" by nations in Southeast Asia, on the other hand, appear to play an important part in Chinese calculations. These points have particularly been stressed by the more candid Chinese officials. [redacted]

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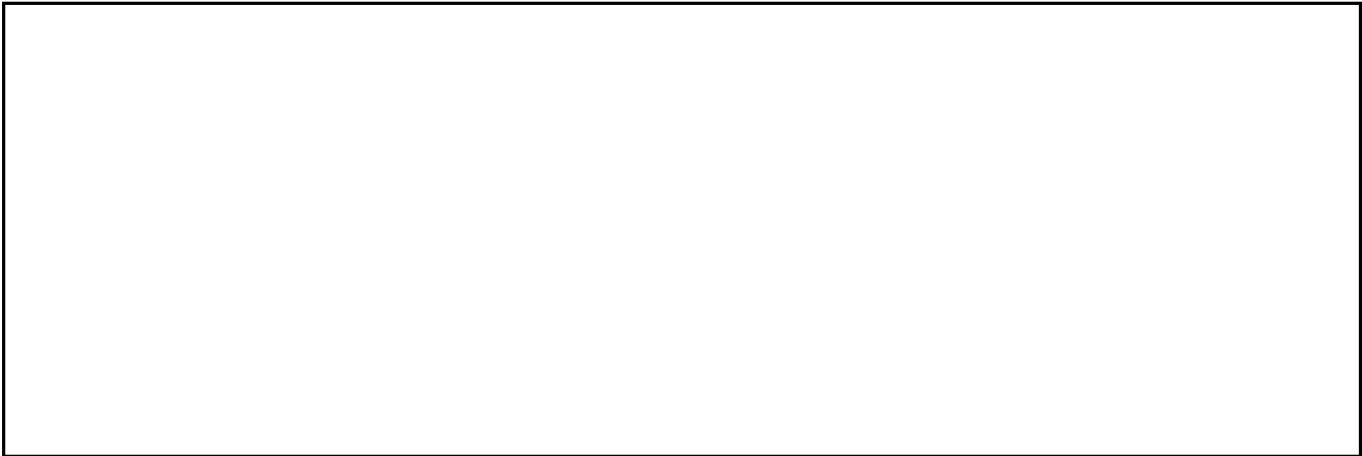
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Should the Chinese initiate action against Vietnam, they would certainly attempt to avoid a protracted conflict with their southern neighbors. A drive into Vietnam territory, limited in time and distance, followed by a relatively rapid withdrawal, in the manner of China's 1962 conflict with India, is the most likely option. We still cannot rule out more forceful action nor can we rule out a miscalculation that would make an early Chinese withdrawal difficult, thus extending and raising the level of action. The Chinese could strike at any time -- even before Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-ping) arrives in the US. [redacted]

Soviet media, while maintaining a drumfire of criticism of Peking for border provocations against Vietnam and for using military pressure, including troop concentrations, in an effort to "intimidate" Vietnam, have avoided addressing the contingency of direct Chinese military action against Vietnam, much less characterizing it as imminent. [redacted]

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The failure of Soviet media to raise the Chinese attack contingency, relieving Moscow of the need to address the question of Soviet response, suggests either that the Soviets do not regard it as a serious possibility, or if they do, that they wish to avoid committing themselves to any particular course of action in response. In any case, they have not issued any clear public warning designed to deter Peking.

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[redacted]

We believe the Soviet response to any Chinese attack on Vietnam will be contingent on the extent and severity of the Chinese action and its political effects. The USSR may conclude that a shallow and short-lived Chinese incursion would not threaten important Soviet interests and might generate important political benefits for Moscow and Hanoi without requiring more than demonstrative measures of support for Vietnam, short of direct military action. Such measures might include consultations, additional conspicuous aid, a naval show of force, and troop movements on the Soviet side of the border. A deeper and more sustained Chinese invasion would be more likely to evoke more significant Soviet actions. These might include demonstrative air and ground patrolling, and ultimately to some sort of military action, probably measured, for example, reoccupation of one or more of the Sino-Soviet border river islands now held by the Chinese. [redacted]

[redacted]