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COMMUNIST INTENTIONS TOWARD INDOCHINA

Soviet and Chinese Communist propaganda has extended the "campaign for negotiations" to Indochina, but there is no firm evidence that Moscow and Peiping are ready to withdraw their support of the Viet Minh or to take the initiative in opening truce negotiations.

Of the three principal courses of action open to the Communists in Indochina -- an all-out offensive supported by Chinese forces in an attempt to obtain a military decision; an armistice; or a continuation of a war of attrition, accompanied by "peace" bids for tactical reasons -- the third would appear to be their most probable choice.

Increased Soviet propaganda attention to Indochina since July has featured the theme that there, as elsewhere, the peaceful purposes of the Communist world are being thwarted only by American intransigence and aggressive ambitions. To earlier claims that the Korean armistice has greatly encouraged the French people "to struggle for the cessation of the war," Moscow has recently added that the armistice has also "reinforced the confidence of the Vietnamese people in the possibility of ending the war and settling Franco-Vietnamese relations through direct negotiations."

Since early September Peiping's propaganda on Indochina has followed the line introduced by Moscow in July. Communist China's Peoples Daily on 2 September, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's eighth anniversary, warned that "only by applying the principle of settling international disputes through negotiations" can France find a solution.

At the same time, however, the Peoples Daily also assured the Viet Minh that the "Asian people" look forward to the "DRV achieving still greater successes and victories in their struggle for national liberation," and Molotov expressed his wishes that the "Vietnam people may score many new victories in their struggle for the freedom and independence of their fatherland."

Signs of a conciliatory attitude

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negotiate were also conspicuously absent from Ho Chi Minh's anniversary address. He cautioned against any belief that the Korean armistice might bring about a relaxation of the struggle in Vietnam. Claiming that the position of the enemy is "weaker and weaker," Ho said "our victory is certain on the military plane" and warned that "peace is possible only when there is real unification and independence."

In considering whether to continue the war in Indochina, the Communist leaders enjoy a wider range of courses of action and considerably greater maneuverability than they had in deciding to conclude a Korean armistice. Communist planning of strategy and tactics in Indochina is not subject to the heavy pressures which induced Moscow and Peiping to make the substantial concessions necessary to achieve an armistice in Korea.

The war in Indochina does not occupy such a key role in the East-West conflict, nor does it generate such dangerous pressures as to threaten the success of Soviet global strategy or the security of Soviet territory.

There are three main considerations which distinguish the Indochina war from the Korean conflict:

First, the geographical remoteness of this war from the borders of the USSR in itself gives Moscow much greater freedom of action. The extreme sensitivity of the Soviet leaders to potential threats to the security of the Maritime Provinces and to strategic Manchuria exerted a strong influence toward caution and restraint in the Korean war.

Second, the armed forces of Communist China have not been committed. In Korea the heavy commitment of Chinese manpower exposed the USSR to the danger that, should China be faced with the destruction of its forces, Soviet troops must be engaged to protect the USSR's frontiers and to defend its vital interests in the Far East. In Indochina, the USSR enjoys a much wider margin of security and maneuverability because Chinese forces have so far been held in reserve.

Third, the Indochina war has not been "internationalized" after the pattern of Korea. In particular, US armed forces have not been committed. France's insistence that the Viet Minh revolt is the exclusive concern of the French Union and not a proper subject for UN discussion, much less intervention, has so far permitted the Communists to escape the military, political, psychological and economic handicaps which "internationalization" would generate.

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In addition to these three main distinctions, the Indochina war differs from the Korean conflict in that there is no heavy Soviet investment in weapons and supplies, the USSR is not faced with a high rate of attrition.

These considerations presumably form the foundation of current Soviet policy toward the Indochina war. The primary aim of this policy is to preserve and strengthen the military and political power of the Viet Minh, the strongest "national liberation movement" in Southeast Asia. In pursuit of this aim, Moscow is attempting to forestall increased US and possible UN intervention by oblique diplomatic pressure and by exploiting public pressure in France for a negotiated settlement to end the war at almost any cost.

Moscow evidently bases this policy on the assumption that continued Sino-Soviet support of the Viet Minh will not seriously conflict with the "peace offensive." The Soviet leaders have attempted to avoid being charged with responsibility for this war by portraying it as a struggle against Western colonialism.

There appear to be three principal courses of action open to those who determine Viet Minh strategy and tactics.

One alternative would call for an all-out Viet Minh offensive, supported by the introduction of Chinese Communist "volunteers" and possibly of Soviet aircraft, military supplies and advisers, in an attempt to force a military decision. The minimum objective of such an offensive would probably be to expel the French from the strategic Tonkin delta, its maximum objective to drive the French out of Indochina entirely.

This alternative would involve grave risks for the Communists in view of the recent warnings by American leaders. The Soviet Union, with the example of Korea before it would probably not choose this course unless it were prepared to provoke formidable US-UN retaliation.

The Chinese Communists were capable, throughout the course of the Korean war, of simultaneous large-scale intervention in Indochina. The Korean armistice does not significantly change the picture. The key consideration is the apparent desire of both Moscow and Peiping to avoid another Korean-type venture in the current phase of the world Communist program. An all-out offensive now, or in the near future, would run counter to the whole orientation of Soviet policy since Stalin's death.

A general offensive in Indochina would work to the

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advantage of global Communist interests only as a component part of a larger, calculated policy of military conquest which would reach far beyond the borders of Indochina and signal the abrupt abandonment of the well-established tactical line of the "peace offensive."

A second alternative would involve a decision that the over-all interests and objectives of the Communist world require an end of the hostilities in Indochina.

There are several avenues through which the Communists could explore the possible benefits of serious negotiations. Peiping might make a direct approach to the French, although it is extremely unlikely that the Chinese would, as the French hope, be a party to isolating and destroying the Viet Minh in exchange for French recognition or any other consideration.

The more likely course, assuming a genuine Communist interest in negotiations, would be to introduce the Indochina question in the Korean political conference. Chou En-lai has twice in recent weeks called for discussion in the conference of "other questions" affecting the Far East. Although he has also said that the Communists do not wish to discuss the Indochina question "parallel" with the principal agenda items of troop withdrawal and Korean unification, they may plan to put the question forward later in the conference.

The major advantage which might be expected to accrue to the Communists by concluding an Indochina truce would be the removal of a situation which might ultimately result in the military defeat of the Viet Minh or in US armed intervention. Moscow might therefore conclude at some future date that a truce followed by "political forms of action" might offer the better prospect of success, as well as giving the USSR the opportunity to point out in Paris the advantages of French-Soviet cooperation on European problems also. Recent Soviet propaganda reveals Moscow's concern over increased American aid for Indochina and suggests a genuine apprehensiveness over a possible commitment of US armed forces.

The disadvantages of an armistice for the Communists would include the removal of the heavy drain on French manpower and resources which has substantially reduced French military power in Europe and strengthened French reluctance to permit German rearmament.

Because the Indochina peninsula is the gateway to the rest of Southeast Asia, an armistice would jeopardize the

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strength and reduce the effectiveness of other "liberation movements" in this area. It would weaken a long-standing Soviet policy of encouraging the "liberation movements" and might raise fears that their interests will be sacrificed in favor of broader Soviet objectives.

So far the French have given little encouragement to any such Communist hopes for an armistice beyond indicating their own hope that negotiations may be possible through a general conference on the Far East. There is no likelihood that France will go back on its obligations as a Western ally, but it might respond to Soviet offers of negotiation by further pressing the United States for greater support of French policy.

A third alternative would be a continued war of attrition, accompanied by "peace" bids and feelers as a form of insurance on which the Viet Minh could fall back if French successes threatened to upset Communist plans. This tactic would be supported by continued aid from China but would not involve the introduction of Chinese forces.

Chinese Communist aid to the Viet Minh has been flowing at a rate of an estimated 1,000 tons a month during 1953. The Korean truce may encourage Peiping to increase it. The current Communist program in Indochina would seem to present Peiping with no problems, as Chinese aid at its present or probable future levels would preserve Viet Minh capabilities without seriously risking allied retaliation against China.

This course, which for the present at least would avoid confronting the French with the unequivocal choice between military defeat and US or UN intervention in force, would probably be regarded as the most effective method of limiting the scope of American intervention. Even with greatly increased US financial aid, a continued war of attrition would still exact a heavy toll in French officers and non-coms urgently needed to train and staff French forces in Europe.

Another advantage for Moscow would be a demonstration of consistent support of Asian national liberation movements, the main instrument of Soviet policy in this area.

Finally, the Communists may believe that a continuation of military pressure combined with "peace" bids would have a debilitating effect on the morale of the Vietnamese, who are still no match, politically or militarily, for the Viet Minh.

The disadvantages of a continuation of the war of attrition would include the constant risk of an unexpected French

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success which would threaten the Viet Minh with extinction and bring Western military forces to China's borders.

Another disadvantage would be that the US would be in a stronger position to urge on the French the necessity of granting greater independence and sovereignty to the Associated States and to train and equip their armies.

The third course of action -- continuation of a war of attrition, with "peace" bids for tactical reasons -- would appear the most probable choice. There are no indications that Chinese combat forces will be sent into Indochina or that "volunteers" will be engaged in large numbers in the fighting.

The time does not seem ripe for a genuine Communist effort to negotiate. No Communist movement in the Far East has yet been willing to negotiate a military conflict which it was winning. The Viet Minh are still winning. Should the tide turn, the current "peace" line could then be put forward seriously.

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