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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Moscow, by its protest of 5 August alleging that US aircraft strafed a Soviet merchant ship in Haiphong harbor, displays a growing uncertainty and apprehension concerning US policy. Its protest is carefully worded, however, so that it does not imply that the strafing was deliberate, and the note itself does not appear to signal a change in Moscow's present policy of limiting Soviet risks in the conflict.

On the contrary, recent signs of Soviet attitudes toward the US seem to underscore Moscow's desire to continue to deal with the US on practical questions of interest and importance despite the strains of Vietnam. This attitude was evident in Premier Kosygin's address to the Supreme Soviet on the day following the "strafing" incident.

Kosygin blamed the US for the strain in Soviet-American relations, but said the Soviet government did "not believe that Soviet-American relations cannot be different from what they are now." He stated that although "aggressive moods obviously predominate in Washington at the present stage, we know that there are other, sounder tendencies there, too. The strengthening of these tendencies will be received with due understanding on our part." The Soviet premier pointed out that despite the "exceedingly tense" international situation caused by the war, measures such as a nonproliferation treaty could still be dealt with.

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In recent days, the USSR has demonstrated its desire to make progress on other matters. The US Embassy in Moscow noted the cooperative spirit displayed by the Soviets toward the US in discussions which ended on 30 July concerning the conservation and use of fishery resources. Much the same spirit and a general lack of polemics was evident on the part of the Soviets in the outer space treaty negotiations in Geneva.

On Vietnam, the Soviets have been attempting recently to persuade third parties to urge restraint on the US. Soviet ambassadors have made demarches to Free World countries (e.g., Sweden and Denmark) warning of the gravity of the situation. The intensely emotional position that Brezhnev took on the subject during UN Secretary General U Thant's visit to Moscow also may have been calculated to create pressure on the US from other quarters to ease military pressure on Hanoi. These tactics reveal not only Moscow's concern over US policy in Vietnam, but a continuing frustration over its inability thus far to influence the course of events there.

The Soviet note charges that US aircraft "strafed the moorings of Haiphong port" on 2 August and "in this connection, large caliber bullets" hit the Soviet vessel Medyn, endangering the lives of the crew. Although this ship, a large-hatch dry cargo vessel carrying POL in drums, is known to have been in Haiphong harbor at the time of the US air strike against the Haiphong POL storage site, its exact position cannot be established. Nor can it be established that the vessel actually was hit by US ordnance. Pilots of the strike aircraft reported all bombs were dropped in the target area and that no foreign shipping was involved. Strike aircraft were armed with guns, but did not use them. Flak-suppression aircraft which accompanied the strike aircraft were not armed with guns or other ordnance which would fit the description of "large caliber bullets."

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