Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

29296

SECRET

3.5(c)

RSS No. 0025/68
25 March 1968

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

THE ATTITUDES OF NORTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS TOWARD FIGHTING AND NEGOTIATING

(Reference Title: ESAU XXXVII)

SECRET

2-236478/1

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted]

3.5(c)

THE ATTITUDES OF NORTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS TOWARD FIGHTING AND NEGOTIATING

This is a staff study produced by the Special Research Staff of the Directorate of Intelligence. It traces the attitudes of North Vietnamese leaders on the conduct of the war--that is, fighting, negotiating, and fighting-while-negotiating. The paper attempts to show how these attitudes have developed, to set forth the general scheme the leaders have appeared to agree on, and to suggest the circumstances in which latent differences among them could perhaps become important.

The study is based upon an extensive review of Hanoi's public statements and of relevant classified materials, emphasizing the past three years. It does not include some materials given very limited dissemination.

John Kerry King
Chief, Special Research Staff

[redacted]

3.5(c)

~~SECRET~~

[redacted]

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

THE ATTITUDES OF NORTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS TOWARD THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

Page

Summary and Conclusions.....i

A Priori Groupings.....1

From Geneva to War in the South, 1954-1960.....2

Domination by the Militants, 1961-1963.....4

Hostility to Negotiations, 1964.....6

Attraction to Negotiations, Late 1964 and Early 1965.....7

Ambiguity About Negotiations, Late 1965.....11

An Agreed Position on the Conduct of the War, Early 1966.....13

Renewed Probing on Negotiations, Late 1966 and Early 1967.....20

Pressure for Cessation of the Bombing, Early 1967....25

Marking Time, Summer 1967.....28

Toward Negotiations Again (Maybe), September 1967....31

New Hopes for Pressures on Washington, Autumn 1967...34

Renewed Pressure for Talks, December 1967 and January 1968.....38

The Tet Offensive As a Prelude to Negotiations, Early 1968.....41

Some Conclusions and Some Speculation.....49

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

THE ATTITUDES OF NORTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS TOWARD FIGHTING AND NEGOTIATING

Summary and Conclusions

There have been differences among North Vietnamese leaders with respect to the conduct of the war since 1954, but by early 1966 the primary figures had apparently been able to subordinate their differences to an agreed general scheme--to accept a military stand-off if necessary, and to await indications that the U.S. will to persist had been broken. The breaking of the U.S. will--regarded as the stage of "decisive" but not "final" victory--could be brought about in the "relatively short period" of a "few" years. This need not involve negotiations, but it probably would. It might be signalled by American acceptance of Communist terms for entering into negotiations, or might come in the course of negotiations. The Communists would continue to fight while negotiating, and, with the eventual U.S. withdrawal and the establishment of a Communist-dominated "coalition" in the South, the "protracted war" would end in "final" victory.

This approach to the conduct of the war has apparently underlain Hanoi's professions of willingness since early 1967 to enter into "talks" which would set up negotiations--after an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing and of unspecified other "acts of war" against the North. In refusing to give anything at all for a cessation--not even a promise not to take military advantage of it--the Communists have apparently meant this refusal to serve as a test of whether the U.S. will has been broken or at least bent. The Communists have kept open, however, the option of getting into negotiations without insisting on this test and of trying then to break the U.S. will during a possibly prolonged period of fighting-while-negotiating.

The recent Tet offensive was consistent with this attitude toward negotiations, including the Communist

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

preference for breaking the U.S. will before beginning negotiations. Hanoi apparently calculated that the attacks, if they achieved maximum success, would lead to American acceptance of Communist terms for negotiations and to the early establishment of a Communist-dominated "coalition" government. In the apparent Communist scenario, the U.S. would be forced to accept this "coalition" as part of the settlement and to negotiate with it a withdrawal of U.S. forces. In reaffirming--soon after the offensive began--Hanoi's own interest in bilateral talks and negotiations with the United States, and in saying in effect that the talks could be negotiations, Hanoi's Foreign Minister may have been trying to simplify the process of getting negotiations started (by cutting through the immediate problem of defining the roles in negotiations of the Saigon government and the Liberation Front). The Communist failure to hold any of the cities --as a basis for proclaiming a "coalition" which could join ongoing negotiations between Hanoi and Washington, but excluding Saigon--may have postponed that possible short-cut to a settlement but did not eliminate it.

It is probably still the Communist estimate that the U.S. can be brought to accept a settlement essentially on Communist terms. Since autumn 1967 the Communists have shown an increased confidence that this would be the outcome, primarily as a result of continued military pressure in Vietnam and the erosion of the Saigon government (and thus of the basis for the U.S. presence in Vietnam), and secondarily as a result of domestic problems in the United States and intensified activities by militant Communists elsewhere. In their view, they cannot be compelled by continued bombing to agree to end the war, while (as they continue to see it) the U.S. is unable to prevent reinforcements and supplies from reaching the South, unable to secure the countryside when the cities are brought under attack, and unable to create a viable political structure in the South. The Tet offensive presumably increased Hanoi's confidence on the last two points.

On the assumption that Hanoi will not soon take the remaining step to get into "talks" or will take that step but will be intransigent in talks and/or negotiations

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

and cause them to fail, the question remains as to whether North Vietnamese leaders will see things any differently a year or two from now. This is the question of the state of their own will if and when they find that their basic estimate--of the loss of U.S. will to persist--has been mistaken.

Even before that time, the death or disability of Ho Chi Minh might conceivably precipitate a power struggle among the other primary leaders and force Hanoi to take a less militant attitude toward the conduct of the war. But it seems much more likely that these leaders would work together until the course of the war itself forced them into conflict. There have been apparent differences in inclination among Ho's three principal lieutenants--party leader Le Duan seeming the hardest, Premier Pham Van Dong the least hard, General Giap somewhere between--which in the proper circumstances could perhaps produce such a conflict.

If the North Vietnamese leaders were under continued pressure and had no prospect either of a settlement on their terms or of a military victory, there might then be either a general shift to the right (a less militant attitude) or a split in the politburo. Even with Ho still dominant, either might happen; with Ho out of the picture, such possibilities would be enhanced. Premier Dong would be expected to lead any general shift to the right or to lead right wing forces in a split. Le Duan (with Truong Chinh) would be expected to lead resistance to a shift or to lead the left in a split. Dong and Duan would each have several followers in the politburo. General Giap might be the key figure in the middle; while he would probably have fewer followers at the politburo level, they might include those decisive in the control of the principal instruments of force, the army and the police.

It must be emphasized that such a shift or split appears to be more than a marginal possibility only if and when the Communist leaders--or some of them--come to believe that the basic factors are no longer working in their favor. At present, they are confident that this situation has not arisen and that it will not arise.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

THE ATTITUDES OF NORTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS TOWARD THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

A Priori Groupings

Some preliminary groupings of North Vietnamese leaders can be made a priori. One would expect, on the Chinese example, to find a single dominant leader and at least three loose associations of his lieutenants, disposed by temperament and profession to think and behave in fairly distinctive ways: party-machine figures, inclined to be doctrinaire, militant, and pro-Chinese; government leaders, less doctrinaire, more nearly moderate, and pro-Soviet; and military leaders, likely to be closer in their sympathies to the second group than to the first. Thus, at any time after perhaps 1960, the members of the North Vietnamese party politburo--the group that counts--could be broken down something like this:

(a) Ho Chi Minh, clearly the dominant figure;

(b) Le Duan, first secretary, primary figure of the party-machine group; Le Duc Tho, a secretary, director of the party's organization department; Nguyen Chi Thanh (now dead), a secretary, director of political work in the armed forces; and possibly Truong Chinh, one-time first secretary displaced by Duan.

(c) Pham Van Dong, premier, primary figure of the government group; Pham Hung, ranking deputy premier; Le Thanh Nghi, the principal economic planner; Nguyen Duy Trinh, a planner, now foreign minister; and possibly Hoang Van Hoan, foreign affairs specialist, sometime ambassador to Peking.

(d) General Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Defense, primary figure of the military group; and Van Tien Dung, his chief-of-staff.

SECRET

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

(e) Finally, as a free floater or as head of a possible police group, Tran Quoc Hoan, Minister of Public Security, probable head of the party police. (Dung and Hoan are only alternate members.)

The following exercise examines the positions taken by and attributed to these leaders in recent years, in order to judge whether differences among them have any practical consequences for Hanoi's conduct of the war, including the question of a possible negotiated settlement.

From Geneva to War in the South, 1954-1960

By spring 1954, the Vietnamese Communists, carrying out a "protracted war" in three stages as originally formulated by Mao and as updated for Vietnam in 1950 by General Giap, had destroyed the enemy's will to persist (without defeating the French militarily)--the same objective they are working toward now. In summer 1954, however, Ho Chi Minh, working primarily through Pham Van Dong, accepted an unfavorable settlement in the Geneva negotiations. This was mainly owing to Russian and Chinese pressure, and it was reportedly opposed and criticized by Le Duan and other "militants." The North Vietnamese Communists then lay back, waiting for the Diem government in the South to break down, while themselves concentrating on a harsh land-reform on the Chinese model. But Diem did pretty well, while the land-reform failed; Truong Chinh, then secretary-general, had to assume the responsibility for this failure.

Against Russian advice, the party began in 1956 to make preparations for "armed struggle" in the South, and the militants began to group more closely around Le Duan, who was already associated mainly with the program (then emphasizing subversion) in the South; Duan was soon to displace Truong Chinh as the de facto secretary-general. At the same time, Diem refused to hold elections for the unification of Vietnam (while Hanoi refused to allow supervision of elections in the North), and those like

SECRET

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

Pham Van Dong identified with the Geneva agreements reportedly suffered some loss of prestige in consequence.

In late 1957, Peking shifted from "peaceful coexistence" to a militant pursuit of anti-American policies everywhere, and in early 1958 the Vietnamese Communists responded in a series of pronouncements by the militant Le Duan criticizing Khrushchev's policies. In the same period, another hard-line figure, Nguyen Chi Thanh, played the leading role for the party in forcing military professionals to accept party positions on a range of questions. General Giap, both a party leader and military leader, apparently tried to stay out of the dispute, but some observers believe that he declined in stature in 1958 and 1959.

In May 1959 the North Vietnamese party decided upon a new phase of violent revolution in the South, and publicly exhorted its compatriots there to launch it. While Khrushchev was advising the North Vietnamese to avoid a direct confrontation with the U.S., Mao was telling them to press on. Le Duan, leader of the militants and Ho's most influential lieutenant, advocated taking the risk, and reportedly had the support of other militants like Thanh and Le Duc Tho; Hoang Van Hoan, though not a party-machine type, had joined this militant group by this time.

By spring 1960 Hanoi's line in the Sino-Soviet dispute was virtually identical with Peking's, but in the latter part of 1960 Ho saw the wisdom of adopting a neutral position. Illustrating the practice of North Vietnamese leaders of expressing a common position on a critical matter, the relatively moderate Dong was chosen to state this line, and the relatively hard Tho gave it his public support.

At this time (September 1960) Hanoi openly declared its intention to promote and support "revolutionary struggle" in the South. Le Duan was the spokesman for this intention, and General Giap played a supporting role. Dong, while not opposed, was more cautious. Duan also called for the formation of a new front in the South, and the Liberation Front duly appeared in October 1960. It soon

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

issued a call for the overthrow of Diem's government and its replacement by a "coalition."

Following the U.S. elections of November 1960, there were several North Vietnamese probes--encouraged by Moscow--of American intentions, and one North Vietnamese leader at that time described the leadership as divided between a moderate group around Premier Dong --which wanted to ease tensions--and a group of unidentified "extremists" (presumably Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Thanh, Tho, and Hoan, and perhaps at that time Nguyen Duy Trinh, the present foreign minister).

Domination by the Militants, 1961-1963

Peking was vociferous in 1960 and 1961 in publicly encouraging the violence in South Vietnam, and Premier Dong visited both Peking and Moscow to get declarations of support. Vietnamese Communist leaders seemed confident that American aid would not extend to the large-scale commitment of troops or to airstrikes against the North, and seemed well satisfied with the progress of the guerrilla war in the South.

By the end of 1961, Hanoi was on record with its terms for a settlement--essentially, a U.S. withdrawal and acceptance of the Front's program for the South. In January 1962 Hanoi surfaced the People's Revolutionary [Communist] party as the guiding force of the Front. Soon thereafter, Hanoi appealed for international negotiations. Throughout 1962, however, the Communists indicated that they did not intend to make concessions either to set up negotiations or in the course of them; in their scenario, only the U.S. was to do so.

By early 1963, lack of Communist progress in the South had apparently precipitated a dispute in the North Vietnamese leadership--one serious enough to impel General Giap to appeal publicly for party unity. The divisive question was whether (a) to maintain or increase the tempo of military action in the South, or (b) to put greater

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

emphasis on political forms of action. The advocates of the hard-line course--reaffirmed publicly by the militants Duan and Thanh--prevailed, although a minority remained unconvinced. Thanh became Hanoi's leading spokesman on military affairs, a shift toward Chinese positions in the Sino-Soviet dispute began, and a pro-Chinese secondary leader (Xuan Thuy) was named Foreign Minister.

Peking sent Liu Shao-chi (then second only to Mao) to Hanoi in May 1963 to stiffen the determination of the militants. Liu publicly praised their leader, Le Duan, and the militant Truong Chinh thanked Liu for his endorsement of Hanoi's policy; but he and Ho both made clear to Liu that Hanoi would not fully accept Chinese positions in the Sino-Soviet dispute. (Hanoi soon did support Peking on the test-ban treaty, however, because any Communist cooperation with the U.S. on a "peace" issue undercut the militant program in the South.)

In July 1963 the Liberation Front in the South stated explicitly what had been suggested earlier--a distinction between (a) negotiations with the U.S. on the 'external' matter of U.S. withdrawal, and (b) negotiations with elements in the South on the 'internal' matter of "unification." The full scenario now was: U.S. agreement to withdraw, the working out of arrangements for withdrawal in negotiations, the formation of a "coalition" government in the South, and the arrangement of "reunification" by the two regimes. This is still the basic scenario.

The militants of Le Duan's conjectured group pursued their advantage in the summer and fall of 1963. General Thanh denounced those who were unwilling to provoke the United States; Truong Chinh took a hard line on the need to provoke internal war and risk external war; and Thanh returned to denounce the cautious again and to call for a struggle against "revisionism." The demand for an American withdrawal continued to be made in terms which suggested little or no flexibility, and North Vietnamese spokesmen held out little prospect of successful negotiations. The relatively moderate Dong associated himself with that position, and was the first to emphasize the

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

importance of making the U.S. lose the will to persist so that it would take the initiative to withdraw. Le Duan continued to speak in extremely militant terms.

By the end of 1963, a fairly clear picture of the North Vietnamese leadership had emerged: Ho Chi Minh as the dominant figure, balancing and mediating between militant and relatively moderate groups; Le Duan as the leader of the militants, including Truong Chinh, Thanh, Tho, Hoan, and possibly Trinh; Pham Van Dong as the leader of the moderates (but, like Chou En-lai in China, one who would loyally carry out militant policies which his leader favored), a group probably including Pham Hung and possibly including Le Thanh Nghi; and General Giap as likely to be closer in general to the moderates, although not necessarily in his attitude toward the war.

Hostility to Negotiations, 1964

In early 1964, the position of the dominant figures in Hanoi--Ho Chi Minh and the militants around Le Duan--was about as hard as possible. One element of this was a rejection of negotiations (except with anti-Saigon elements in the South). Duan, Thanh, and Tho all publicly criticized the opponents of the dominant (militant) line. General Giap in the same period seemed either to be fending off criticism or making a counter-criticism of the militants.

Also in early 1964, Duan, Tho and Hoan (three militants) went together to Moscow to get greater Soviet support, perhaps including a statement deterring the U.S. from airstrikes. The mission failed, and by late spring Khrushchev's caution was drawing criticism even from some of the relatively moderate like Dong and Giap.

During that spring, North Vietnamese journals rejected any international negotiations before attaining a series of military successes in the South which would leave the U.S. no choice but to withdraw. General Giap himself said this, and agreed that the prerequisite for

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

a settlement was an American withdrawal. Such statements were evasive on the relationship between withdrawal and possible negotiation--for example, whether withdrawal was to precede "negotiations" or was to be worked out in them.

In June 1964, the Chinese decided to increase their logistic support of North Vietnam. Neither Peking nor Hanoi appeared to fear nuclear strikes against either China or North Vietnam, and one North Vietnamese military leader publicly reassured his comrades that use of nuclear weapons was politically unacceptable to the U.S. Both were probably concerned, however, with the possibility of conventional bombing; and in fact the first strike, provoked by Hanoi in a bad reading of the U.S. humor, came in August.

Tension between the party leaders and the professional military re-emerged at this time, apparently on the first principle of party domination of the army, rather than on any particular issue related to the conduct of the war. Truong Chinh, Tho and lesser militants took the lead again in insisting on the principle. General Giap and other military leaders agreed on the principle, but again showed some sympathy for the military professionals being harassed by political types.

Attraction to Negotiations, Late 1964 and Early 1965

Ho Chi Minh was reportedly very receptive in the late months of 1964 to third-party proposals for negotiations between North Vietnam and the United States, at a time when the war was going very badly for South Vietnam and Ho may have believed that he could negotiate a surrender. It was reported that Ho agreed to meet with an American representative in Rangoon, and that Premier Dong also expressed a "great desire" for negotiations. In the same period, North Vietnamese spokesmen privately encouraged the belief that an American withdrawal could follow the establishment of a "coalition" government in the South, and that reunification could come much later. Also in this period, spokesmen privately expressed the desire of the Liberation Front to negotiate with Saigon, implying readiness to deal with the legal government.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

While Hanoi was waiting for the U.S. response, and immediately following Khrushchev's fall, Dong led a delegation to Moscow. There he got an agreement on political and military support, but apparently also a private statement of Moscow's preference for a negotiated settlement. The Chinese opposed the latter, and saw a trace of flexibility in Hanoi's attitude; there were in fact some hints of this in the North Vietnamese party press in December, which stated a willingness to "talk peace" if and when the American attitude changed. In the same month, Peking began to upgrade the Liberation Front, as a hedge against Hanoi's possible willingness to settle for less than Mao was asking (which was, if possible, a complete military victory and if not that then a U.S. withdrawal prior to negotiations). Both General Giap and C/S Dung published articles on the war at that time --both tough and confident, and unconcerned with negotiations, articles which understandably were to serve as the model for statements by military leaders.

In December and January (with Hanoi still waiting for an American response), French officials probed North Vietnamese willingness to conclude a settlement on the basis of "neutralization" of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese fielded this by observing that the Liberation Front program already envisaged a "neutral" government for the South. Application of this concept to the North was to come only in the form of a provision--in Hanoi's four "points"--for the North and South both to abstain from military alliances.

Washington reportedly rejected the proposed Rangoon meeting in a message of late January 1965, although the third-party proponent's version of the event has left unclear the form of the reply and the stated grounds. Some sources were apparently told that the grounds were that negotiations would serve to depress South Vietnamese morale--a result Ho may indeed have been counting on (a captured document later admitted this to be one of the principal purposes of negotiations).

There were signs of continued North Vietnamese interest in negotiations even after this, coinciding with

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

Kosygin's advocacy of this course in his talks in Hanoi in February. In late February and early March the Chinese urged Hanoi to reject negotiations categorically and seemed to be inciting the North Vietnamese to make a large-scale attack across the 17th Parallel (which would help to deter a political settlement in the South by destroying the concept of the South).

The Liberation Front in March--which had criticized Soviet efforts toward negotiations--appeared to follow Chinese counsel in making the accomplished fact of an American withdrawal a precondition for negotiations, and in early April Hanoi Radio associated Ho Chi Minh himself with this apparent position. Pham Van Dong, however, speaking privately at the same time, repeated General Giap's call of March for a cessation of the increasing U.S. airstrikes and implied that "talks" might follow upon such a cessation.

Speaking publicly a few days later, Dong put forward the four "points"--all of them made at one or another time previously, and stated by Ho Chi Minh himself in the form of "three points" during 1964--which have since been invariably held to be the "basis" for a settlement. The "points," briefly, called for U.S. withdrawal, abstention of North and South from military alliances, settlement of affairs in the South in accordance with the Liberation Front's program, and accomplishment of reunification at an unspecified time. (These "points" as stated would not bar Northern support of the war in the South, and would simplify the task of imposing a Communist-dominated government on the South.)

Dong in this speech called for "recognition" of the four "points" as a precondition for any negotiations. As "recognition" apparently meant 'acceptance in principle,' Dong was apparently not calling for an American withdrawal prior to negotiations, but rather for an American promise (in advance of negotiations) to withdraw in the course of negotiations or thereafter. Peking, however, chose to take the harder position apparently stated by Ho and the Front as official (withdrawal first, negotiations later), and this interpretation was not publicly disputed by Hanoi.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

In the same period (mid-April), Hanoi turned down a 17-nation appeal for a cease-fire and talks.

There was evidence in April 1965 that elements of the North Vietnamese leadership--although perhaps not at the top levels--were attracted to negotiations on too easy terms. The new chief of political work in the armed forces warned in strong terms of the need to combat an "exaggerated desire for peace" and to resist the lure of negotiations. However, the pro-Chinese Foreign Minister was replaced by one less so (Nguyen Duy Trinh, a politburo member) which may have been owing either to preparations for eventual negotiations or to Hanoi's anger with the Chinese--indicated by Le Duan at the time--over Peking's obstruction of Soviet materiel passing to North Vietnam.

Faced with the hard position stated by Ho and the Front and endorsed by Peking, Moscow began to call for a cessation of the bombing as a precondition for negotiations. Hanoi did not discourage this, but would not affirm Dong's reported private statement that this might be the only precondition for "talks" (as distinct from, preliminary to, full-scale negotiations, although Dong may not have made the distinction at the time). Hanoi in early May again rejected a third-nation proposal for a cease-fire, and the week-long pause in the bombing in mid-May did not make Hanoi any more forthcoming. North Vietnamese spokesmen rejected the idea of a reciprocal concession, and Foreign Minister Trinh refused to provide any clarification of the four "points." However, a spokesman outside Hanoi confirmed that Dong's proposal was indeed for acceptance of the "points" in principle, prior to negotiations.

In July 1965, while primary leaders like Dong and Giap were being evasive in their statements about negotiations and Giap was stating Hanoi's uncertainty as to whether the U.S. was going to turn its "special war" into a full-scale "local" war, some sources stated what was--or was to become--Hanoi's true position. Soviet and other bloc sources said that "talks" could follow a permanent cessation of the bombing, while one North Vietnamese leader stated that negotiations would follow the cessation of

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the bombing and of the U.S. troop build-up, plus acceptance in principle of the four "points." (This is still essentially Hanoi's position.) The Chinese Communist foreign minister contributed to the picture by stating privately that the dominant leaders in Hanoi regarded the time as not yet "ripe" for negotiations. The question of when the time would be "ripe" was not then--but was to be later--in dispute between Peking and Hanoi.

Ambiguity About Negotiations, Late 1965

At about the same time (mid-1965), when the U.S. build-up and airstrikes had clearly indicated the American determination to play a major role in the fighting, a debate apparently began among North Vietnamese leaders on military strategy. This followed in time one on similar lines between Peking and Hanoi, in which Peking (envisaging a Communist victory in a much shorter period than Hanoi did) had been pushing the Vietnamese Communists to pass from a predominantly guerrilla to a predominantly conventional phase, urging North Vietnam to increase the number of its regular forces in the South, and pressing Hanoi as well not to consider negotiations. In the internal debate developing from mid-1965, the militant, pro-Chinese Thanh, sent at that time to direct military operations in the South, argued that the Viet Cong were capable of large-scale, prolonged attacks on U.S. forces, while the opposition--possibly including Giap--apparently doubted this and seemed to favor a shift to a defensive strategy emphasizing guerrilla warfare; as General Thanh was later to put it, as late as autumn 1965 "we were not firmly resolved to fight" (meaning, apparently, "big battles"). This dispute later seemed to subside, and may have ended by the time of the death of Thanh in mid-1967.

In the latter half of 1965, North Vietnamese leaders presented a mixed picture with respect to a negotiated settlement of the war. Ho Chi Minh (who in August asked for "proof" that the U.S. had accepted in principle the four "points") and Pham Van Dong (who of course had stated Ho's position in formulating the points) suggested readiness to negotiate when the U.S. called off the bombing,

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

stopped the troop build-up, and "recognized" the points. Moreover, Le Duan seemed to move further away from his one-time extremely pro-Chinese position, making himself appear at least as not opposed to negotiations on these terms; and two of his conjectured followers, Tho and Hoan, followed his lead. However, C/S Dung and Truong Chinh appeared to be opposed to negotiations on any terms, and the Chinese again threw their weight behind those who took this position (and who favored large-scale battles and greater use of North Vietnamese regulars in the South). Statements by the Foreign Ministry and by lesser leaders were ambiguous: for example, a Foreign Ministry statement of 23 September was interpreted by some observers as a harsh rejection of U.S. overtures and by others as bidding for a dialogue with the U.S. (it seemed somewhat forthcoming on the matter of a U.S. withdrawal and the role of the Liberation Front), while several sources explicitly rejected the idea of a reciprocal concession for cessation of the bombing but encouraged the view that Hanoi would be forthcoming in unspecified ways.

Perhaps Hanoi's position was best stated by Dong and Giap. Giap in October argued publicly to the effect that the American military position was not yet bad enough to prepare Washington to negotiate a surrender, and called for "equal emphasis" on operations by guerrillas and regular forces in a war of attrition. And Dong was reported at the same time to be stating privately--as he had in 1963--his confidence that protracted war would create political conditions in the United States (as in France in 1954) which would eventually force acceptance of the four "points." (Le Duan was soon to state a similar view.) In the winter of 1965-66, this position was to be given a theoretical rationale, and was to become the reported position of all of the primary leaders by mid-1966.

In November and December, bloc sources continued to encourage the view that Hanoi would be forthcoming after a cessation of the bombing, and there were some reports (not well sourced) that Hanoi would or might effect a de-facto scaling-down or even a cease-fire after such a cessation. After the U.S. on 24 December began

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

a pause in the bombing which was to last more than five weeks, Ho Chi Minh on 28 December introduced the explicit demand for a "complete and unconditional" cessation. While Ho did not state that this action would suffice for "talks," one spokesman for Hanoi implied that talks would indeed follow a cessation of the bombing and acceptance in principle of the four "points," and that Hanoi would de-escalate the war in the course of those talks, effecting a complete cease-fire in the course of subsequent "negotiations." At the same time, the Lao Dong central committee passed a new resolution--to be discussed presently--which was to serve as the theoretical rationale for Hanoi's conduct of the war.

The record as of the end of 1965 suggested a picture of the North Vietnamese leadership essentially the same as it had seemed two years earlier but with a few possibly significant changes: Ho Chi Minh as still clearly dominant; Le Duan still second, with himself, Truong Chinh, Thanh, Tho and Hoan as all still more-or-less militant, but with Duan, Tho and Hoan having shifted from extreme pro-Chinese positions, leaving only Chinh and Thanh in that apparent position; Dong as still the leader of the relatively moderate, favoring negotiations but not soft on conditions for a settlement, along with Hung, Nghi and possibly Trinh; and General Giap as still closer to the moderates in general, but apparently opposed to early negotiations. All of the primary figures apparently were moving toward a rough agreement to undertake "talks" if the U.S. was willing to make an important concession (at least the cessation of the bombing) to get them, and toward another agreement that American will to persist in the war could be eroded to the point that they would be able to negotiate a phased surrender.

An Agreed Position on the Conduct of the War, Early 1966

The United States in early January 1966--during a bombing pause which was to last to the end of January--offered a 14-point statement which Hanoi came to recognize (in its surly way) as a most forthcoming position. Although

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

the statement was quickly denounced by Hanoi, it was later treated by North Vietnamese spokesmen as having expressed acceptance in principle of three of the four points which Hanoi had presented as the "basis" for a settlement, and thus as having gone far toward meeting Hanoi's conditions for negotiations--if, as had been frequently implied, acceptance in principle of these "points" was required in advance of any full-scale negotiations. (The three accepted, entirely or essentially, related to U.S. withdrawal and the dismantling of bases, abstention of North and South from military alliances, and reunification to be effected by the Vietnamese themselves.)

As this U.S. statement was being put on the record, another Soviet delegation--led by Shelepin--came to Hanoi and reportedly again encouraged Hanoi to enter into negotiations. According to a captured document, Hanoi promptly rejected this advice. According to [redacted] the North Vietnamese did this in the form of insisting to Shelepin that they would enter into "talks" (not negotiations) only in exchange for a cessation of the bombing and a halt in the build-up of U.S. forces, leaving the question open as to whether they would demand acceptance in principle of all four "points" as stated as a precondition for full-scale negotiations. In any case, Ho Chi Minh--who had apparently been asked directly by the U.S. what his response would be if the bombing pause were extended--was no more forthcoming in his 24 January letter (to heads of state) than he had been on 28 December. Evading the fact that the U.S. had accepted in principle three of the four "points," Ho's emphasis was on the point that the U.S. had not accepted. He insisted that the U.S. must recognize the Liberation Front as the "sole genuine representative" of the South and must negotiate with it (about withdrawal of U.S. troops), a demand which as stated was manifestly unacceptable. He reiterated that the U.S. must accept the whole four-point package and declared that the U.S. must "prove this by actual deeds; and must unconditionally" end the bombing. The latter demand--in this formulation--could be read as meaning the "proof" that the whole package was being bought, and North Vietnamese spokesmen said privately that this was the right reading; one said further that the cessation 3.3(h)(2)

SECRET

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

would have to be proclaimed "permanent and unconditional" (another manifestly unacceptable demand).

In early February, after the U.S. had resumed the bombing (31 January), various sources reported that North Vietnamese leaders were now in agreement in spurning negotiations and pressing on to a successful military conclusion. Articles at the time by General Giap and C/S Dung contended --as might be expected--that this could be done. However, Giap informed his audience that the U.S. had indeed "gone beyond" the earlier "special war" and that the new war--to be fought by "guerrilla warfare" and "limited regular warfare"--would be "long and hard." [redacted] 3.3(h)(2) [redacted] in the same period said that Hanoi realized that it could not win a military victory; Hanoi's plan, they said (as Pham Van Dong had been indicating for more than two years), was to make the war so costly that the U.S. would withdraw. In the same period, an article by the hard-line Le Duc Tho indicated that elements in the party--not the hard-liners like himself, and not necessarily any members of the politburo--were discouraged by the war and wanted a negotiated settlement on terms acceptable to the U.S.; the article also suggested tension on other matters between party-machine leaders like himself and government leaders like Premier Dong and Foreign Minister Trinh. Hanoi at the same time admitted a morale problem among the Viet Cong in the South.

At about this time, North Vietnamese leaders began to transmit to Communist forces in the South an agreed position on the conduct of the war which had been reached by the central committee at the end of 1965--that is, a new resolution embodying decisions reached after U.S. intervention had blocked the military victory the Communists had expected to achieve in 1965 and after the party leaders had had time to assess their new situation. The resolution itself has not come to light, but several captured documents written in early 1966 are believed to reflect it faithfully. The best of these were a resolution by the Communists' "central office for South Vietnam" (COSVN), a letter by Le Duan, and speeches attributed to General Thanh and Deputy C/S Nguyen Van Vinh.

[redacted] 3.5(c)
Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

The COSVN document argued that "decisive victory" would come when the Vietnamese Communists had destroyed a large part of U.S. forces and most of the South Vietnamese forces. (It remained for other documents to make clear that--as Hanoi saw it--this would have the effect of destroying the U.S. will to persist.) The Communist objective was stated as that of coordinating military operations with a "popular uprising to liberate cities and towns," preparing for a "general offensive and uprising" when the time was ripe. (These terms have not been used in the same way at all times.)

The hard Le Duan began his mid-March letter to the Viet Cong by saying that the politburo was (now) in complete agreement on the war. Conceding that U.S. intervention had greatly slowed the "revolution," he nevertheless asserted that the Viet Cong was now on the offensive (contrary to the Chinese view). The politburo continued to hold, he wrote, both to the strategy of "protracted war" and to the objective of gaining "decisive victory in a relatively short period of time." As now defined, however, "decisive" victory would come when the United States was frustrated in Vietnam and knew it--so that it could be brought to accept Hanoi's terms for a settlement and would withdraw. The politburo, he wrote, was agreed on a military and political struggle, a fight-and-negotiate policy that had worked well for the Chinese. The time was not ripe (he continued) to negotiate; and it would not be ripe (he went on to imply) so long as the U.S. tried to impose conditions ("concessions") for negotiations. In any case, the politburo would decide when negotiations were to Vietnamese Communist interests. (The Russians in this period again turned out to be right about Hanoi's position: Soviet leaders said that Hanoi was not ready to negotiate, but that, when it was, then acceptance in principle of the four "points" would have to be the basis for negotiations.)

In late March Le Duan led a delegation to Moscow, where he warmly praised the Russians without accepting their advice to be more forthcoming about negotiations. And in early April, on the anniversary of the original statement of the four "points," Hanoi reaffirmed that its

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

terms for ending the war had not changed and that it had no immediate interest in negotiations. (In other words, the U.S. still had not been softened up enough.)

In April 1966, General Thanh and Deputy C/S Vinh gave illuminating expositions (notes on which were later captured) of the party's decisions of late 1965 on the conduct of the war, clarifying some of the points made by COSVN and Le Duan. Agreeing with Duan that the party for some time had envisaged "decisive victory" in a "relatively short period of time," they made it more clear that large-scale American intervention had made it necessary to define "decisive" victory in terms of breaking the U.S. will to persist. In this connection, they were confident that the U.S. greatly underestimated the number of troops which would prove necessary to prevent the North from reinforcing the South and to conduct the war in the South effectively (including the defense of the cities) at the same time. "Decisive" victory, which would create the "conditions" for "final" victory, would come in the course of an indecisive war (they foresaw a "deadlock"), after a part of the U.S. forces and most of the South Vietnamese forces had been destroyed (as the COSVN document had said); at some point, the U.S. would decide that it did not care to go on with the war and would be ready for negotiations. (The thought apparently was: if the U.S. were ready to negotiate on Hanoi's terms, that would prove that its will had been broken; while if negotiations were undertaken for whatever reason on other terms, Hanoi would use negotiations to find out whether the U.S. will was broken, and, if not, to go on to break it.) When negotiations did come (Vinh said), the Communists would use them as "another front," with which to "disintegrate" South Vietnamese armed forces and exacerbate "contradictions" (conflicts of interest) in the enemy camp. Fighting would continue (according to Vinh's exposition) during and perhaps even beyond negotiations (thus "protracted" war), in order to impose Hanoi's terms and ensure that agreements were kept; in other words, whether the U.S. will was broken before or during negotiations, the settlement would be on Hanoi's terms. Whereas the Chinese (Vinh said), thought that the time would not be ripe for negotiations for several years or "even worse, seven years"

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

(contrary to their earlier exhortations to press for a quick victory), the North Vietnamese were confident they could bring the war to a fight-and-negotiate stage in two or three or at most four years.

Peking soon made clear that it was concerned over the possibility that Hanoi would enter into negotiations prematurely in order to get the U.S. to stop the bombing. It presumably made this point to Ho when he made an unpublicized trip to Peking in May.

Hanoi's public pronouncements in April and May of 1966 continued to convey the impression--as would be expected from the party documents--that North Vietnam had no immediate interest in negotiations, but was continuing to prepare for negotiations when the time was ripe. For example, Premier Dong in mid-April indirectly conceded that the U.S. had accepted in principle three of the four "points" and went on to present Ho Chi Minh's demands in such a way as to seem to be saying more clearly that cessation of the bombing would be taken as "proof" that the U.S. had accepted in principle the four "points," after which negotiations could begin. In other words, the time would be ripe when the U.S. gave a good indication--by halting the bombing without any reciprocal concession--that its will was or could be broken.

In June and July, North Vietnamese officials continued to imply that Hanoi would enter into some kind of discussions in exchange for the "unconditional" and permanent cessation of the bombing demanded earlier. While some of these sources explicitly rejected any reciprocal concession for the cessation, some were reportedly more forthcoming; one visitor construed remarks by Pham Van Dong himself as meaning that Hanoi would or might make a concession, possibly in the form of halting the movement of Northerners into the South. Other North Vietnamese sources said that Hanoi would be forthcoming in the actual negotiations, e.g. would be satisfied for a time with a "step" toward withdrawal, would not demand Communist domination of a government in the South and would accept international supervision of elections, and would postpone unification indefinitely.

~~SECRET~~

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

The Chinese publicly attacked the possibility of negotiations or even "talks." And a visitor to Peking confirmed that the Chinese had a genuine fear that Ho at some stage might agree to a settlement on easier terms than an American surrender.

Some bloc sources have asserted that North Vietnamese leaders were ready to enter into negotiations in the early summer of 1966 and that the U.S. airstrikes near Hanoi changed their minds about the feasibility of negotiations, but the bulk of the evidence indicates that the dominant figures in Hanoi were not in fact in any hurry. North Vietnamese leaders at that time were reported by many sources to believe--consistently with the private remarks of Pham Van Dong in 1963 and 1965, with the central committee decisions of late 1965, and with the exposition of those decisions by party leaders in early 1966--that the war had reached an indecisive stage in which neither side could win a military victory, and that Hanoi could exploit such a situation better than the U.S. could, but that the time was still not ripe for negotiations, and that Vietnamese Communist forces might have to go on fighting for two or three years yet before U.S. public opinion would force the U.S. to accept Communist terms. Ho Chi Minh himself gave a visitor much this assessment, and General Thanh wrote an article exhorting the people to hold out and make the U.S. realize it could not win--about as close as Hanoi could come to saying publicly that it could not win either, but that it could better exploit a stand-off. General Giap was rumored to be among those who favored negotiations immediately, but Giap both before and after that time associated himself publicly with the dominant view (as above) and probably really shared it.

In July Ho reaffirmed publicly that the Vietnamese Communists would fight for 20 years or more if necessary (they did not think it would be necessary), a line Peking liked to hear. But the North Vietnamese leaders were soon to make clear that they would not let Peking formulate Hanoi's foreign policy, and that they would enter into negotiations if and when they decided it was to their interest.

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

Renewed Probing on Negotiations, Late 1966 and Early 1967

In August 1966 Hanoi may have concluded--possibly on the basis of conversations with other bloc officials--that the U.S. had come nearer to readiness to talk on something like Hanoi's terms. There were unconfirmed reports that Premier Dong and General Giap went to Moscow at this time to tell the Russians that Hanoi would act on this if conditions were favorable (i.e., if the U.S. made a large concession).

In September the picture was, as usual, mixed. Dong himself on 1 September dismissed negotiations in a "fight and win" speech. Further, after President Johnson on 5 September proposed to make public a schedule for the withdrawal of U.S. forces if infiltration from the North were halted and DRV forces then in the South withdrawn, Hanoi quickly denounced this proposal as an attempt to "trick" Hanoi into admitting that Northern forces were in fact in the South (General Thanh in his March 1966 speech had admitted to--indeed, boasted of--five divisions), and went on to say that the U.S. could not impose conditions either for the U.S. withdrawal or for a cessation of the bombing. At the same time, bloc sources claimed reason to believe that Hanoi was "tired" of the war and was willing to effect a de facto cessation of the infiltration into the South in exchange for a cessation of the bombing, and on 24 September Dong said still more clearly what he had seemed to be saying in April--that the sign of American "good will" required by Hanoi, as the first step toward a "peaceful solution," was the permanent cessation of the bombing. This was the clearest public implication to that time (although this had been said privately) that talks of some kind could follow a cessation (of some kind) of the bombing. There was still the question--before negotiations could follow--of Hanoi's third "point" on the Liberation Front's program, but the U.S. had come some distance here too in Ambassador Goldberg's statement at the UN that some form of recognition of the Front could be worked out. (Some weeks later, a North Vietnamese spokesman in a private talk appeared to reciprocate by failing to demand that the Front be recognized as the "sole" spokesman of the South.)

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

At about the same time (October or November), the North Vietnamese party politburo adopted a resolution defining a neutral position for Hanoi in the Sino-Soviet dispute and emphasizing the need for Hanoi to manage the war independently of Russian and Chinese positions. This specifically included the preservation of Hanoi's freedom to enter into and to conduct negotiations.

At the same time (October and November), bloc sources passed the word that Hanoi would "no longer" be deterred by Peking from acting on its desire for a negotiated settlement, and stated flatly (though privately) that cessation of the bombing was the only precondition for "negotiations." (In fact, it was not, although it was the principal one for "talks"; a North Vietnamese spokesman in November confirmed that the conditions for negotiations were cessation of the bombing, recognition of the Liberation Front as a spokesman for the South, and acceptance in principle of the four "points.") While bloc sources did not claim that Hanoi would promise to de-escalate in exchange for a cessation of the bombing, some non-Communist spokesmen claimed to have indications that the Vietnamese Communists were prepared to "cease hostilities" on a de facto basis.

By November, Hanoi was ready to send public signals to the outside world that it would act independently of Peking, which was known to be opposed to negotiations. Hanoi broadcast at that time a speech by Truong Chinh, the most pro-Chinese of any of the top leaders, which rejected Mao's "thought" for Vietnam. Moreover, Le Duan, long regarded as generally pro-Chinese, made a speech in December which was clearly an attack on the premises and content of Mao's "cultural revolution." The two speeches could be taken as removing Le Duan and his followers (most of the "militants") as obstacles to negotiations. The Chinese immediately expressed doubt that Hanoi's leaders --Ho in particular--would stand firm against negotiations.

At the same time (December), East European diplomats were talking to the North Vietnamese about a 10-point statement (drafted by themselves) which in their view held promise as a basis for talks and negotiations. According to various sources, these talks broke down when

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the U.S. asked that one of these points--which provided that North Vietnam would not be forced to acknowledge publicly the presence of its forces in the South--be amended to provide that, in exchange for this face-saving concession, those Northern forces actually be withdrawn from the South. Bloc sources subsequently asserted that whatever hope there may have been--not very much--for resolving this matter was quickly destroyed by airstrikes of mid-December in the outskirts of Hanoi, an assertion similar to the assertion made by similar sources in early summer 1966, when in their view the picture had likewise been promising. Although Hanoi was reportedly assured that targets in or near Hanoi would not be bombed again, the North Vietnamese reportedly declined to discuss further the 10-point draft.

In January 1967 Dong went to Moscow and Duan went to Peking to explain the autumn resolution of the politburo on the management of the war (including talks and negotiations). Moscow was reportedly very agreeable, saying that it would support either continued fighting or efforts to negotiate. The Chinese, however, expressed opposition to negotiations even if combined with fighting, and they again proposed that the Vietnamese Communists fight on for five to seven more years until Peking was ready to help. Liberation Front representatives were reported to be taking privately much the same line as the Chinese.

Also in January, when observers in Hanoi were reporting that U.S. bombing was hurting the regime badly, there were several statements by the North Vietnamese and their friends designed to encourage the view that Hanoi was now serious about negotiations. Later in the month, one of these sources gave Senator Robert Kennedy a proposal for negotiations which went beyond anything previously on the record, in that--as reported--it opened with an apparently clear offer to enter negotiations (or talks) in exchange for an unconditional cessation of the bombing and went on to propose three stages of negotiations: bilateral negotiations between Hanoi and Washington on problems relating to those governments; "continuation of negotiations" on the matters, in sequence, of a

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

cease-fire between the U.S. and the Liberation Front, the formation of a "coalition" government in the South, and the status of U.S. forces in the South after negotiations; and "local" negotiations by representatives of the U.S., North Vietnam, the Front and the "coalition" in order to "completely solve" the Vietnam problem. (In other words, negotiations were to include the Front at an early stage, either as a third party to ongoing negotiations or in the form of bilateral U.S.-Front negotiations undertaken separately and concurrently; either seemed more likely the true scenario than the reading--e.g., from Ho's letter of January 1966--that Hanoi was encouraging the U.S. to negotiate with the Front independently of Hanoi.) The proposal as reported was not really a retreat from the four "points." Indeed, while it was forthcoming to a degree in making more clear that U.S. troops need not be withdrawn prior to negotiations, it failed to provide any role in negotiations for the Saigon government or any role in a "coalition" for Saigon's leaders.

At the end of January 1967, Foreign Minister Trinh stated publicly and explicitly (for the first time) that "talks" (not negotiations) could follow cessation of the bombing (and other "acts of war," e.g. reconnaissance flights, naval operations off the North Korean coast, shelling across the DMZ). In the context of possible talks, Trinh asked only for an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing (i.e., not "permanent" as well), a formulation thereafter employed (in this context) in all elite statements. (Trinh did not promise that talks would necessarily follow.) In the same period, Truong Chinh made another tough speech which did not mention negotiations, and a Liberation Front spokesman ignored Trinh's remarks on the matter. Nevertheless, Hanoi and its friends obviously felt that Hanoi had made a move and that the next move was up to the United States.

As of January 1967, when Hanoi seemed more forthcoming about negotiations than it had been at any time since autumn 1964, the picture of the North Vietnamese leadership looked much the same, but the positions of individuals had developed. Ho Chi Minh seemed still dominant, putting forth various spokesmen as he chose: he himself

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

had been receptive to negotiations in 1964, hard (while his spokesmen were evasive) to mid-1966, and as of mid-1966 among those who thought Hanoi could hold out until the U.S. softened, while in autumn 1966 he had made preparations for negotiations and in January 1967 had certainly authorized the release of a somewhat more forthcoming statement, including the offer of "talks" in exchange for the large concession of a cessation of the bombing.

As for the other leaders, Duan still seemed second, still the leader of at least a loose group, but since mid-1965 not extremely pro-Chinese and not inflexibly militant; Tho and Hoan still seemed his likely followers, although perhaps midway between Duan and the most militant. The most militant had continued to be Truong Chinh and Thanh, but the former too had withdrawn from an extremely pro-Chinese position, and the latter had associated himself with the central committee resolution which envisaged eventual negotiations. Dong still seemed third, still the leader of the relatively moderate, foremost in offering negotiations (or talks) and in such a way as to suggest that this course was his personal preference, but also foremost in stating Ho's hard terms for a settlement, and foremost also in arguing (since 1963) that a protracted war would force the U.S. to accept those terms; Hung, Nghi and Trinh all seemed pretty well fixed as his followers. General Giap still seemed the fourth primary figure, somewhere between Duan and Dong, and apparently associated with the central committee's official position on negotiations.

While there had been abundant evidence of tension among individuals and groups since 1954, the weight of evidence indicated that by early 1966 their remaining differences had been submerged for the time being, to the point where all of the politburo members could accommodate themselves to a broad 'central' position on the war, one which they continued to hold in January 1967: to try to force negotiations on Hanoi's terms within two or three years (recognizing that differences among themselves might emerge in defining the terms of a settlement in negotiations), meanwhile offering to talk with the

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

United States on conditions (cessation of the bombing) which would much reduce the pressure on North Vietnam. While they agreed that it was important to try to get the bombing stopped, they also appeared to agree that they could hold out for some time, so sharply divisive pressures did not seem to be operating on themselves as leaders.

Pressure for Cessation of the Bombing, Early 1967

In the first week of February, beginning an intensive campaign to induce the United States to cease the bombing, Hanoi publicly and privately assured the U.S. that Trinh's 28 January offer of "talks" was genuine; Moscow encouraged Washington to accept the offer, while Peking did not. Some spokesmen for Hanoi--including Ho Chi Minh in a talk with two American newsmen--encouraged the view that a de facto cessation would do and that de-escalation would or might follow, and other spokesmen encouraged the view that full-scale negotiations would follow the talks and that Hanoi was prepared to make concessions in them.

On 8 February, culminating a series of probes of Hanoi's intentions, President Johnson sent Ho Chi Minh a letter (received on 10 February) which suggested to Hanoi that it act privately rather than publicly if it were seriously interested in negotiations and which stated the President's willingness to order a cessation of the bombing and a halt in the U.S. troop build-up (the same actions Ho reportedly specified to Shelepin as conditions for talks a year earlier) as soon as assured that infiltration into the South had stopped. In other words, the request was for de-escalation, a request later in 1967 modified to a request for non-escalation. (North Vietnamese sources have asserted that an "ultimatum" accompanied this 8 February letter, namely that the U.S. would wait only until 14 February for a reply.) In the second week of February, while this letter was being considered, Hanoi sent a delegation to Peking which found the Chinese hostile to the President's proposal.

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

On 14 February the bombing was resumed, and on 15 February Ho Chi Minh replied. It is not clear whether he deliberately waited for the asserted "ultimatum"--said by North Vietnamese sources to be "unacceptable"--to expire, or was waiting for word from Peking, or simply needed five days to prepare an answer. In any case, Ho's reply ignored the President's call for a halt in infiltration, and reiterated that Hanoi would enter into talks only if there were an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing. He also reiterated that the four "points" were the basis for a settlement ("correct political solution"), and called again for the U.S. to "recognize" the Liberation Front (he did not in this letter demand, however, that the Front be recognized as the "sole" spokesman for the South). Soon thereafter, on 20 February, Peking denounced the prospect of talks even in exchange for a "permanent" cessation of the bombing.

On 1 March, Dong said that he saw no "present possibility" of talks with the U.S. but reaffirmed the offer. Other sources offered supporting statements in the form of confirming Peking's suspicions of the North Vietnamese leadership while asserting that Peking's influence was now minimal in Hanoi--in other words, that Peking was opposed to negotiations but that this was not the controlling factor. In publishing on 21 March the texts of the Johnson-Ho exchange, Hanoi seemed not to be telling the U.S. that it was not interested in talks but rather to be notifying Peking that North Vietnam would enter into talks when its own conditions--"unconditional" cessation of the bombing and so on--were met.

A North Vietnamese delegation headed by Dong went to Moscow in April to seek increased military aid, and was reportedly told again that Moscow would support the military effort but hoped for a negotiated settlement, as the Russians did not believe that a military victory was possible. General Giap soon reaffirmed publicly that a military victory was indeed possible (although he like others had increasingly implied that Hanoi's true assessment was that of a deadlock). Peking at the same time, in commentaries commending Viet Cong progress, appeared to regard the Viet Cong as still a "weak army strategically

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

on the defensive," a view obnoxious to Hanoi both in terms of its military conduct of the war and its contingent interest in negotiations (because it could not negotiate from a "defensive" position).

In mid-April Dong was reported to be still confident that Hanoi could hold out, reiterating that there would be no "concessions." At the same time, Foreign Minister Trinh, in an article stating explicitly (as Dong had conceded indirectly a year earlier) that the U.S. had "recognized" three of Hanoi's four "points," followed Ho Chi Minh's lead in suggesting a possible willingness to compromise on the point still in dispute; that is, while describing the Front as the "sole genuine representative" of the South, he did not insist that the U.S. recognize it as that in order to begin negotiations. Trinh, like Le Duan a year earlier, justified negotiations whenever they seemed desirable, and, like Ho in February, declared flatly that Hanoi would not talk "under the threat of bombs." (This much--no talks under bombing--has seemed from the first a matter of principle, while the question of whether to give anything to get the bombing stopped may or may not be a matter of principle.) At the same time, a Front leader reportedly again encouraged a belief in a de facto arrangement, stating flatly that the Viet Cong would scale down the war in the South for a cessation of the bombing.

At the end of April, Peking denounced Moscow for advocating "unconditional" discussions, and showed strong concern that Hanoi might reduce its effort in the South in order to get negotiations or close it out in the course of negotiations. At the same time, Hanoi released the December 1966 speech of Le Duan which had been clearly anti-Chinese (i.e., anti-Mao) in intent. Two weeks later (mid-May), the North Vietnamese party journal hit Mao even harder, in an article praising Ho's style of leadership while by implication denouncing Mao's. One factor was surely the persistent Chinese intervention in Hanoi's management of the war, especially the effort to close out the option of negotiations when the time was ripe.

SECRET

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

In the rest of May, North Vietnamese sources continued to assert that Hanoi regarded talks with the U.S. as desirable now, but only if the bombing ceased. Premier Dong was reported at the time to be "fed up" with the war, whereas Ho Chi Minh was said not to share this view. Chinese officials gave support (presumably unwitting) to the view that Hanoi really did want to talk, saying that they believed Ho to be willing and that he was a "captive of the revisionists" in Hanoi (earlier identified as--in Peking's view--Duan, Dong, and Giap, the other primary leaders). In the last week of May, articles by North Vietnamese military leaders again rejected the Chinese view that the Viet Cong was on the "defensive"--partly to defend its conduct of the war and perhaps partly to reaffirm that Hanoi was in a strong enough position to negotiate if it chose to do so. This closed out the period, however, of intensive North Vietnamese pressure for a cessation of bombing in exchange for talks.

Marking Time, Summer 1967

In early June, Foreign Minister Trinh set the tone of Hanoi's public pronouncements for the summer of 1967 in an interview pointing to the "good will" expressed in his 28 January offer of talks and evading the question of whether Hanoi was prepared to offer a reciprocal de-escalation in exchange for a cessation of the bombing. (At the least, it seemed, Hanoi was not going to agree publicly to do so, and probably not even privately in those explicit terms.) Trinh denounced the U.S. for having imposed a "time-limit" for Ho's reply to President Johnson's 8 February letter, and went on to state that Hanoi was not counting on the 1968 Presidential election in the U.S. to bring a settlement but rather on Vietnam's "own efforts." C/S Dung soon contributed a very hard article dismissing negotiations: whereas Trinh in April had defended Hanoi's course against both those who wanted negotiations at once and those who opposed negotiations altogether, Dong seemed to be attacking only the proponents of negotiations. Other spokesmen, perhaps taking their cue from these public statements, said privately that

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

Hanoi's view of the importance of U.S. public opinion had indeed changed and that Hanoi was determined to fight on to military victory--meaning, apparently, that Hanoi was no longer counting on U.S. public opinion to reinforce Communist successes on the battlefield and thus compel Washington to undertake negotiations on Hanoi's conditions and to accept a settlement on Hanoi's terms. However, other spokesmen for Hanoi continued to state privately that North Vietnamese leaders recognized that they could not win the war in a conventional military sense, that Hanoi was still willing to enter into talks as soon as the U.S. "unconditionally" ceased the bombing (one said again that it would not be necessary to declare the cessation unconditional), and that all questions were negotiable except the bombing.

While the primary leaders probably shared the view that the Vietnamese Communists could not win the war in a conventional sense, the view of those leaders--even the moderates--reportedly remained sanguine, because their assessment did not depend on a military victory in that sense. Two of these, Premier Dong and General Giap, reportedly reaffirmed privately the view that most of the leaders had reportedly held since early 1966: that Hanoi could hold out, and that the U.S. would eventually be obliged to withdraw. At about the same time, a North Vietnamese official summed up Hanoi's position: that Hanoi was prepared to negotiate but did not "need" to do so at that time. Another said, contrary to reports of a changing view of the factor of the 1968 elections, that Hanoi needed to "hold out" only until those elections.

At the same time, the death (in early July) of General Thanh, director of operations in the South, removed from the politburo the man who had seemed the hardest of all the "militants," and put the militants in a minority. Thus, if the primary leaders--contrary to their stated views--had not been in agreement on a course of action (holding out until the U.S. had softened up), and if Ho were now obliged to be responsive to a new balance of power--with the "moderates" dominant--in the politburo, one would expect to see--as in the Korean war after Stalin's death--some signs of a more forthcoming

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

attitude. (The earlier dispute between Thanh and others on the relative emphasis to be given large-unit versus guerrilla operations had apparently been resolved by the time of his death, with a decision to increase both.)

In the weeks following Thanh's death, Hanoi seemed to go out of its way in its public pronouncements to discourage any belief that its overall position on the war would soften, while Peking continued to show its fear that Hanoi would indeed soften. Party leader Le Duan, another military leader backing up C/S Dung, and General Giap himself all added their voices to those dismissing negotiations. Moreover, Hanoi privately reassured the troops that any period of negotiations would be used to prepare for a "general counter-offensive." (Hanoi's true view of negotiations was surely more sophisticated than this--thinking of them, at a minimum, as a means of discovering whether the will of the enemy had indeed been broken, and not simply as a respite; moreover, in the event, the operation described by the Communists as beginning the "general offensive"--the attacks on cities in late January 1968--came before any negotiations had got underway.) However, the Vietnamese Communists continued to prepare for possible negotiations, a policy which did not derive from General Thanh's death. In this period they continued to work privately to make their position on the third of their four "points" (the role of the Front and the terms of its program) look more attractive; and North Vietnamese spokesmen reportedly said privately that Hanoi would settle for a de facto cessation of the bombing (or perhaps even a scaling-down of it, similar to the staged de-escalation proposed by several Republican congressmen), and Pham Van Dong himself made a private statement construed by a visitor to mean that a de facto cessation would do.

[According to Washington official sources (quoted some months later), it was at this time--on or about 25 August--that the United States transmitted to Hanoi the position which was to be stated publicly by President Johnson five weeks later: namely, that the U.S. would stop the bombing if assured that this would lead to prompt and productive discussions, and that North Vietnam would not take military advantage of the cessation. Because

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the precise terms of this message have not been made public and may have differed significantly from the terms employed by the President--for example, as stated publicly in late September the position was that the U.S. would "assume" that no advantage would be taken--the Communist response to this overture is discussed in a subsequent section of this paper.]

At the end of August, Ho Chi Minh made what was to be his last public appearance until late December. At the same time, Premier Dong, speaking publicly, accused the U.S. of hypocrisy in its talk about negotiations and again implied--as had Trinh in January--that Hanoi was no longer demanding a permanent cessation of the bombing as a precondition for talks. But Hanoi did not, at the time, draw attention to this possible shift.

Toward Negotiations Again (Maybe), September 1967

Throughout September, Hanoi seemed to be preparing again for talks and negotiations. On 1 September, Hanoi broadcast the Liberation Front's new "political program," emphasizing the broad character of the "coalition" government it envisaged for the South and the accession of the regime through "free general elections." (The Vietnamese Communists privately reassured their troops, however, that this "coalition" would be dominated by the Front, and their spokesmen said privately that the leaders of the Saigon government were not acceptable.) A Front spokesman confirmed that the Front wished to negotiate with the U.S. on the matter of an American withdrawal, and with other (unspecified) Vietnamese on the composition of the envisaged coalition; and Dong reaffirmed that the U.S. must talk with the Front if it wanted peace in the South. The Chinese quickly expressed their continued preference for a prolonged military struggle, while the Russians endorsed the Front's new program.

On 10 September, Premier Dong reaffirmed that Hanoi would enter into talks after an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing, while reaffirming also that Hanoi would make no reciprocal concession (or, at least, would not agree to make one). He also reiterated the

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

call for U.S. "recognition" of the Front, but, again, did not demand its recognition as the "sole" spokesman for the South. After Secretary Rusk (on the same day) stated publicly that the Department regarded "unconditionally" as meaning "permanently," from mid-September Hanoi repeatedly called attention to the fact that it was no longer demanding an explicit U.S. commitment to a "permanent" cessation of the bombing--thus leaving open the question of whether it would demand an explicit statement that the cessation was "unconditional" or private assurances that it was, or would simply settle for a de facto cessation (as often stated or implied). At the same time, Foreign Minister Trinh told a visitor that talks would (not "could") follow cessation of the bombing, beginning with a meeting to work out an agenda. Another spokesman privately confirmed this, saying again that "everything" could be discussed.

At the same time, a North Vietnamese official confirmed that Secretary McNamara's testimony had been interpreted in Hanoi as indicating a "realistic" American assessment of the bombing--namely, that the bombing could not shake the determination of the dominant figures in Hanoi to hold out until the U.S. wearied of the war and accepted Hanoi's terms. This source seemed to clarify Hanoi's view of the relationship between public opinion and the U.S. elections--that is, public opinion would eventually work to end the war, but not necessarily or even probably as soon as 1968. (It will be recalled that North Vietnamese estimates in the winter of 1965-1966 had allowed for this, envisaging "decisive" victory at any time in the next several years.)

Also at this time, General Giap published another analysis of the war, one emphasizing--as increasingly recognized since early 1966--the present "deadlock" or "stalemate." He argued on one hand that the U.S. recognized that it could not "defeat" the Vietnamese Communists; American forces in Vietnam were not large enough to do the job, and the U.S. could not afford--politically, economically, or militarily--to commit sufficient forces. But on the other hand, while pointing to such encouraging factors as the Communists' increasing ability to "attack

SECRET

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

cities," he did not encourage his audience to believe that the Viet Cong could triumph militarily in the foreseeable future--unless assisted by a "revolution" in the U.S. or by the opening of a second front against the U.S. elsewhere, the latter being an addition to the scenario long urged by Castro. (In public statements by Dong and Giap and others, and in private remarks to visitors, North Vietnamese leaders gave an impression of high hopes that the "struggle" of Negro Americans would supply this "revolution," forcing the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam. Moreover, Giap was reported to be visiting Cuba at about this time, perhaps exploring the prospects for a second--or third--front in Latin America.) Giap confirmed that Hanoi was not counting on the 1968 elections, and seemed to give more importance to the possibility that U.S. troops would be needed outside Vietnam (in the U.S. and/or elsewhere). He concluded that Hanoi must hold out, because what was at stake was nothing less than the doctrine of the efficacy of "liberation" wars.

At the same time, visitors to Hanoi got the impression that Ho Chi Minh had become a "figurehead" and that Pham Van Dong was now dominant. The evidence for those conclusions was not impressive, but it was confirmed that Ho was ill and Dong had indeed seemed to be growing in importance among the primary figures.

At the end of September, in speeches surrounding Communist China's National Day, Peking reaffirmed its opposition to negotiations, while North Vietnamese spokesmen--both the relatively moderate Premier Dong and the hard Truong Chinh--left the door open for negotiations, without expressing any favor for them. North Vietnamese officials in conversations, and the line taken in a captured document, agreed at that time--confirming many indications of Hanoi's thinking--that victory for the Vietnamese Communists would come not from a conventional military triumph but from increasing the human and material cost of the war to the U.S. until Washington was ready to accept Communist terms for and in negotiations. Part of this scheme was to erode the basis for the U.S. presence by weakening the Saigon government.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

New Hopes for Pressures on Washington, Autumn 1967

President Johnson on 29 September delivered a speech in San Antonio in which he offered to stop the bombing if this would lead promptly to productive discussions, and stated that the U.S. would "assume" that Hanoi would not take military advantage of this. This was a position which had reportedly been transmitted privately five weeks earlier; while the terms of the private message are not known, the position as stated publicly by the President must have been recognized by Hanoi as the most conciliatory possible way of asking for a reciprocal concession, as it did not demand de-escalation in exchange for a cessation. Nevertheless, Hanoi publicly attacked this position in early October, on the ground that the proffered cessation was still conditional--conditional on the results of the talks. Moreover, Hanoi thereafter failed to probe privately--as it had failed since late August to probe--any of the President's key formulations. This backing-away again at a time when the U.S. was unusually forthcoming--as in early 1966--admitted of several possible explanations, including those (a) that Hanoi had never been serious about negotiations, or (b) that Hanoi did not want to prejudice the chance of an "unconditional" cessation by showing interest in a lesser offer or (c) that Ho Chi Minh was incapacitated, and party leadership had fallen to militants opposed to negotiations (but Ho soon reappeared). The right explanation was probably the reason stated (in other words, the U.S., rather than showing that its will to persist was broken by offering an "unconditional" cessation, was looking for a sign that Hanoi's will was broken), together with Vietnamese Communist expectations from military operations planned for the winter, and Hanoi's apparent new appreciation of the contribution that might be made by the opening of a second front elsewhere.

This last point was taken up in an article broadcast immediately after Hanoi's rejection of the President's overture. Agreeing with General Giap's estimate of a "stalemate" in Vietnam, the writer argued explicitly that the U.S. would be "unable to cope" if another "Vietnam-type" (guerrilla) war were to get started. This article,

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

and a captured document pointing to the importance of diversion of U.S. military forces to deal with the "developing Negro movement," strengthened the impression that Hanoi had high hopes for (without necessarily counting on) contributions by the most militant of the Communist states and parties (e.g. the Cuban) and from large-scale disorders in the United States.

Both in early and mid-October, Hanoi reaffirmed through diplomats and other spokesmen the official position that "unconditional" cessation of the bombing must precede talks, and that there would be no reciprocal concession. Some warned of Communist preparations for major military actions (e.g., forecasting "another Dien Bien Phu"), implying that these would be undertaken if the present Communist terms for talks and negotiations were not accepted. (Various spokesmen confirmed that Hanoi envisaged first "talks," then "negotiations.") At the same time, spokesmen for Hanoi stated publicly and privately that Hanoi had no confidence in the word of President Johnson and Secretary Rusk (described privately as "crooks") -thus preparing the ground for possible subsequent assertions, if Hanoi could not get talks and negotiations on its own terms, that Hanoi had known all along that it could not deal with the President and the Secretary.

In late October, Ho Chi Minh and Premier Dong reportedly said (as had some North Vietnamese leaders in June) that they were under no pressure to negotiate at all, as their side was "winning." They reportedly reaffirmed their view of the importance of U.S. public opinion, which they saw as swinging against the war. Other spokesmen for Hanoi said the same.

At the same time, there was additional evidence from a variety of sources that Hanoi and the Front were trying to design a concept for a "coalition" which would be acceptable to all but the hardest anti-Communists in Saigon--as a part of the process of eroding the position of the Saigon government and thus the basis for the U.S. presence in Vietnam (and thus the willingness of the U.S. to persist in the war). Contrary to what had been told

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the Viet Cong troops, various Communist sources encouraged the view that the Communists need not have and would not seek Communist domination of the coalition from the start. At the same time, captured documents called for a new offensive in the winter of 1967-68--a "General Offensive and General Uprising," which in retrospect appear to have forecast the attacks on cities in late January 1968--which would prepare the population psychologically to accept a Communist-dominated "coalition" in the South.

In early November, Ho Chi Minh was reported now to be so sick he had to stay in bed. Evidence was lacking that he was too sick to make his will known and to impose it, but this introduced a new factor: if Ho's illness were to lead to his incapacity or death, policies would have to be reformulated, and subordinated differences might emerge again.

Also in early November, on the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution, Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and Truong Chinh all contributed important statements. Duan by implication, and Chinh explicitly, were militant about the war, but both left the door open for negotiations.* Dong was less sanguine about a military victory, but--stating what had been and was probably still the position of Ho and the majority--envisaged the U.S. as eventually losing its will to persist and withdrawing (perhaps assisted by negotiations). Dong at the same time reiterated that the U.S. aimed by its bombing to force Hanoi into negotiations and to accept American terms in negotiations, and that Hanoi would never negotiate "under bombing or the threat of bombing."

There were continued reports in November that the Communists would conduct a winter offensive to soften up the South for a "coalition," and some suggested that the primarily political phase could begin as early as February or March (presumably as the happy result of the

*One observer--Victor Zorza--contended after the late January attacks that Le Duan in this November speech had advocated an "urban uprising" in contrast to Giap's advocacy of "political action" in the cities. In fact both advocated "political struggle" in the cities without specifying the form.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

"general offensive and general uprising.") In other words, while the Communists still seemed to be presenting a "coalition" in terms designed to be acceptable to the United States as well as to all elements of the Saigon government except the very top leaders, these reports were suggesting the possibility that the Communists--if successful in their military operations during the winter--would proclaim a "coalition" government in and for the South without waiting for negotiations with the U.S. In any case, Peking soon showed its concern again over the possible composition of a coalition in the South, warning the Front of the dangers of not having tight Communist control from the start.

In mid-November, Premier Dong gave a curious interview in which he reaffirmed the demand for an "unconditional" cessation but then refused to define "unconditional," and in which he reaffirmed the demand for a U.S. withdrawal but then refused to say when and how this was to be accomplished. In broadcasting this interview, Hanoi might have been implying that it could not state its true position publicly, and thus have been inviting the U.S. to explore privately both of these points (although Hanoi itself had not explored privately the Administration's formulations of late August and late September).

In late November, the North Vietnamese military journal reaffirmed the official estimate that U.S. policy would not change as a result of the 1968 elections. The article made clear, however, that this was a doctrinal argument which need not have reflected the true estimate, and in fact the same article, discussing U.S. domestic opposition to the war, suggested a private conclusion that Hanoi would indeed be able to exploit U.S. domestic opposition--in conjunction with domestic disorder--either before or after the elections. A Front spokesman at the time said that the Front did indeed count on the "anti-war movement" in the United States to help "very much" in bringing the war to an end, although he made no estimate of the time.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Renewed Pressure for Talks, December 1967 and January 1968

In the first week of December, a variety of Communist sources (largely non-Vietnamese) asserted that Hanoi would "respond positively" to a de facto cessation of the bombing. Such sources seemed to be encouraging the U.S. to believe that Hanoi could not promise to make progress in the talks (as this depended on both parties) and could not promise not to exploit a prolonged bombing pause (because aiding the South--like not negotiating under bombing--was a matter of "principle"), but would agree privately to try to make progress and to refrain from exploiting the pause. However, [redacted] said that, while talks would follow within "three weeks" of cessation of the bombing, Hanoi's current position called for de-escalation (or non-escalation) to be taken up in the talks; in other words, Hanoi would not give anything in this respect prior to the talks, if at all. 3.3(h)(2)

Shortly thereafter, a North Vietnamese ambassador reportedly stated--as spokesmen for Hanoi had periodically stated since June--that Hanoi was in no hurry to negotiate. Describing American leaders as "fighting among themselves," he again indicated that differences of opinion in the U.S. were an important factor in Hanoi's calculations.

In mid-December, Vietnamese Communist sources publicly and privately provided unusually good indications that North Vietnam was being badly hurt by the airstrikes. However, Hanoi failed to comment on President Johnson's suggestion of 19 December that the Saigon government hold informal talks with the Liberation Front, and during the Christmas cease-fire it continued (in fact, increased) the movement of trucks into the South. In late December, Ho Chi Minh (described as "strong and healthy") reappeared and made another "fight and win" speech. But on 29 December, Foreign Minister Trinh reaffirmed the offer of "talks" following an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing (the DRV "will" hold talks).

In mid-January, a North Vietnamese spokesman abroad [redacted] said 3.3(h)(2)

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

publicly that talks "will" follow a cessation of the bombing, and that this cessation could be announced "through a declaration or any other procedure capable of proving the reality" of it (meaning, perhaps, private assurances), but that Hanoi would make no reciprocal concession. [This latter formulation may have meant that Hanoi would make no concession which could be publicly taken as reciprocal, but would make such a concession--if at all--in a second stage coinciding with the talks, an interpretation consistent with the Russian official's account of Hanoi's position as of early December. At the same time, unidentified sources were reported to be asserting that Hanoi did indeed intend to make a reciprocal concession--in the form (they said) of de-escalation--in the course of the talks.] The North Vietnamese spokesman abroad said that the questions to be taken up in the talks could be decided on in a meeting (an early meeting) of the two parties. Hanoi Radio presented this interview as authoritative: after cessation of the bombing and other acts of war against the North, the DRV "will hold talks with the U.S. on relevant questions," the level of the talks and their agenda would be worked out in a meeting, and the talks would begin "after an appropriate time."*

There was another interview from the same place (Paris) on the following day, probably with the same spokesman. The spokesman was even more forthcoming in this interview, asserting that talks might begin within "a few days," and that they might take up any subject, including questions relating to South Vietnam. Consistently with the Russian account of Hanoi's position and perhaps in accordance with reports that Hanoi was prepared to de-escalate during the talks, this spokesman reiterated that Hanoi would make no reciprocal concession for cessation

*Some sources have reported Hanoi's formulation on "other acts of war" to mean a demand for cessation of military operations in the South as well as against the North; but Hanoi itself has always stated this point as a demand for cessation of acts of war against the DRV.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

of the bombing but was willing to discuss the President's "no advantage" proposal (presumably in the talks). This interview was not officially endorsed, but probably stated the true position; on the same day (17 January), an authoritative spokesman for Hanoi reportedly told an inquiring diplomat that the publicly-stated position of Hanoi meant that, after the bombing was stopped, talks would begin and could take up any subject (including de-escalation or non-escalation), and that Hanoi did not require any further secret contacts to clarify positions. Soon thereafter, various sources (who may or may not have known the true positions of North Vietnamese leaders) again encouraged the view that Hanoi would settle for a de facto cessation and would respond with a de facto de-escalation, but [redacted] the remarks attributed to the above-cited spokesman seemed to state the position more clearly: no agreement on de-escalation or non-escalation prior to talks. 3.3(h)(2)

President Johnson's remarks on Vietnam in his State of the Union message on 17 January--reiterating essentially the San Antonio formulations but with a harder phrasing on the matter of "no advantage" (this time, that North Vietnam "must not take advantage" rather than the earlier, more conciliatory formulation that the U.S. would "assume" that no advantage would be taken)--was predictably rejected by Nhan Dan within a few days. As previously, Hanoi treated these formulations as an attempt to impose "conditions", and the abusive terms of the commentary may have been meant (on one reading) to convey Hanoi's displeasure that the President was drawing public attention to U.S. demands (rather than working for a de facto arrangement).

In remarks attributed to leading officials of the Administration in the last week of January, however, Hanoi must have recognized that the U.S. was stating the most forthcoming position on talks and negotiations that it had ever taken, at least publicly. These officials were quoted to the effect that the "no advantage" formulation should be interpreted to mean American willingness to allow a "normal" flow of men and materiel from North to South during the talks, although not a willingness to

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

accept a dramatic change in the military balance. In other words, this U.S. condition was stated clearly as agreement to non-escalation, rather than as the de-escalation which most observers had previously interpreted it to be. Moreover, this clarification was provided in a context of de facto limitation of the airstrikes--excluding Hanoi and Haiphong and their environs from the strikes--which had persisted since mid-January.*

Thus, as of late January, the Vietnamese Communists could evidently conclude that they could get into "talks" --the talks they had been professing to desire--simply by refraining from insisting that a cessation of the bombing be proclaimed as "unconditional" and by letting it be known privately that they were willing to have talks promptly, to try to make them productive, and to refrain from trying to effect a major change in the military balance while the talks were going on.

The Tet Offensive as a Prelude to Negotiations, Early 1968

The widespread attacks on cities and military installations in South Vietnam which began on 30 January served, in Secretary Rusk's phrase, as a "political answer" to the U.S. overtures of January. The attacks were open to interpretation as a conclusive answer to any overtures--namely, that the Communists were not interested in talks and negotiations on any terms at any time. This view, however, seemed excessive. While the increased professions of interest in talks and negotiations in the months of December and January may have

*At the same time, President Thieu of South Vietnam in his State of the Union message dismissed Communist proposals for talks and rejected any "coalition" with the Front. This line to some extent suited Hanoi's purposes, because the Communists had already made clear that they envisaged no role in either negotiations or a "coalition" for the leaders of the Saigon government.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

been intended in part to put the U.S. off guard prior to the Tet offensive, the Communists soon made clear that they were still interested in talks and negotiations on their terms, and various materials soon made clear that the attacks were undertaken as part of a scenario in which the Communists envisaged successful attacks as leading to American acceptance of Communist terms for and in negotiations, as well as American acceptance of any kind of "coalition" the Communists might proclaim.

The Tet offensive, which came during a lunar New Year cease-fire proclaimed by the Communists themselves, was presented as the long-heralded "general offensive" which was to set off a "general uprising" in the South. The operation was pretty clearly a failure in at least three major respects: apart from the fact that the Communists suffered very heavy casualities (perhaps anticipated), they pretty clearly hoped to hold at least some of the points they attacked, hoped for "uprisings" in at least some of the cities, and hoped for mass defections on the part of South Vietnamese armed forces.* If they had

*Some observers think that the Communists could not even have hoped for these things. At the other extreme, Douglas Pike--in an interesting article in the Washington Post of 25 February--has argued that the Communists were counting on mass defections by South Vietnamese troops and a "great deal of public support." On the present writer's reading, the right word is hope. Pike also argues that the Communist scenario envisaged a decisive military victory by mid-1968, and some other observers agree; on the present writer's reading, however, the "decisive" victory envisaged was as set forth in early 1966--that is, the breaking of the U.S. will to persist, in part by eroding the basis for the U.S. presence in Vietnam, which would be expressed by U.S. acceptance of Communist terms for and/or in negotiations. Pike also argues that the Tet offensive was undertaken by General Giap because he (and Ho and Dong) were on the "defensive" against younger members of the politburo who wanted a greater emphasis on negotiations. There had been no
(footnote continued on page 43)

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

achieved these things, they would have been in an excellent position [redacted] to proclaim "alliances" or local governments, which in turn could act with the Front to proclaim a "coalition" government for all of the South, which in turn could take in those elements of the Saigon government (or what was left of it) acceptable to the Communists, which in turn could "negotiate" an American withdrawal. (Two "alliances" to this end were proclaimed in Saigon and Hue in the early days of the fighting.) Disappointed in this, the Communists had to take comfort--which at that was considerable--in the great damage they did to the pacification program in the countryside, and in their demonstration to the people of the South that they could strike damaging blows anywhere. 3.3(h)(2)

The best account of the envisaged relationship between the Tet offensive and negotiations was obtained [redacted] from a Vietnamese Communist official--concerned with one of the cities attacked--who was briefed by a delegation from Hanoi soon after the attacks began. The general offensive ("general raid attack") was predicated on the intransigence of the Saigon government (about negotiating with the Communists) and on the insufficient readiness of the United States to negotiate (although the U.S. was seen as much more nearly willing than Saigon). Under heavier pressure (the Tet offensive), it was argued, both the U.S. and the remains of the Saigon government would be forced to accept Communist terms for and in negotiations--and, indeed, the operation could be judged successful only if it achieved this end. As the argument apparently ran, the Saigon government would be seriously weakened, perhaps in effect destroyed as a government, and 3.3(h)(2)

(footnote continued from page 42)
evidence, however, of a split between older and younger members of the politburo on these lines, and, as previously noted, the leaders seemed to be agreed from early 1966 on a scenario which envisaged negotiations when the U.S. had been sufficiently softened up.

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

it might even be possible to establish a rival and generally credible "central" government. While successful action on any scale against the Saigon government would be a "victory" in a limited sense, this would still not be a "decisive" victory--because a decisive victory could come only by breaking the U.S. will to resist (precisely the way this concept of "decisive" victory was defined in early 1966), unless a new "central" government had such manifest authority (apparently viewed as a marginal possibility) as to be able simply to order the U.S. to withdraw. (A captured COSVN document confirmed that even a successful operation would bring only a partial victory.) The U.S. had the option (the argument continued) of bringing in additional forces to make up even for the "collapse" of the Saigon government (and, moreover, other forces in Saigon might "unite" against the Communists); thus it would be necessary to continue military operations until U.S. bases had been destroyed or until the U.S. was ready to agree (presumably in negotiations) to withdraw its forces.

A captured document confirmed that it was the Communist hope that the offensive would be so successful as to lead to the early establishment of a "coalition" government. In this connection (meaning, apparently, whether the "coalition" was established prior to negotiations or as the result of them), the Liberation Front was prepared to negotiate with the United States but not with the "puppet" government (i.e., not with the Saigon government as a government, not with its leaders). This document also confirmed surmises as to which posts the Communists would demand in a "coalition" of any kind--the ministries of Defense, Public Security, and Foreign Affairs, and the key ministry or ministries concerned with the economy.

A captured Communist official (fairly high-level) confirmed that it was the Communist plan to keep the military pressure on--in a series of attacks--until the Communists got the kind of "coalition" they wanted. As he understood it, the first step would be a provisional "united" government for the South, worked out by the Front and elements of the Saigon government and dominated by the Front. After agreement had been reached on "political

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

problems" implicit in such a "united" government--e.g., after the Communists had got the key ministries--the various parties would apparently go on to set up the kind of "coalition" envisaged all along in the Front's program; he did not, however, make clear the role of the U.S. in this.

Immediately after the Tet offensive began a spokesman reaffirmed Hanoi's interest in talks with the U.S. (but not with the leaders in Saigon), and added his voice to those asserting or implying that the Communists would effect a de facto de-escalation in exchange for a cessation of the bombing. Foreign Minister Trinh made the first part of this official on 8 February. Citing his statements of January 1967 and December 1967 as having "clearly indicated the way to bring about talks," Trinh reiterated that the San Antonio formula (even, presumably, as most recently defined by Administration spokesmen) was unacceptable because it was a proposal for a conditional cessation. However, Trinh went on to confirm the position stated by the spokesman in Paris in mid-January--namely, that "relevant problems" (Trinh's 29 December formulation) could be discussed, meaning questions related to a settlement on the basis of the Geneva agreements (of which Hanoi's four "points" had long been presented as the concentrated expression), that "other questions" could be taken up in the talks (either formulation would permit the war in the South to be discussed), and that the talks could start as soon as the U.S. chose to "demonstrate the reality of the unconditional cessation" of the bombing and other acts of war against the North (in other words, he was apparently not asking the U.S. to proclaim this).* In the same period, the Communists privately assured representatives of several non-Communist governments that they were indeed still prepared to talk with the U.S. if the bombing were halted.

*Another observer has suggested that Trinh may have deliberately obscured the distinction between "talks" and negotiations, saying in effect that talks could be negotiations, thus deftly removing what had been the main obstacle in getting from talks to negotiations (agreement on the roles of the Saigon government and the Liberation Front). This is important if true, but Trinh's intention is not clear.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

The Communists also reaffirmed their interest in negotiations with elements in Saigon, but not with the Saigon government as a government. A Liberation Front spokesman on 8 and 9 February said that the establishment of a "provisional" government (see above) was now a Front objective, at an unspecified time and following "consultation with other revolutionary forces." Soon thereafter, according to Havana Radio, the chief of the Front mission in Hanoi said that the Front had not advocated and did not advocate a coalition with the "Saigon regime; that is out." For the Front, he said, any future coalition would be made up of those elements of the population which had contributed to the "liberation" of the South.

At the same time, the Vietnamese Communists in effect reaffirmed the concept of a protracted war. An authoritative commentary appearing in the military newspaper on 11 February argued that, while the two weeks of the Tet offensive had achieved a "marvelous victory," the American will to persist was not yet broken. The Americans, "basically stubborn," would "pour in more troops and money," and "decisive trials" were "still in prospect." In other words, the Communists still had some distance to go to a "decisive" victory, and some distance beyond that to a "final" victory.

In mid-February North Vietnamese sources said again--as reported periodically since early December--that Hanoi was willing to make "de-escalation" an item on the agenda of "talks" with the U.S. These reports--of willingness to discuss the U.S. demand--seemed more likely to be a true account of Hanoi's position than the occasional reports in the same period from friends of the North Vietnamese that Hanoi had already assured them of its willingness to de-escalate.

Nevertheless, in the last week of February sources in contact directly or indirectly with the North Vietnamese continued to profess confidence that Hanoi would make a reciprocal concession for a cessation of the bombing. A well-known correspondent said this on 23 February, apparently on the basis of conversations with non-Vietnamese

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Communists, who had encouraged such a view all along, [redacted] said [redacted] that he had been given "assurances" that Hanoi would reciprocate (give something "tangible") for a cessation. 3.3(h)(2)

In the same period, the North Vietnamese military newspaper summed up the situation. Communist forces were now in a position to "launch simultaneous, continuous, large-scale and highly effective attacks," and "everywhere" in South Vietnam Communist military and political forces were being expanded and developed. The enemy, in contrast, had fallen into a "complete defensive position" and had lost the initiative. "Regardless of how many more troops" and how much more materiel the U.S. might pour in, the U.S. could not stabilize the situation. In sum, the Vietnamese Communists now had a solid basis for moving on to an eventual "complete victory" (although still not a military victory in a conventional sense).

Thus, at the beginning of March 1968, the Vietnamese Communists seemed genuinely to see their position as strong. They could continue to fight indefinitely, and they could begin to talk, while continuing to fight, at whatever time the United States was willing to accept Communist terms (unconditional cessation of the bombing) for the talks. As the Communists saw it, there was no good reason for them to abandon their basic estimate --abiding for more than two years--that "decisive" victory, the loss of the U.S. will to persist, could come in a "relatively short time" (perhaps by 1969 or 1970), and that "final" victory, the negotiated withdrawal of American forces and the formation of a Communist-dominated "coalition" in the South, lay not too far beyond that.

As of March 1968, the picture of the North Vietnamese leadership had developed a bit further in some respects, although with fresh opacities in others. While Ho Chi Minh had apparently been sick for a while in the late months of 1967, his lieutenants had continued to act on his positions, essentially those of prosecuting the war vigorously while leaving the door open for negotiations, making only small concessions to that end while encouraging

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

unofficially a belief that larger concessions lay ahead; and Ho himself was back in action. Le Duan did not seem as clearly the second-ranking leader (he may have been overtaken by Pham Van Dong), but he may still have been, and was still associated with Ho's positions, and still the leader of a relatively militant group, probably including Le Duc Tho and possibly including Hoang Van Hoan. The most militant had been reduced by the death of General Thanh, but Truong Chinh was still a leader of this group, possibly with one or two followers at the politburo level. (In all, four of the nine remaining full members apart from Ho--Duan, Tho, Hoan, and Chinh--seemed on the 'left' of the spectrum.) Pham Van Dong still seemed at least third, possibly second, in the hierarchy (although some now saw him as first); he had continued to have the largest role in stating Hanoi's positions on the war, had continued to suggest his personal favor for negotiations, and had had the largest role in stating Hanoi's small concessions and implying larger future concessions, but had also associated himself with Ho's position that Hanoi did not "need" to negotiate and had continued to believe that the U.S. would lose the will to persist and would withdraw (probably through negotiations); his followers still seemed to be Pham Hung, Le Thanh Nghi, and Nguyen Duy Trinh. General Giap still seemed fourth, and, while reaffirming the Vietnamese Communists' ability to win, had seemed increasingly to think of the war as a stand-off and to associate himself with the willingness of other primary leaders to negotiate from that position; C/S Dung still seemed his likely follower, although the latter's very hard line on negotiations may have indicated an important difference of view on this. (Thus five of the nine full members apart from Ho--Dong, Hung, Nghi, Trinh, and Giap--seemed to be on the 'right' of the spectrum.)

As suggested above, it still seemed likely, as of March 1968, that the primary leaders were in agreement on a position for the conduct of the war which--as they saw it--would pose no sharply divisive issues for some time yet. In other words, all seemed willing to accept for a time the cost of holding out--a continuation of the bombing--while attempting to get a cessation of the bombing at no real cost to Hanoi, and all seemed willing to

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

accept a settlement--in negotiations in which they would be relieved of the pressure of the bombing--which would result sooner or later in an American withdrawal and a Communist-dominated "coalition." The critical time for their cohesion would come--if at all--only when the costs had mounted and when there was no hope of either a settlement on those terms or a military victory in lieu of it.

Some Conclusions and Some Speculation

There has been evidence of tension among groups (not always the same ones) in the leadership on various questions related directly or indirectly to the war at least since 1954: in the Geneva settlement of 1954: during the land-reform of 1954-56; in working out the relationship between the party apparatus and the military establishment in 1956-1957; in deciding to undertake violent revolution in the South in 1959; in deciding to state this course openly in 1960; in working out a relationship with the Soviet and Chinese parties when the Sino-Soviet dispute hardened in 1959-60; in probing the Kennedy Administration's intentions in 1960-61; in deciding the relative emphasis to put on military versus political forms of action in the South in 1962-63; in again defining the party-military relationship in 1964; possibly but not demonstrably, later in 1964, surrounding the offer to undertake talks with the U.S.; again in early 1965, in deciding what attitude to take toward negotiations after the U.S. had not taken up the first offer; possibly in early 1965, in formulating the terms for a "peaceful settlement" (that is, on questions related to the U.S. withdrawal, the form of government in the South, and "unification" of Vietnam, tension which if latent might emerge again if negotiations were to take place); and clearly, in 1965, continuing perhaps to 1967, on the question of the relative emphasis to give to large-scale military operations versus guerrilla warfare.

By early 1966, however, the primary figures had apparently been able to subordinate their remaining differences to an agreed position on--an overall scheme for--

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the conduct of the war, even if not always in agreement on military methods. While in any Communist party dominated by a single leader the stated views of lesser figures must be in a range permitted by that leader, so that private views may differ widely, the public and private statements of the primary figures (reinforced by documents)--Ho, Duan, Dong, and Giap--after late 1965 seemed to indicate genuine agreement on a course of action. This was to settle if necessary for a military stand-off and to wait for indications, at some time in the next "few" years (from early 1966) that the U.S. will to persist had been broken. This "decisive victory" might come when the U.S. entered into negotiations on Communist terms, including a cessation of the bombing (desirable in itself), or might be brought about only in the course of negotiations (relieved of the pressure of the bombing), but it should come in a "relatively short period." The Communists would continue to fight while negotiating, in order to impose Hanoi's will and to make it stick; and with the eventual U.S. withdrawal (perhaps after "unification"), the "protracted war" would end in "final victory."

This plan for the conduct of the war apparently underlay Hanoi's professions of willingness, from early 1967, to enter into "talks" in exchange for an "unconditional" cessation of the bombing and of unspecified other "acts of war" against the North. This seemed true regardless of whether the Communists (a) were to stand on their refusal to give anything at all--not even a promise not to take military advantage of a cessation--for a cessation, or (b) were instead to offer privately the signs of willingness to compromise (i.e., genuinely negotiate) which the U.S. had been demanding. If they remained intransigent, they would be choosing to wait for indications as they saw it that the U.S. will had been broken (or at least cracked) before negotiations began. If instead they were passably forthcoming, they would be choosing to find out in the course of talks and negotiations whether the U.S. will had been broken--and, if not, to try to break it. They apparently believed that they could get a settlement on essentially their terms if they held out (before negotiations and/or in them). From autumn 1967 they showed an increased confidence that, if they kept the military pressure

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

on, the demands made on U.S. resources by the war in Vietnam, together with the erosion of the basis for the U.S. presence in Vietnam, plus (secondarily) domestic problems in the U.S. and increased activity by militant Communists elsewhere, would sooner or later force the United States to accept this outcome.

The recent Tet offensive was consistent both with this general scheme and with the Communist effort to break the U.S. will if possible before beginning negotiations. Hanoi apparently calculated that the attacks, if they achieved maximum success, would lead to American acceptance of Communist terms for negotiations and to the early establishment of a Communist-dominated "coalition" government. In the Communist scenario, the U.S. would eventually be forced to accept this "coalition" as part of the settlement and to negotiate with it a withdrawal of U.S. forces. In reaffirming Hanoi's interest (in his 8 February statement) in bilateral talks and negotiations with the U.S., and in blurring the distinction between talks and negotiations (saying in effect that talks could be negotiations), Foreign Minister Trinh may have been trying to simplify the process of getting negotiations started (by cutting through the immediate problem of reaching agreement on the roles in negotiations of the Saigon government and the Liberation Front). This is turn would simplify the process of negotiating an American withdrawal, as this could be effected between the U.S. and a "coalition"--less obviously a creature of Hanoi than is the Front--which would join the ongoing negotiations, excluding the Saigon government. The Communist failure to hold any of the cities--as a basis for proclaiming a "coalition"--postponed but did not eliminate that possible shortcut to a settlement.

In regard to "talks," it is still the Communists' official position that they will give nothing in exchange for a cessation of the bombing. While some of their spokesmen and other sources continue to encourage the view that Hanoi will be forthcoming once the "talks" are underway, and while Hanoi has so shaped its position that it is not possible to be sure of Hanoi's attitude on the matter of a reciprocal concession until there has in fact been a cessation of the bombing for some weeks, Peking apparently means its intransigence to serve as a test of the U.S. will.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

In regard to negotiations, there might seem little difficulty about progressing to negotiations once the "talks" had got underway, in view of U.S. acceptance of three of Hanoi's four "points" and Hanoi's various indications of willingness to accommodate on the remaining point. However, the failure of the Tet offensive to create conditions for an early "coalition" may return the Communists to a demand for recognition of the Front as an autonomous entity and as a full participant in negotiations or even to a demand that the Front be recognized as the "sole" representative of the South. Moreover, the Communists may go ahead and proclaim a "coalition" anyway, and demand that its program be accepted in principle--before negotiations begin--as the basis for a settlement in the South.

With regard to a settlement, the Communist position is still known only in the most general terms, hardly better than their own formulation of them in the four "points." As for a cease-fire, unless Trinh was changing the position in his 8 February interview, the North Vietnamese are not willing to handle the matter of a cease-fire in the South; the U.S. would have to negotiate this with the Front or a "coalition." In either case (i.e. no matter who is handling it), the Communists would presumably not agree to an immediate cease-fire and regroupment, as their concept envisages a period of fighting-and-negotiating, and it is not clear at what point they would regard a cease-fire as an acceptable risk; neither could there be a guarantee against a resumption of hostilities, as their concept envisages such a resumption if negotiations are unsuccessful or if agreements are not kept. They would obviously insist on the cessation of all military operations against the North (assuming that this had not already taken place prior to "talks"), although the cessation of some operations (e.g. reconnaissance) perhaps could not be verified. They would also of course insist on the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and bases from the South (already agreed to in principle), but it is doubtful that they would agree to withdraw North Vietnamese forces (which do not officially exist) from the South in exchange, or that they would go ahead and do this without any agreement, or that there

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

could be any reliable way of checking this (e.g. Northern units could be absorbed into the Viet Cong or even into the population, ready to be reconstituted). Nor is it clear that they would agree to halt the infiltration. It is not even certain that the Communists would agree to an American withdrawal by stages; while the latter seems much more likely than an insistence on an immediate withdrawal, there is no firm indication as to the timing they envisage ("two years" might or might not be right) and even the minimum position might be unacceptable to Saigon. They would presumably try hard to get an agreement that the U.S. would not conclude a military alliance with, or provide military aid to, whatever remained of the present Saigon government or whatever kind of "coalition" was set up. Assuming that they had not already proclaimed a "coalition" into which they could take those elements of the present Saigon government which were acceptable, they would certainly press for the kind of "coalition"--one in which they controlled the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense--which could be relied on never to make any request for U.S. military aid. They would no doubt work for the kind of "coalition" which could not effectively resist Communist direction in other respects as well, although it is likely that they would seek only the key posts--like those cited above--at the start. And they would presumably seek a formal U.S. agreement not to interfere in the later "reunification" of Vietnam. In sum, while there is no way of knowing Hanoi's precise terms for a negotiated settlement until actually engaged in negotiations (in fact, well along in negotiations), Hanoi's minimum demands would be for a complete U.S. withdrawal sooner or later and for the kind of government in the South which could be dominated by the Communists sooner or later, with assurances that Communist arrangements would not be upset by the U.S.

As the North Vietnamese leaders apparently continue to see it, they can afford to wait for a settlement on some such agreeable terms as those outlined above because greater pressures are operating on the United States than on themselves. As they see it, they cannot be compelled by continued bombing to respond to an "objective" situation and agree to end the war, while the U.S. is faced with at least three problems in the conduct of the war in

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

the South which will be very difficult if not impossible for the U.S. to solve, and which reinforce one another. One is that of preventing the Communists in the North from continuing to support the Communists in the South with men and materiel; this would require a difficult political decision to extend the war into Laos, and the dispatch of many additional U.S. troops. Another is that of securing the countryside when the cities are brought under attack (cf. the results of the recent Tet offensive), which would also require many more troops. While the Communists are aware that additional manpower is available, they seem genuinely to have calculated that the United States--for various political, economic and military reasons, of which the pressure of U.S. public opinion is the most important--will not find it feasible to commit several hundreds of thousands of additional U.S. troops to the war in Vietnam. (While, in connection with this--the problems faced by the U.S. in building up its forces in Vietnam--the Communists would have to reconsider the possibility of U.S. public opinion coming to favor--alternatively--the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam as the apparent answer, they still seem confident that the U.S., owing to the pressure of international opinion, has no intention of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam in any case.) The third great problem, as they see it, is the instability of the Saigon government--that is, the inability of the U.S. to create a viable political structure in the South, something which in Hanoi's view the U.S. cannot do regardless of the build-up of U.S. forces. With respect to the factors which Hanoi regards as possibly contributing importantly to American problems in conducting the war, Hanoi may have been given fresh hopes by the Kerner Commission report and by U.S. comment on it (the U.S. must spend great sums to allay American Negro grievances, the U.S. will not move as fast as necessary, there will be great disorder in the next year or two, etc.); but this factor is probably hard to assess.

On the assumption that Hanoi--owing to its calculation, on some such lines as the above, that it can afford to wait--will not soon take the remaining step to get into

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

"talks" or will take that step but will be intransigent in talks and/or negotiations and cause them to fail, the question remains as to whether North Vietnamese leaders will see things any differently a year or two or three years from now. This is the question of the state of their own will, if and when they find that their expectation of a "decisive" victory by about 1970--that is, the breaking of the U.S. will to persist--has been disappointed.

There are of course possibilities--ranging from marginal to fair--for a crisis to overtake the North Vietnamese leadership prior to that hypothetical time when the present leadership is forced to recognize that its basic estimate has been mistaken. These relate to the overthrow of the present leadership, the death or disability of Ho Chi Minh, and (perhaps in connection with the latter) a factional struggle among Ho's present lieutenants.

There are a few observers who credit the possibility that the entire present leadership will be overthrown by a group of secondary figures with a common interest in ending the war. Apart from the difficulty of identifying such figures, this possibility seems the most marginal. It seems virtually out of the question for the entire leadership, as a group, to be overthrown; it controls, as a group, too much power.

There is another scenario which envisages the deposing of the dominant figure by a group of his lieutenants (as happened to Khrushchev), or action by the dominant figure in concert with various of his lieutenants to break a powerful group (as happened in China in 1965 and 1966, when Mao worked with military and government leaders to smash the party-machine group which until then had been the most powerful group in China). The analogy for North Vietnam would be a common effort by Duan, Dong and Giap to set Ho Chi Minh aside, or an effort by Ho and Dong and Giap to break Duan and Truong Chinh and the other "militants." But this scenario assumes that Ho has been imposing his will on the other primary figures against their own will, or that Duan and Chinh have been primarily responsible for the hard line on the conduct of the war,

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

and the evidence does not support this. Moreover, there is no evidence that either process has begun in North Vietnam.

It is uncertain, however, how long Ho will be well enough to continue as the dominant figure. There is some doubt about his status even now, and some observers have concluded that Ho is "senile," has been put into an "old folks' home," and at most is solicited for advice (advice which, on this view, other leaders are not obliged to take). But the evidence for this view is similar to the evidence on Mao Tse-tung's decline which preceded his re-emergence as the clearly dominant figure, and it seems advisable to assume, until better evidence comes to hand, that Ho continues to formulate policy on the critical matters. The chances are that Ho, like Mao (and as other North Vietnamese leaders have said), does not concern himself with the details of daily affairs--in other words, he intervenes only when he feels the matter to be important enough. The conduct of the war is surely important enough.

If Ho were incapacitated or were to die soon, it is doubtful that the position of the North Vietnamese leadership could be determined by a simple process of counting heads, tabulating "votes," at that time. Even if a confident assessment of the position of every one of the other full members could be made (and it cannot), one would have to wait for a period of adjustment. The secondary figures, in order to secure their futures, would probably group around the primary figures--Duan, Dong, Giap, and possibly Truong Chinh--and in this process they would tend to adjust their positions to those of their principals. Even if this judgment is mistaken and some of the primary figures were soon dislodged by secondary leaders, there would seem to be little comfort in it for the United States. The man standing behind each of the primary figures seems to be at least as hard as he is. Just as Le Duan, apparently in the best position to succeed Ho Chi Minh if a single successor is arrived at, has seemed in general harder than Ho himself, so the leading candidates to succeed Le Duan as head of the party-machine--Truong Chinh or Le Duc Tho--have both seemed harder than Duan. Any politburo-level successor

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

to Pham Van Dong as Premier would probably be a harder man; and the man behind General Giap, C/S Dung, has taken very hard positions on the war.

It is of course not certain that, if Ho were out of the way, Duan, Dong and Giap could continue to work effectively together for even a little while. There might be an immediate struggle for power which--because they were preoccupied with it--would force a shift to the right in policy, i.e. a less militant attitude toward the conduct of the war. But it seems likely that they would at least try to work together, especially in managing the war, and would continue to do so until circumstances forced them into conflict.

There have been apparent differences in inclination among those three--Duan being the hardest, Dong the least hard, Giap somewhere in between--which could produce such a conflict. This would seem to depend, however, on their being under heavy pressure. Thus the question returns to that hypothetical time when their basic estimate had been disproved in their own eyes. This would mean that, while public opinion in the U.S. may indeed have prevented the Administration (any Administration) from making the very large additional investments of manpower that might succeed in suffocating the Communist military effort in the South, no combination of factors had led the Administration to negotiate on Hanoi's terms, so that the prospect for the Vietnamese Communists--as far ahead as they could see--was for an inconclusive struggle, a continued "deadlock" or "stalemate" (to use General Giap's terms). Even with Ho Chi Minh still dominant, there might then be either a general shift to the right or a split in the politburo, and this possibility would be enhanced by the death or disability of Ho.

With Ho out of the picture, Pham Van Dong (among the primary leaders) would be expected to lead any general shift to the right, or to act as the leader of the right-wing forces if a split were to develop. Of the secondary figures, Pham Hung, Le Thanh Nghi, and Nguyen Duy Trinh would be most likely to follow. Such men, the managers

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580

3.5(c)

of practical affairs, might finally be moved by such considerations as the continued great loss of North Vietnam's best young men in a hopeless cause.

Le Duan and Truong Chinh would be expected to lead any resistance to a shift or to lead the left in a split. Le Duc Tho and Hoang Van Hoan would seem likely to come down on this side, as might Tran Quoc Hoan the security specialist and C/S Van Tien Dung. Most of these have shown some ability to adjust to events, however, and some might not stay on the left.

General Giap might be the key figure in the middle, especially if Ho were out of the picture, and might be joined by C/S Dung and the security man Hoan. Giap might swing the balance, if he were to reaffirm at that time that his forces could not win the war in a conventional sense and were to opt for ending or scaling down the war.

It is impossible to judge, on present information, how long it may take (beyond, say, early 1970) for a shift to the right or a split among politburo members to appear, or which group would win the struggle in the event of a split. As regards the latter, little is known, for example, about the responsiveness of instruments of force to various individuals in the leadership: there is hardly any existing picture of Tran Quoc Hoan, the security specialist who appears to control all types of security forces (including counter-intelligence and the secret police), and who may or may not report to and be aligned with someone other than Ho himself (e.g., Le Duan); similarly, General Giap's degree of control of the armed forces--through the Ministry of Defense, the Military Affairs Committee, and personal proteges--is quite uncertain; further, it is not clear whether Pham Van Dong has any substantial assets outside the government apparatus, or whether Truong Chinh has any real power beyond his influence over Hoc Tap and the party school. But it seems fair to conclude that the North Vietnamese leadership, if pressure is kept on it, may shift or split within the next few years, and that the leaders themselves may provide clues before that time as to how far any shift will extend and as to which group would win in any split.

3.5(c)

Approved for Release: 2019/04/17 C01369580