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Thematic Summary: PROSPECTS FOR BEGINNING TALKS AND NEGOTIATING A SETTLEMENT*

How an end to the conflict might be negotiated was rarely considered by INR in the early days of the new administration in 1961 since neither side appeared interested in negotiating within the foreseeable future. During 1962-63, calls by the Communists for consultations under the auspices of the 1954 Geneva Conference to condemn US/GVN actions were interpreted at face value--as a Communist effort to undercut American support for and assistance to the GVN. There was a general assumption, however, that the Communists might eventually seek a negotiated settlement, not only as an interim stop to takeover.

In the turmoil of 1963, INR thought that Hanoi might encourage some contacts with GVN officials, particularly involving Viet Cong officials, but would do so largely for their disruptive impact, without making much effort actually to reach agreement in the extremely fluid situation. At this juncture and subsequently, INR judged that Hanoi eventually might seek a political solution on the basis of some form of coalition government and neutralization without effective controls; INR felt that Hanoi might make this move when it felt either that the Communist position

* The reader is reminded that this review does not include all of INR's studies, because some were based on sensitive information which has not yet been reclassified. It must also be pointed out again that INR was hampered in its analysis of Communist positions by the fact that on grounds of sensitivity some important information was withheld or only belatedly made available.

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was too weak for anything more to be gained from military pressure or that the position was strong enough to insure a Communist takeover through political channels.

In 1964, as the question of retaliation against North Vietnam itself was debated and probable Communist reactions weighed, INR at first agreed with the general view of the Intelligence Community that Hanoi probably would seek to involve the United States in negotiations --but without making significant concessions--in an effort to forestall or halt attacks against the North. In the fall of 1964, INR shifted its position on the question. It still believed that Hanoi might make moves toward negotiating while escalation was being debated, but thought that Hanoi would not do so to halt a sustained bombing program--largely because of its concern to avoid appearing weak and compliant with American demands. In late 1964 and early 1965, when the Communists hinted at flexibility and interest in talks, INR felt that the evidence was insufficient to judge whether they simply were trying to ward off escalation, or whether they had a more serious interest in negotiations. The conclusion implicit in INR's discussion was that the matter merited exploring further in careful, private contacts.

After the bombing program began and President Johnson called for "unconditional" negotiations, North Vietnam issued its Four Points in mid-April 1965. In INR's view the Four Points themselves were not new, but the way in which they were presented meant that for the first time

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Hanoi had officially allowed that the conflict could end in a political settlement and provided terms for it. Subsequently, INR closely analyzed public and private statements by the Vietnamese Communists in an effort to identify shifts in their attitude. Hanoi seemed to be leaving the door open for eventual compromise, cautiously indicating interest in probing the American position, but ever wary of appearing weak or prepared to compromise while the bombing continued. INR believed that the Communists would in turn raise their military effort before indicating renewed interest in negotiations, in order not to appear to deal from weakness.

INR believed that this sensitivity would prevent Hanoi from responding positively to pauses in the bombing which were accompanied by implied or explicit demands for reciprocal de-escalation in the South. Even if a pause were handled with the utmost discretion to preserve Communist "face," INR felt that there was little chance for a rapid pay-off. For Hanoi demanded recognition of its Four Points in some form, as well as a permanent halt to bombing as preconditions to talks and, less precisely, some role for the Viet Cong (National Liberation Front). Even after US troops were despatched, Hanoi seemed confident that its position in the South would grow stronger and enable the Communist side to prevail.

Although INR had thought the Communists eventually might make some positive response to an announced pause, its analysis of Communist

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actions during the pause in December 1965-January 1966 suggested that the North Vietnamese probably were not interested in negotiations nor even in entangling Washington in protracted contacts in exchange for an extended pause. Nevertheless, INR saw sufficient ambiguity and uncertainty on the Communist side to recommend that the US continue exploration before it resumed the bombing.

After the bombing was resumed in late January 1966, Hanoi's stand on negotiations remained virtually on dead center until a year later. In INR's judgment, there was no chance for talks on US terms --but, although Hanoi's position was tough, the North Vietnamese leaders kept the position sufficiently ambiguous to leave them an approach to compromise when they saw fit. In the meantime, it was clear that Hanoi was relying primarily on wearing down the non-Communist side through its protracted war tactics.

In January 1967, public North Vietnamese statements indicated movement when they began making an unconditional bombing halt the sole condition for talks. Hanoi's maximum bargaining position, in INR's view, was to hold out hope for contacts in return for a bombing halt and to commit the United States to discussing the future of the GVN, with the NLF involved, before these contacts developed into negotiations.

During 1967, Hanoi gave no more ground, although INR felt that it might be interested in testing the non-Communist side through

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contacts. Basically, however, the North Vietnamese remained highly suspicious, distrustful of US actions, and concerned over their ability to gain much through negotiations. These negative attitudes, combined with Hanoi's evident confidence in its position in the South, left slim chance for productive negotiations.

INR noted, however, that according to Hanoi's doctrine, a move in the direction of talks might follow some spectacular military action in the South. In late December, a month before the Tet Offensive began--and perhaps in anticipation of it--North Vietnam's Foreign Minister again shifted the formula to promise that talks "would"--instead of could, as in January--begin after the US unconditionally halted bombing. INR suggested that this change meant that Hanoi was feeling the effects of the bombing and also that the North Vietnamese might be concerned about the progress being made in the South toward political stability. There was little question, INR thought, that talks would in fact begin if the US stopped the bombing, but INR doubted that Hanoi was willing to concede that it would take "no advantage" of a bombing halt, as requested by President Johnson. However, tacit understanding on this score seemed possible. Even if talks were undertaken, INR felt that they would be very protracted and accompanied by continued Communist military pressure. This judgment was reiterated by INR after Hanoi agreed to limited contacts following the partial halt in American bombing announced on March 31, 1968.

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As soon as the holding of talks was agreed upon, INR also noted that the long-held intransigent position of the GVN comprised an additional stumbling block to a negotiated settlement. In INR's view, Saigon would have to accept bilateral talks, but would do its utmost to keep the future of South Vietnam off the agenda and generally to prevent widening the talks. Saigon seemed still to be "almost totally unprepared" for a political settlement of the conflict.

Throughout the summer and early fall, INR saw in the contradictory signals from Hanoi indications that the North Vietnamese leaders were reviewing and debating future strategy. INR believed that Hanoi was experiencing adverse pressures, which were leading it to seek some kind of agreement by the end of 1968 or possibly not later than mid-1969. If a satisfactory one could not be reached, INR felt Hanoi would continue to fight but probably with less intensity.

By October, it appeared to INR that Hanoi was ready to concede a little on the issue of reciprocity in return for a full bombing halt; it still, however, sought US-NLF talks and opposed including the GVN in negotiations. In fact, by the end of October, Hanoi tacitly had conceded something on both the military and the diplomatic fronts, and President Johnson announced that the bombing halt would be complete and that the talks would be expanded to include the GVN and the NLF. When Saigon refused to accept the formula, INR speculated that the GVN would procrastinate for some time and, even if it joined the talks, would seek to block discussion of substantive issues. At the same time, INR cautioned against expecting rapid progress from Hanoi. Even though the

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North Vietnamese were in the long run to yield on more extreme demands, they would not move quickly in this direction; and, far from seeking an early ceasefire as some predicted, Hanoi would avoid doing so until a final settlement was negotiated.

There are several implicit and explicit themes which seem to stand out in a review of INR's analysis. First, the North Vietnamese eventually would negotiate but, being confident that their position in the South would grow stronger over the long run, they were in no hurry to undertake talks, let alone quickly seek a compromise agreement. Bombing or no bombing, they were certainly under no pressure such as to force them off their steadfast determination to avoid the appearance of yielding to coercion. INR also believed that North Vietnam was deeply suspicious of US motives and distrustful of US actions.

Nonetheless, while it cautioned against high expectations, INR was not as pessimistic as some interpreters, but at most times discerned elements of flexibility in Hanoi's behavior. Some pressures were apparently in the later years being felt by the North Vietnamese. INR often suggested that private explorations might be fruitful, both to gain insight into what Hanoi might be willing to concede without having to reveal it in public, and to allay Hanoi's suspicion that the US was basically not prepared to modify its maximum position.

In the last analysis, Hanoi seemed to agree fully with Mao Tse-tung's adage that one could not gain at the negotiating table what could not be gained on the battlefield. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese Communists

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apparently came to believe that time was not irrevocably on their side and that opportunities to gain something through negotiations had to be seized. INR thought that Hanoi's negotiating strategy was to divide an issue into the smallest pieces possible and then make only limited tactical retreats from which they would then establish a new maximum position. In short, the political track would be long and full of pitfalls but an agreement, not wholly at odds with US interests, possibly could be reached eventually, assuming that the allies were able to stay the course militarily.

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