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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D C 20301

8 OCT 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Air and Naval Operations Against North Vietnam

Background and Nature of Objective

At this stage of developments, with Neogitations talks seemingly stalled in Paris, with combat activity levels reduced in South Vietnam, but with seemingly rising levels of discontent in the United States, we should review the over-all situation and determine the course of action best calculated to achieve our objective there. As you have stated, our objective in South Vietnam is to achieve for the South Vietnamese people an opportunity to determine the political and economic institutions under which they will live. Various alternatives to achieve that objective are possible. Arrayed in terms of intensity -- and probably duration -- of U.S. involvement, there are at least four alternative concepts: (a) A rapid U.S. exodus under honorable conditions, e.g., under the umbrella of a cease-fire; (b) accelerated Vietnamization of all levels of activity in South Vietnam; (c) pursuit of the currently programmed Vietnamization activity; or (d) escalated U.S. military activity with an eye towards imposing decisively on North Vietnam's will and capability to pursue the war in South Vietnam. This memorandum addresses the last alternative, i.e., that dealing with increased U.S. military activity.

Criteria and General Observations

In seeking our objective in South Vietnam, we must be alert to some constraints. We must, for example, act in a fashion which will:

- . Maintain the support of the American people.
- . Be within tolerable economic limits, both for the U.S. and South Vietnam, i.e., not create undue inflationary or balance of payments pressures on the one hand or exorbitant and self-defeating controls on the other;
- . Not destroy the political, economic, and social fabric of South Vietnam and the other nations of Southeast Asia;

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- . Not disable us from honoring our commitments and protecting our security interests elsewhere in the world;
- . Not result in the alienation of our friends and allies elsewhere in the world; and
- . Not precipitate a wider, more costly, and even longer conflict.

The fundamental question is how to gain our objective within these controlling criteria. Would escalated U.S. military activity do so?

A total military victory would require the destruction or ejection of NVN forces from South Vietnam and its immediate borders in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam, plus the reduction of VC forces to impotence. This course has some rudimentary appeal.

A number of questions are raised, however, by the concept of military victory. One question is whether the U.S. people would stand for the concomitant higher casualty levels on both sides. A second question is whether the U.S. economy could sustain, without substantial readjustments, the burden of increased resources for the war effort. A third question, assuming the increased military activity would spread throughout Southeast Asia, is whether the damage levels inflicted, especially in South Vietnam, would preclude achievement of a viable South Vietnamese society. A fourth question implicit in concentration on military victory concerns our ability to honor our other commitments, to prevent alienating our friends and allies, and to avoid creating a larger war with more, and more dangerous, adversaries.

The answers to most of the key questions involved in a concept of military victory, dictate against pursuing such a course. But such answers may be somewhat academic for the very reason you have already ruled out the pursuit of military victory.

The question then is whether there might be some form of escalated U.S. military activity which, short of military victory, could act upon the North Vietnamese will and capability decisively enough to cause them to negotiate a settlement which would allow the U.S. to achieve its basic objective. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have submitted a proposal to you which purports to achieve that purpose.

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What the Concept Is

The Joint Chiefs of Staff concept proposes a high-intensity air and naval campaign against North Vietnam. While the details of the plan are still evolving, the following dimensions are clear:

- Surprise and concentration of effort in the Haiphong/Hanoi area would be emphasized.
- Phase I would involve those "integrated modules" designed to (a) neutralize the NVN air order-of-battle; (b) close key NVN ports; and (c) destroy other "high value" targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area.
- Phase II would involve additional "attack modules" designed to (a) destroy NVN war-supporting facilities, particularly again in the Hanoi/Haiphong area and (b) interdict the Northeast rail line.

The Phase I concept would involve strikes on thirty (30) targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area and mining the approaches to the NVN ports of Haiphong, Hon Gui, Cam Pha, Ben Thuy, Dong Hoi, and Quang Khi. More than 3500 sorties would be flown. The Chiefs conclude the Phase I operations would have "a strong psychological and military impact on the North Vietnamese leadership."

The Phase II concept would involve strikes on an added eight (8) targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area. The Chiefs conclude the Phase II operations would "contribute to a reduction of the enemy's ability to carry out its aggression against South Vietnam." The Chiefs add, however, in a significant caveat that "... it must be emphasized that a significant reduction in the flow of material to their (NVN) forces in South Vietnam would require a sustained campaign over an extended period of time." The implied JCS conclusion is that any decisive impact on the war in South Vietnam and the attainment of the basic U.S. objective there depends on (a) the North Vietnamese will being so affected by the initial strikes as to cause them to negotiate a favorable settlement to the U.S., or (b) the prosecution of a sustained and indefinite U.S. air and sea campaign against North Vietnam. Both parts of that implied JCS conclusion involve significant uncertainties, risks, and costs.

CIA Evaluation of the JCS Concept

The single most instructive evaluation of the type of concept proposed by the JCS is a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memorandum

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written in May 1968 and updated on October 7, 1969. The CIA conclusions are as follows:

- A Mining program would serve as an effective means of interdicting North Vietnam's normal seaborne commerce. The disruption to this trade would be widespread but temporary, given Communist China's cooperation. Within a short period -- two to three months -- North Vietnam and its allies would be able to implement alternative procedures for maintaining the flow of essential economic and military imports. The North Vietnamese, however, could sustain the economy and the war effort at present levels for several months solely by drawing down present reserves and maintaining present imports overland. Shipment of goods from the USSR and Eastern Europe by overland routes would raise costs, but constitute a small additional burden on Hanoi's Communist allies.
- There seems, in brief, to be no way of overcoming Hanoi's ability to sustain a continuing flow of essential material support from abroad, to distribute these goods internally, and to forward them to its forces in South Vietnam, except in the unlikely event of Chinese intransigence. The existing capacities of the railroad, highway, and river connections with Communist China -- some 16,000 tons a day -- are more than twice the daily volume of North Vietnamese imports.
- A mining-bombing program would carry with it significant liabilities. The possibility of damage, sinking, or entrapment in port of foreign shipping is high. This would present the USSR, particularly, with difficult decisions and create new risks of a Soviet-US confrontation. If the mining were effective and forced a shift to alternate overland supply routes, it would require more extensive cooperation and assistance on the part of the Chinese. This conceivably could result in strengthening Chinese political influence in Hanoi. It would also risk a confrontation between US and Red Chinese air and naval forces.
- A mining program would also evoke protest and critical reaction from Free World maritime states. Almost all world powers would see the program as further intensification of the war, even if the program were to follow a breakdown of the Paris negotiations.

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- If the negotiations were in process when the mining program was started, Hanoi would probably break off the talks. However, any such North Vietnamese decision would probably be based on the total war situation, including the status of the fighting in the south and the success of the talks in undermining the position of the Saigon government.

Added Evaluation of the JCS Concept Plan

The CIA evaluation, which technically goes into detail to substantiate the conclusions stated above, can be reinforced by analyzing the specific JCS Concept Plan now being presented. The Chiefs' Plan, for example, is characterized by the following:

- U.S. losses in Phase I and Phase II are estimated by the Chiefs to be less than 3 percent of the sorties flown. Even based on that loss percentage estimate, losses on the first wave of attacks (3799 sorties over five full days) would be in excess of 100 aircraft. Given the density of the NVN air defenses in that area, and the concurrency of the strikes, i.e., the fact the NVN air order-of-battle is not to be cleared out before the other targets are attacked, losses could be much higher. Furthermore, the loss of major US ships would have to be considered.
- Civilian casualties in North Vietnam would be high. Given the location of the targets in densely populated areas, and the element of surprise to be utilized, the civilian casualties would probably be substantial. Charges would be made the U.S. is killing civilians indiscriminately.
- At risk would be increased NVN attacks through the DMZ and accentuated attacks on SVN populated areas. While the NVA/VC forces have not literally adhered to the November 1, 1968 understanding in these areas, the violations have been well below their capability. The exposure of U.S. and GVN forces in northern I Corps could lead, in particular, to an early call by U.S. Commanders for ground reinforcements.
- The military effectiveness of the plan is cast in doubt by the Task Group notes which have been provided from Saigon. That Group indicated, inter alia, the following problem areas:

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- The existence of sanctuary air bases in Red China. This means an air threat could continue indefinitely, possibly even with Red Chinese involvement.
- Even with the mining plan, "NVN could accommodate ... by expanding their lightering facilities...."
- At present, the enemy probably has sufficient supplies stockpiled in Cambodia to support his forces in III and IV Corps at 1967-68 operating rates for several months. Therefore, unless the resupply route through Cambodia were sealed, the war in SVN could be continued.
- Sealing off Cambodia would require Cambodian tacit agreement. Blockade and mining are considered acts of war under international law. It is not clear such tacit agreement could be obtained.
- There is an implication that substantially larger requests for both air, naval, and ground forces and requests for added operating authorities would ensue. Such forces and authorities would be involved in:
 - Quarantining or blockading Cambodia.
 - Flying B-52 raids into NVN.
 - Making ground incursions into Cambodia, Laos, and NVN.
- No reference is made to costs. It is difficult to price out the JCS Concept Plan on the basis of the information provided. But a rough estimate would put the incremental annual costs at anywhere from \$1.0 billion to \$5.0 billion. The economic impact of such outlays is not addressed.

In addition to the implications in the Chiefs' Concept Plan as not constituted, there are the following initial considerations:

- If U.S. casualties should increase, either in actions in NVN or resultant actions in SVN, the U.S. public reaction could be devastating. It would not suffice to say that in the long-run casualties will be reduced if they increase sharply in the short-run.

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- Demonstrations would have to be expected, both in the U.S. and at U.S. Embassies abroad. This would be all the more probable without some NVN provocation for the U.S. adoption of the Chiefs' Plan.
- Allegations would be made that the military had taken control in the U.S.

The sum total of the considerations outlined above casts grave doubt on the validity and efficacy of the JCS Concept Plan. The Chiefs add another note of doubt by taking note of the questionable weather in NVN during the winter months. Their wariness is well taken. In November 1966, we were able to fly only an average of 242 sorties per day and in November 1967 only 239 sorties per day over NVN. That is far below the sortie level indicated in the JCS Plan, which calls, for example, for 797 sorties on the first full day of operations. Succeeding winter months give equally poor flying weather over North Vietnam until about April.

But weather is a second-order question. It is noteworthy the Chiefs, while recommending the Plan be approved for continuing planning, do not

- Indicate how the Plan would lead to conclusive or decisive results, nor do the Chiefs
- Contend that the Plan would have decisive results.

Therefore, the Plan would involve the U.S. in expanded costs and risks with no clear resultant military or political benefits.



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