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Soviet Attitudes and Intentions Toward the Vietnam War

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SNIE 11-11-67: SOVIET ATTITUDES AND INTENTIONS TOWARD
THE VIETNAM WAR

EXPLANATORY NOTE

This SNIE was prepared at the request of the Department of State. It is intended as a general examination of Soviet attitudes and policies, especially in the present phase of the war in Vietnam. Where particular US actions are discussed, these are intended to be illustrative rather than to reflect actual policy decisions. Nevertheless, recipients will recognize that, since US policy in Vietnam is under continuous review, any paper taking note of any possible US actions should be handled as an extremely sensitive document.

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SOVIET ATTITUDES AND INTENTIONS TOWARD THE VIETNAM WAR

THE PROBLEM

To examine the USSR's policies toward the Vietnam war and its views of relevant US policies, and to estimate Soviet intentions in relation to that conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

A. While the Soviet leaders see the war as advantageous to them in many ways, they also see disadvantages which make their options unpromising and hazardous. They probably believe that there is no prospect of movement toward a political solution for several months at best and appear to have concluded that for the time being they have no alternative but to help Hanoi to carry on the war, hoping that changes of attitude in either Hanoi or Washington, or both, will make a political solution possible later.

B. The Soviet leaders fear that the US, in its impatience to get the war over, will escalate the conflict in a way which will increase the risks and costs for the USSR; in an effort to forestall this they are currently stressing their intention to move to more vigorous support of North Vietnam. We believe that during the coming months they will continue to supply equipment designed to strengthen air and coastal defenses in North Vietnam and to increase the firepower of both the regular North Vietnamese forces and the Communist forces fighting in the South.

C. Whether or not there are formal arrangements covering the transit of Soviet supplies across China, we believe that Peking will not pose serious obstacles to such transit. But the relations between

Moscow and Peking are still fundamentally hostile, and their attitudes toward major issues of war and peace in Vietnam will continue to differ profoundly.

D. The North Vietnamese at some point will probably press the Soviets for more sophisticated equipment than those types now arriving on the scene or in the pipeline. These might include cruise missiles and tactical rockets which could be used to support North Vietnamese operations in the DMZ area and against US warships. The USSR might believe it had to respond to such pressure, although it would be concerned that the use of such weapons would provoke a still more dangerous US response.

E. If the intensity of the conflict were to be increased by the US, we believe that at some point the USSR would create an atmosphere of heightened tension with the US. The Soviets might take certain actions designed to bolster North Vietnam and to warn the US, such as the provision of limited numbers of volunteers or crews for defense equipment or possibly aircraft. They might also break off negotiations with the US on various subjects and suspend certain agreements now in effect. The mining or the blockade of the North Vietnamese coast would be most likely to provoke these responses, since this would constitute a direct challenge to the Soviets, and there would be little they could do on the scene. We do not think the Soviets are prepared to resort to strong and direct threats of general war as a means to protect North Vietnam or to preserve Soviet face.

F. There would also be a good chance that at some juncture the Soviets would exert strong efforts toward a political solution, but they would probably not make Hanoi's acceptance of talks an explicit condition of continued material support.

DISCUSSION

I. SOVIET POLICY

1. The USSR's initial post-Khrushchev commitment to North Vietnam in late 1964 was almost certainly based on what proved to be a miscalculation: in all probability, the Soviet leaders did not then expect the US to step up its involvement in the conflict and they foresaw a relatively quick and easy Communist victory in the South. They wanted to be associated with that victory and—more concerned than Khrushchev with the problems and issues of the Communist world—were especially anxious to disprove Chinese charges that they were soft on imperialism. Initiation of the US air campaign in February 1965 caught them by surprise (and Kosygin in Hanoi), and their actions ever since have reflected their determination to maintain their commitment to Hanoi, but at the same time to control the risks of doing so, especially vis-a-vis the US.

2. There is within this broad context a wide area of uncertainty in the USSR's attitude toward the war. The Soviets surely see the war as advantageous to them in many ways. It diverts US political and strategic attention away from areas of primary interest to the USSR, it imposes burdens on US resources, and it employs a substantial portion of US military forces-in-being. Moreover, it has deeply troubled many US allies and associates, especially in Europe, and it is a divisive factor within the US itself. Finally, the war—and their important role in it—allows the Soviets to score further gains against the Chinese, both in Hanoi and in the Communist movement as a whole.

3. On the other hand, the conflict, as seen from Moscow, has its adverse aspects as well. The bombing of North Vietnam constitutes a continuing reproach to the Soviet Union, unable as it is to protect a small ally. The war is taking place far from the USSR and is being waged by a state which is unwilling to accept Soviet political guidance on the conduct of the war and is suspicious even of Soviet counsel. The buildup of US forces, and their engagement in combat, increases pressures on the Soviet leaders to expand their own forces, and this, in turn, may impose some additional strains on the economy and further complicate long-range economic planning. Perhaps most important, the US may undertake new courses of action which would force the Soviets to choose between confronting the US or backing down. Moscow is also almost certainly concerned that a Korean-type war could develop, leading to Chinese involvement and all the complications and dangers which the USSR desires to avoid.

4. The pro's and con's of this situation tend to make alternative Soviet options unpromising or hazardous. If they attempted to force Hanoi into negotiations—e.g., by threatening to stop supplies—they might fail, for Hanoi, even without Soviet aid, could fight on if it wished, though the nature and the level of the conflict would necessarily change. Such a failure would effectively end Soviet

influence in Hanoi, throw North Vietnam entirely back on China, and diminish Soviet prestige in the Communist world as well as in many "uncommitted" countries. The same calamities would follow if Moscow simply withdrew its support of Hanoi in order to escape the risks of deeper involvement. On the other hand, Moscow cannot feasibly undertake any serious military participation in the war, with its own combat forces, far from the sources of Soviet power, and at the end of lines of communication passing through the dubiously friendly territory of China or risking US counteraction at sea. Finally, if Moscow tried to influence the US by heavy pressures elsewhere in the world, it would risk provoking a partial US mobilization and a major international crisis.

5. As for the war itself, the Soviet leaders have probably concluded that a military victory by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese is not possible. They probably also believe that a clear-cut military victory by the US-Vietnamese forces is also impossible, unless the US steps up its war against North Vietnam to a very substantial degree or is prepared to engage in a long and costly struggle. In addition, the Soviet leaders have probably concluded, as a consequence of the events of the past two to three months, that there is no prospect of movement toward a political solution, at least by negotiation, for several months at best. Especially since Kosygin's visit to London in February, it must appear to the Soviets that both sides are determined not to accept the other's terms for the opening of negotiations. The Soviet leaders thus appear to have concluded that for a time they have no alternative but to help Hanoi to carry on the war, hoping that changes of attitude in either Hanoi or Washington, or both, will make a political solution possible later.

6. The Soviet leaders probably recognize that a substantial majority in the US supports the President in his wish to terminate the war by a political settlement and that US withdrawal without meaningful concessions from the Communists in Vietnam is an unrealistic hope. But they fear that, in its anxiety to get the war over and finished, the US will escalate the conflict in a way which would pose those serious dangers we have noted above.

7. In its efforts to prevent the US from escalating the conflict and to accept terms also acceptable to Hanoi for moving toward a political settlement, the Soviet leaders have engaged in a variety of stratagems. For a period they sought to warn the US of the harmful effect upon US-Soviet relations of the continued rise in the US commitment. Although they have continued to pursue this theme, they have since last summer also used another route; they permitted some tangible progress in US-Soviet relations, partly in order to persuade the US that such progress should not be jeopardized by new US actions in Vietnam. Finally, they took steps, which culminated in the Wilson-Kosygin talks, designed to convince the US leaders that there was a real prospect for political settlement. At the moment, because of their fear of imminent escalation, they are trying to convince the US of the hazards of escalation, this time by stressing that they intend to meet US moves with even more vigorous support of North Vietnam.

II. SOVIET REACTIONS TO ESCALATION

8. We believe that both Hanoi and Moscow have expected a higher level of US military operations against North Vietnam, and it seems likely that the Soviets will respond to the current expanded bombing program by providing additional quantities and perhaps new types of weapons and equipment. Indeed, they may already have decided to do so.

9. We believe that the attitude of China will not pose serious obstacles to the continued transit of Soviet military supplies. We have no evidence that shipments have been significantly disrupted in the past, despite Soviet charges to the contrary and despite some degree of Chinese harassment. Early this year, at the height of the anti-Soviet demonstrations in Peking, the Soviets and the North Vietnamese apparently made some new arrangements under which the North Vietnamese would accept Soviet cargo at the Sino-Soviet border and assume responsibility for its onward movement.¹ Such an arrangement would lessen still further the chances of Chinese meddling with Soviet supplies, but it would seem to have little bearing on Sino-Soviet relations. These relations remain fundamentally hostile, and Chinese and Soviet attitudes toward major issues of war and peace in Vietnam will continue to differ profoundly.

10. In general, we believe that the types of weaponry the Soviets are likely to supply during the coming months will be intended to strengthen the air and coastal defenses of North Vietnam and to increase the firepower of both the regular North Vietnamese forces and the Communist forces fighting in the South.² To bolster air defense, the Soviets will probably supply more jet fighters with air-to-air missiles, more surface-to-air missiles, and improved anti-aircraft artillery (e.g., the ZU-23). We think it somewhat less likely that they would introduce an improved surface-to-air missile system with a somewhat better capability against low altitude attacks than the SA-2's now in North Vietnam. To meet US naval attacks on coastal shipping, there is a good chance that the Soviets will provide coastal defense missiles with conventional warheads (the Samlet and perhaps even the coastal defense version of the Shaddock). They will also probably supply more patrol boats, perhaps even the Komar or OSA guided missile patrol boats. For the ground forces, the Soviets will probably provide additional multiple rocket launchers, heavier artillery and mortars, better anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, and a variety of anti-personnel devices. Some of the lighter, more mobile equipment would be sent forward by Hanoi to South Vietnam for use against US personnel and bases. Indeed, some has already appeared there.

11. The North Vietnamese would probably at some point press the Soviets for more sophisticated equipment, and this would pose a serious problem for the Soviets. They might believe they had to respond to such pressure,

¹A critical change in Chinese internal affairs, should it come, could of course significantly alter existing transit arrangements.

²See ANNEX for the characteristics of selected weapons and weapons systems.

especially if hard pressed by North Vietnam and if no break appeared on the political horizon. They might provide nonnuclear weapons with additional range and firepower, hoping that the new military situation thus created would bring about a change in the US position. But the Soviets would also be concerned that the introduction of new types of weapons and especially their use in South Vietnam would provoke further US retaliation, which they would like to avoid, or even create a situation which would invite a US invasion of North Vietnam. We believe nevertheless that there is a good chance that they would provide some of these weapons systems.

12. If the Soviets did decide to embark on this course, some of the weapons involved might be the Salish short-range ground-support cruise missile or the Frog tactical rocket. Both are road mobile, require little in the way of permanent support facilities, and would not present a ready target for US bombing. Vietnamese could be trained to man them in a few months. They could be used from sites in North Vietnam against US forces in the DMZ area, but probably would not be transported South. The 150 n.m. Scud and the 300 n.m. Shaddock would also meet these general criteria for mobility and Vietnamese manning. The latter however, is a relatively new and complex system never deployed outside the USSR, and, in any case, both the Scud and Shaddock are too cumbersome and complicated for use in the South. If the Soviets were prepared to provide a weapon for attacks upon the South Vietnamese population or US bases, they might consider MRBMs with conventional warheads. Such weapons would create logistical problems and have marginal military value; if provided, their use would be primarily for political and psychological reasons. In any event, the Soviets would probably believe that the emplacement of such weapons would provoke an unacceptable level of US retaliation, and we consider their provision unlikely.

13. Beyond supplying equipment, the Soviets could take certain other actions to bolster the North Vietnamese and warn the US. They might believe, for example, that the provision of limited numbers of volunteers, or of crews for defense equipment or possibly aircraft, would serve as a warning without leading to a serious confrontation.

14. In any event, a steady increase in the level of combat and especially in the level of US air attacks would make the Soviet leaders increasingly nervous, and each new step would bring them closer to responses which would seriously impair US-Soviet relations. They might, for example, break off various negotiations and contacts with the US, and perhaps suspend certain agreements of recent months. We cannot say precisely what would be the Soviet response to particular actions. Much would depend upon what had gone before and how dangerous the situation of North Vietnam had become. But we are persuaded that at some point the USSR would create an atmosphere of heightened tension with the US.

15. The mining or the blockade of the North Vietnamese coast would be most likely to produce this result, since such action would constitute a direct challenge to the Soviets. At a minimum they would try to mobilize world opinion

against the US on this issue, and, depending on the attitude of North Vietnam, would consider taking the matter to the UN.

16. There is little that the Soviets could do on the scene if confronted with this kind of situation. They do not have the strength in the area to force a blockade or to confront the US with a major military challenge, and we do not believe they would wish to run large risks simply in order to harass US forces or gain temporary respite. In the case of mining, for example, the Soviets could try to reopen shipping routes by bringing in minesweepers, other naval ships for protection, and air cover from North Vietnam. But this would be a hazardous venture, since the US could continue to sow mines by air and the Soviets could not prevent it unless they were prepared to begin a major naval and air war. We believe they would not risk their shipping in mined waters and would attempt the necessary supply by other means, e.g., through China or by lighter-*age*. Most important, we do not think that the Soviets are prepared to resort to strong and direct threats of general war as a means to protect North Vietnam or to preserve Soviet face.

17. Regardless of the precise action taken by the US, the Soviets might at some point exert pressures on the US outside of Southeast Asia. Heightened tensions in Korea, new troubles in the Middle East are possibilities. But Berlin is the most plausible pressure point; US interests there are directly engaged and vulnerable, and the USSR could be surer of controlling the action. They might consider that only minor pressure on access routes would be enough to create the impression of an impending crisis. But we think it unlikely that the Soviets would want to take the risk of provoking by such pressures a major and generalized crisis which would not only undercut their policies in Western Europe but could also lead to a US-Soviet confrontation.

18. There would be a good chance that the Soviets would at some juncture exert strong efforts toward a political solution of the Vietnam problem. They would have to weigh the risks of some level of confrontation with the US against their reluctance to put real pressure on Hanoi for such a solution. They would almost certainly urge the course of negotiation more vigorously than they have heretofore. But they would probably not be willing to make Hanoi's acceptance of talks an explicit condition of continued material support. If negotiations did get underway, they would, of course, still bend every effort to obtain terms which gave Hanoi hope of eventually achieving its aims.

ANNEX

CHARACTERISTICS OF CERTAIN SOVIET WEAPONS
MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

I. GROUND FORCES

Scud A or B (SS-1b or c)

Type: single-stage, tactical ballistic with storable liquid propellant

Range: 150 n.m.

Warhead: 1,500 to 2,000 lbs. HE or CW (intended primarily for nuclear option)

Accuracy: 0.5 n.m. CEP

Refire time: 1½ to 2½ hours

Remarks: the Scud launcher is mounted on a modified tank chassis; it has been deployed in the USSR and some East European countries

Salish (SSC-2a)

Type: surface-to-surface version of the Kennel air-to-surface, turbo-jet cruise missile

Range: 60 n.m.

Warhead: 2,200 lbs. HE (nuclear possible)

Accuracy: 300-500 feet CEP

Refire time: unknown

Remarks: the Salish is transported on a wheeled launcher; it is deployed in the USSR, Cuba and with Soviet forces in East Germany

Shaddock (SSC-1a)

Type: tactical ground forces version of the SS-N-3 naval cruise missile

Range: 300 n.m.

Warhead: 1,000 to 2,000 lbs. HE (nuclear option)

Accuracy: 0.5 n.m. CEP at 150 n.m. range

Refire time: unknown

Remarks: the Shaddock is transported in a launch tube on a wheeled vehicle; it has not been made available to non-Soviet forces

Frog

Type: solid propellant, surface-to-surface, unguided rocket available in several versions
Range: 18 to 37 n.m. with conventional warhead
Warhead: 820 to 1,300 lbs. HE (nuclear option)
Accuracy: 500-800 meter CEP at $\frac{2}{3}$ maximum range
Reaction time: 15-30 minutes
Remarks: the Frog is mounted on a light tank chassis and can support ground forces in a variety of climatic and terrain conditions; variants have been deployed in the USSR, East Europe and Cuba

II. COASTAL DEFENSE

Samlet (SSC-2b)

Type: coastal defense version of the Kennel air-to-surface, turbo-jet cruise missile
Range: 45 n.m.
Warhead: 2,200 lbs. HE or CW
Overall system reliability: 60-70 percent
Refire time: 15 minutes
Remarks: two, wheeled Samlet launchers are deployed per launch site; the system has been deployed in the USSR, Cuba, Communist China, North Korea, and East Europe

Shaddock (SSC-1b)

Type: coastal defense version of the SSC-1a ground forces cruise missile
Range: 270 n.m.
Warhead: 1,000 to 2,000 lbs. HE or CW (nuclear option)
Overall system reliability: 60 percent
Refire time: no refire
Remarks: the Shaddock has not been made available to non-Soviet forces.

Styx (SS-N-2)

Type: liquid-fuel, antiship cruise missile launched from Osa and Komar-class guided missile patrol boats
Range: 20 n.m.
Warhead: 500-2,000 lbs. HE
Overall system reliability: 50 to 75 percent depending on homing mode
Refire time: no refire

Remarks: carried by Komar (2 launchers) and Osa-class (4 launchers) guided missile patrol boats; deployed in the USSR, Cuba, China, North Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria, and East Europe

III. ANTI-AIRCRAFT

ZU-23

Type: 23 mm twin anti-aircraft gun mounted on a towed, two-wheel chassis
Range: 8,200 yards horizontal; 19,000 feet vertical; 6,600 feet effective anti-aircraft range
Rate of fire: 60 rounds per minute per gun
Muzzle velocity: 3,050
Weight: 2,060 lbs. overall
Remarks: the ZU-23 is a dual-purpose weapon suitable for AA use as well as direct-fire ground use against personnel and light armor; it is standard issue in the USSR and has been delivered to several other countries

IV. MEDIUM RANGE BALLISTIC MISSILES

Shyster (SS-3)

Type: single stage MRBM employing radio-inertial guidance and nonstorable liquid propellant
Range: 630 n.m.
Warhead: 2,700 lbs. nuclear (conventional possible)
Accuracy: 1.0 to 1.75 n.m. CEP
Refire time: 2 to 5 hours
Remarks: the SS-3 is now obsolete; it has never been deployed outside the USSR

Sandal (SS-4)

Type: single stage MRBM employing inertial guidance and storable liquid propellant
Range: 1,020 n.m.
Warhead: 1,900-2,500 lbs. nuclear (conventional possible)
Accuracy: 1.25 n.m. CEP
Refire time: 2 to 4 hours

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Remarks: the SS-4 is deployed in both soft and hard sites, primarily in the European USSR; a much larger conventional warhead could be delivered to shorter ranges (e.g., 4,000 lbs. to about 800 n.m.); this system was deployed to Cuba and withdrawn in 1962

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