

China and the Escalation of the Vietnam War: January to July 1965

By

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(Under the Direction of William Stueck)

This thesis examines the connections between the Johnson administration's concerns about China and the escalation of the Vietnam War in early 1965. Chapter one examines how the need to contain Communist China in the context of Sino-Soviet conflict contributed to the Johnson administration's decision of escalating the war in the first place. Chapter two and three discuss how the possibility of direct Chinese intervention in Vietnam shaped America's strategy of gradual escalation and how the attitude of Communist China toward a negotiated settlement helped to rule out a possible political solution in Vietnam.

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Introduction: China's Role in the Vietnam War Reconsidered

Scholars now agree that early 1965 was the pivotal period in the Johnson administration's escalation of the Vietnam War. During this time, Washington fundamentally deepened the U.S. commitment to Saigon by initiating the regular bombing of North Vietnam and by sending American ground combat troops to South Vietnam. Yet historians disagree among each other on why and how American leaders chose to do what they did in Vietnam in this important period.¹ Moreover, as a factor crucial to the understanding of America's escalation of the Vietnam War, the role played by American leaders' concern about China has failed to receive sufficient and proper treatment from most scholars.

To be sure, it is wrong to say that historians have not discussed China's role in the Vietnam War. Almost every Vietnam War history mentions China; yet China is usually assumed as given background without much detailed analysis. It is unclear how concerns about China functioned during the Johnson administration's handling of the war. From the early 1990s, due to the newly released Chinese sources, historians began to realize the depth of China's involvement in the Vietnam War, focusing on Beijing's assistance to Hanoi and the relations between the war and China's domestic revolution.² Although these works have begun to be incorporated into the literature on the Vietnam War, their impact on the understanding of the war's escalation in early 1965 has been minimized. One reason is that these works mainly focus on the foreign policy of

¹ See, for example, H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York: 2000); and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (4th rev. ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

² Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969," *China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995): 356-387; Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965: New Chinese Evidence," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 6-7 (Winter 1995-1996): 233-250; Zhang Xiaoming, "The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Military History* 60 (October 1996): 731-762; Qiang Zhai, *China and The Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

China and deal with how Chinese leaders viewed the war in Vietnam, not how American policy makers regarded China's involvement in the Vietnam War. Thus most historians continue to regard China as a given factor in Washington's Vietnam policy-making, and feel no need to do a detailed analysis of how the consideration of China changed and how it shaped America's escalation of the war.

Indeed, a careful examination of America's decision-making on the escalation of the war reveals that Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors paid close attention to China's attitudes and its potential responses. Consideration of China loomed large in terms of three basic problems the Johnson administration faced: whether or not to escalate the war, the proper military strategy and the proper political strategy once the war escalated. Without an in-depth analysis of the dynamic of Washington's calculations regarding China, it is impossible to develop a comprehensive interpretation of America's management of the escalation.

Historians are sharply divided on the issue of whether the Johnson administration should have escalated the war in early 1965 in the first place.³ The initial interpretation, which emerged during the course of the war, was highly critical toward government policy, a stance both fueled and reinforced by the war's unpopularity at home.⁴ When North Vietnam finally took the south

³ Robert A. Divine, "Vietnam Reconsidered", *Diplomatic History*, 12 (Winter, 1988), 79-93; Gary R. Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War", *Diplomatic History*, 18(Spring 1994), 239-264; Robert J. McMahon, "U.S.-Vietnamese Relations: A Historiographical Survey", in Warren I. Cohen, *Pacific Passage: The Study of American-East Asian Relations on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 313-336.

⁴ Some scholars holding this stance believe that if American policymakers had reached a more realistic assessment of the limited interests at stake for the U.S. in Vietnam, the escalation could have been avoided. See Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

Other scholars, critical of the escalation, see U.S. intervention as a logical outgrowth of the unquestioned global containment strategy. See George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne, 1990); James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did* (New York: Random House, 1986); William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

in 1975, some scholars began to challenge the earlier critique.⁵ Both sides, however, failed to give full credit to the role China played in the White House's conference rooms because they treated China as a minor partner in a communist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union, not an independent actor which itself might be important enough to shape America's decision on escalation.

An example is George C. Herring's *America's Longest War*, which is representative of the works opposing the war's escalation. In the fourth edition of this highly-respected work, Herring maintains that the escalation was a result of the unquestioned assumptions of the containment policy, which made Washington exaggerate the USSR's threat in Southeast Asia. He admits China's role in terms of Beijing's assistance to Hanoi, and he also recognizes the difference between China and the Soviet Union. But Herring never views China as an independent factor and the Sino-Soviet split as important enough to shape Washington's consideration of America's stakes in Vietnam.⁶

Unlike Herring, Michael Lind sets out to justify America's escalation by arguing that it was necessary for Washington to fight a proxy war with Moscow in Indochina, a peripheral area strategically, to avoid broader conflicts in other regions such as Europe. Not unlike Herring, Lind believes that despite their differences, China and the Soviet Union cooperated to take Vietnam into the communist bloc, and China only added extra troubles on the real, dangerous Soviet conspiracy.⁷ Both sides, then, mainly focused on Soviet-American relations, and downplayed Sino-American relations during the escalation.

⁵ See Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1978); Timothy J. Lomperis, *The War Everyone Lost—And Won: America's Intervention in Vietnam's Twin Struggles* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University Press, 1984); Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984); Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 131-171.

⁷ Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, 1-31.

To Herring and Lind, China only played a minor role in the communist movement and the Sino-Soviet split was not fully comprehended and utilized by America leaders. In fact, a close examination of America's Vietnam policy-making process will show that American leaders actually realized that Beijing was more aggressive and more dangerous than Moscow in Southeast Asia. They also recognized the split between the two communist powers and tried to take advantage of it. More important, there was a deeper concern that if America failed to contain China in Vietnam, the Soviet Union would be forced back to a hard line toward the West and thus the trend of détente would be killed. In short, the Johnson administration's consideration of China contributed significantly to the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Once the decision for escalation was made, the proper military strategy became one focus of debates. Yuen Foong Khong, in his famous *Analogies at War*, argues that the Korean War analogy played an important role in Washington's reasoning about the proper military actions. While he points out that the fear of a direct Chinese intervention, as happened in the Korean War, forced Johnson to adopt a moderate military option, his main focus is on the role played by historical analogies in America's foreign policy-making, not on whether such analogies were well-founded.⁸

Other authors, however, have taken a step further. They propose that massive and quick application of U.S. military power against North Vietnam could have won the war, while the gradual escalation of the war actually allowed Hanoi time to adjust to U.S. pressure and lost the war by making American soldiers fight with one hand bound behind their back. In advancing these propositions, they acknowledge that it was American leaders' mindless fear of direct Chinese intervention into the war that precluded a more decisive military option. As Harry G.

⁸ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 97-148.

Summers argues, the United States “allowed (itself) to be bluffed by China throughout most of the war.”⁹ Although some historians, using newly released Chinese sources, argue that if American had taken a more dramatic military strategy, there would have been a real danger of another Sino-American war,¹⁰ the myth persists that American soldiers were deprived of victory by the civilian officers in Washington. A close examination of America’s perception of China’s intervention in early 1965 not only reaffirms that China would have intervened had the ground war spread to North Vietnam; it will also show that American policy makers well understood that China was serious about its warnings. After all, China did supply North Vietnam with considerable aid. Moreover, Washington accurately recognized that direct Chinese intervention would change the power balance in Vietnam. By the middle of 1965, it seemed that both sides had reached a kind of mutual understanding regarding the pace and level of the war in Vietnam.

The consideration of China also shaped America’s handling of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, a point that has not been fully addressed by historians. Some scholars attribute the abortive negotiations to a stubborn Hanoi.¹¹ Most others argue that America failed to get a political solution instead of an escalation of the war because Johnson and his advisors were so preoccupied by the containment policy that they equated a political settlement with a defeat, and they believed that the South Vietnam Government was too weak to stand by itself once America withdrew. Under these circumstances, American leaders did not even bother to conceive a detailed agenda for negotiation. Fredrik Logevall, for example, argues that Johnson and his several key advisors were so obsessed with fighting for their manhood and America’s credibility

⁹ Summers, *On Strategy*, 94. For another typical view of this critique, see Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Chen Jian, “China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969,” 366-369; Qiang Zhai, “Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965: New Chinese Evidence,” 243.

¹¹ Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America’s search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978).

that they even ignored opposition from major allies.¹² While focusing on the voices from allies and from within America, Logevall pays little attention to the role of the other side in ruling out a negotiated settlement. China, long known to oppose negotiations, was not taken into full consideration in terms of to what extent and on what level it determined America's approach to a political settlement in Vietnam. Although Qiang Zhai discusses the relations between China's opposition to Vietnam peace talks and China's domestic revolutionary ideology,¹³ we still need to examine how and to what extent Washington's consideration of Beijing decided the fate of a political settlement in Vietnam.

Given the fact that China played a crucial role in America's escalation of the Vietnam War in early 1965, it is time to single the China factor out and weigh it in a broader context. The following pages will discuss America's consideration of China when the Johnson administration tried to figure out whether American should be further involved in Vietnam, and once the war escalated, what would be the best military and political strategy.

¹² Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, especially see 375-413.

¹³ Qiang Zhai, "Opposing Negotiations: China and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-1968." *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (February 1999), 21-49.

Chapter One:

Vietnam: A Classroom to Teach China a Lesson

“The ChiCom government expects that Johnson will continue the policy line of Kennedy (in Vietnam) at least until the next presidential election,” the CIA reported on December 24, 1963, one month after President Kennedy’s death, “There is a big question however as to what his policy will be after he is perhaps elected next year. The Chinese are convinced that he is more conservative than Kennedy was.”¹⁴

The Chinese leaders would not wait too long to get the “big question” answered. Lyndon B. Johnson, who inherited Kennedy’s key advisors on foreign policy, gradually transformed a limited partnership with Saigon into an open-ended commitment to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. During this process, concerns about China played a significant role in deciding whether American soldiers should fight the war for the South Vietnamese. Even Chinese leaders knew their country would play a key role in America’s calculation. On June 24, 1964, after Washington reaffirmed its commitment to Saigon, Liu Shaoqi, China’s Head of State, told Van Tien Dung, North Vietnam’s chief of staff and the individual in charge of military operations in South Vietnam, “when they [American leaders] do something about Vietnam, they will have to think of China.”¹⁵ In the same month, Mao Zedong further assured the North Vietnamese that “your business is my business; my business is your business. We together will unconditionally fight America.”¹⁶

¹⁴ “Chinese Communist Reaction to President Kennedy’s Death and Expectations for President Johnson”, December 24, 1963, *CIA Research Reports, China, 1946-1976*, (microform), (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1982), Reel 1, 0838,2.

¹⁵ Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 209.

¹⁶ Qu Aiguo, Bao Mingrong, and Xiao Zhuyao, *Yuanyue kangmei: Zhongguo zhiyuan budui zai yuenan* (Assisting Vietnam, Resisting America: Chinese Supporting Units in Vietnam), (Beijing: Junshi Keji, 1995), 9.

The intimate relationship between Hanoi and Beijing was well apprehended by Washington. In fact, the Johnson administration's concerns about China began far earlier than the decision for escalating the war was made in early 1965. From the day he took charge in the White House, Johnson pledged to stand firm before the Communist threat in Vietnam. After he listened to Ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge's assessment of the Saigon regime on November 24, 1963, Johnson felt like a "catfish that had just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in the middle of it." He vowed to meet the Communist threat and told Lodge to "go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word."¹⁷

Eighteen days later, Roger Hilsman, then assistant secretary of State for Far East Affairs, released his famous speech on China policy in San Francisco. This speech, with the acquiescence of Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Johnson himself,¹⁸ was welcomed by most people as a much delayed foreign policy initiative toward Communist China, for the new Johnson administration now admitted that America could not just ignore Red China as a "passing phenomena" and called for a more flexible "open door" policy toward Beijing. However, this speech conveyed a mixed message. Hilsman made it clear that the viability of this initiative depended on the Chinese leaders—only if they ceased to remain "wedded to a fundamentalist form of Communism which emphasizes violent revolution even if it threatens the physical ruin of the civilized world," halted "their determination to spread their system everywhere," and "admit that there are common interests which cross ideological lines." Yet Hilsman hardly expected Communist China would change its behavior, for "the differing circumstances and opportunities on the peripheries of the Soviet Union and Communist China" made it easy for

¹⁷ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decisionmaking on Vietnam*. The Senator Gravel edition. 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon, 1971-1972), 3: 17-23. Hereafter cited as *PP(Gravel)*.

¹⁸ In his oral history, Rusk confirmed that he and Johnson knew of Hilsman's speech before it was released. He also confirmed that no one opposed it beforehand. See Dean Rusk Oral History Collection, Rusk on China, Transcript, QQ, 10-11, Dean Rusk Oral History Collection, Richard B. Russell Library, Athens, the University of Georgia Library.

Beijing to realize its ambitions. “The Soviet Union and European members of its bloc border on long-established—as well as more distant—deterrent and defensive forces. Communist China’s neighbors, on the other hand, include newly established states struggling to maintain their independence, with very limited defence forces.” Therefore, “there is a wider range of opportunities for aggression and subversion available to Peking, which renders it even more important that in dealing with Peking we do not permit that regime to underestimate free world firmness and determination.” Hilsman thus warned that if China would not let its neighbors alone, in this instance the Southeast Asia nations, America would not “betray our interests and those of our Allies to appease the ambitions of Communist China’s leaders.”¹⁹

Hilsman’s speech contained three important themes that later developed into key rationale of the Johnson administration’s escalation of the Vietnam War. The first was the perceived Chinese Communist threat to Southeast Asia. To be sure, from the time the Communist Chinese regime was established, consecutive American administrations had regarded Southeast Asian countries as natural preys of international Communism. One main objective of America’s involvement in the first Indochina War was to contain the expansion of Communism in that area. Yet when Lyndon Johnson took office the perceived Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia seemed much more immediate and urgent than before, for at the moment the entrenched American containment policy toward China reached a crucial break point. During the first months of the Johnson administration, Washington had to accept the fact that the economic embargo against China had largely failed, in no small part because of increased trade between China and key U.S. allies such as Japan, Canada, Australia and Britain.²⁰ Dean Rusk, for example, once urged

¹⁹ Roger Hilsman’s Speech on China Policy to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, December 13, 1963, printed in Roderick MacFarquhar, *Sino-American Relations, 1949-71* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), 201-205.

²⁰ For American economic blockade against China, see Zhang Shuguang, *Economic Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001).

Johnson to remind the Prime Minister of Australia of the danger inherent in the trade with China. “*Let him know that,*” Rusk suggested, “while we recognize Australia’s right to trade with whatever nation it pleases, *we are uneasy about Australia’s increasing dependence on Communist China as a market...You may wish to express our concern at the potential domestic (i.e. within Australia) political problems that might arise should the livelihood of too many Australians come to depend on sales to Communist China.*”²¹

To the Johnson administration’s uneasiness, China did not merely survive American economic punishment, it also launched a world-wide diplomatic offensive. On December 14, 1963, Chinese Premier Zhou En-Lai and Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi started a two-month tour of Africa. On December 21, Zhou and the United Arab Republic President Gamal Abdel Nasser issued a joint statement denouncing “the imperialist policy adopted [by America] in the Middle East” and warned against “the threat of such a policy to world peace and security.”²² Three days later, Zhou delivered a speech in Algeria in the company of President Ahmed Ben Bella. In this speech Zhou declared that the current international situation was “excellent for revolutionary struggle and the pursuit of national liberation” and Algeria would be “the Cuba of Africa.”²³ In Morocco, Zhou and Chen accused the U.S. of “its policy of hostility toward China” and its holding the “Chinese territory of Taiwan ... and maintaining military bases around China and violating Chinese airspace and territorial waters.”²⁴ During the next month, China announced the intention to develop cultural and economic relations with various African countries such as Tunisia, Mali, Guinea, Ethiopia and Somalia and called for an Asian, African, Latin American

²¹ Memorandum from Dean Rusk to LBJ, June 22, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), 27: 2. Hereafter cited as *FRUS*. Emphasis original.

²² *People’s Daily*, December 22, 1964.

²³ *Ibid.*, December 25, 1964.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, December 29, 1964.

“anti-imperialist” conference in Ghana.²⁵ This spectacular diplomatic tour was a big victory for Communist China. Soon afterward fourteen African countries recognized Beijing, leaving only fifteen to continue their relations with Taipei.

Beijing was greatly encouraged and decided to advance further. Indeed, Mao and his colleagues believed it was time to break America’s containment toward China and expand China’s influence not only in Africa, but also in Southeast Asia and Latin America. The Chinese diplomatic impact was felt by the Johnson administration particularly in Southeast Asian countries. Soon after the trip to Africa, Zhou En-Lai and Chen Yi rushed out to several Asian nations. On February 18, 1964, Zhou and General Ne Win, head of Burma’s military junta, said in a joint statement that the emerging nations of Africa and Asia should concentrate on building “their independent national economy ... [depending] on the efforts of their peoples and their own material resources.” The statement also warned those nations to “beware of attempts by colonialists and neo-colonialists to dominate newly independent countries by taking advantage of the financial and economic difficulties with which they are faced.”²⁶ On the same day, Zhou and Chen proceeded to Pakistan, where Zhou announced that China would support Pakistan’s position on Kashmir. The two nations soon developed a close relationship. Several months later, Pakistan announced it was to receive an interest-free \$60 million loan from China and would repay the loan over a 30 to 40-year period.²⁷ On March 15, a planeload of arms arrived in Cambodia from China. At the airport, Prince Sihanouk told the Chinese ambassador that “since our liberation from conditional American aid, our two armies have been able fraternally to extend hands.”²⁸ On April 4, the Premier of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma, visited Beijing and

²⁵ Ibid., January 9, 12, 16, 21, 30; February 1, 1964.

²⁶ Ibid., February 19, 1964.

²⁷ Ibid., February 20, June 31, 1964.

²⁸ Ibid., March 16, 1964.

appealed for assistance in bringing peace to his country. Zhou replied by blaming Laotian chaos on the U.S. and demanding that U.S. forces be withdrawn from South Vietnam. After the Laotian coup on April 19, Chen Yi again blamed America again and said that “Laos is now faced with the dangers of all-out civil war as a result of provocations of United States imperialists and the Laotian right wing.” Meanwhile, China refused to use its influence to stop the military actions of Communist Pathet Lao.²⁹

Compared with Communist China’s activities in these countries, however, more serious troubles were caused by Beijing in Indonesia. During the early 1960s, the Indonesia President Sukarno gathered the Indonesia Army and the Indonesia Communist Party (PKI) behind his “Confrontation” policy toward Malaysia and the West. Under this policy, Sukarno developed a doctrine of continuing revolution against neo-colonialism, swore to crush the Britain-backed Malaysia and openly invited help from the Communist world. As the most important “domino” of Southeast Asian nations,³⁰ the Johnson administration feared Beijing might take over Indonesia through PKI, the third largest Communist party after the Russian and the Chinese. In fact, Johnson and his advisors’ fear was well-founded in the light of Beijing’s support of Sukarno in his conflict with Malaysia. On January 7, 1964, McGeorge Bundy briefed Johnson on the importance of not losing Indonesia to Chinese Communism: “we are contending for the long-range future of a country of 100 million with great resources in a strategic location” and this is “essential to our national interest.”³¹ On the same day at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, senior officials agreed that “if the Indonesians turn against us and seize U.S.

²⁹ Ibid., April 5, May 13, 1964.

³⁰ The importance of Indonesia was repeated by the Eisenhower administration and the Kennedy administration. For a up-to-date analysis, see John Subritzky, *Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand Diplomacy in the Malaysian-Indonesian Confrontation, 1961-5* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

³¹ McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, January 7, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines*, 26: 13.

investments, the Chinese Communists might get the U.S. oil companies, thereby altering the strategic balance in the area.”³²

Johnson hardly needed any brief. “I made a speech on the Greek-Turkish policy in 1945 or 6 in which I said when you let a bully come in and start raiding you in your front yard, if you run, he’ll come in and run you out of your bedroom the next night.” Johnson told McNamara, “I don’t think we ought to encourage this guy [Sukarno] to do what he is doing there.”³³ Despite these strong words, however, Washington restrained its direct actions toward Indonesia. The main reason was that the Johnson administration was reluctant to supplant the role played by London in the Indonesian-Malaysian confrontation. “In your talks in London you should emphasize that we were not presuming to interfere in someone else’s problem,” Rusk told the American ambassador to London, but the British government should be warned about the “firm implantation of ChiCom influence in Indonesia through PKI.”³⁴ Moreover, Rusk had no doubt that Beijing was the hand behind all these troubles. “We should try to look at Western policy in Southeast Asia as a whole rather than as individual problems of Britain over Malaysia or of US over South Vietnam,” Rusk argued.³⁵

Reports and memos flowing into the White House confirmed Rusk’s concerns about China. In January 1964, for example, one National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) reported that “China’s direct military threat to the West will remain limited, but China will continue to be a major force in Asia, and a crucial menace to its Asian neighbors and to Western interests in the area.”³⁶ In February, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded that “the Chinese Communist Army will continue to be the strongest in Asia and will provide a powerful backing for Chinese Communist

³² NSC Meeting, January 7, 1964, *Ibid.*, 19.

³³ Conversation between LBJ and McNamara, January 2, 1964, *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁴ Telegram, January 23, 1964. *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁵ Telegram, January 23, 1964, *ibid.*, 50.

³⁶ National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 13-64, January 27, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 17.

foreign policy,” which would be continued “efforts to achieve recognition as a major world power and the dominant power in Asia.” Unless America stands firm before Communist China, the JCS warned, China “would probably feel that the United States would be more reluctant to intervene on the Asian mainland and thus the tone of Chinese policy would probably become more assertive” and “generally, Asians probably will become more reluctant to assume a strong stand in opposition to China in the absence of credible guarantees of Western protection.”³⁷

Fully aware of China’s threat to its neighbors, the Johnson administration saw a larger conspiracy behind the curtain. “It became increasingly clear that Ho Chi Minh’s military campaign against South Vietnam was part of a larger, much more ambitious strategy being conducted by the Communists,” Johnson later recalled: “Peking was in a bellicose and boastful mood Peking was promising Hanoi full support and was urging ‘wars of national liberation’ as the solution to all the problems of non-Communist underdeveloped nations.” Moreover, Johnson believed that the domino theory could be applied to China perfectly. “The Chinese were training Thai guerillas.” In Indonesia, Sukarno “went to Communist China” for support and to “destroy the new Malaysian Federation.” Cambodia also quickly became “a principal supply point for Chinese military equipment going to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.” “In Laos Chinese influence was dominant in the country’s two northernmost provinces,” and Johnson “had no doubt the North Koreans were only waiting for us to be thrown out of Vietnam before launching their own offensive against South Korea.” Thus Johnson saw a “Djakarta-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang axis, with Cambodia probably to be brought in as a junior partner and Laos to be merely absorbed by the North Vietnamese and Chinese.” From this prospect, he believed that

³⁷ Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, National Security Policy*, 10: 26-41.

“the decisions we were making would determine not merely the fate of Vietnam but also the shape of Asia for many years.”³⁸

However, according to this memoir, Vietnam, not any other single country, was Johnson’s main focus. While the perceived Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia in Hilsman’s speech was firmly established within the Johnson administration, it was Vietnam that would become the key battlefield in Washington’s effort to contain Chinese Communism. For the Chinese Communists’ activities and influence abroad, as we shall see later, were most severely felt in this divided country.

Standing firm before Communist expansionism was an entrenched Johnson worldview. The increased Chinese communist activities in Southeast Asia reinforced this view, which was also the core rationale of the long-standing U.S. policy of opposing the expansion of communism into South Vietnam. Thus, not to intervene in Vietnam to prevent Saigon’s fall into the hegemony of Red China would be a break with history. Moreover, Johnson and his senior advisors fully embraced the lessons America learned from the 1930s—from the Japanese attack on Manchuria, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and especially Hitler’s advance in Europe—that is, that appeasing aggressors only leads to further aggression. In other words, aggression unchecked is aggression unleashed, and aggression unleashed is particularly dangerous because it leads eventually to general war just as the unchecked fascist aggressions of the 1930s led directly to World War II. As Vice President from 1961 to 1963, Johnson had already regarded Vietnam as today’s Czechoslovakia of Southeast Asia. In May 1961 Kennedy sent Johnson to visit government chiefs of Southeast Asia countries, and the principle goal of this trip was to encourage Saigon to introduce social reforms and step its military resistance to the Communists. Johnson took this chance to express his views about America’s policy on Southeast Asia. In a

³⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: HEC Public, 1971), 134-136.

local store full of Chinese customers at Bangkok, Johnson lectured his non-English-speaking audience about the virtues of democracy and the dangers of Chinese Communism. In Saigon, he called Ngo Dinh Diem, then the President of South Vietnam, the Winston Churchill of Asia in a warm speech delivered in downtown Saigon. On his return to the United States Johnson pressed the case for a greater commitment to the defense of South Vietnam. "I cannot stress too strongly the extreme importance of following up this mission with other measures, other actions, and other efforts," Johnson told Kennedy, "The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination." Otherwise, "the United States, inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shore...and the vast Pacific becomes a Red Sea." Therefore America "must decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a 'Fortress America' concept."³⁹ Thus to Johnson, Vietnam was clearly the domino Communist China would pull down first.

Although Johnson was at the periphery of Kennedy's inner circle, his perception about the Communist threat to Vietnam persisted into his own administration. "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went," he swore after the brief on Vietnam with his key advisors on November 24. Johnson urged them to "devote every effort" to the war. "Don't go to bed at night until you have asked yourself, 'Have I done everything I could to further the American effort to assist South Vietnam?'"⁴⁰ Indeed, Johnson's alarm about China was shared and reinforced by his key advisors. In a memorandum to Johnson in mid-March 1964, McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for National Security Affairs, reiterated the importance of South Vietnam as the first domino in Southeast

³⁹ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12-20; LBJ to JFK, May 23, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vietnam*, 1: 135-178.

⁴⁰ Bill Moyers, "Flashback," *Newsweek*, February 10, 1975. Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 99-100.

Asia. He believed that America must stand firm before the Chinese expansionism and that America would win because “it is quite foreign to the traditions of the area to give in to pressures which are directed from Peking.” He also suggested that “some deliberate connection of the Communists with China may be helpful in Saigon.”⁴¹ Roger Hilsman backed Bundy by arguing that America should “warn the Communist side that they are indeed playing a ‘deeply dangerous game.’”⁴² Robert McNamara, Johnson’s Secretary of Defense, later reflected in his memoir that “we—certainly I—badly misread China’s objectives and mistook its bellicose rhetoric to imply a drive for regional hegemony.”⁴³ Even if McNamara and others really misunderstood China’s intentions, a question remaining highly controversial, the secretary’s reflection, from another perspective only demonstrated how seriously the China threat was taken in the Johnson administration. Yet the most adamant person who argued to contain China in Vietnam was Johnson’s Secretary of State, Dean Rusk.

As one of the most sophisticated American officials, Dean Rusk was also one of Johnson’s most trusted Cabinet members. In the Kennedy administration, Rusk assigned one officer to Johnson as his liaison with the State Department and kept Johnson fully informed about foreign policy. Rusk’s advice on America’s Vietnam policy was crucial not only because of his close relationship with Johnson, but also because of his extraordinary experience with China, Vietnam and other Asian countries. Besides his fascination with the China Town culture in Atlanta, Georgia in his childhood, Rusk served as chief of war plans under General Joseph Stilwell in the China-Burma-India theater during World War II. After helping draw the 38th parallel in Korea in 1945, Rusk was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs in the Truman administration. Later, when he served as president of the Rockefeller Foundation, Rusk chaired

⁴¹ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, March 14, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 148-149.

⁴² Hilsman to Rusk, March 14, 1964, *ibid.*, 178.

⁴³ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), 33.

the subpanel on foreign policy of one massive project organized by the Rockefeller family devoted to the study of U.S. national policy, especially toward China and the Sino-Soviet split. When Rusk served as Secretary of State in the Kennedy administration, he was active dealing with policies toward China and Taiwan.⁴⁴

Although Rusk was not a China specialist, he had abundant experiences dealing with the Chinese Nationalist government, and had developed friendly relationships with senior officials in Nanjing and then Taipei, including Wellington Koo and Chiang Kai-shek himself. As for Communist China, while Rusk amazed the world by shaking hands with the Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi during a meeting on Laos in Geneva in 1962, he possessed bitter feelings toward Beijing. When China was “lost” to Communism in 1949, Rusk, like other people, felt like a “jilted lover,” asking himself, how could the Chinese people have turned against us? As one of the first American officials who was informed of the breakout of the Korean War, Rusk admitted that the war “hardened American attitudes toward Peking; it certainly hardened mine.”⁴⁵ The fact that most people underestimated the prospect of Chinese intervention in the Korean War only reinforced Rusk’s belief that Communist China was a dangerous enemy, a belief that was magnified by the breakout of the Sino-India border clash right in the middle of the Cuba missile crisis. After this brief Sino-India War that “totally caught us off guard,” Rusk, as well as other senior American officials, further regarded China as “a real menace in Asia.”⁴⁶

Thus to Rusk there was no difficulty in regarding China as the aggressive and expansionist communist state behind the disturbing situation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. In April 1963, Rusk told a Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) meeting that China’s “blatant aggression ... revealed for the whole world Communist China’s readiness to turn even on those

⁴⁴ Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa, N.J.: Cooper Square Publishers, 1980).

⁴⁵ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 158, 284.

⁴⁶ Dean Rusk Oral History, January 1986, Rusk on China, Transcript www.wwnorton.com/eh/rosh/rosh.htm.

who have tried to be a friend (India) and to resort to overt aggression whenever its expansionist aims are thereby served.”⁴⁷ Like Johnson, Rusk believed it necessary to stand up to China if the United States ever hoped to moderate its behavior. Otherwise China would learn the wrong lesson. Clark Clifford, one of Johnson’s closest unofficial advisors until he replaced Robert McNamara as the secretary of defense in 1968, observed that, from the beginning of the Johnson administration’s involvement in Vietnam, “memories of Munich and appeasement were fresh, especially in the minds of Dean Rusk and Lyndon Johnson.”⁴⁸

Besides the perceived imminent threat from Communist China in Vietnam and the need to meet this new aggressive conspiracy head-on, domestic political pressure also forced the Johnson administration to shore up its commitment to Saigon. The Democrats had never forgotten the conservatives’ inquisition into “the loss of China” during the 1950s and the charge that they were “soft” on communism. Now Johnson, who inherited a mess in Vietnam from Kennedy and feared that his administration would not be considered legitimate until he could win the pending presidential election in November, completely understood the disasters the “loss” of Vietnam to Communism would bring.

Johnson’s key advisors shared with him this concern about being “soft” on Communism. McGeorge Bundy, for example, opined that “the political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon.”⁴⁹ Johnson hardly needed such a reminder. He told John Knight, Chairman of the Board of the *Miami Herald*, that one thing he could do in Vietnam “is run and let the dominoes start falling over. And God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China

⁴⁷ *Department of State Bulletin*, 48, April 29, 1963, 641-643. (Hereafter cited as DSB)

⁴⁸ Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President* (New York: Random House, 1991), 403.

⁴⁹ McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, January 9, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 8.

would just be warming up, compared to what they'd say now. I see [Richard] Nixon is raising hell about it today. [Barry] Goldwater too.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Johnson knew that not only could he not be “soft” on international communism, but he could not be “soft” on Communist China in particular. When France decided to recognize Communist China in January 1964, Johnson consulted his congressional mentor Richard Russell (D-GA) about the proper reaction. Although Russell thought “the time’s going to come when we’re going to have to recognize Red China,” “politically, right now, it’s poison, of course.” Johnson agreed: “ I don’t think there’s any question about that.”⁵¹ Indeed, Johnson’s political instinct was accurate: now the popular view of China became even more negative than that which had existed in the late 1950s. A May Gallup Poll showed that 56 percent of the public now agreed that the People’s Republic of China was the chief danger to lasting world peace, up 9 percent from the previous March.⁵²

If the domestic political atmosphere dictated that the Johnson administration stand firm in Vietnam, it also prohibited the White House from stepping up America’s involvement there dramatically. As the highest leader of a nation enmeshed in the aftermath of the assassination of Kennedy, Johnson put high priority on maintaining order at home and creating a political coalition on Capital Hill favorable to passing a tax cut bill, a Civil Rights Act left over by Kennedy, and later his own massive domestic reform legislation known as the Great Society. When more and more congressmen, including Senator Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright, Senator Wayne Morse, Senator Ernest Gruening and even Richard Russell, expressed their concern about getting bogged down in Vietnam, Johnson was reluctant to make any major new move there. Any cursory decision that

⁵⁰ Conversation between LBJ and John Knight, February 3, 1964, Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge: the Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 213.

⁵¹ Conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, January 15, 1964, *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵² “Special Report on American Opinion”, *Washington Post*, November 30, 1964.

could satisfy the hawkish resolutions from the Pentagon and the JCS, Johnson feared, would block his domestic reform, hurt him in the Presidential election and snuff his ambition of becoming the second Franklin D. Roosevelt. “I’m supposed to be a great healer and a great pleader,” Johnson once remarked, “Kennedy’s had chances but I haven’t had any.”⁵³ Under this situation, the best choice to Johnson was keeping Kennedy’s policy on Vietnam. “We haven’t got any Congress that will go with us, and we haven’t got any mothers that will go with us in a war,” Johnson told McGeorge Bundy, “And nine months I’m just an inherited—I’m a trustee. I’ve got to win an election ... and then you can make a decision. But in the meantime, let’s see if we can’t find enough things to do to keep them (the Communists) off base, and to stop these shipments that are coming in from Laos, and take a few selected targets to upset them a little bit without getting another Korean operation started.”⁵⁴

In fact, Johnson’s desire to maintain the status quo in Vietnam was established at the very beginning of his White House tenure. On November 26, 1963, Johnson approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, which declared U.S. support for the new government of Duong Van Minh and stressed that the level of economic and military assistance to Saigon would be maintained at least as high as to the Diem regime. Yet the war remained basically a South Vietnamese affair to win or lose.⁵⁵ Communist China would not cooperate, however. During the first months of the Johnson administration, more and more hard evidence of the Chinese hand appeared. On February 7, 1964, the National Security Staff reported that “we have intelligence strongly suggesting that a high level meeting between the North Vietnamese and the Chinese is taking place in a town called Mengtzu near the North Vietnamese border. There has also been a significant movement of Chinese interceptor and bomber aircraft into this

⁵³ Conversation between LBJ and Marshall McNell, April 10, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 316-317.

⁵⁴ Conversation between LBJ and McGeorge Bundy, March 4, 1964, *Ibid.*, 266-267.

⁵⁵ *PP* (Gravel), 3:17-20.

area.”⁵⁶ Several days later, the Defense Intelligence Agency confirmed the increased Chinese intervention: “Certain signs of new North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist military activities, together with an upsurge of Viet Cong activity in South Vietnam ... raise the question whether the situation in South Vietnam may be on the verge of collapse.”⁵⁷

On January 30, 1964, the Minh government in Saigon was turned over by a coup led by General Nguyen Khanh. Together with reports about intensified Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam, the reconfirmed instability of Saigon’s politics eroded Johnson’s confidence in maintaining the status quo. “I just can’t believe that we can’t take fifteen thousand advisers and two hundred thousand people (South Vietnamese) and maintain the status quo for six months,” Johnson complained to Bundy; “I just believe we can do that if we do it right now. I don’t know enough about it to know.”⁵⁸ Determined that he could not let Vietnam ruin his efforts at home, in March 1964 Johnson sent Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the JCS, to Saigon on a fact-finding mission. McNamara’s report affirmed that the close relationship between Hanoi and Beijing was now making trouble for Washington. “Since July 1, 1963, the following items of equipment, not previously encountered in South Vietnam, have been captured from the Viet Cong: Chicom 75 mm, recoilless rifles; Chicom heavy machine guns; U.S. ... 50 caliber heavy machine guns on Chicom mounts,” McNamara warned. “In addition, it is clear that the Viet Cong are using Chinese 90 mm rocket launchers and mortars”. Of ammunition captured from the enemy, “ninety percent was of Chicom manufacture.”⁵⁹

If Johnson was not shocked by China’s support of North Vietnam, he was certainly confused by America’s principal Cold War enemy—the Soviet Union. “Why aren’t the Russians as

⁵⁶ Memo from National Security Council Staff to McGeorge Bundy, February 7, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1:64.

⁵⁷ Paper Prepared in the Defense Intelligence Agency, February 12, 1964, *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁸ Conversation between LBJ and McGeorge Bundy, March 2, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 263.

⁵⁹ Memorandum from McNamara to the President on South Vietnam, March 16, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam* 1: 156-157.

interested in this as we are?” Johnson could not understand why the Soviets were indifferent to saving Vietnam from the influence of the Chinese Communists, “Looks like to me that the Russians would be more interested in saving Vietnam than we are.” “You can’t be sure what their position is, I think.” McNamara answered. “Why do they want to see the Chinese Communists envelop Southeast Asia?” Johnson insisted, “I thought they just had an umbrella over them, just like de Gaulle does, and thought we’d do it and they didn’t need to do it.”⁶⁰

Johnson was pondering a crucial factor in U.S. calculations—the Sino-Soviet split. In fact, the Sino-Soviet split was the second theme implied in Hilsman’s speech. Compared with the Soviet Union, China now became a more aggressive, if not more dangerous, Communist power with its eyes focused on Southeast Asia. As one of the most sensitive and controversial issues of the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split loomed large in America’s involvement in Vietnam far before Johnson took charge of the White House. During the Eisenhower administration, Washington had already begun to regard Communist China as a more reckless enemy than the Soviet Union, given that the new boss of the Kremlin, Nikita Khrushchev, started the so-called “de-Stalinization” and began to stress “peaceful coexistence” with the West. In order to repulse the Chinese hordes from sweeping over Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, the Eisenhower administration even discussed the possibility of nuclear strikes against China in early 1954. Although the Geneva Conference in 1954 ended the first Indochina conflict, Washington still regarded China as a potential threat to Vietnam. According to NSC 5612/1, “U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia,” which was approved in 1956, the Communism directed by the Soviets was “now emphasiz[ing] non-military methods,” while the

⁶⁰ Conversation between LBJ and Robert McNamara, March 21, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 293-294.

“danger of overt aggression would “remain inherent so long as Communist China and North Vietnam continue a basically hostile policy supported by substantial military forces.”⁶¹

The Sino-Soviet split, which became apparent at the end of the 1950s, continued to enlarge during the Kennedy administration. On January 6, 1961, Khrushchev reiterated his commitment to peaceful coexistence with the West, after he decided to pull Soviet technicians out of China in 1960. By that time, China had showed its militancy toward America during the two Taiwan Strait crises. Early in 1961, the CIA noted the frictions between the two communist powers, concluding that “it is certain that the Sino-Soviet dispute was genuine, serious and bitter, and that it still continues.”⁶² In 1962, the CIA argued that “by any definitions, the USSR and Communist China have already broken, breached, ruptured, rived, or split.”⁶³ By 1963, the CIA reported that Sino-Soviet relations had reached a “new crisis.” Ideological and national differences had become so fundamental that “the USSR and China are now two separate powers whose interests conflict on almost every major issue.” This development, the CIA believed, would “obviously have many important advantages for the West,” one of which could be an improved Soviet-American relationship.⁶⁴ Thus the intelligence agency tried to explore new possibilities for America in Vietnam generated by the Sino-Soviet split. China, the CIA believed in mid-1964, would become a more aggressive and more dangerous enemy than the Soviet Union in Vietnam. “China apparently believes that the U.S is greatly weakened (a paper tiger) In any case, the U.S. is likely to engage in local wars to retain its positions and the Communists should not

⁶¹ NSC 5621/1, “U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia”, September 5, 1956, U.S. Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 10, 1082-1095.

⁶² “The Sino-Soviet Dispute and Its Significance”, *CIA Research Reports*, April 1, 1961. Reel 1, 0580, 2.

⁶³ “Prospects for the Sino-Soviet Relations”, *Ibid.*, 1962, Reel 1, 0680, 12.

⁶⁴ “Sino-Soviet Relations at a New Crisis”, *Ibid.*, January 14, 1963, Reel 1, 0725, 10-12.

hesitate to participate in such wars. Moscow, on the other hand, believes ... the (Communist) bloc should avoid getting involved in such wars.”⁶⁵

The Johnson administration watched the growing Sino-Soviet split closely. Through 1964, the Chinese and Soviet parties exchanged the most trenchant polemics ever seen in the history of the international Communist movement. When the Soviet Union prepared to begin détente with the West, China accused Khrushchev and his colleagues of betraying the true Communist spirit. “Dean Rusk said the USSR were becoming a moderate power in the world,” *People’s Daily* and *Red Flag* reported. “This shows that Khrushchev’s revisionism has completely surrendered to American imperialism...and Khrushchev clique is allowing American imperialism to carve up (oppressed people).”⁶⁶ The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was annoyed by China’s open challenge to its leadership in the Communist camp. Moreover, the Soviets also saw China as a dangerous partner, if not an enemy. Khrushchev was clearly troubled by Mao’s announcement that “American is a paper tiger.” “The Chinese don’t recognize any law except the law of power and force,” he recalled. Such a reckless China would cause much trouble, especially in Vietnam where “it will be a great pity” if “the infectious growth of pro-Chinese influence will be able to spread.”⁶⁷

Most senior officials in Washington thus accepted the Sino-Soviet split as real. The reluctance to acknowledge it was simply a result of the uncertainty of what kind of American

⁶⁵ “Remarks of the Chief of the Nanking Military Academy and other Chinese Military Leaders on the Situation in South Vietnam”, *Ibid.*, June 25, 1964, Reel 2, 0045, 1-3.

On the other hand, Paul Kreisberg, a State Department official in charge of China Affairs from 1960 to 1962, later recalled that, “For several years, there continued to be a great reluctance inside the U.S. government to acknowledge that there was a Sino-Soviet split. There was a widespread view that it was all a fake. It was a fraud being perpetrated for western consumption, an argument that drove the professionals out of their minds, which then went on well into the Vietnam years, with Dean Rusk being convinced as late as 1963 or ’64 that what was going on in Vietnam was simply part of the Sino-Soviet expansion of communist power.” Obviously, Kreisberg’s observation was not accurate. Paul Kreisberg Interview, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 168.

⁶⁶ “Niuping Sugong Zhongyang de gongkaixin”(The Ninth Public Critique of SCP), July 14, 1964, in *Jianguo Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian* (A Selection of Important Documents since the Founding of the PRC), (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1992-1998), 19: 57-60.

⁶⁷ Nakita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970), 470, 478, 485.

policy should be adopted in response, especially on Vietnam. As for Rusk, he was fully aware of the Sino-Soviet split at least from the late Kennedy administration. Indeed, the new Johnson administration had every reason to believe that the split was genuine. In a letter sent to Johnson and the heads of state throughout the world, Khrushchev proposed an international agreement to settle territorial disputes and border issues by peaceful means.⁶⁸ On January 2, 1964, Johnson asked McGeorge Bundy to “get Rusk and the five ablest men in the State Department and go up to Camp David and lock the gate this weekend and try to find some imaginative proposal or some initiative that we can take besides just reacting to actions and just letting Khrushchev wire everybody twenty-five pages every two days and us just sit back and dodge.” Johnson groaned, “I’m tired, by God, (of) him being the man who wants peace in the world and I’m the guy who wants war.”⁶⁹ The result, not surprisingly, was a growing détente between the two superpowers. Johnson seemed eager to answer Khrushchev’s initiative, and he calculated that unlike being “soft” on Chinese Communism, “a political poison,” a friendly gesture toward the Russians would not do him much harm. Thereby Johnson asked the House Majority leader Carl Albert for help on the Republicans’ opposition to the wheat sales with the Soviet Union. As long as the sales could be approved by the Congress, Johnson said, “they can call me a Communist all over this country—Nixon can—and that will satisfy them.”⁷⁰

Watching the disputes going on between the two Communist powers, Washington gradually linked Vietnam more often to Beijing than to Moscow. “Hanoi is encouraged on its aggressive course by Communist China,” McNamara declared. “Hanoi’s victory would be only a first step toward eventual Chinese hegemony over the two Vietnams and Southeast Asia and toward exploitation of the new strategy on other parts of the world.” Therefore, “Communist China’s

⁶⁸ *DSB*, February 3, 1964, 158-163.

⁶⁹ Conversation between LBJ and McGeorge Bundy, January 2, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 144-145.

⁷⁰ Conversation between LBJ and Carl Albert, December 20, 1963, *Ibid.*, 112.

interests are clear: It has publicly castigated Moscow for betraying the revolutionary cause whenever the Soviets have sounded a cautionary note. It has characterized the United States as a paper tiger and has insisted that the revolutionary struggle for 'liberation and unification' of Vietnam could be conducted without risks by, in effect, crawling under the nuclear and conventional defense of the free world. Peiping thus appears to ... use Vietnam as a test case."⁷¹

Indeed, after McNamara's March 1964 mission to Saigon, there was no doubt in the Johnson administration that Vietnam was becoming the hottest arena for China's support for "wars of national liberation" and America's defense of the free world. However, although McNamara's concern about China was shared by other senior officials in Washington, the Johnson administration was reluctant to adopt any dramatic action in Vietnam, for there were still suspicions that escalated American actions in Vietnam would drive the Chinese and the Soviets together again. On March 20, 1964, Johnson told Ambassador Lodge to hold fire in Vietnam until the Sino-Soviet split's implications for future American policy became clear. "There is additional international reason for avoiding immediate overt action," Johnson ordered, "in that we expect a showdown between the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties soon and action against the North (Vietnam) will be more practicable after than before a showdown." Lodge fully agreed.⁷²

Thus when NSAM 288 was approved by Johnson on March 17, 1964 based on the report of the McNamara-Taylor mission, Washington still tried to stick to the status quo policy. Nevertheless, compared with NSAM 273, NSAM 288 stated the rationale of America's commitment to Saigon comprehensively and enlarged Washington's objectives in South Vietnam. Besides seeking "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam," America now must

⁷¹ McNamara, "United States Policy in Vietnam", April 13, 1964, *PP(Gravel)*, 3: 714-715.

⁷² LBJ to Lodge, March 20, 1964; Lodge to LBJ, March 23, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 185-186.

defend the whole of Southeast Asia, of which area South Vietnam held the key. “Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam,” it argued, “almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period without help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India on the West, Australia and New Zealand to the South, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the North and East would be greatly increased.” Indeed, this was a classic version of the domino theory. But the timing was crucial: maybe now was the time for devoting America fully to the defense of Southeast Asia. “All of these consequences would probably have been true even if the U.S. had not since 1954, and especially since 1961, become so heavily engaged in South Vietnam. However, that fact accentuates the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia but in the rest of the world, where the South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation to meet the Communist ‘wars of liberation.’”⁷³ NSAM 288 thus recommended gradual military pressure toward Hanoi.

NSAM 288 indeed was a comprehensive version of the rationale of the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policy. By then the perceived danger of Communist China, more aggressive than the Soviet Union, contributed significantly to Washington’s firm stance in Vietnam. Indeed, to show America’s determination not to appease Communist aggression was the last theme in Hilsman’s speech. And this was the core spirit of NSAM 288. However, China per se, as viewed in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, can not explain America’s escalation of the Vietnam War sufficiently. After all, compared with the Soviet Union, China lacked the

⁷³ *PP* (Gravel), 3: 50-56.

ability to confront America globally as well as regionally, although many people believed that China might have several advantages in the Vietnam jungles. More important, Vietnam was clearly viewed in the global Cold War context. Although the Sino-Soviet split was real, most officials in Washington regarded it as a dispute over methods, not objectives. True the Chinese favored a military approach toward the “wars of liberation” while the Russians stressed the “peaceful coexistence,” yet they both struggled for ultimate Communist domination of the world.

Still, at the moment Washington was more concerned about the Communist methods than remote Communist aims. For Johnson and his advisors, the aggressive Chinese Communists, if unchecked, could kill the nascent trend toward détente with the Soviet Union and push the latter back to the militant hard line. In order to understand this point, it is necessary to examine it in a broader context, namely Cold War nuclear deterrence.

Troubled by the heavy cost of the Korea War in terms of casualties and the burden on the domestic economy, the Eisenhower administration developed a lower-cost strategy for national defense in 1953. According to this “new look,” Eisenhower’s Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced in 1954 that America would depend on nuclear weapons’ capacity to retaliate instantly to achieve a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost, a strategy known as “massive retaliation.” This strategy was based on the U.S. nuclear superiority—the capability of attacking the Soviet Union from a variety of angles while remaining invulnerable itself. This superiority, however, was shattered in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, which proved that now the USSR had the ability to build intercontinental missiles. The panic caused by the “missile gap” in America soon faded, however, when the U.S. realized that it still had enough second-strike power to deter a possible Soviet attack. Yet soon the two superpowers reached a dangerous nuclear balance—the two nations had the ability to destroy each other even if after absorbing a

first strike from their counterpart. In McNamara's words, America and the Soviet Union reached a state of "mutual assured destruction (MAD)."⁷⁴

In this situation, the so-called "credibility gap," as Jonathan Schell puts it, appeared.⁷⁵ According to the credibility gap theory, the best way to contain Communist expansion was to keep American credibility—the unwavering determination to use force to meet Communist aggression whenever and wherever it happened. By showing the determination of containing Communism both to friends and to enemies, America could defend the free world most efficiently. However, the strategy used to keep American credibility, which was heavily based on nuclear deterrence, caused a serious problem. The core rationale of nuclear deterrence of the "new look" was the use of nuclear weapons against the enemy if deterrence failed. Yet under the situation of MAD, this surely meant suicide. Calculating that America would not really use nuclear weapons, the Communist powers would ignore the warning and subvert the world piecemeal. Thereby America would only have two choices: an all-out nuclear war or retreat.

This credibility gap, more and more people argued, should be covered by a conventional limited war designed to meet any limited, local Communist aggression. Instead of rushing to the brink of nuclear war or retreating, America should be able to use controlled force to contain Communism and keep credibility. This limited war theory became more important in the light of the Communist support of "wars of national liberation," which often took the form of local insurgencies. Among the supporters of the limited war theory were Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor, two key advisors in Johnson's Vietnam policy making. As early as 1962, McNamara began proposing a "flexible response" toward the Communist threat. Under "flexible

⁷⁴ For nuclear strategy development, see Philip Windsor, *Strategic Thinking* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002). Moti Nissani, *Lives in the Balance* (Carson City, N.V.: Hollowbrook Publishing, 1992). John Lewis Caddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May and Jonathan Rosenberg, ed. *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Random House, 1975).

response,” McNamara recommended the use of all kinds of conventional means short of nuclear war to contain Communism.⁷⁶ Taylor argued that reliance on the threat of “blasting [our enemies] from the face of the earth with atomic bombing if they commit aggression against us or our friends ... offers no alternative other than reciprocal suicide or retreat.” The only way out, according to Taylor, was limited war. Thus he argued that America had to expand and reinforce its ground forces overseas and create a robust reserve of ground and air forces.⁷⁷

However, there were still inherent dangers within the limited war theory. When America met the Soviet-supported “wars of liberation” head-on, the limited confrontation could be so escalated as to threaten a real nuclear war. The Cuban missile crisis was a typical example. Ironically, the same crisis also helped to diminish this danger. After realizing the real possibility of nuclear slaughters, the two superpowers sought to relax the tensions between them. As a result, America and the Soviet Union signed the limited Nuclear Test Ban, established a “hot-line” between Kremlin and White House, and began the trend of *détente*. As one CIA report remarked, “the Soviet behavior since the spectacular failure of the Cuban missile venture has reflected a growing recognition that the wide-ranging political offensive against the West has run its course without yielding the expected results.” The conclusion was clear: the Soviet Union had learned its lesson. “Events over the past three years, particularly the Cuban fiasco, have called into question the fundamental assumptions of this strategy—that time and long-term trends in the East-West contest were working to the advantage of the USSR and the socialist camp. Khrushchev’s adjustments to this situation have been symbolized by the limited test ban treaty last summer and the relaxation of pressures on Berlin and other exposed areas.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Windsor, *Strategic Thinking*, 66-67.

⁷⁷ Maxwell Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1959), Chapter 8.

⁷⁸ CIA Memo, April 17, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, the Soviet Union*, 14: 62.

China, however, clearly had not yet learned its lesson. “Peiping has chosen the underdeveloped, ex-colonial world as its most advantageous arena of conflict. In this ‘Third World’, the Chinese not only aim to erode US strength but to displace Soviet influence The greatest impact of Peiping’s policy is felt in Southeast Asia. The theater of primary interest is Indochina, where Peiping is seeking a decisive and humiliating defeat of the US.”⁷⁹ No one disagreed with this argument. Since Vietnam now became a test case for the “wars of liberation,” it could also serve as a perfect classroom to teach China a lesson. Indeed, at stake in Vietnam were not only an independent, non-Communism South Vietnam, but also the long-term impacts of the victory of Hanoi and Beijing. If the Communist Chinese should prevail, then not only would Beijing’s influence would be felt everywhere, the Soviets would also be forced to be more aggressive, both militarily and politically, toward the West. In other words, if America failed to teach China a lesson, the Soviet Union might drift toward Beijing’s hard line. Moscow itself might be really persuaded that the United States was a paper tiger. A powerful USSR back to its Cold War hard line would be a real nightmare for American policy makers.

The dramatic events of the remainder of 1964 induced more and more American officials to reason along these lines. To Johnson, these several months mixed blessing with curse. Domestically, the carefully manipulated public opinion by the Johnson administration finally paid off. Throughout 1964, Johnson and his advisors concealed the real situation in Vietnam so carefully that most people believed the government’s Vietnam policy was anything but the Americanization of the war. On July 2, 1964, Johnson signed the historical Civil Rights Bill into law. Four months later, Johnson was formally elected President in a landslide victory, with most people thinking Johnson was a moderate leader while the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater

⁷⁹ CIA Memo, May 5, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 169.

was a hawk who would lead this country into disaster. No longer a “trustee,” Johnson felt he could be more assertive in foreign affairs with a solid domestic political foundation.

However, his leadership had already been challenged by the Tonkin Gulf incidents. On August 3, 1964, the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* was attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Two days later, another alleged attack was reported. After authorizing reprisal air strikes against North Vietnam, Johnson turned to the Congress for support. The result was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, by which “the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”⁸⁰ The day after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was approved, William Bundy, now the assistant secretary of State for Far East Affairs, argued that “Hanoi and Peiping are certainly not persuaded that they must abandon their efforts in South Vietnam and Laos” and “a solution ... will require a combination of military pressure and some form of communication under which Hanoi (and Peiping) eventually accept the idea of getting out.”⁸¹

Hanoi and Beijing surely felt they were winning the war. They also seemed to attract more followers in Asia. On August 17, Sukarno sharply attacked America in his Indonesian independence day speech. He not only accused America of provoking the Tonkin Gulf incidents, but also adopted much Chinese revolutionary language. In December, the PKI openly sided with the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet split. In January 1961, Indonesia withdrew from the United Nations and moved even closer to China.⁸² In the previous October, China pledged to support

⁸⁰ Southeast Asia resolution, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam* (Washington, 1969), 154.

⁸¹ William Bundy, “Next Courses of Action in Southeast Asia”, August 11, 1964, *PP*(Gravel), 3: 525-526.

⁸² *FRUS, 1964-1968*, 26: 132-139, 208-213.

Cambodia in case of “foreign arms aggression.” In return, the Cambodian Prince Sihanouk called China was Cambodian’s “number one friend.”⁸³

China’s first test of a nuclear weapon on October 16, 1964 further convinced U.S. leaders that actions must be taken to contain “a billion Chinese now armed with nuclear weapons.” Although Johnson downplayed this event publicly by assuring the American people that it “comes as no surprise to the United States Government” and “our defense plans take full account of this development,”⁸⁴ these words somehow belied a deeper concern about China’s nuclear weapon development. The Johnson administration did foresee the coming Chinese atomic bomb test, and on September 15 senior officials held a national security meeting in Washington. According to Bundy, one conclusion was “that there are many possibilities for joint action with the Soviet Government if that Government is interested. Such possibilities include a warning to the Chinese against (nuclear) tests, a possible undertaking to give up underground testing and to hold the Chinese accountable if they resist in any way, and even a possible agreement to cooperate in preventive military action. We therefore agreed that it would be most desirable for the Secretary of State to explore this matter very privately with Ambassador Dobrynin as soon as possible.”⁸⁵ To the Johnson administration, although the Chinese bomb could not become a real military threat to the U.S. in the immediate future, most people agreed that it would boost China’s prestige greatly.

Just at this time, another unexpected change came from the Soviet Union—Khrushchev was ousted in October. Astonished by this change, the Johnson administration was concerned about the new government’s policy. Immediately after the Soviet Union announced Khrushchev’s

⁸³ *People’s Daily*, October 5, 1964.

⁸⁴ “Statement by the President on the First Chinese Nuclear Device”, October 16, 1964; “Recent Events on Russia, China, and Great Britain”, October 18, 1964. In *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64* (Washington D.C. 1965), 2: 1357, 1379.

⁸⁵ Memorandum for the Record, September 15, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 94.

retirement on October 15, 1964, the National Security Council staff noticed that “significant in all this is the new government’s attempt to reassure other governments (Western governments) of Soviet intentions to continue on the Khrushchevian course of peaceful coexistence.”⁸⁶ The American Embassy in Moscow also reported that the foreign policy statement of Kremlin “essentially repeats previous coexistence line This not only calculated to reassure Soviet military and dissuade any who might contemplate attempt exploit change but should give pause to speculation that strategy toward Chinese may be shifting.”⁸⁷ The State Department also reported that there would be no change currently both in the peaceful coexistence policy and the Sino-Soviet split, while the CIA concluded that the new leaders would “continue the broad policy lines of the Khrushchev era” and they had made it clear “to the Chinese Communists that they should have no illusions that the USSR may now be disposed to abandon or compromise the ‘principled’ positions it has long defended against Peiping’s assaults.”⁸⁸

Thus in the immediate aftermath of Khrushchev’s downfall, the Johnson administration seemed to conclude that the Sino-Soviet split and Moscow’s moderate approach to the West were genuine. When the Chinese resumed their attack on the Soviets after a temporary wait-and-see tactic, Johnson felt so convinced by the breakdown of Sino-Soviet fellowship that he was able to tell Mike Mansfield, who always suspected America’s deeper involvement in Vietnam would drive the two Communist powers together, that “it is most unlikely that these events (direct military pressure on North Vietnam) will have the effect of driving the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists closer together.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ NSC Staff to McGeorge Bundy, October 16, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, the Soviet Union*, 14: 131.

⁸⁷ Telegram, *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁸ State Department to McGeorge Bundy, October 17, 1964; CIA Memo, October 17, 1964, *Ibid.*, 136-141.

⁸⁹ LBJ to Mansfield, February 9, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 209.

Nevertheless, the Johnson administration fully understood the dilemma Moscow faced in Vietnam. Compared with Communist China, the Soviet Union was in a disadvantageous position. “Khrushchev had virtually disengaged Soviet policy from the Indochina problem, presumably because since mid-1963 Hanoi’s alignment with Peking had been complete and the USSR no longer had any real influence on the conduct of the warfare in South Vietnam and Laos,” the State Department concluded.⁹⁰ Since American officials tended to believe that the discontent with Khrushchev’s handling of Sino-Soviet relations contributed to his downfall, they noticed that “the new leaders are trying to play a more active role to discourage the U.S. from broadening the war and to promote negotiations of some kind. This change probably reflects their belief that Khrushchev had left a dangerous situation largely in the hands of Peiping and had perhaps even encouraged the U.S. to be more aggressive by his responses in past incidents.”⁹¹ Faced with the Chinese challenge to their leadership of the international Communism movement, the Soviets “almost certainly” would “prefer” the course “to combine a strong display of support for Hanoi with diplomatic action to contain the crisis” in Vietnam. However, there was “little chance that a ‘wider war’ would develop over South Vietnam and so involve the USSR in a risky commitment.”⁹² Since “*in time* experience may persuade the Soviet leaders that competition with China on the latter’s terms is unprofitable and that a hard-line foreign policy is inconsistent with efforts to promote domestic economic growth,” the Soviets would not “undertake the military defense of the DRV or run very high risks to protect it.”⁹³

Clearly senior officials in Washington were considering long-term Soviet-American relations. Fully aware of the short-term pressures on U.S.-USSR relations caused by Moscow’s

⁹⁰ Memo, February 15, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, the Soviet Union*, 14:244.

⁹¹ National Intelligence Estimate, January 27, 1965, *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹² Memo, February 15, 1965, *Ibid.* 245-246.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 226, 289. Emphasis added.

dilemma in Vietnam, the Johnson administration understood it was America's initiative to shape the long-term Cold War situation. "At a crucial juncture in Sino-Soviet relations," the State Department argued in favor of signing a Bilateral Air Agreement with the USSR in November: "it would provide the Soviets with evidence of the success of their 'peaceful coexistence' policy as an alternative to the Chinese hard line."⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the Johnson administration decided that the Soviet Union must be warned of any slide toward the Chinese stance. During a meeting with the Soviet Premier Kosygin in July 1965, for example, despite Kosygin's protest that the U.S. Vietnam policy caused Moscow much trouble, U.S. ambassador at large Averell Harriman carefully reminded Kosygin that "in view of the Soviet dispute with Peiping, he would have thought that the USSR would not favor the use of force as a means for the settlement of problems in the Far East." He also "assured Kosygin that the U.S. will not stand by and see country after country fall under Peiping's heel."⁹⁵

It was not enough to keep the Soviets quiet. America must also set back China's ambitions in Vietnam. Otherwise, more and more countries would follow China's suit, and the Soviets would be pushed back to the hard line. At one NSC meeting in September 1964, Johnson asked "if anyone doubted whether it was worth all this effort." General Wheeler of the JCS remarked that if South Vietnam were lost, "country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area." McNamara, McCone, Taylor and Rusk all agreed.⁹⁶

Indeed, other American officials expressed this same logic. Among Johnson's closest advisors, Walt Rostow, chairman of the Policy Planning Council for the State Department and the replacement for McGeorge Bundy, was the firmest in embracing the Sino-Soviet split. As a

⁹⁴ Memo, November 9, 1964, *Ibid.*, 171.

⁹⁵ Meeting, July 15, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3: 147-152.

⁹⁶ Memo of Meeting, September 9, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 749-755.

self-appointed China expert, Rostow's opinion on the implication of the divided Communist world for America's Vietnam policy was typical. He argued in early 1965 that the United States should respond positively to Soviet efforts to explore a possible political settlement in Vietnam. In this way, the United States could deepen the existing Sino-Soviet split and make clear that "the contrary Chinese View, if put to the test, was likely to entail swift disaster." Therefore, in order to discourage the Chinese adopting a more reckless course toward the West, it was "critically important that South Vietnam maintain its independence and that the present North Vietnam offensive be frustrated."⁹⁷

Other second rank officials expressed similar ideas. After the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Johnson named William Bundy the chairman of an interdepartmental NSC Working Group, which was devoted to study proper American actions in Vietnam in the future. In the group's working papers, containing China and keeping American credibility were linked together. One joint memo argued that Hanoi and Beijing were expecting the United States to give up. If so, then "such an image of a United States which will back down from defense of its vital interests in response to mere words (the paper tiger) would be one of the strongest encouragements to further communist adventures, in Southeast Asia and everywhere else."⁹⁸ Michael Forrestal from NSC Staff argued that "Communist China shares the same internal political necessity for ideological expansion today that the Soviet Union did during the time of the Comintern and the period just following the Second World War." Therefore, "we should delay China's swallowing up Southeast Asia until (a) she develops better table manners and (b) the food is somewhat more indigestible."⁹⁹ John McNaughton from the Defense Department claimed that one of America's aims was to "protect US reputation as a counter-subversion guarantor." Thus he favored a

⁹⁷ Walt Rostow, Memo, March 5, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, National Security Policy*, 10: 220-226.

⁹⁸ Joint Memo, November 10, 1964, *PP* (Grave), 3: 621,

⁹⁹ Memo, November 4, 1964, *Ibid.*, 592.

gradual escalation of the war. “If the DRV or China strike or invade South Vietnam, US forces will be sufficient to handle the problem.” By taking this risk, “it would demonstrate that US was a ‘good doctor’ willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied, and hurt the enemy badly.”¹⁰⁰

High ranking officials discussed the Sino-Soviet split and its implications more directly. During one congressional hearing held in 1966, Taylor divided the Communist world into two camps, the Soviet Camp and Viet Cong, Hanoi, Beijing Camp. When asked why he did not mention the Soviet role in Vietnam, Taylor answered that “the relationship of Moscow to the problem ... is quite different from that which links those three elements together.” Pushed further, Taylor continued: “I would say that it is the Peking Chinese wing of the Communist block which would gain primarily by success in this part of the world. Actually their success to some extent might even embarrass the Soviet Union because they have—they are known to be the conservative force tending to discourage any escalation in this part of the world. The Soviet Union has no national objective to gain here, and they have a great deal to lose if, in the course of events, it brought them into confrontation with the United States.” Therefore according to Taylor, “a simple statement of what we are doing in South Vietnam is to say that we are engaged in a clash of purpose and interest with the militant wing of the Communist movement, represented by Hanoi, the Viet Cong, and Peking.” The aim of these Communist leaders was to “demonstrate the efficacy of the so-called ‘War of Liberation’ as a cheap, safe, and disavowable technique for the future expansion of militant Communism.” If they would achieve this goal, then this technique “will be widely used about the world” and even the Soviets would be forced to see the “ ‘War of Liberation’ as not only admissible but inevitable.” Thus America must show

¹⁰⁰ Memo, November 7, 1964, Ibid., 601-604.

the world that “far from being cheap, safe, and disavowable,” the “War of Liberation” is “costly, dangerous, and doomed to failure.”¹⁰¹

On March 11, 1965, McNamara confirmed the need to contain China before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. During the testimony for the Foreign Assistance Act of 1965, the Defense Secretary lectured the Committee on the application of the limited war to Vietnam. “As U.S. retaliatory capabilities have made the certain destruction involved in a full-scale nuclear exchange increasingly obvious to any potential aggressor, aggression has sought new and more subtle outlets,” McNamara declared. “But if free and independent nations are to survive in the world, limited, nonnuclear aggression must be deterred no less effectively than we have deterred the use of nuclear weapons and all-out, general war.” Therefore, “regarding Vietnam, there are two paramount reasons why we must succeed in helping that country resist the aggression First, a Communist victory in South Vietnam would immediately open the way for further adventures by the Hanoi regime, and by China Second, it is vital that the United States prove to the world that the form of aggression being tested in South Vietnam is not the ‘wave of the future.’”¹⁰²

While McNamara argued for assistance to Saigon, the subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs arranged a series of hearings on the Sino-Soviet conflict and its implications for the United States in March 1965. From March 10 to March 31, the subcommittee held nine hearings and heard the testimonies of more than twenty witnesses, including government officials, military officers and scholars. The Committee intended to study the origin and development of the Sino-Soviet conflict, as well as its

¹⁰¹ Testimony of Maxwell Taylor, February 17, 1966, J. William Fulbright, *The Vietnam Hearings* (New York: Random House, 1966), 168-170, 194-195.

¹⁰² Testimony of Robert McNamara, March 11, 1965, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings on the Foreign Assistance Act of 1965* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), Part 4, 627-628.

implications for American foreign policy in Europe and the Third World. Nevertheless, by this time the Sino-Soviet split was so closely linked to the war in Vietnam and the witnesses referred to Vietnam so frequently that the Chairman of the Committee at some point had to remind people of staying with the original course. Thus these hearings actually revealed the mainstream thought on the connection between Vietnam War and the Sino-Soviet conflict.

Roger Hilsman was the first witness that appeared before the committee. By this time, he had further developed the themes in his San Francisco speech released more than one year ago. The Sino-Soviet dispute, Hilsman told the committee, was concerned about ideology, power struggle, grand strategy and policies toward the in-between world. The Chinese Communists were more aggressive than the Soviets. While Mao Zedong belittled “the United States and the free world” as “only a paper tiger,” Khrushchev replied that “this particular paper tiger had nuclear teeth.” Thus in the future “the Chinese Communist price for healing the [Sino-Soviet] breach will be too high for the Soviets to pay,” for “the Chinese will insist on abandoning the policy of easing international tensions that the Soviets adopted following the Cuban missile crisis and returning to a very aggressive, very Stalinist Cold War.” In Hilsman’s view, the Soviets felt hard pressed not to abandon the current line of peaceful coexistence, yet they might return to high-risk cold war because of “very weighty reasons—if we [U.S.] adopt policies that they feel force them into it, or if the Chinese high-risk policies are so successful that the Soviets are in danger of losing their position of leadership in the bloc.” Hilsman’s logic was clear. In order to prevent the Soviets from falling back to the Cold War hard line, America must manage to contain the Chinese hard line. “Basically, we must deal with Communist China as an independent force in the world, and in the long run our policy must combine firmness with a willingness to provide the Chinese Communists with an honorable and acceptable alternative to

continued hostility,” Hilsman suggested. Moreover, since “this is the policy we have been following with the Soviet Union—when they put missiles in Cuba we dealt with them firmly, very firmly, but a few months later we had the flexibility to negotiate a test ban treaty,” Hilsman believed that this should also be the “only sound approach for the long run” toward China.

For Hilsman, deterring the Soviet Union first required keeping American credibility before Chinese Communism, especially in Vietnam. “The real test of our capacity to deal with the Chinese Communists both firmly and wisely is in Southeast Asia and South Vietnam.” Hilsman argued: “It is the supreme test for our determination to stop Chinese-inspired Communist expansion, which we must do.” “In the circumstances, the only thing we can really be sure will impress either Communist or non-Communist Asians are ground forces.” He continued, “limited wars are a fact of life in the nuclear age. The Communists, and especially the Chinese Communists, will continue to present limited challenges—guerrilla terrorism, small-scale ground attack, and so on—and they will present these challenges in uninviting places in Southeast Asia and in Africa If we do not face the possibility of fighting on the ground now, in Southeast Asia, then we will surely have to face it later—in Thailand or elsewhere—and in even more unfavorable circumstances.”¹⁰³

Hilsman happened to be the first witness that appeared before the committee and the first one who spoke out on the Chinese pressures on the Russians. His concerns were shared by other people who testified in the following days. “Moscow is faced today with Chinese pressures of the heaviest possible sort which not only demand an immediate deterioration in Russia’s relations with the West but obviously have as their concealed aim the provocation of actual hostilities between Russia and the West at the earliest possible moment.” George Kennan

¹⁰³ Testimony of Roger Hilsman, March 10, 1965, Subcommittee on the Far East and Pacific of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, March 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, and 31, 1965 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 2-6.

claimed: “Because the Chinese reckon if they can bring about a complete and irreparable break of some sort between the Russians and ourselves and the other Western countries, then they will have the Russians in a position of isolation where the Russians will have no alternative but to put their hopes on China and give them what they want.” In Kennan’s eyes, the Sino-Soviet conflict would mean a lot for America: “that the positions of these two great political groupings and governments [the Soviet Union camp and the Chinese camp] are different ones is a fact that warrants our most careful and thoughtful attention; because, as between these differing positions, some are more useful to the cause of world peace and some are less useful, and it is up to us to look at them and to decide which are one way and which are the other way, and to conduct our policies, if we can, in such a way as to encourage those tendencies which are at least preferable to others, of not wholly satisfactory from our standpoint.”

Because it was up to the U.S. to make sure that the Chinese way of conducting “wars of liberation” could not work, Kennan regarded the conflict in Vietnam crucial. “I would say the greatest misgivings I have about the Vietnam situation is ... that an awful lot of people are sitting on their hands and saying ‘we are going to look and see who wins between the Americans and the North Vietnamese, and we will come down on the winning side when it is advantageous for us to do so.’” Therefore if America could break Communist China’s dream in Vietnam, it could also help to choose the “more useful” way to world peace. Standing firm in Vietnam would “strengthen their [the Soviets] hand vis-a-vis the Chinese. This is what they will say behind the scenes. They will go to the Chinese and say: ‘Look here, we have been telling you all along you would get in trouble if you continued this thing.’”¹⁰⁴

Kennan’s arguments were further supported by Professor Thomas Wolfe from George Washington University. “With regard to Vietnam,” Wolfe argued, “my own feeling is that it

¹⁰⁴ Testimony of George Kennan, March 11, 1965, *Ibid.*, 76, 67, 48, 69.

would be a very serious matter for us to back out of this situation now under circumstances which would surely be interpreted in many places in the world as a vindication of the militant revolutionary approach espoused by Hanoi and Peiping.” Should this be the case, the Soviet Union would have no choice but come back to the hard line toward the West. “Should the new Soviet leaders yield to the Chinese argument that the United States can be safely opposed and ultimately defeated by waging the political struggle more militantly at the level of small wars and insurgency actions, they will have taken a fundamental decision of far-reaching consequences.” On the contrary, if the United States could shore up its credibility regarding the defense of the free world in Vietnam, “the Soviet leaders may even derive some profit from the lesson that American reaction to imprudent levels of provocation can be dangerous Now they are able to say in effect to Hanoi and to Peiping: ‘Look, comrades, we have told you that you can not push the Americans too far. Our line in this situation was the proper line to follow.’” In short, a limited but firm stance in Vietnam “would be doing a favor for those people within the Soviet Union who still have a feeling for the desirability of maintaining a détente relationship with us by not letting it, be demonstrated here that the other way of relating to us in the world—the militant way—is the one that pays off.”¹⁰⁵

Donald S. Zagoria from Columbia University concurred. “Defeat for the United States in Vietnam—no matter how it was disguised—would almost certainly encourage the Chinese and other Communist parties in underdeveloped areas to believe that the Chinese model of ‘liberation war’ is neither so risky nor so pointless as the Russians have contended. Chinese prestige in the international Communist movement, particularly among those parties in the neutral campus, would be enhanced and the ‘paper tiger’ thesis would probably be more widely accepted.” If the Chinese should win the Sino-Soviet dispute by their success in Vietnam, then “not only would

¹⁰⁵ Testimony of Thomas Wolfe, March 11, 1965, *Ibid.*, 50, 52, 81.

they have severe, very serious consequences for our position in Asia, but I think they might well force the Russians reconsider their own caution and adopt a more militant policy themselves.” Therefore, American actions in Vietnam “would take place in the broader context of a common interest between Moscow and Washington in not allowing Peiping to be the victor in Soviet-American confrontation in which both have much to lose and nothing to gain.”¹⁰⁶

The consensus reached by these witnesses on the connection between the Sino-Soviet conflict and the war in Vietnam gained extra strength when officials from the State Department provided their own insights. Marshall Green, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs, argued that the Chinese Communists must be taught a lesson in Vietnam. “I conclude that the Chinese Communists are a real threat and perhaps pose their greatest threat in terms of their ability and efforts to identify themselves with the underdeveloped areas of the world,” Green told the Committee. “As Peiping seeks to gain victories for its more activist and militant support for ‘wars of national liberation,’ the threat to the free men and nations is increased.” According to Green, Beijing had to “vindicate their militant revolutionary thesis.” “If Peiping succeeds in vindicating this thesis it will have an alarming impact on the whole Communist world and upon the rest of the world.”¹⁰⁷ James F. Leonard, Chief of Asian Communist Areas Division, fully agreed. He noticed a new round of dispute now going on between the two Communist powers, which was mainly focused on the Vietnam War. Should the Soviets yield before the Chinese, they would be forced to “admit before the Communists and people of the world that Khrushchev revisionism, chauvinism, and splitism is wrong” and the result would be a return to a hard Cold War line.¹⁰⁸ Richard H. Davis, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, observed that “the present situation in Southeast Asia is illustrative of the

¹⁰⁶ Testimony of Donald S. Zagoria, March 15, 1965, *Ibid.*, 116, 130, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Testimony of Marshall Green, March 23, 1965, *Ibid.*, 330, 319, 332.

¹⁰⁸ Testimony of James F. Leonard, March 23, 1965, *Ibid.*, 325-326.

caution which Moscow apparently wishes to exercise in conflict undertaken by Communist movements which do not follow Moscow's lead and which do not involve vital Soviet national interests and security." If America could not keep its credibility before Communism in Vietnam, then Moscow's caution would disappear, for "efforts by Moscow to maintain reasonably good relations with us are considered a betrayal of Communist interests by Peiping."¹⁰⁹

The strongest remark on the need to contain Communist China in Vietnam, not surprisingly, came from Dean Rusk. As the last witness before the hearings, Rusk told his audience that containing China in Vietnam now became an established policy of the Johnson administration. "It was suggested that the United States show a firm determination to stay in Southeast Asia; that we should fight in Vietnam chiefly to convince Communist China that her strategy of violent revolution and subversion will not succeed." Otherwise, "if Peiping can demonstrate in Southeast Asia that Peiping's doctrine of communism, of militant communism, is the correct one and the successful one, this will almost certainly bring about a greater unity of the Communist world behind the point of view of Peiping. It will almost force Moscow to say: 'We were wrong in this ideological argument,' and force Moscow to move over toward Peiping."¹¹⁰

Indeed, Rusk's belief in the need to keep the Soviets from becoming aggressive by containing the Chinese in Vietnam was so strong that one year later he repeated his opinion on this issue again in other hearings. "The United States has a clear and direct commitment to the security of South Vietnam against external attack. The integrity of our commitments is absolutely essential to the preservation of peace right around the globe." Rusk told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on January 28, 1966: "At stake also is the still broader question: whether aggression is to be permitted, once again, to succeed. We know from painful experience

¹⁰⁹ Testimony of Richard H. Leonard, March 23, 1965, Ibid., 323-324.

¹¹⁰ Testimony of Dean Rusk, March 31, 1965, Ibid., 357-358.

that aggression feeds on aggression.” Rusk continued: “A central issue in the dispute between the two leading Communist powers today is to what extent it is effective—and prudent—to use force to promote the spread of Communism. If the bellicose doctrines of the Asian Communists should reap a substantial reward, the outlook for peace in this world would be grim indeed.” Thereby Rusk told the Committee that “we have no present plans to withdraw our forces from there [Vietnam] We have tried to make it clear over and over again that although Hanoi is the prime actor in this situation, it is the policy of Peking that has greatly stimulated Hanoi The doctrines and the politics espoused by Peking today constitute perhaps the most important single problem of peace. I have had a foreign minister on the other side of the curtain, I prefer not to name him [Dobrynin?], say that moving Peking to peaceful coexistence is the number-one problem in the world today.”¹¹¹

Given the strong consensus reached by the witnesses of the need to contain Communist China, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs made it clear in its final report on the Sino-Soviet conflict and its implications that the assumptions behind America’s Vietnam policy should not be questioned:

Arguments were being made in the United States against any attempt by the United States to escalate the war on the premise that it would only bring the USSR and Red China closer together. However, the limited escalation since early this year has produced, so far, precisely the opposite effect. If anything, the increased U.S. military pressure on North Vietnam has tended to exacerbate the dispute...

Vietnam appears to be a key test of the conflicting Communist strategies which is the root of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Peiping, whose strategy is a militant and aggressive revolutionary struggle, does not believe that such a policy entails any high risk of

¹¹¹ Dean Rusk Testimony, January 28, 1966, Fulbright, *The Vietnam Hearings*, 4-5, 18, 21.

military escalation. Moscow, on the other hand, since the Cuba confrontation, has been forced to recognize the danger of nuclear war and their policy of peaceful coexistence is designed to relieve international tensions. They fear being drawn into a larger war through China's miscalculation of the degree of provocation the United States will take.

By standing firm in Vietnam, the United States confirms the Soviet contention in the Communist world that America is a power to be reckoned with. Should the United States withdraw from Vietnam, this would tend to support the Chinese contention that their revolutionary activities represent only a small risk of escalating into a larger conflict. The immediate impact on the Soviets within the Communist community would be a loss of prestige and influence. It would probably result not only in the complete abandonment by them of their peaceful coexistence policy but start them on a return to the very aggressive, Stalinist Cold War.¹¹²

Thus throughout 1964 and early 1965, Communist China was regarded by the Johnson administration as a dangerous enemy that must be contained in Vietnam. The perceived Chinese expansionism in the Third World and the more aggressive Communist China viewed in the context of Sino-Soviet conflict made the Johnson administration realize that if America hoped to keep its credibility in a nuclear age, it must dissuade the Soviet Union from moving toward the Chinese Cold War hard line by meeting the threat from Hanoi and Beijing head-on in Vietnam. After all, Moscow had learned from the Cuban Missile crisis, and then the world saw a growing détente between the two superpowers. "I think we should not encourage them by rewarding them for a policy which is so contrary to the prospects of peace," Rusk said in a television interview. If

¹¹² *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, 8R-9R.

China would not leave its neighbors alone, Rusk continued, “then there is trouble ahead.”¹¹³ If the Russians could be taught to be civilized, so could the Chinese.

Indeed, Johnson finally made up his mind to escalate the war in Vietnam. In February 1965, before the sustained air strikes against Hanoi began, George McGovern, a young first-term senator made an appointment to see the president. McGovern screwed up his courage and pointed out that the Chinese and Vietnamese had been fighting each other for a thousand years. “It's hard for me to believe that Ho Chi Minh is a stooge of the Chinese.” Johnson exploded: “Goddamn, George, you and Fulbright and all your history teachers down there. I haven't got time to fuck around with history. I've got boys on the line out there. I can't be worried about history when there are boys out there who might die before morning.”¹¹⁴ Johnson and his advisors wanted to be good teachers to China. If Cuba was the classroom for Moscow, then Vietnam would be the classroom for China. And so it began.

¹¹³ Dean Rush Interview, *Department State Bulletin*, November 11, 1964, 51: 772.

¹¹⁴ Rabdall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1995, 364-365.

Chapter Two:

Vietnam: A Cuba for China

The President said “the [U.S.] bombing of Hanoi ... would create a Cuba for China” and “would bring China into the struggle I agreed with him.” Senator Mike Mansfield recorded on June 3, 1965.¹¹⁵ Mansfield did not explain the meaning of “a Cuba for China” further, yet its implication was clear. By this time, the sustained bombing against North Vietnam had lasted for more than three months, and Johnson was pressured by some advisors to send more ground troops to South Vietnam. Obviously, the dramatically escalated American military actions in Vietnam would risk the possibility of a direct Chinese intervention, an open-ended land war in Asia that Johnson tried to avoid.

Although Washington was determined to teach China a lesson in Vietnam, Johnson and his advisors knew they must be careful about the proper pedagogy. After all, America’s main objective in Vietnam was to deny “victory” to the Communists, not to destroy Hanoi, let alone China. No one wanted a Korean-style war with China on mainland Asia. As an established guiding thought of making Vietnam policy, Johnson had repeated this as the situation in Saigon continued to deteriorate and calls abounded for escalated American military actions. “If it came down to an option for us of just sending the Americans in there to do the fighting, (it) will, of course, eventually lead into a ground war and a conventional war with China,” Johnson told Russell, as he had told his other advisors, “I don’t want another Korea.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Memorandum of Mike Mansfield, June 3, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 709.

¹¹⁶ Conversation between LBJ and Russell, May 27, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 363-365.

Despite the strong restrictions on the Americanization of the war, the rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam by February 1965 had made the delay of a major decision impossible. If Communist China regarded the situation in Vietnam as ripe for a revolution, then the Johnson administration saw it as ripe for teaching China a lesson. All that was needed was a proper excuse. On February 7, 1965, Viet Cong guerrillas raided a U.S. adviser's barracks in Pleiku, South Vietnam. Three days later, the Viet Cong attacked another U.S. barracks in Qui Nhon. Despite a CIA report five days later that China had massed troops along the China-North Vietnam border,¹¹⁷ the Johnson administration finally decided to escalate the Vietnam War by direct American military involvement.

After the Pleiku raid, how to do enough in Vietnam while not doing so much as to provoke China became a key factor in shaping the White House's military planning. Despite the need for more extensive action, Johnson stuck to his cautious approach. As early as in March 1964, when McNamara returned from Vietnam with his recommendations for further military action, the JCS argued that the proposed steps might not be strong enough. They indicated that America should consider attacking military targets in the North immediately. In August and September, although a consensus for "doing more" was emerging, senior officials still had many doubts about heavier military pressure against Hanoi.¹¹⁸ The main concern was clearly over China's potential responses. As Johnson later recalled: "During my first year in the White House no formal proposal for an air campaign against North Vietnam ever came to me as the agreed suggestion of my principal advisers. Whenever the subject came up, one or another of them usually mentioned

¹¹⁷ "Chinese Communists Brace for Possible Spread of Indochina War", February 12, 1965, *CIA Research Reports*, Reel 2, 0210, 2-9.

¹¹⁸ *PP(Gravel)*, 3:130-133.

the risk of giving Communist China an excuse for massive intervention in Vietnam I fully concurred.”¹¹⁹

However, Johnson and his key aides pledged to shore up the commitment to Saigon and ruled out the possibility of an early withdrawal, as proved by the rebuke of Mike Mansfield as early as the end of 1963. Mansfield, who always had second thoughts about the American presence in Vietnam, believed that current efforts to secure a victory over the VC might “in time, involve U.S. forces throughout Southeast Asia, and finally throughout China itself in search of victory.” “What national interest in Asia would steel the American people for the massive costs of an ever-deepening involvement of that kind?” he asked. Indeed, Mansfield questioned the basic assumption of America’s involvement in Vietnam and thus he favored a truce in there leading to a neutralized country.¹²⁰ Most senior advisers of Johnson found it hard to accept Mansfield’s dissent. McNamara argued that the U.S. commitment in Vietnam was part of the Cold War competition with China, the war in Vietnam was “a test of U.S. firmness and specifically a test of U.S. capacity to deal with ‘wars of national liberation.’” Thus the stakes for America in Vietnam “are so high that ... we must go on bending every effort to win.”¹²¹

A year later, Maxwell Taylor, now the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, continued to believe that America’s credibility was in danger: “Immediate withdrawal in the present atmosphere would, I am certain, be interpreted both here and in Hanoi and Peking as a sign of weakness and desperation which could result in panic among our friends and great encouragement to the enemy.”¹²² Rusk agreed that “strength and clarity of U.S. commitment and

¹¹⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 119.

¹²⁰ Mansfield to Johnson, Dec. 7, 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vietnam*, 4:691.

¹²¹ McNamara to Johnson, January 7, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*. 1: 12-13.

¹²² Taylor to Department of State, January 6, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 19.

determination are of major importance in political and even military balances in SVN.”¹²³ Thus America’s withdrawal from Vietnam was rejected as a viable policy option.

The desire to contain China figured prominently in the Johnson administration’s decision to escalate the war in Vietnam. In January 1965 William Bundy compared North Vietnam with North Korea. Bundy believed that North Vietnam’s efforts to control the south were a copy of North Korea’s actions in 1950 and that both were supported by Communist China. Such an aggression “must be met early and head-on or it will have to be met later and in tougher circumstances.”¹²⁴ During late 1964 and early 1965, when more and more reports about the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam rushed into the White House, the Johnson administration had to decide the next step.

To a great extent, the framework of America’s options was laid in the fall of 1964, when the William Bundy Working Group on Vietnam drafted successive “New Courses of Action in Southeast Asia.” On November 26, 1964, the group settled on three options. Option A “would be to continue present policies indefinitely: Maximum assistance within South Vietnam, limited external actions in Laos and by the GVN covertly against North Vietnam, specific individual reprisal actions against VC,” but excluding the introduction of U.S. combat troops or a “United States taking over of command.” Option B “would add to present actions a systematic program of military pressures against the North, with increasingly pressure actions to be continued at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption until we achieve our present stated objectives.” Option C differed from B in terms of the pace and scale of the air strikes: “The military scenario should give the impression of a steady deliberate approach,” beginning with “graduated military moves

¹²³ Rusk to Taylor, January 7, 1965. Ibid., 40.

¹²⁴ *Department of State Bulletin*, February 8, 1965, 171.

against infiltration targets, first in Laos and then in the DRV, and then against other targets in North Vietnam.”¹²⁵

It was expected that the situation in South Vietnam “would deteriorate further under Option A,” yet views were divided as to “whether Option B was significantly more likely to lead to a major escalation than Option C.”¹²⁶ On December 1, after a long meeting with his top advisers, Johnson discarded Option B and renamed A and C as Phase and Phase of a two-stage program. Johnson dropped Option B because he did not want to raise too much pressure on Hanoi and Beijing. When Taylor doubted that Hanoi and Beijing would “slap back” if America “slapped” Hanoi, Johnson rejoined, “Didn’t MacArthur say the same?”¹²⁷ From hindsight, it is clear that Johnson kept the possibility of Chinese intervention in mind when he made decisions. However, the worsening situation in South Vietnam forced him to make the choice quickly.

In a memo to Johnson on January 27, 1965, McGeorge Bundy and McNamara were “pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat” and they all recommended to “use our military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy.”¹²⁸ After the Pleiku raid, when it was clear that the current policy—Option A—could not work anymore, several advisers of Johnson did not want to see an escalation of the war. Senator Mansfield once again urged the Johnson administration to avoid a wider war, using potential Chinese intervention as a primary reason to avoid escalation. In a letter to Johnson on February 8, Mansfield believed “at least indirect Chinese intervention is to be anticipated.” Although he shared Johnson’s “feeling ... because of the attack on Pleiku”, he warned that “if we went too far in North Vietnam we would be in a far worse position than we were in Korea,” for “we would

¹²⁵ *PP(Gravel)*, 3: 659-660.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 237-239.

¹²⁷ George Kahin, *Intervention*, (New York: Knopf, 1986), 252.

¹²⁸ Memo to Johnson, *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 95-96.

well be squeezed in a nutcracker by developing events throughout Southeast Asia over which the Chinese cast an ominous shadow.”¹²⁹ In a Congressional Leadership Meeting on February 10, Senator Fulbright also “engaged in a discussion that involved Bundy and McNamara in which he questioned McNamara on the feasibility of any retaliatory attack or any kind of military action involving the mainland of China.”¹³⁰

Other dissent came from within the administration. Undersecretary of State George Ball and former ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn Thompson sent a long memo to President Johnson on February 13. They argued that America “can not long continue air strikes against North Vietnam without facing the likelihood of engagement with Chinese,” which would become another Korea-type war. Once this happened, “the Soviets would be faced with a painful dilemma,” as they “are obliged (by treaty) to come to China’s assistance if China is attacked.” They claimed that U.S. objectives in Vietnam as supported by McNamara, Bundy and Taylor were excessive, because Hanoi would regard acceptance of these requirements as “unconditional surrender.” Communist China would regard this as a defeat, “since it would mean the collapse of the basic Chinese ideological position which they have been disputing with the Soviets.” Thus the air strike would place Beijing “under great pressure to engage the United States on the ground as well as in the air.”¹³¹

While some people feared Chinese intervention, others downplayed such a possibility. On February 11 the CIA decided that China was taking a defensive position. The agency argued that at the outset of the air strike, “there is a fair chance that Peiping would also introduce limited numbers of Chinese ground troops as ‘volunteers’ into North Vietnam,” but they “still think that China, conscious of the danger of provoking major US attacks against its own territory, probably

¹²⁹ Mansfield to Johnson, *Ibid.*, 204-205.

¹³⁰ Notes of Meeting, *Ibid.*, 225.

¹³¹ Memo to Johnson, *Ibid.*, 252-261.

would not take this step.”¹³² On the next day, the CIA concluded that Beijing “hopes to avoid a direct confrontation with US forces, and the steps it has taken are probably calculated in part to back up threatening propaganda aimed at deterring the US from actions that would bring it face to face with Communist China.”¹³³

The JCS took a more aggressive position. Also on February 11, the chiefs concluded that “the Chinese Communists would be reluctant to become directly involved in the fighting in Southeast Asia,” although China “probably would feel an increased compulsion to take some dramatic action to counter the impact of the US pressures” including sending “volunteers.” Yet the JCS thought the risk of escalation was manageable through their eight-week air strike program. “The communist air threat involved should be eliminated,” and America “will demonstrate to the DRV that continuation of its direction and support of insurgencies will lead progressively to more serious punishment.”¹³⁴

Therefore, Johnson faced a wide range of options with two extremes. He found both extremes hard to accept. At a White House meeting immediately after the Pleiku attack, Johnson refused Mansfield’s suggestion by saying that he “kept the shotgun over the mantel and the bullets in the basement for a long time now, but the enemy was killing his personnel and he could not expect them to continue their work if he did not authorize them to take steps to defend themselves.”¹³⁵ McGeorge Bundy later replied to Mansfield’s letter that the administration was aware of the risks but aimed to “keep the risk of that involvement [Chinese] as low as possible” and that America must hold its commitment in Vietnam.¹³⁶ Fully realizing that the JCS’s program actually activated the dropped Option B, Johnson also turned it down. John McCone,

¹³² SNIE, February 11, 1965. Ibid.248.

¹³³ SNIE, February 12, 1965, Ibid., 251.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 241.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 159-160

¹³⁶ Bundy to Mansfield, Ibid., 209-211.

the director of CIA, who was now taking a tougher stance urging a more rapid operation “regardless of what the Chinese say,” observed at a NSC meeting on February 8 that Johnson “wished to avoid a rapid escalation and therefore favored a gradual approach.”¹³⁷

To Johnson, this was neither a time to admit defeat by withdrawal, nor a time to escalate the war dramatically by an intensive air strike. Thus Option C became the only acceptable choice. In fact, Johnson’s caution was fully justifiable in the wake of Chinese responses ever since the Tonkin Gulf incidents. Shortly after America’s reprisal air strikes against North Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf Incidents, Beijing ordered the Chinese air force and naval units stationed in south and southeast China to begin a state of combat readiness. Four air divisions and one antiaircraft artillery division were deployed into areas adjacent to North Vietnam. In August, Beijing also sent some MIG-15 and MIG-17 jets to Hanoi to deter further U.S. escalation of the war.¹³⁸ While building up its military strength around the Hanoi-Haiphong area and along the Chinese-Vietnamese border, Beijing launched another round of propaganda aimed at showing America China’s determination to defend Hanoi. Through late 1964 and early 1965, major media of the Chinese Communist Party delivered one consistent message: if America should indicate the intention of destroying the Hanoi regime and/or attacking China directly by either the heavy bombing of North Vietnam and/or sending ground troops across the 17th parallel, China would definitely send its own troops to fight Americans. On February 15, 1965, the *People’s Daily* even threatened that if America sent troops beyond the 17th parallel, China would reopen the Korean War. “If the United States expands the war in Vietnam,” the editorial article warned, “the front will extend from Vietnam to Korea.”¹³⁹ At the same time, the American Embassy in Poland

¹³⁷ Ibid., 195.

¹³⁸ Wang Dinglie, *Dangdai Zhongguo Kongjun* (Modern Chinese Air Force) (Beijing: Social Science Publisher, 1989), 384; Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 213-214; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 132-133.

¹³⁹ *People’s Daily*, February 15, 1965.

reported back to Washington that during the latest Sino-American Warsaw talk, the Chinese “made it clear action against [North] Vietnam is action against China If we [Americans] insist on spreading war flames to North Vietnam, China will definitely not sit idly by.”¹⁴⁰ American officials knew that these were the exact words sent by Zhou En-lai before the Chinese intervention in the Korean War. Allen Whiting from the State Department, who was assigned to look for signals of Chinese intentions that the United States missed in 1950, saw the Chinese MIGs, the construction of airfields along the Chinese-Vietnamese border and the intensified Chinese warnings as indications of growing Chinese concern. When he reported his analysis to other senior officials, they took it seriously.¹⁴¹

Compared with Option C in the context of serious Chinese warnings, the disadvantages of Option B were clear. According to William Bundy and John McNaughton, the “opening military actions under Option B would be major air attacks on key targets in the DRV, starting with the major Phuc Yen airfield.” The Phuc Yen airfield, however, was located near Hanoi and was a major MIG base with heavy defense forces. Thus Johnson’s most key advisors felt that it would require a massive air effort to destroy this target and the likelihood of engagement with the Chinese MIGs would be increased. Moreover, such an engagement would lead to a series of escalatory steps culminating into a ground with China.¹⁴² Therefore, although Option B might be more effective in terms of military actions, the Johnson administration finally settled on Option C.

Johnson’s choice was further strengthened by McGeorge Bundy’s advice. On February 7 Bundy submitted an eight-page long report to Johnson. Bundy argued that “the stakes in Vietnam are extremely high The international prestige of the United States and a substantial part of

¹⁴⁰ Telegram, February 24, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 148-149.

¹⁴¹ Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, 175-188.

¹⁴² *PP* (Gravel), 3: 661-679.

our influence are directly at risk in Vietnam ... any negotiated U.S. withdrawal today would mean surrender on the installment plan.” Thus America must offset the “widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course.” Under the current situation, “the best available way of increasing our chance of success in Vietnam is the development and execution of a policy of *sustained reprisal* against North Vietnam.” Moreover, “this reprisal policy should begin at a low level. Its level of force and pressure should be increased only gradually—and it should be decreased if VC terror visibly decreases. The object would not be to ‘win’ the air war against Hanoi, but rather to influence the course of the struggle in the South.” Bundy believed that such a gradual approach would help to sustain the GVN and stop Hanoi and Beijing, and this program “seems cheap.”¹⁴³ Johnson “was impressed by its logic and persuaded strongly by its argument.”¹⁴⁴ On February 13, Johnson formally gave the go-ahead for Phase , and the air strike code-named “Rolling Thunder” was launched on March 2.

Yet the concerns about China were not appeased by this decision. On February 17 Vice President Hubert Humphrey again raised the danger of Chinese intervention. “We should not underestimate the likelihood of Chinese intervention and repeat the mistake of the Korean War,” he argued. “If we begin to bomb further north in Vietnam, the likelihood is great of an encounter with the Chinese.” Once this happened, “Peking’s full prestige will be involved as she can not afford to permit her to be destroyed.” Moreover, in this case the Soviets would “honor its treaty of friendship and come to China’s assistance.”¹⁴⁵ This warning, however, was again offset by a meeting between Johnson and former President Eisenhower on the same day. Eisenhower assured Johnson that the risks of Chinese intervention were tolerable and that he should worry

¹⁴³ Ibid., 175-185.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 128.

¹⁴⁵ Humphrey to Johnson, February, 17, 1965. *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 309-313.

less about what China might do if the United States escalated the bombing of the North. When Johnson still doubted the possible Chinese intervention, Eisenhower urged him to downplay this possibility. If they did, however, Eisenhower was ready for a major war. If China entered, he recommended “hitting them at once with air forces, picking out the key points along their support routes.” Moreover, if necessary, “we were to use tactical nuclear weapons,” and “such use in itself would not add to the chances of escalation.”¹⁴⁶ Johnson found Eisenhower’s opinion useful.¹⁴⁷

Once Rolling Thunder began, Johnson insisted on maintaining tight personal control over the air war—“they can’t even bomb an outhouse without my approval,” he is said to have boasted.¹⁴⁸ Another reason for putting the situation in Vietnam under control had to do with Johnson’s domestic political agenda. When Johnson was thinking about the feasibility of sustained air strikes against Hanoi in early 1965, Johnson’s Great Society legislation also reached a crucial phrase. Exploiting his massive victory in the 1964 election, the president rammed through the Congress the next year a broad array of domestic legislation: Medicare, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, the Voting Rights Act, an immigration reform law, the Water Quality Act and the Solid Waste Disposal Act, along with other statutes of lesser consequence. All these programs required money, and Johnson had every reason to believe that the Congress would block the money needed in the face of a costly war in Vietnam even though the majority of these bills was expected to be passed soon.

However, the guns or butter dilemma and its impact on the American economy fully unfolded only after Johnson’s July decision for the Vietnam War escalation. And Johnson did not seem to discuss this question until late 1965. In fact, in his early months in the Oval Office,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 300-308.

¹⁴⁷ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 131.

¹⁴⁸ William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell), 1980, 119.

Johnson never thought the conflict in Vietnam would eventually cost his Great Society dearly. In order to get a tax cut bill passed on Capitol Hill, Johnson was convinced in early 1964 that the budget for the next year must be held low, at \$100 billion, which actually turned out to be \$ 97.9 billion. Johnson also directed McNamara to shut down numerous military installations all around America and reduce defense spending in order to get money for the Great Society programs in early 1964. As a result of the tax cut, the American economy under the Johnson administration sustained the high growth that started under the Kennedy administration. The President's popularity was tremendous; his approval rating was consistently higher than 70 percent from March through June 1965.¹⁴⁹ As one analyst later noted, "Here was a political leader in a position of apparently impregnable strength. He had to decide how to spend national resources that were growing at the rate of 5 percent a year. His economic advisers were telling him they had discovered the secret of perpetual growth."¹⁵⁰

Without the Vietnam War, Johnson certainly would have spent most resources for the Great Society. However, even facing the coming escalation in late 1964, Johnson still did not think there would be any problem in financing his Great Society. At one NSC meeting held on September 9, 1964, Johnson and his key advisors agreed that there should be no financial restraints placed on the pursuit of U.S. goals in Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy recorded the following exchange: "Secretary McNamara asked if it were clear that money was no object Secretary Rusk said he very much hoped money would not be regarded as the ceiling, and felt that it would be worth any amount to win Ambassador Taylor replied that the country team (in Saigon) would ask for any money it needed. The President emphasized his own continuing

¹⁴⁹ Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, 68.

¹⁵⁰ Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 225.

conviction that it was necessary not to spare the horses. He pointed out that this had been his constant view ... [and] reemphasized that money was no object.”¹⁵¹

Therefore, although there were some thoughts on the war’s cost when Rolling Thunder was planned, both Johnson and his foreign policy advisors did not entertain these ideas very seriously. The underlying assumption of the American military decisions in February 1965 was that Hanoi and Beijing would soon reconsider their positions after suffering enough from superior American firepower. Thus McNamara, Taylor and General Westmoreland all believed that the war would end by the end of 1965. Johnson seemed to share the optimism with them.¹⁵² After all, it would be hard for him to believe that America, the most powerful country in the world, could be bogged down by Vietnam, “the fourth-class rotten country” in Johnson’s own words. Even if the war would cost America some money, it could not affect the Great Society. As Johnson repeated, he could get both guns and butter: “I believe we can do both. We are a country which was built by pioneers who had a rifle in one hand and an ax in the other. We are a nation with the highest GNP, the highest wages, and the most people at work. We can do both. [Vietnam War and the Great Society] And as long as I am president we will do both.”¹⁵³

If the tightly controlled Rolling Thunder would not cost America a lot, a land war with China certainly would. But the rapidly changing situation in Vietnam soon induced Johnson to consider further escalation of the war. In fact, Rolling Thunder caused different responses among American leaders. Some policy makers observed that the morale in Saigon increased,

¹⁵¹ NSC Meeting, September 9, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1:749-755.

¹⁵² During 1964, Johnson’s key advisors believed that the war would end soon, probably by the end of 1965. As a result, Johnson did not inform his economic advisors on war affairs and they did not include the cost when they worked on the budget for the Great Society. See Jeffrey W. Helsing, *Johnson’s War/ Johnson’s Great Society: The Guns and Butter Trap* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), 15-47.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 526. Johnson gave this speech in early 1965.

while others worried about the growing harsh rhetoric from Beijing. Moreover, the fear that the air strike against Hanoi would draw Moscow and Beijing together revived.

The Johnson administration's handling of the air strike actually revealed that American leaders took full advantage of the Sino-Soviet split. When the Pleiku attack occurred, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin was visiting Hanoi. America's retaliatory air strikes directed against North Vietnamese targets, Mansfield feared, would bring about "a closer degree of cooperation by the Soviet Union and the Chinese."¹⁵⁴ But his idea was rebuked by other key advisors. McNamara did not believe there would be any Soviet military reaction, and George Ball argued that the Soviets, unaware of Hanoi's plan, "were mouse-trapped". However, since "we have talked to Russians in an effort to explain why we had to retaliate as we did ... they will understand."¹⁵⁵ Ambassador Thompson, after talking with his counterpart Dobrynin, believed that instead of acting radically, "the Soviets would invite a conference."¹⁵⁶

While it seemed that the White House was expecting a rational reaction from the Kremlin, the Johnson administration acted carefully to calm down the Chinese. On February 24 in the Warsaw Meeting with China, America reassured China that while the U.S. would continue to defend itself and South Vietnam, it had no aggressive intentions toward North Vietnam and China.¹⁵⁷

Deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations seemed to make Washington focus on China without worrying too much about the USSR. Thus when the sustained air strike against North Vietnam turned out to be ineffective and the argument about the introduction of U.S ground combat troops grew, concerns about China even played a more decisive role. At first, only relatively modest

¹⁵⁴ Mansfield to President, February 8, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 203.

¹⁵⁵ Meeting Notes, February 8, 1965, *Ibid.*, 188-189.

¹⁵⁶ Meeting Record, February 8, 1965, *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁵⁷ Meeting Record, February 24, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 148-149.

numbers of troops were seen as necessary, with their mission limited to protecting the U.S. air bases in the South. But within five months it was being argued that massive forces were in fact essential. This argument became stronger with the increasing evidence that Hanoi was unleashing its own ground combat units in response to the additional U.S. military intervention.

In fact, in the eight-week air strike plan submitted by the JCS on February 11, a collateral deployment of a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) was recommended—only to protect the U.S. air base in Da Nang, South Vietnam. On February 22 General William Westmoreland, U.S. Commander in Vietnam, asked for two Marine Battalions Landing Teams (BLT) for that purpose.¹⁵⁸ Despite Taylor's opposition that "such action would be steps in reversing long standing policy of avoiding commitment of ground combat forces in SVN," the Johnson administration finally approved Westmoreland's request. Given the "never again" atmosphere after the Korean War in America (i.e., American ground combat troops should never again fight Chinese infantry in mainland Asia) the Johnson administration carefully defined the task: "The U.S. Marine Force will not, repeat will not, engage in day to day actions against the Viet Cong The limited mission of the Marines will be to relieve Government of South Vietnam forces now engaged in security duties for action in the pacification program and in offensive roles against Communist guerrilla forces."¹⁵⁹ Although Washington believed that this deployment would not trigger a Chinese intervention, the JCS still directed Westmoreland to be careful: "Washington authorities are attempting to steer a careful course which maximizes the effect of our operations both inside and outside South Vietnam, while minimizing the chance of suddenly escalating military action to the point where the ChiComs would become involved."¹⁶⁰ Moreover, on March 2 John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense, suggested that the

¹⁵⁸ PP(Gravel), 417.

¹⁵⁹ PP(Gravel), 3:418-423.

¹⁶⁰ JCS to Westmoreland, March 1, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 388-389.

173d Airborne Brigade be deployed instead of the Marines. This last minute change might have been McNaughton's attempt to emphasize the limited, temporary nature of the U.S. troop deployment and to reduce the conspicuousness of the U.S. presence, since Airborne troops carried less equipment and looked less formidable than the Marines plus they had no history of peace-keeping intervention in foreign wars.¹⁶¹

The Johnson administration regarded this small ground troop deployment as proper. On the one hand, this would show America's determination to fulfill its commitment; on the other hand, due to the limited mission, this would be regarded as a logical development of military action, rather than an aggressive signal to Beijing. From late February to mid March, the Johnson administration reached the conclusion that the sustained air strike, American ground combat troops and the increased military pressure against North Vietnam did not surpass the boundary of China's tolerance. A CIA report said, "there are no signs of open military moves to change the character of the war through the intervention of large-scale regular forces not now engaged, either North Vietnamese or Chinese. Peking had talked very tough, and there are some Chinese Communist precautionary movements and activities which could, of course, presage later military intervention, but this was expected."¹⁶²

Ironically, China's inaction made Americans suspect that they were losing the war. Some officials argued that Beijing had not made any move because it believed that the final victory would belong to China. The increasing reports about the bad situation in Saigon and the continuing request for more troops from Westmoreland seemed to the JCS and other senior officials to confirm Beijing's belief and forced the Johnson administration to further increase its military efforts in Vietnam. On March 10 McNaughton prepared a paper for follow-up actions in

¹⁶¹ PP(Gravel), 3:402

¹⁶² CIA to McGeorge Bundy, March 8, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 421.

South Vietnam. He declared that U.S. aims were: “70%--To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor); 20%--To keep SVN (and their adjacent) territory from Chinese hands; 10%--To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.” Since the primary aim was to defend America’s credibility as the defender of freedom, it would require “massive US ground effort in South Vietnam,” according to McNaughton. Thus McNaughton argued in favor of “add(ing) Westmoreland’s 25,000 additional US combat support personnel” and “deploy 3-5 US divisions.” Although fully recognizing the possibility of a Chinese intervention, he claimed that “We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly.”¹⁶³

There was something unusual about this document—the combination of a low-key and a high-key tone when McNaughton stated American objectives in Vietnam. By only allocating twenty percent of the U.S. aim to keeping China from taking over Southeast Asia, McNaughton actually downplayed the importance of the “physical domino theory”—as Jonathan Schell puts it. This was a result of the belief mentioned above that America was losing the war and China was destined to have its hands in Southeast Asia. The thing more important, therefore, was the impact of the “psychological domino theory.” Even if America could not keep an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, America must fight for its credibility. And the fighting itself—the fact that Americans were willing to get bloodied—was the best way to show the world America’s determination to contain Communism, especially Chinese Communism. For as made clear in Chapter One, the failure to force the Chinese to pay a high price for their possible victory would encourage the Soviets to be more aggressive toward the West.¹⁶⁴ Thus containing China gained a new meaning within the framework of keeping American credibility. As McGeorge

¹⁶³ Paper by McNaughton, Mar. 10, 1965, Ibid., 427-431.

¹⁶⁴ Schell, *Time of Illusion*, 10-11, 364-365.

Bundy told Johnson in early February: “We cannot assert that a policy of sustained reprisal will succeed in changing the course of the contest in Vietnam. It may fail What we can say is that even if it fails, the policy will be worth it. At a minimum it will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own. Beyond that, a reprisal policy—to the extent that it demonstrated U.S. willingness to employ this new norm in counter-insurgency—will set a higher price for the future upon all adventures of guerrilla warfare, and it should therefore somewhat increase our ability to deter such adventures.”¹⁶⁵

Although McNaughton’s paper was not made the stated policy of the White House, most advisers to Johnson agreed with his analysis—now it seemed that America had no choice but to send more men to Vietnam. On March 14 Alexis Johnson came back from his mission to Vietnam with a 21-point program. He proposed deployment of up to a full U.S. division for security tasks, and he proposed a four-division force along the Demilitarized Zone. In a NSC meeting on March 26, the request for more troops was discussed. McNamara said that now America had 28,000 troops in Vietnam, and he intended to approve the request of 10,000 more. The CIA, however, although insisting on its previous estimate that China would not intervene, reported that one part of the intelligence community now “thinks that the Chinese Communists will respond by sending combat troops before Hanoi reaches the point of being forced to accept negotiations.” President Johnson delayed the decision.¹⁶⁶ Yet on March 30 an automobile loaded with explosives blew up outside the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. This incident further cast a shadow on the following NSC meeting.

¹⁶⁵ Bundy to LBJ, February 7, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 184-185.

¹⁶⁶ NSC Meeting, Mar. 26, 1965, *Ibid.*, 483-485.

From April 1 to 2, almost all senior U.S. officials gathered at Washington to attend a NSC meeting. Faced with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Vietnam, most of them favored more ground combat troops. On April 6 NSAM 328 declared that the President had decided to send two more Marine battalions to Vietnam and to alter the mission of U.S. combat forces “to permit their more active use.” NSAM 328 was a pivotal document. It marked the acceptance by President Johnson of the concept that U.S. troops would engage in offensive ground operations against North Vietnam. Yet it also indicated the anxiety of Johnson—his decision to proceed very slowly and carefully so that U.S. policy should appear to be wholly consistent. Thus Johnson only approved the deployment of two battalions, although he knew that McNamara and the JCS all favored a three-division force.¹⁶⁷ No doubt Johnson made this decision under great pressure from his advisers. In a letter to Johnson, McCone argued that if America did not step up its war effort, “the Communists are likely to feel they can afford to accept a considerable amount of bomb damage while they improve their air defenses and step up their insurgency in South Vietnam.” He felt that, although there was a possibility of Chinese intervention, America should not act too weakly. Thus he urged “we deploy additional troops, which I believe necessary.” He did not think “we have to fear taking on the MIG’s.” (Chinese warplanes)¹⁶⁸ Yet Johnson believed that a sharply increased war effort, including the possibility of deeper Chinese intervention, outweighed the possible advantages.¹⁶⁹

The concerns about China played a key role in the debates. As *The New York Times* observed, “Administration leaders realize that the strategy of a step-up carries with it the threat of open intervention by North Vietnam or Communist China Ambassador Taylor said the chances of intervention by the Chinese were ‘very slight at the present time’. From

¹⁶⁷ *PP(Gravel)*, 3:447

¹⁶⁸ McCone to Johnson, undated, after April 2, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 521.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 140

Congressional sources, however, it was apparent that this threat has begun to weight heavily on the Administration's thinking to the point that it has developed 'contingency planning' as to how many American troops would be needed in the event of Chinese intervention."¹⁷⁰

This observation was accurate, for Taylor did argue that "there were two contingencies involved: (1) the counterinsurgency efforts in its larger dimensions in VN and (2) general war with China."¹⁷¹ The tension was increased when on April 10 *The New York Times* reported that, although denied by the Department of Defense, an encounter of American and Chinese warplanes probably had occurred.¹⁷² On the next day, it reported again that North Vietnam declared that "an ever bigger international army of volunteers" was forming "to fight the United States aggressors in Vietnam."¹⁷³ Although American officials continued to deny the encounter and the possibility of the introduction of Chinese volunteers to Vietnam, they actually worried about the growing tension. McGeorge Bundy admitted that "strikes ... involved us in our first MIG engagement and it may be assumed that strikes further north would increase the likelihood of additional engagements." He thus asked, "Should our target lists be expanded to go beyond the strictly military?... How close should US aircraft fly to Hainan Island and other Chinese territory?... Should support force be deployed now to South Vietnam beyond the 18-20,000 increase specified in NSAM 328?"¹⁷⁴

Under this circumstance, it was not surprising that senior officials differed on the issue of further deployment of ground troops. In order to get a consensus, McNamara chaired a meeting on April 20 at Honolulu. On April 21 President Johnson was informed that the Honolulu Conference agreed to send more troops to Vietnam, which would amount to 82,000 U.S. soldiers.

¹⁷⁰ "U.S. Plans to Add Troops In Vietnam", *The New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1965. Hereafter cited as *NYT*.

¹⁷¹ Memo for Record, Apr. 4, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 535.

¹⁷² "U.S. Unsure in MIG's", *NYT*, Apr. 10, 1965,

¹⁷³ "Hanoi Says 'Army of Volunteers' is forming to Fight Americans", *NYT*, Apr. 11, 1965

¹⁷⁴ Bundy to Rusk, Apr., 13, 1965. *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2:551-552.

On the same day, at Warsaw, China again denounced America and threatened to intervene if America sent troops to North Vietnam, while McCone assured the U.S. president that China would not come in.¹⁷⁵ On April 22, Johnson approved the additional deployment.

However, the most serious Chinese warning was yet to come. On April 2, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai asked President Mohammad Ayub Khan of Pakistan to convey several points to Washington: “(1), China would not take the initiative to provoke a war against the United States; (2) China means what it says, and China will honor whatever international obligations it has undertaken; and (3) China is prepared.” Since Ayub Khan’s planned visit to Washington was cancelled, China tried in other ways to convey its message. On May 28, in a meeting with Indonesian first prime minister Subandrio, Zhou issued a four-point statement: “(1) China will not take the initiative to provoke a war against the United States; (2) China will honor what it has said; (3) China is prepared; and (4) if the United States bombs China, that means bringing the war to China, and the war is unlimited.”¹⁷⁶ Three days later, on May 31, Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi met with British Charge d’Affairs Donald Hopson, formally asking him to deliver the same message to Washington. “Perhaps this message had not gotten through,” Chen Yi said, so “he would be grateful if the British government would pass it on.”¹⁷⁷

Washington did receive China’s message. Yet both Rusk and McGeorge Bundy regarded it as a “defensive nature” message. In fact, on June 12, William Raborn, now the director of the CIA, submitted a long letter to Johnson in which he summarized all the NIE’s and SNIE’s on China since 1964. He concluded that “the Communists will try to restrain further expansion of military conflict,” if there would only be “moderate or limited escalation (or no escalation).”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 575, 595; *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 165.

¹⁷⁶ “77 Conversations”, 124, 131.

¹⁷⁷ Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 217.

¹⁷⁸ RaBorn to Johnson, Jun. 12, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2:763-772.

Yet at this time, American military leaders had already asked for more troops. On June 7, Westmoreland requested an additional one hundred thousand troops from Washington. This request would bring U.S. force levels in South Vietnam to 175,000 troops or 34 battalions. Another 10 battalions were to be sent by other allied forces. Westmoreland argued that only 44 battalions could convince the VC that they could not win.¹⁷⁹

Now the Johnson administration faced the hardest decision since 1964. Granting Westmoreland's request would mean that America would be fighting a major land war in Vietnam, with all possible dangers. Rejecting it would mean the eventual conquest of South Vietnam by the communists. Senior officials were working hard to develop their suggestions, and they differed greatly.

George Ball had always been opposed to escalation. On June 18 Ball again submitted a memorandum to Johnson. Ball argued that America must "limit our commitment in time and magnitude and establish specific time schedules for the selection of optional courses of action." Ball only agreed to add American ground forces to 10,000 with the limited mission of a security. If the war was escalated beyond the current level, Ball feared that "Red China can hardly help but react. And our best Soviet experts do not believe that the Soviet Union could stand down in the event that we became involved directly with the Chinese." Thus Ball recommended two actions: first, "continue our air strike on North Vietnam but avoiding Hanoi-Haiphong complex (the industry area of North Vietnam) and keeping well south of the Chinese border;" and second, get a negotiated settlement.¹⁸⁰

Although Johnson was "deeply affected by the undersecretary's analysis,"¹⁸¹ he had tougher advisers. Bundy and McNamara both favored a much heavier Rolling Thunder operation against

¹⁷⁹ Westmoreland to JCS, Jun. 7, 1965, *Ibid.*, 733-736.

¹⁸⁰ Memo from Ball to Johnson, Jun. 18, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3: 16-21.

¹⁸¹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 144.

the Hanoi-Haiphong area and additional ground forces. On June 23 Johnson met with his advisers in the White House to discuss Vietnam. The general feeling was that more forces would be needed. When Ball presented his idea, Rusk said that in this case America would end up with secure areas only in Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and NATO, with even India falling to the Communist Chinese. McNamara argued that a lot more force would be needed. Johnson thus directed McNamara and Ball to produce studies of their own ideas.¹⁸²

On June 26 Ball analyzed the consequences of withdrawal. He argued that such action would not be seen as a defeat because other countries did not see any crucial American national interests involved in Vietnam. On the contrary, deeper involvement in Vietnam would do damage to both America's ability and reputation, thus weakening America's ability to defend the free world.¹⁸³ He also believed that an escalation of the war would "pose grave danger of involving Red China" and "by pursuing a systematic and careful plan for cutting our losses we should be able to create the conditions under which we can get out of a dangerous situation without excessive loss of American prestige and influence."¹⁸⁴ Yet on the same day General Taylor joined in to argue for a bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area.¹⁸⁵ On June 28 Westmoreland urged Johnson to approve his request.¹⁸⁶ On June 30, after comparing France in 1954 and America in 1965, McGeorge Bundy argued that America would win if it stepped up its war efforts.¹⁸⁷ On the same day, the CIA reported that they agreed "the VC may now be winning" and America "could not be successful until we have demonstrated we can stop and turn back the VC/DRV attack and are able to face down Chinese Communist threats."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3: 40-41.

¹⁸³ Ball to Johnson, Jun. 27, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3: 55-57.

¹⁸⁴ Paper by Ball, undated, *Ibid.*, 62-63.

¹⁸⁵ Taylor to Johnson, Jun. 27, 1965, *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸⁶ Westmoreland to Johnson, Jun. 28, *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁸⁷ Bundy to Johnson, Jun., 30, *Ibid.*, 79-85.

¹⁸⁸ CIA to Johnson, Jun., 30, *Ibid.*, 86-89.

The most forceful opposition to Ball came from McNamara and Rusk. On July 1 McNamara argued for escalation. According to him, America now had three options: “(1) Cut out losses and withdraw under the best conditions that can be arranged; (2) continue at about the present level with 75,000 U.S. troops and (3), expand substantially the US military pressure.” McNamara favored the last choice. He argued for sending the 44 battalions requested by Westmoreland, deploying an additional 13 helicopter companies and 5 Chinook platoons, and bombing the Hanoi-Haiphong area. He felt that, “so long as no US or GVN troops invade North Vietnam and so long as no US or GVN aircraft attack Chinese territory, the Chinese probably will not send regular ground forces or aircraft into the war.”¹⁸⁹ On the same day, Rusk also supported escalation, yet he was more reserved than McNamara, saying that “we should not, for the present, attack targets in the immediate Hanoi-Haiphong area” because it was “the principal brake upon direct Chinese participation.”¹⁹⁰

Ball seemed to lose this battle. Yet Johnson still wanted to delay the decision. He sent McNamara to Saigon to see the situation there. When McNamara came back on July 20, he still insisted on his idea. Thus from July 21 to July 22, Johnson and his advisers gathered in the White House, and at this meeting they eventually decided America’s fate in the Vietnam War.

On the morning of July 21, Ball and McNamara still held their own lines. Johnson on the one hand thought McNamara’s plan “dangerous and perilous;” on the other hand, he did not think “we have made a full commitment” and Ball had not “proposed an alternative course” other than McNamara’s recommendation.¹⁹¹ That afternoon, Johnson rejected Ball’s plan but invited alternatives to McNamara’s plan. On July 22 Johnson and his advisers (without Ball) discussed McNamara’s plan. During this meeting, Johnson raised the possibility of Chinese

¹⁸⁹ McNamara to Johnson, Jul. 1, Ibid., 97-104.

¹⁹⁰ Paper by Rusk, Jul. 1, 1965, Ibid., 106.

¹⁹¹ Meeting Record, Jul. 21, 1965, Ibid., 192.

intervention four times. Each time his advisers tried to reassure him that even if this happened, they could handle it. On the other hand, they believed that as long as American ground troops' tasks were limited in South Vietnam, China would not seek a confrontation with America by sending its own combat troops. Yet Johnson still had doubts. "MacArthur didn't think they would come in either," he noted.¹⁹² Once again, Johnson's worry was supported by the signals from Beijing. On July 17, China declared that Beijing and Hanoi had concluded an agreement under which China would send huge military aid to North Vietnam. The same editorial repeated again that if America bombed China or sent troops beyond the 17th parallel, China would "fight America even if without the Soviets."¹⁹³

Thus Johnson still tried to delay the final decision. Although he thought withdrawal could not be accepted, he also thought a rapid escalation would bring China in. Moreover, people supporting the latter choice also argued to call up reserves and declare a national emergency. At the same time, unlike in the spring and early summer, there was a concern about the costs of the military moves now contemplated. McGeorge Bundy mentioned some of McNamara's concerns in a memo to Johnson on July 21. "Bob (McNamara) is carrying out your orders to plan this whole job with only \$300-400 million in immediate new funds," Bundy told Johnson, "But I think you will want to know that he thinks our posture of candor and responsibility would be better if we ask for \$2 billion to take us through the end of the calendar years, on the understanding that we will come back for more, if necessary. Bob is afraid we simply cannot get away with the idea that a call-up of the planned magnitude can be paid for by anything so small as another few hundred million. Cy Vance told me the other day that the overall cost is likely to be on the order of \$8 billion in the coming year and I can understand Bob's worry that in the

¹⁹² Meeting Record, Jul. 22, 1965, *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁹³ *People's Daily*, July 17, 1965.

nature of things, these projected costs will be sure to come out pretty quickly, especially if he looks as if he was trying to pull a fast one.”¹⁹⁴

McNamara soon expressed his concerns himself. Fearing the war would cost a lot, he went to Johnson and requested a tax increase. The President “flatly refused my advice to increase taxes to pay for the war and thus avert inflation. I submitted my spending estimate and proposed a tax increase in a highly classified draft memorandum known to only a handful of people. Not even the treasury secretary or the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers knew about it.”¹⁹⁵ In fact, Johnson’s economic advisers were still kept in the dark about the costs of the war at this time.

Clearly Johnson’s concern about the Great Society made him reluctant to call up reserves and go to Congress for more money. An illuminating document came on July 19 through McGeorge Bundy. On that day, Bundy provided the president with arguments for avoiding a billion-dollar appropriation in Vietnam, one of which asserted that “it would create the false impression that we have to have guns, not butter—and would help the enemies of the President’s domestic legislative program.” Johnson soon directed Bundy to erase this argument, and Bundy submitted a revised version several days later.¹⁹⁶ Clearly Johnson intended to hide the real costs of the war from the public and keep Congress’s focus on the Great Society.

Yet the concerns about financing the war and the Great Society at the same time can not alone explain why Johnson made the final decision. If the domestic concern was the sole determinant, then why did Johnson not choose to “use massive Strategic Air Command power to bring the enemy to his knees?” It seems that concerns about China’s intervention played a more

¹⁹⁴ Memo, Jul. 21, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3:206-207.

¹⁹⁵ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 205.

¹⁹⁶ Memo, Bundy to LBJ, July 19, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 3: 165.

decisive role in shaping the Johnson administration's final decision for escalating the Vietnam War.

The day for final judgement came on July 27. At that day's NSC meeting, Johnson summarized what he considered America's five options. First was to "use massive power to bring the enemy to his knees." The second was to "ask for everything we might desire from Congress—money, authority to call up the reserves." Yet these dramatic courses would invite a Chinese intervention. The third was to "get out on the grounds that we don't belong there," while the fourth was "to keep the present level." "No one is recommending" these options, he observed. Finally, Johnson chose "to do what is necessary to meet the present situation, but not to be unnecessarily provocative to either the Russians or the Communist Chinese. We will give the commanders the men they say they need and, out of existing materials in the U.S., we will give them the materials they say they need. We will get the necessary money in the new budget and will use our transfer authority until January. We will neither brag about what we are doing nor thunder at the Chinese Communists."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Meeting Record, Jul., 27, 1965, Ibid., 262-263.

Chapter Three:

China and Vietnam Peace Talks

On January 30, 1964, French President Charles de Gaulle reviewed the reasons for the French decision to recognize the People's Republic of China. "In fact, there is in Asia no political reality, notably with regard to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, or to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Burma, or to Korea or Soviet Russia or Japan, etc., which does not concern or affect China," the General told the media. "There is, in particular, neither a war nor a peace imaginable on this continent without China's being implicated in it," de Gaulle continued. "Thus it would be absolutely impossible to envision, without China, a possible neutrality agreement relating to the Southeast Asian States—a neutrality which, by definition, must be accepted by all, guaranteed on the international level."¹⁹⁸

General de Gaulle's analysis about China's role in a negotiated settlement in Vietnam turned out to be accurate. Throughout 1964 until July 1965, the Johnson administration discussed the idea of a possible political settlement in Vietnam more than once. Yet Communist China proved to be the only major power involved that consistently opposed any possible negotiation.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, in order to understand why a political settlement in Vietnam, a policy option supported by varied people before the escalation of the war, was firmly rejected by the Johnson administration, one must again focus on China.

In fact, de Gaulle urged America to consider some kind of negotiation even before Johnson took charge. During the first months of Johnson's White House years, de Gaulle publicly proposed the neutralization of South Vietnam. However, Johnson and his advisors found this

¹⁹⁸ *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 49-50.

¹⁹⁹ Qiang Zhai, *China and The Vietnam Wars*, Chapter 7.

difficult to accept. Rusk recommended that Johnson ask for a clarification because “we put the emphasis on what de Gaulle’s proposals were taken to mean in Southeast Asia and that’s the thing that’s caused all the anxiety. Because you see, he hasn’t made any specific proposals. All he’s talked about in very vague terms is neutralization of Southeast Asia.” As for the enemy, Rusk continued, “it’s been very clear that the Communist side is not about to neutralize North Vietnam.” Johnson fully concurred.²⁰⁰

Besides the vagueness of de Gaulle’s proposals, the attitude of the Communist side, especially of the Chinese, was more important in ruling out any possible political negotiations. Since the need to contain China served as a central rationale for U.S. Vietnam policy, some people in the Johnson administration regarded a political settlement as another word for surrender. In fact, before the escalation of the war in July 1965, Johnson and his advisors held a basic assumption about any kind of political negotiation. Due to the serious situation in Saigon and the bellicose Chinese attitude, they believed that unless America and South Vietnam could turn the tide around, they would take the weak position at the conference table and any kind of neutralization would inevitably turn Saigon into the hand of Hanoi and Beijing. Thus the main aim of Rolling Thunder and sending American ground troops was to stop the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, boost the morale in South Vietnam and hopefully create a stable government in Saigon, and force the Communists to change their mind and accept a settlement on American terms.

Although the Johnson administration faced mounting pressures from its European allies for negotiations, it happily found firm supporters in its Asian allies. During April 1964, Rusk visited several Southeast Asian states. From Taipei to Saigon, Rusk was urged by the leaders to stand firm in South Vietnam. Chiang Kai-shek told Rusk, “we should know that the real masters of

²⁰⁰ Conversation between LBJ and Rusk, February 1, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 210.

North Vietnam are the Chinese Communists. They pull the strings It may be that Southeast Asia cannot be made secure unless the Chinese Communists are hurt and hurt badly.”²⁰¹ In Cambodia, Sihanouk “is convinced that Vietnamese Communists, backed by ChiComs, will eventually win war in Vietnam” and “he cannot be sure this will happen soon enough to prevent South Vietnam from inflicting considerable damage on Cambodia.”²⁰² The most powerful argument came from Saigon, where General Khanh “responded that as far as he was concerned we could use anything we wanted against China. As long as Communist China remained ‘you will never have security.’” And Khanh firmly regarded an early negotiation as a show of weakness.²⁰³

It seemed that for the Southeast Asian countries, any real political settlement must come after beating Hanoi and Beijing on the battlefield. At one SEATO meeting, people agreed that “there certainly was no assurance Chinese Communists in fact would accept a neutral Vietnam even with the U.S. forces withdrawn.”²⁰⁴ Thus McGeorge Bundy warned against an early negotiation: “Any U.S. overtures at this time would be regarded by North Vietnam as a sign that we were becoming war weary and frustrated, and this would convince Hanoi all the more that its tactics were wearing us down and succeeding.”²⁰⁵

Indeed, China would not accept any kind of negotiation. China’s strong opposition to the Vietnam peace talks had a deep root. Between 1963 and 1964, Mao completed his strategic thought about the “three world.” The first world was the world of the two superpowers. The second world referred to other developed industrial countries, most of which leaned to the American camp. The third world referred to the underdeveloped Asian, African and Latin

²⁰¹ Memo, April 16, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30:41-47.

²⁰² Telegram, March 26, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Mainland Southeast Asia*, 28: 288-289.

²⁰³ Memo, April 18, 1964, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 1: 244.

²⁰⁴ Memo, April 15, 1964, *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁰⁵ Memo, *Ibid.*, 229-230.

American nations. Mao believed that China should make friends with the third world countries to create an international united front against Washington and Moscow.²⁰⁶

During this increasingly radical period of Chinese foreign policy, Mao pointed out three “anti-imperialist” heroes: Ho Chi Minh, Castro and Ben Bella. In a speech to a group of Chilean journalists on June 23, 1964, Mao declared: “We oppose war, but we support the anti-imperialist war waged by oppressed peoples. We support the revolutionary war in Cuba and Algeria. We also support the anti-U.S.-imperialist war conducted by the South Vietnamese people.”²⁰⁷

China’s support of the “wars of national liberation” was entwined with its sense of national insecurity. In another speech launched in early 1964, Mao believed that the United States and its “running dogs” had constructed a containment line around China in Asia. The war in Vietnam, viewed by the Chinese Chairman, could serve as a good chance for breaking this blockade line and even driving the Americans out of Asia. Thus a “negotiated settlement could only play into the hand of Americans, for they could get what they could not get on the battlefield and continue to stay in Asia.” “So long as imperialism exists [in Asia], the danger of war is there. We are not the chief of staff for imperialism and have no idea when it will start a war.”²⁰⁸ Thus Mao strongly believed that any negotiation would become unconditional surrender.

This “unconditional surrender,” in the eyes of Chinese leaders, would be particularly dangerous in the context of the Vietnam conflict. To a great extent, China’s firm opposition to a political settlement in Vietnam was determined by China’s involvement in the First Indochina War (1950-1954). After the North Vietnamese won the decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu against the French in 1954, Hanoi’s hope of a reunified Vietnam under Communist rule was set back by China and the Soviet Union. Instead of supporting Hanoi pursuing a final military victory in the

²⁰⁶ *Mao Waijiao Wenxian*, 506-509.

²⁰⁷ *People’s Daily*, June 24, 1964.

²⁰⁸ *People’s Daily*, June 17, 1964.

wake of Dien Bien Phu, the Chinese and the Soviets cooperated to drag the North Vietnamese to the conference table. During the 1954 Geneva Conference, China used a possible American intervention to push Hanoi to accept a cease fire and a temporally divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel. According to the 1954 Geneva Accord, Vietnam would be unified by a later national plebiscite. If this would happen, Beijing assured Hanoi that Vietnam could be reunified into a communist nation. However, when the expected plebiscite did not happen and the military conflict between the two Vietnams resumed, more and more leaders in Hanoi began to believe that they were betrayed by their Communist comrades. In Beijing, the senior leaders insisted their strategy in 1954 correct, yet they also clearly knew that they could not afford another early negotiation about Vietnam in 1965. Otherwise, they would lose the trust of Hanoi.²⁰⁹ Moreover, like the Soviet Union, China also faced a dilemma in Vietnam: it must be tough in order to prove its “true revolutionary spirit.” Again and again China rebuked any negotiation initiative as a conspiracy between imperialism and revisionism to subvert China. To Beijing, standing firm in Vietnam was required both by the conflict with America and the dispute with the Soviet Union.

For America, Beijing’s opposition to any political settlement in Vietnam was only one side of a same coin. The other side of the coin was the perceived aggressive Chinese Communists and the need to stand firm before them. The two sides indeed mutually reinforced each other. Thus the existence of the China factor made the Vietnam negotiation a deadlock—the need to teach China a lesson was a precondition to an acceptable political settlement; a negotiation at the current phase seemed impossible without backing off from containing China.

Therefore in early 1965 the Johnson administration gradually stepped up its military efforts in Vietnam partly to gain a better bargaining position. China, a communist power that could not tolerate a “Cuba” created by America in its backyard, delivered serious signals to the Johnson

²⁰⁹ Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 138-134; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 49-63.

administration. Yet when Washington read these warnings as defensive, some senior policy makers in the White House raised the possibility of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam.

In fact, the Chinese clearly expressed their intentions: China would not back off from a war with America, yet China would not seek one. In the February 24 Warsaw talks, Wang Guoquan, Ambassador of the PRC to Poland, warned his American counterpart John Cabot that whether or not China would enter the war depended on America. Despite Wang's strong words, Cabot observed that "Wang's statements were less heated than they might have been expected to be under the circumstance—less, for instance, than after the Tonkin Gulf incidents." He concluded that "I scarcely think his statement indicated that intervention is planned for the moment."²¹⁰

Even with this conclusion, Washington still could not be sure about Beijing's future response to a proposal for peace talks. On the one hand, America had heard such strong accusations and warnings from China for a long time and somehow had gotten used to dismissing some of them as rhetoric; on the other hand, planners in Washington were not sure about the boundaries of China's tolerance. They wondered whether China would turn its warnings into action when Rolling Thunder began several days later, although China probably had sensed the increasing tension in Vietnam.

Therefore, when the first Rolling Thunder was cancelled partly due to a suspected coup in Saigon, America also reacted to a negotiation initiative proposed by London and Moscow. Yet American leaders had a sense that the negotiation would come to naught. For a long time most senior officials in Washington believed that any negotiated political settlement in Vietnam would mean a defeat to America. The miserable situation of South Vietnam provided America with a poor bargaining position. The Johnson administration insisted that before the tide turned America would not sit at a conference table. Thus America reacted passively to this proposal. As Dean

²¹⁰ Cabot to Department of State, February 24, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30:149-151.

Rusk told Taylor: “We would stop short of ourselves proposing formal systematic negotiations but assumption of 1954 co-chairmanship.”²¹¹ In other words, America should not actively pursue any peace talks. William Bundy fully agreed: “The U.S. itself would take no initiative for talk, but would agree to cooperate in consultation.”²¹²

The negotiation initiative was proposed first by Soviet Premier Kosygin. Embarrassed by the Vietnam situation, the Soviets, who felt obliged to support North Vietnam while being reluctant to confront America, eagerly looked for a negotiated settlement. Yet the Chinese condemned the Soviet move, asserting that Moscow wanted to cut a deal with Washington.²¹³

Johnson and his advisors were hardly surprised by the failure. In fact, they had already reached the conclusion that China would not sit at the conference table: “Peiping—like Hanoi—has no desire for any agreement except on Communist terms. Peiping ... claims that the U.S. is hoping to gain at the conference table what it can not win on the battlefield.”²¹⁴

However, some officials, such as Ambassador at Large Averell Harriman, argued to give Beijing more carrots. By doing so, he believed that “Peiping could have the security of a comfortable buffer area. They might be ready to accept such a buffer, as long as they were sure that there would be no attempt to make it a Western bastion. The ChiCom leadership is patient and it might be willing to put off for the time being its expansionist hopes.”²¹⁵

Rusk was also busy dealing with the possibility of a negotiation with North Vietnam and China. Actually, now there was a strong appeal in world opinion for peace talks, including the famous 17-nation proposal and the Secretary General of the United Nation U. Thant’s five-power

²¹¹ *PP(Gravel)*, 3:326.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 327.

²¹³ Qiang Zhai, “Opposing Negotiations: China and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-1968”, *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (February 1999): 23.

²¹⁴ CIA Memo, Feb, 23, 1965, *Ibid.*, 361.

²¹⁵ Memo by Harriman, Apr., 1 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 505-506.

talks. On April 1 Rusk reported that there might be “an area open for useful negotiations.”²¹⁶ McGeorge Bundy also argued for exploring the possibility of a negotiation. But they all agreed that it was hard to expect Beijing to change its stance. Nevertheless, Bundy believed that a better chance could be acquired by providing more carrots.²¹⁷

Under these circumstances, President Johnson gave a speech on April 7 at John Hopkins University. Many media believed that Johnson took an initiative on peace talks when he said “we will never be second in the search for ... a peaceful settlement in Vietnam we remain ready with this purpose for unconditional discussions.” Many people were excited by this kind of “unconditional discussions,” which differed from America’s previous insistence on the end of support of the Viet Cong from North Vietnam as a basis for talks. Moreover, Johnson also proposed to help develop the Mekong River basin with “a billion dollar American investment.” Yet Johnson also delivered a strong message to China: “Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking.” Thus America must keep its word to contain the Chinese threat.²¹⁸

From the viewpoint of Hanoi and Beijing, Johnson’s initiative contained more sticks than carrots. North Vietnam immediately published its “four points,” still insisting that America should first withdraw from Vietnam. China also denounced Johnson’s speech as “a swindle pure and simple.”²¹⁹

When Hanoi and Beijing closed the door, the tension between America and China grew. On April 21 at Warsaw, China again denounced America and threatened to intervene²²⁰ On April 22, Johnson approved the additional deployment.

²¹⁶ Memo for Record, Apr., 2, 1965, Ibid., 517.

²¹⁷ PP(Gravel), 3: 347.

²¹⁸ Johnson, “Peace Without Conquest”, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, LBJ, 1965*, 394-399.

²¹⁹ PP(Gravel), 3: 356.

²²⁰ FRUS 2: 575, 595; *FRUS, 1964-1968, China*, 30: 165.

Even as America escalated its war effort, Washington tried to explore a political settlement. Yet this time American leaders paid more attention to exploring the differences among Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow. Ironically, the reason for doing so was also the reason why Beijing refused to negotiate and why Beijing was unlikely to intervene. Most American officials thought Beijing “might reason that the new enemy forces would serve only to postpone the ultimate Communist victory.”²²¹ Thus Beijing neither wanted to talk nor wanted to intervene. Yet it seemed that Hanoi had different views on talks and it used the Soviet-Sino split to serve itself. As early as February, Rusk thought maybe “Hanoi was ready to talk peace with US it was clearly not pro-Peking.”²²² In April Bundy argued that “our prime objects remain, I presume, to separate Peking and Hanoi.”²²³

In a speech on May 13, Johnson further said, “Communist China apparently desires the war to continue whatever the cost to their allies. Their target is not merely South Vietnam: it is Asia. Their objective is not the fulfillment of Vietnamese nationalism: it is to erode and to discredit America’s ability to help prevent Chinese domination over all of Asia.” In order to woo Hanoi from Beijing, Johnson even hinted that America would help Vietnam to realize its nationalist goals.²²⁴

May 13 was also the beginning of a short bombing pause, code-named Mayflower, which was designed to seek Hanoi’s reaction in the hope that there would be some concession. On the same day, George Ball suggested that America seek private communications to Hanoi and Moscow, and “Peiping would be left out of this consultation.” Ball argued that, “although the North Vietnamese and the Soviets would inform the Chinese in due course, it seems preferable

²²¹ CIA Memo, Apr. 21, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam* 2: 594.

²²² Rusk to UN, Feb. 25, 1965, *Ibid.*, 369.

²²³ Bundy to Rusk, Apr. 13, 1965, *Ibid.*, 552.

²²⁴ “Transcript of Address by President on Vietnam War and China’s Role”, *NYT*, May 14, 1965.

for the first reactions to be those of the North Vietnamese and the Soviets. This would leave Peiping last in and, hopefully, odd man out. The risk of rubbing salt in Chinese wounds may be worth it.”²²⁵

However, when there was news from the French that North Vietnam seemed interested in talks, the bombing resumed. It might be that Johnson had become impatient, or that Washington never fully believed that the peace initiative would succeed. Indeed, the latter was probably the real reason. On the one hand, the Johnson administration well understood the close relations between Hanoi and Beijing. It was impossible that China would allow North Vietnam pursue a negotiated settlement with America by itself. For Hanoi’s leaders, although they did not fully trust the Chinese, they knew in their hearts that the Chinese assistance was crucial to their final victory. Thus it was unlikely that Hanoi would bypass China and sit at the conference table with America. On the other hand, Johnson and his advisers knew that they could not afford the “carrots” that Hanoi really wanted. As early as 1964, the Bundy Working Group already rejected an early political settlement. Such a settlement depended on: “(a) that the DRV cease its assistance to and direction of the VC; (b) that an independent and secure GVN be re-established; and (c) that there be adequate international supervising and verification machinery.”²²⁶ Several months later, the Johnson administration still found it hard to back down from these objectives. At one NSC meeting in April 1965, just few days before Johnson’s Hopkins speech, Dean Rusk again stressed that America should never comprise an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam for a political settlement with Hanoi and Beijing. Only if these two Communist powers let their neighbors along could there be a possible negotiated settlement.²²⁷

Hence in the middle of May America concluded that Beijing and Hanoi would not sit at the

²²⁵ Paper by Ball, May 13, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 655.

²²⁶ *PP*(Gravel), 3: 687-691.

²²⁷ NSC Meeting, April 2, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968, Vietnam*, 2: 517-519.

conference table at this time, and China was unlikely to come in any peace talks in the near future. By focusing on the China factor, therefore, we can easily understand why a possible political settlement in Vietnam did not work. Both China and America could not afford to compromise their objectives. For America, the urgent need to protect its vital interests in Vietnam before an unwavering Communist China effectively ruled out any early negotiations—unless it could improve its bargaining position at the battlefield.

Conclusion

“I want them [Generals in Saigon] to leave me alone, because I got bigger things to do right here at home.” So Lyndon Johnson told his advisers on November 24, 1963, when Vietnam was still a remote place in American consciousness.²²⁸ One and half a years later, Johnson had bigger things to do right there in Vietnam. During the first several months of 1965, the Johnson administration launched a sustained air war against North Vietnam and introduced American ground combat troops into South Vietnam. Historians have provided many explanations for these decisions, but it has been my purpose here to highlight concerns about China in the deliberations of American leaders.

With its credibility as the leader and defender of the “free world” at stake, Washington perceived a great need to stand firm in South Vietnam in the face of Communist expansion. When the long peace of the Cold War began, however, most allies regarded Vietnam as a peripheral area where no vital interests of the free world were involved. But the emerging Communist China as a more aggressive power compared with a moderate Soviet Union troubled Johnson and his advisors a lot. The Sino-Soviet split, Washington concluded, would change the balance of power in Southeast Asia if the Chinese were not to be contained. Moreover, Hanoi was regarded as a puppet of Beijing, a pawn of no importance. If the Chinese way of waging “wars of liberation” succeeded, the Soviets would be pushed back to a hard Cold War stance. Thus America chose to escalate the war to fight Hanoi and Beijing, with the hope that some kind of cooperation with the Soviet Union, which also regarded China as a troublemaker, would help to settle the dust quickly.

Although determined to contain China, the Johnson administration adopted a cautious

²²⁸ Bill Moyers, “Flashback,” *Newsweek*, February 10, 1975. Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 100.

approach in terms of military strategy. The consideration of a Chinese intervention limited American policy makers' choices, but American leaders were not bluffed by China. Even if the White House deemed Beijing's warnings as defensive, Johnson and his colleagues still chose to use limited military force. While fully understanding that China did not want an open land war with America, Washington also did not want to seek one. Thus by the middle of 1965, it seemed that the two powers had reached a mutual understanding in regard to the level and pace of the war in Vietnam. To America, this certainly did not mean appeasement of China. After all, this was a containment war. And U.S. planners usually defined the objective in Vietnam as "denying victory to Communism"—denial of South Vietnam to Communism—not "pursuing a complete victory over China."

America's consideration of China also helped to rule out a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. Because China, the primary enemy, took a tough stance, there was no reason to expect successful peace talks. American leaders knew that China linked Vietnam with other areas, such as Taiwan. Thus the Johnson administration could not afford the carrot China really wanted. Indeed, too much was at stake.

It might be interesting to notice the way Lyndon Johnson referred to Communist China. When he just took office, Johnson was talking about "700 million Chinese." During mid 1964, he began to talk about "800 million Chinese Reds." After October 1964, however, Johnson was talking about "a billion crazy Chinese armed with nuclear bombs." This, therefore, reflected that China did play a crucial role in the escalation of the Vietnam War. By examining America's calculation about China, we can further understand why and how American leaders chose to do what they did in the early 1965.

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