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July 12, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY

THROUGH: S/S

FROM: G - Charles E. Bohlen

SUBJECT: Bombing Question in Vietnamese Situation

In the interest of clarity I would like to set forth my views on the bombing question in the Vietnamese situation. In the first place these views are set forth without any attempt to evaluate -- which I am in no position to do -- the effect of the cessation of bombing on the Saigon Government and its situation in the country.

It seems to me entirely clear that the North Vietnamese Government does not really wish to see the bombing cease. This is particularly true since the limitations imposed by the President in his March 31 speech which halted bombing in the populated areas of the country. Rather I feel that Hanoi recognizes fully that it is the bombing that gives them the greatest claim on the Communist countries, particularly the Soviet Union, for support in this fight. The Soviet Union it seems to me has made it quite clear that its interest in having the bombing stopped is in part at least to lighten the obligation which it must for ideological reasons feel in regard to the support of a small socialist country under attack from a non-socialist country. I think the reason for Soviet reticence as to what they could promise in the event that bombing ceased is due entirely to the fact that the Russians themselves are not at all sure of what they could do with Hanoi.

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If the bombing was stopped I have little doubt that the Soviet Union would feel itself freer to press advice on Hanoi, and conceivably even use the threat of withholding of military supplies from Hanoi if Hanoi proved recalcitrant. I doubt very much if the Soviet Government has any overriding interest in the outcome of the fight in Vietnam.

Another advantage of a unilateral cessation of the bombing would be that we would thus maintain fully our right to aerial surveillance over North Vietnam, a point which would surely be contested by the North Vietnamese if the cessation resulted from any form of agreement.

I think there is some merit in what Nick has suggested, namely that after we have presented on Monday to the North Vietnamese - in a private meeting - desiderata we pass them to the Russians at the same time asking the simple question if in light of these desiderata the Soviets still maintain their positions set forth in Kosygin's letter. I would certainly not undertake to guarantee that Soviet efforts would have any certainty of success, but I am reasonably confident that the Soviets would make the effort. I do not believe that the Russian view expressed in Kosygin's letter is just a cheap trick to delude us since I doubt that the Soviet Union places so low a value on their relations with the U. S.

Any relations of this sort of course must entail (not communicated to any foreign country) the resumption of bombing if cessation produces no valuable results from our point of view.

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