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Letter from East German Foreign Minister Otto Winzer to [Politburo Members] Comrade Walter Ulbricht, Comrade Willi Stoph, Comrade Erich Honecker, and Comrade Hermann Axen[Excerpts]

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Summary:

Letter from East German Foreign Minister to members of the SED Politburo which contains parts of a report by a Soviet delegation headed by Ambassador Shcherbakov. The Vietnamese situation is discussed, and it is asserted that Vietnamese officials are too quick to listen to Chinese advisors. It is also noted that, while the American morale is decreasing, it will still be most difficult to bring about the second "Dien Bien Phu" they are looking for.

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Below I transmit excerpts of a piece of information on the visit of a Soviet delegation to Hanoi headed by Comrade Shelepin, which the ambassador of the USSR in the DRV, Comrade Shcherbakov, provided to some ambassadors of the socialist countries.

Comrade Shcherbakov explained, among others, the following:

Some questions related to the rise of aggression were planned to be discussed, questions with regard to negotiations and questions with regard to aid, which had remained open after [the visit of] the Le Thanh Nghi delegation.[1] Another task was to clarify the attitude of the Chinese, especially in relation to the publication of the article of 11 November 1965. Even the Vietnamese maintain that the moment has come to demonstrate close bonds to the Soviet comrades, and this especially with regard to the US 14 Points.[2]

Yet the [Vietnamese] views on the delegation were not uniform. Individual Vietnamese comrades, who stand for close bonds to China, had raised concerns about the visit. They gave reasons to ponder that the Soviet Union exerts some pressure on the DRV to force it to capitulate to the US imperialists. The forces, which were against the visit, spread the rumor that the SU wants to detach the DRV from the PR China [and that the SU wants] to receive the support of the DRV for the 23rd party congress. The proponents of the invitation eventually carried the day on the basis of the situation mentioned. The opponents to the visit of the delegation had to realize that their concerns were unjustified. Apparently Comrade Truong Chinh was the one who the most stubbornly raised ruckus against the delegation. But he had no influence on the attitude of the Politburo, as all of the discussions were conducted in an extraordinary warmhearted and considerate way. Comrade Truong Chinh, as a delegation member, took part in the welcome of the [Soviet] delegation, but did not attend the discussions due to "health reasons," and did not receive, in his function as president of the national assembly, the delegation of deputies of the Supreme Soviet, which accompanied the Soviet delegation, but was replaced for the said reasons. In the same way, [National Assembly Standing Committee Vice-Chairman] Comrade Hoang Van Hoan, who is on medical treatment [Kur] in China, was missing.

Four or five encounters had been planned.

While Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap reported on the military events in 1965, Comrade Pham Van Dong gave the general political report on the overall development and on the conclusions, which had been drawn during the December plenum.

[...]

On individual questions:

They [the Vietnamese] repeated that with their activities in the south they had wrecked an American attack. The NLF prevented the unfolding of actions by US units. The Soviet comrades replied that they believe that the Americans have not yet launched a major attack, but that only skirmishes [Vorgefecht] had occurred that had gone awry for the Americans. The Americans simply are not yet ready with their preparations for a major attack. It has also been revealed that their 11 bases have not yet been completely established. And they have recognized correctly that their forces are not yet sufficient, and that there are difficulties in South Vietnam with the use of modern technology, whose employment in South Vietnamese conditions is complicated. The Vietnamese comrades do not estimate the situation correctly. The American troops still need three to five months of experience.

The Vietnamese comrades explained that they checked the weak and strong sides of

the adversary, and that they know them now. The breakdown of the Saigon army and regime can be noticed; that is why the Americans have shouldered the most difficult battle tasks. The majority of the people are against the Americans. The moral strength is to be found with the NLF, while the fighting morale of the Americans as well as of the Saigon troops is low. That's why they concluded that the American units can be beaten and defeated. Now, individual strikes are executed in order to break their measures step by step and to attack their bases. But since the US potential is big [and] that of the Vietnamese small, one cannot bring about a Dien Bien Phu.

The initiative is and remains in the hands of the NLF, even the diplomatic initiative. (The Soviet comrades expressed the view that this opinion is not correct and that they [the Vietnamese] overestimate their own strength, while they underestimate [the strength] of the Americans.) From that one has to conclude, the Vietnamese comrades said that the war will carry on and that it might come to a broadening of the war. They deduced that the bombing of the DRV in the past year had brought no victory for the US, while the defensive forces of the DRV on the basis of aid by the SU and the other socialist countries have increased multifold. The losses of and damage to the DRV are relatively small. The population has put up with the bombing, so that even here the losses are irrelevant. (According to the opinion of the Soviet comrades this does not conform to facts.)

The Vietnamese are not interested in broadening the war but want to limit it to South Vietnam. But the US wants to blockade the DRV and South Vietnam from the sea; and even blockade China as well as the roads to Laos. Furthermore, the Ho [Chi Minh] Trail is supposed to be smashed.

Further, it is planned to intervene in south and central Laos, whereas Thailand serves as jumping board, and the blockade of Cambodia supposedly has been tightened. That is why it is necessary to turn to the socialist countries for aid also in 1966. For 1966, the Vietnamese plan a series of raids in the south in order to convince the Americans that there is no question about their victory and that the solution of the Vietnam problem is only possible on the basis of the Vietnamese program. Following the [December] plenum, they are convinced of the correctness of their position. That's also what they wanted to convince the [Soviet] delegation of. They are concerned only about the passive attitude which the countries of Asia and Africa assume.

Questions on the solution of the Vietnam question

Basically both sides agree to the necessity of solving this question. The Vietnamese comrades do not deviate from the four points; but they say that the right moment has to be awaited. They think a lot, Pham Van Dong explained, about how a peaceful solution, a political solution could be brought about, and [how to determine] when the opportune moment has come. (In that regard, Comrade Shcherbakov remarked that it is new that they consider these questions, which had not been the case some months ago.) They are not against the initiatives of the Hungarian^[3] and Polish comrades, but [actually] value them. In this respect, they also are different from the Chinese, Comrade Shcherbakov added, because they acknowledge the necessity of creating a diplomatic and political front against the Americans. They consider the 14 Points proposal as a step, one which does not bring anything new, but is only a bluff, because the Americans are in a complicated position. The Soviet comrades replied that one has to see it as a measure to escape the affair, because [the Americans] realize that there is nothing for them to win, and that maybe now the moment has come [for the Vietnamese] to take them by the word and to unmask [them]. This is not a capitulation, but a struggle with other means. How one should approach [this], the Vietnamese comrades explained, they themselves are not completely clear about, and they have made no decision yet. Thus they want to counsel with the Soviet and Chinese comrades, what [moment] should be judged as the right moment. Tentatively, they will keep up the contacts, but [they will] not rush. "We will always

think about it."

SU-DRV Relations

[...]

In general, the talks with the Vietnamese comrades were heartfelt and sincere, and there were many consenting declarations on basic questions. For example they said that they completely agree with the Soviet policy towards America and with the efforts of the Soviet comrades to maintain peace. The Soviet comrades estimate that [their] relations [with the Vietnamese] have improved through these bilateral talks and that a significant step forward was taken. There are some among the Vietnamese comrades who did not say openly their opinion. They desired that we support the Vietnamese policy completely in the communique. They also wanted us to appreciate [würdigen] Chinese aid. The Soviet comrades pointed out that negotiations are taking place between the CPSU and the VWP, and thus a reference to Chinese aid is inappropriate. Furthermore they conveyed [the opinion] that the Vietnamese comrades should not underestimate the US with regard to its military strength. They [the Americans] are in a position to destroy Vietnam completely. It is in the interest of the socialist camp and of the struggle for peace that the war stays limited to South Vietnam, and the Soviet comrades believe that the Vietnamese comrades do not want to give the Americans the opportunity to broaden the war. In this respect the Soviet comrades proposed to increase the number of specialists who [could] strengthen and re-organize anti-aircraft defense. Moreover, they desire that the Soviet specialists have the opportunity to gather experience and to study the tactics of the Americans [in the battlefield]. At the same time, operational assistance could be provided [in return]. The Vietnamese did not reply immediately.

On the question of the solution of the Vietnam question, the Soviet comrades advised that the Vietnamese comrades increase their initiative and explain the Four Points much more to the world's public. The front against imperialism must be enlarged, and the SU will provide any aid for that purpose. One has to fight the Americans on all positions. They [the Vietnamese] were clearly told [by the Soviets] that the Americans would not leave Vietnam solely on the basis of the outcome of the war. Thus it was urgently necessary to increase political activities through talks, solidarity, collective actions of the socialist camp. The US has to be checked on its readiness [to negotiate]. Now is the moment when one has to launch [such] measures actively. For that purpose, trilateral talks should be discussed again and the necessity [should be] recognized to focus on a collective defense. That is the weakness of the socialist camp. The Vietnamese comrades have recognized this as well, but asked the Soviet comrades to talk to the Chinese ("We agree with that and approve of it"). They explained that they had to find out in talks with the Chinese that the latter reject their proposals.

Comrade Shcherbakov explained that the Vietnamese comrades agree too quickly with the Chinese comrades in talks and do not appear tough enough. The influence of the Chinese and the dependency of the Vietnamese [on them] is too great. The Soviet comrades explained the damaging attitude of the Chinese to the Vietnamese comrades. As a matter of fact, the Chinese help to increase the aggression of the US, and thus they shoulder a heavy responsibility toward the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese always stress that they are a small country and a small party, and they hint that they could not stand up to the Chinese. They emphasize that the Chinese help them politically, morally, and economically, especially with food and labor. Later Ho Chi Minh explained in a private talk that the military aid of the Chinese is insignificant. They say that the Chinese have difficulties with their transport system. The Soviet comrades replied that they are ready to help at once. But they could not agree [to the circumstance] that the Chinese wanted to force them to carry out transports by sea. In the end, the Gulf of Tonkin is a war region, where the SU could clash with the US immediately.

Comrade Shcherbakov concluded that one could ascertain that there is no unity within the leadership of the VWP on these questions. Apart from comrades who follow the Chinese line, there are also comrades who recognize that the Chinese harm the national interests of the Vietnamese and that the great power interests of China clash with the national interests of Vietnam. They are on edge over the fact that the Chinese carry the disagreements [with the Soviets] over into the Vietnamese question. They harbor the great hope for aid from the CPSU and the other socialist countries. Even if they appear to be timid, they are for collective action. The Chinese for their part are on edge that the Vietnamese comrades waver and are not hard enough in the question that only the war can solve these questions, as much as they have expressed this attitude before. That's why the Chinese spread slander with regard to the policy of the SU. That's why they have sent to the NLF [their own] representatives, who were supposed to render pressure so that the NLF would not listen to Hanoi, because it is wavering.

Le Duan held back in the talks, made only remarks. Comrade Ho Chi Minh acted similarly; [Politburo member] Le Duc Tho said absolutely nothing. The talks were carried out only by Pham Van Dong. The vice head of the CC department for international relations, Cde. Tran Chi Hien, also appeared positively [in the talks]."

[1] Le Thanh Nghi was in Moscow in late December 1965.

[2] Pronounced by Johnson on 29 December 1965, as a basis for negotiations.

[3] In early 1966, the Hungarians as well as the Mongolians, the Czechoslovaks, the Bulgarians and the East Germans sent letters to the Chinese trying to nudge them to assume a less uncompromising attitude with regard to the Vietnam War. See Hershberg, "Peace Probes and Bombing Pause."