The North Vietnamese communists are, to a very high degree, secretive and xenophobic. Even the representatives of other communist states supplying military and economic assistance to the N. Vietnamese, whether they be diplomats or technical advisers, find their movements circumscribed, their access to officials and official information tightly restricted, and their contacts with the ordinary people virtually non-existent. The atmosphere inside the diplomatic corps in Hanoi is not dissimilar to that in Peking, with relationships between members of the various foreign missions, communist and non-communist, both friendlier and closer than those between the missions and members of the N. Vietnamese administration. It is not that Vietnamese people are unfriendly or rude; they are not, as their ready smiles and unfailing politeness testify. The reason lies in the atmosphere of fear and suspicion which pervades the N. Vietnamese capital, and the uncertainty of how far it is safe to go in relationships with foreigners without incurring official displeasure. Consequently, to be safe rather than sorry, officials restrict their dealings with foreigners to a minimum of what is required by their administrative functions and divulge a minimum of information. As far as the ordinary citizens are concerned, language is often less of a barrier to communication than the unspoken fear of being reported to have conversed with a foreigner without directing remarks through an official interpreter.

Source of rumours

In an atmosphere such as this, there is a tendency for the foreign community to become a hotbed of rumour and speculation. Its members are prone to read too much into a chance remark made by a N. Vietnamese, to misinterpret incidents, the full significance of which is not understood, and to indulge in rumour mongering. There is a strong temptation for individuals to pretend to information they do not possess because it can acquire for them the reputation of enjoying better access than others. Visiting press or television correspondents, by virtue of the fact that they are permitted to travel to places inaccessible to diplomats, enjoy an added status even though their itineraries are carefully designed to ensure that they should see only what the authorities wish them to see and they are constantly under the eye of a guide/interpreter through whom they must address every remark or question. Inevitably, hard reliable information is scarce and difficult to come by, which is precisely what the N. Vietnamese leadership intends. These men regard foreigners as an evil made necessary by N. Vietnam’s present circumstances, but they see to it that the outsiders acquire the least possible informa-
tion about what is happening in the country and interfere in N. Vietnamese affairs as little as possible.

Facts
Yet despite all the safeguards, censorship, and security precautions, Hanoi's leaders have been unable to conceal the fact that a critical phase in the conduct of Vietnamese affairs and in the composition of the small group of senior communists responsible for them began a few months ago. The outward signs are there for all to observe, whether they take the form of published articles attacking Mao Tse-tung, a press conference by a delegation of Viet Cong in Peking which so abused the Soviet Union as to persuade the correspondents of Tass and East European communist news agencies to walk out, broadcasts by Peking Radio citing unnamed Vietnamese sources for their contention that all N. Vietnamese love Mao and study the strategic thinking of Lin Piao, or the information retailed privately by Soviet diplomats abroad that senior pro-Soviet N. Vietnamese communists have recently been arrested. The list of such phenomena could be extended considerably, but it is unnecessary to do so. All indicate the same thing, differences among N. Vietnam's top communist leaders. Nor is it difficult to divine the questions over which disagreements have arisen. They are concerned with N. Vietnam's present situation as a result of the war. This becomes apparent if one examines the circumstances in which N. Vietnam now finds herself.

THE SINO-SOVIET DISPUTE

"In the face of a situation where our camp's unity was seriously impaired, the U.S. imperialists gradually realised that, even with the introduction of several hundred thousand expeditionary troops into the South, the foreseeable situation would not drive them into becoming involved in a major limited war which required that they cope with the strong reaction of the entire socialist bloc." The words are LE DUAN'S, and in them he unequivocally blames Sino-Soviet differences for the presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Elsewhere in the same document he reveals his belief that the war would already have been won by the communists had it not been for direct U.S. intervention. There is no reason to doubt that his view is shared by his colleagues in the N. Vietnamese leadership, or that the Sino-Soviet dispute is regarded as the reason why the Vietnamese war has not been won. But these men are realists and are obliged to deal with a real situation. While doubtless embittered by the enormous cost and suffering this dispute has imposed on Vietnamese communists, they tackle their day-to-day problems on the basis of its existence. General NGUYEN VAN VINH has stated: "We cannot just sit by and wait until the socialist camp is united to achieve decisive victory."

The implication of General Vinh's remark is that decisive victory would more easily be achieved were the Sino-Soviet dispute to end. Conversely, a N. Vietnamese victory will become increasingly difficult unless the dispute is resolved. To cite General Vinh once more, "... without international support, our success would be limited. ..." Success or failure in the war for N. Vietnam, therefore, depends to a not inconsiderable extent on the state of relations between China and the Soviet Union. But these continue to deteriorate from day to day, and, in the opinion of most qualified observers, have already reached the point of no return. Indeed, Soviet Party first secretary BREZHNEV appears to have finalised the breach between the two communist parties when he spoke in Budapest to the Russia-Hungary Friendship Association and accused "Mao Tse-tung and his accomplices" of "counter-revolution", the strongest charge which can be levelled by one communist against another. Chairman Mao, said Brezhnev, was replacing Marxism-Leninism with adventurism and proletarian internationalism with nationalism and could "no longer be called a communist". For her part, China incorporated an embittered attack on the Soviet Union in her message of congratulation to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on the occasion of the 22nd national day so that the N. Vietnamese, for the first time since the state was established, were this year obliged to refrain from
publishing any of the congratulatory messages from other communist states. N. Vietnam has, since the beginning of the Sino-Soviet dispute, carefully avoided associating herself with either side in the dispute and tried to heal the breach. Today, even she must accept that the differences between the two largest communist states are irreconcilable. All the hopes of a strengthened position which would undoubtedly result from support by a unified communist bloc have been dashed. N. Vietnamese leaders must abandon expectations of an amelioration in their situation from that source.

THE SOVIET UNION

Although a community of interest deriving from their shared communist ideology links the Soviet Union and N. Vietnam, marked differences also exist between the two states. An industrialized nation possessing nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles, the Soviet Union is fully aware of the destructive power of the atom and has no wish to hazard the safety of her industry by engaging in nuclear warfare. One of her principal concerns is to avoid a military confrontation with the U.S., which possesses the world's most powerful nuclear armament. Whenever faced with the probability of such a confrontation if she persisted in the course she was following—notably in the Cuban confrontation and the recent Middle East war—she has elected to withdraw. Soviet leaders are well aware that continuing escalation of the Vietnamese war might one day lead to a situation in which they would have to choose between risking war with the U.S. or abandoning their Vietnamese communist allies. Either alternative would militate against Russia's own interests, which is why she has consistently sought a negotiated end to the Vietnam conflict. Moreover, she maintains that the train of development in Vietnam proves the correctness of her own doctrine of peaceful coexistence and the error of Maoist revolutionary war. Soviet representatives have continued to try to convince N. Vietnam that a campaign of political subversion against the South offers greater prospects of success than a military campaign, as well as overwhelming additional advantages. Political subversion would relieve N. Vietnam of the necessity to infiltrate soldiers and arms into the South, would provide no pretext for foreign military intervention there, and would not result in enemy bombing of N. Vietnam. KHRUSHCHEV foresaw the dangers of Soviet involvement in the Vietnamese war and was careful to avoid it. In February 1965, however, KOSSYGIN ill-advisedly committed the Soviet Union to support the N. Vietnamese militarily, though he was careful not to go beyond offering military supplies and technicians. In consequence, N. Vietnam believed that the Soviet Union would find it impossible to withdraw her support no matter what policies Hanoi might decide to adopt because of the adverse reaction such a move would provoke from the Chinese and other communist parties. However, Soviet conduct during the Middle East war, when she conspicuously failed to take any action to prevent the defeat of her Arab allies, to whom she had also been providing massive military aid, cannot but have demonstrated to the N. Vietnamese that they would be most unwise to rely upon Soviet support beyond a certain point. Today Hanoi entertains a more realistic appreciation of the degree to which she can depend on the Soviet Union, though the N. Vietnamese leaders can derive little comfort from it.

CHINA

China has never ceased to advocate a military policy against South Vietnam, both publicly and privately, and may have been influential in persuading N. Vietnamese leaders to adopt such a policy in the first instance. True, she subsequently questioned the efficacy of the N. Vietnamese strategy, but her criticisms related only to the method of executing a military policy, not to the policy itself. In the early days of China's cultural revolution, the railway system was disrupted by red guards who commandeered trains to carry them to demonstrations, with the result that supplies to N. Vietnam were delayed. As the movement gathered greater momentum, fears of still more serious interference with the aid deliveries gripped the Vietnamese communist leaders. Today Hanoi, which is no better or worse informed about what is happening in China than is the rest of the world, receives reports of fighting between Mao's supporters and opponents in
all parts of China and knows that the possibility of these clashes developing into a civil war is very real. Were this to come about, then the transport of desperately needed military supplies might be halted altogether. Since N. Vietnam has no munitions industry of her own and relies entirely upon imported supplies, the consequences could be disastrous for her. Indeed, the adverse effects of the cultural revolution upon the Chinese economy already raise the question of whether China herself can go on supplying aid on the same scale as in the past.

Looked at from Hanoi, the cultural revolution is a most unwelcome development which has already caused setbacks for the Vietnamese communists and could conceivably reduce their country to military impotence. As yet there is no indication of how the turmoil in China will end. If the overland route should be blocked, some of the supplies could, it is true, be delivered by the sea route, but N. Vietnam has very few seaports indeed and those are already working to capacity. All the ports are small and inconvenient and the principal one, Haiphong, relies on a dredged channel, which renders it extremely vulnerable to mines. Under these circumstances N. Vietnam cannot place any reliance on China in the future and must watch developments there with acute apprehension.

NORTH VIETNAM IN WAR

The effects of American bombing, which has gone on with few interruptions since February 1965, upon the life of N. Vietnam are cumulative. At first it was possible to divert labour locally to repair roads and railways and to replace bridges with pontoons or ferries. As the damage became heavier and more widespread, more and more people had to be taken from productive work in agriculture, handicraft manufacture, and industry to cope with the task, for uninterrupted transport was essential to the resupply of communist forces in the South. But bomb damage repair was not the only drain on N. Vietnamese manpower. Seven thousand anti-aircraft gun-sites had to be constructed, constantly manned, and, more troublesome still, supplied with shells. An indication of the size of this task alone may be obtained if it is assumed that each gun-site fires a hundred shells per week. Almost three quarters of a million shells need to be imported weekly and then taken from the Chinese frontier or the ports to individual gun-sites. Again, fear of an enemy landing on N. Vietnam's sea-coast persuaded the communist leaders that elaborate coastal defences had to be constructed and manned. Finally soldiers were needed in growing numbers for infiltration into the South and for concentration around the demilitarized zone for attacks in strength across the frontier.

Massive withdrawals of labour from productive work to deal with these and other war support tasks inevitably led to serious falls in output. The effect was twofold. Greater privations were imposed on an already hard pressed people by mounting shortages of food, clothing, and other necessities. At the same time, larger quantities of essential goods to make good the worst of the deficiencies had to be imported from abroad, which meant that still more manpower was needed for the non-productive work of transport. Military imports, which hitherto enjoyed top priority, now had to compete with these non-military supplies for the limited, and dwindling, available transport space. In recent months the heavy burden has begun to prove too great to be borne. Returning American pilots report that some of the gun positions have failed to fire on their planes, which appears to indicate that supplies of shells are not reaching them, and N. Vietnamese people fortunate enough to have relatives abroad now write letters to these describing their increasing hardships and begging for food, medicines, clothes, and a host of other commodities. In the past such letters would have prudently omitted information about material conditions for fear of attracting the attention of the censor, but dire necessity now leads them to abandon this caution. The fact that youths of sixteen are currently being called up for military service illustrates the proportions of the N. Vietnamese manpower shortage.

Since August the weight of American air attacks has increased and previously untouched targets have been destroyed. The
perfection of new bombing techniques has meant that important structures which had formerly been ignored by American pilots because of the risk of causing civilian casualties are now receiving attention. Most notable of these is the mile-long Doumer rail and road bridge linking Hanoi with the route to its port, Haiphong, and the vital bridge over the Canal des Rapides, also close to Hanoi. Other targets have been rail bridges near the Chinese frontier whose destruction has caused more disruption than might be supposed. The N. Vietnamese have, for a long time, been stockpiling imported goods in the frontier region to await a spell of bad weather which would inhibit air attacks against the railways. When the weather was too bad for flying, the accumulated goods would be carried southwards safely in a hectic spurt of round-the-clock activity. But the destruction of vital bridges means that the trains can no longer reach the storage areas, so that the goods have to be carried by coolies over the rough mountainous terrain, a slow process and a very costly one in manpower.

To conserve valuable industrial machinery, the N. Vietnamese have removed much of this from vulnerable factories and moved it to remote areas together with the workers. Textile machinery, for example, taken from the Hanoi region now operates at Lang-son. But this tactic is proving wasteful for a number of reasons. Not only are the new locations remote from sources of raw material supplies, but the finished articles have to be transported over long distances for distribution. Electric power supplies are rarely available in the new locations and the machinery has to be run by portable generators, which are troublesome and not very efficient.

How much longer N. Vietnam's people can go on supporting these growing hardships and increasing material shortages, nobody knows. They have no outlet for expressing their feelings and would probably not do so even if it were possible for fear of reprisals. The carefully selected Western journalists who are admitted to N. Vietnam are invariably told by communist officials that popular morale is high and support for government policies universal. The more professionally honest of them report this as being official view, but others offer it as their own opinion.

SOUTH VIETNAM

Since January 1965, when it appeared as though the Viet Cong were on the verge of achieving a military victory in S. Vietnam, the position of the communists has deteriorated without pause in every sphere. They have won no significant military victory since that time; they have been obliged massively to reinforce the Viet Cong with regular N. Vietnamese military units in order to keep the insurgency in being; they are suffering far heavier casualties and losing more weapons than their enemies; the numbers of defections from their ranks increase weekly; their headquarters in hitherto safe rear areas have been overrun and captured; their commander-in-chief is now dead. Communist casualties have for a long time been of the order of 2,000 men each week and the number of defectors during the first part of 1967 alone is more than double the total for the whole of 1966.

So great were the military pressures on the communists in S. Vietnam that they were obliged to abandon earlier strategy altogether and adopt a new one. Main force communist units in the southern part of the country found it impossible to operate because difficulties of supply became too great. In consequence, the units were withdrawn to the northern part of the country, to the demilitarized zone, and to the southern extremity of N. Vietnam. The switch shortened supply lines and made it possible to mount sudden attacks in strength against enemy positions in the northern part of the country, but it reduced activity in the southern part to small scale operations. The Americans and S. Vietnamese were obliged to move large numbers of troops into the northern provinces to contain the main force attacks, which left them short of soldiers in the southern areas. Communist casualties in these attacks were admittedly very high, but the enemy too was sustaining heavier casualties than before and was left with insufficient soldiers further south to
continue mounting deep penetration operations against Viet Cong bases or to afford adequate protection against guerilla attack for the rural pacification areas. American commander General WESTMORELAND had to ask for more troops, and his request gave rise to political difficulties in Washington. But any advantage which the communists may derive from the new strategy promises to be short lived because a barrier is currently being constructed south of the demilitarized zone. While it will not prevent infiltrators from entering S. Vietnam—most of these already travel through neighbouring Laos—it will contain attacks by communist troop concentrations and will render any such attack extremely vulnerable to air and artillery bombardment. No less important, it will release soldiers for operations in the southern part of S. Vietnam. From the communist viewpoint, therefore, the military situation is unfavourable and seems likely to become worse in the future.

Political stability, shattered after the overthrow of President NGO Dinh DIEM, was restored to S. Vietnam by the government of General NGUYEN VAN THEU and Air Vice-Marshall NGUYEN CAO KY. Nevertheless, their government was subject to criticism because it lacked any popular mandate and was said to represent nothing. During its two and a half years of office, great political progress was made, which culminated in national presidential and parliamentary elections held in early September. Despite massive communist attempts to prevent their being held, the elections were conducted successfully and have given to S. Vietnam a government and parliament elected by popular suffrage. The communists in N. Vietnam, who have held only 'rubber-stamp' single-candidate elections, will henceforth find it difficult to convince anybody with their argument that the Viet Cong are the only true representatives of the S. Vietnamese people. S. Vietnam today has a distinct political advantage over the communists and, provided the new government uses its mandate intelligently and responsibly, will grow politically stronger and more stable with the passage of time.

CONCLUSIONS

For all the foregoing reasons, communist leaders in Hanoi who review their country's situation are led ineluctably to the conclusion that it is precarious and likely to become more so. The balance sheet reads as follows:

Sino-Soviet Dispute: Situation deteriorating. Little hope of communist bloc unity.

Soviet Union: Will continue military supplies but cannot be relied upon for anything more.


S. Vietnam: Enemy military and political situation stronger. Old strategy abandoned and new strategy threatened by the proposed barrier.

If there were some real hope of achieving communist ends in S. Vietnam inside a relatively short period of time, then Hanoi might reasonably conclude that it was politic to go on putting up with the hardships, to continue paying the mounting cost in damage and casualties, and to accept the risks arising from internal disorders in China. On the other hand, if S. Vietnam should be seen to have set its feet firmly on the path of progress, political, military, and economic, then to continue fighting would be pointless and needlessly costly.

But N. Vietnam continues to fight and to reject all peace overtures, which suggests her leaders discern some hope of ultimate success in today's situation. All but the most committed of them now accept that a military victory cannot be won in the South, so their hopes rest on other factors. The most important of these is certainly the possibility of renewed political chaos in S. Vietnam. Hanoi daily looks for a resurgence of agitation by extremist political Buddhists, for an upsurge of regional rivalries, for a clash between General Thieu and Air Vice-Marshal Ky, and for a protest movement led by unsuccessful candidates in the presidential elections. Any or all of these things could materialize and, if they do so, will unquestionably weaken S. Vietnam and increase communist prospects of success. Much will therefore depend upon the conduct of the newly elected S. Vietnamese government, whose effectiveness or otherwise will exercise a more profound influence...
on Hanoi than most observers realize. Second in importance is the growing frustration with the war now apparent in the United States. This is fostered and encouraged by communist propaganda and the money and effort devoted by N. Vietnam to her propaganda campaign is indicative of how much she expects to accomplish through them. N. Vietnamese representatives overseas were recalled to Hanoi last spring and spent two months working on the improvement of N. Vietnamese propaganda abroad. Each of them brought his own list of criticisms and suggestions which he had drawn up in the light of the experience he had acquired while working at his foreign post. The advent of the 1968 presidential elections in the U.S., with the rising tempo of political debate and the temptations to aspiring office seekers to attack government policy in Vietnam, must be regarded by Hanoi as offering a most fruitful field for an intensified propaganda campaign.

N. Vietnam's top leadership group, the Party Politburo, is sharply divided over the war. Those most committed to the present military policy, are Le Duan and Truong Chinh. They may be expected to resist any change of policy as long as they possibly can, but their faction has been greatly weakened by the death of General Nguyen Chi Thanh, its third most senior member. General Thanh, who was known in N. Vietnam as 'Le Duan's right hand', commanded the Viet Cong in S. Vietnam until he died earlier this year "from a heart attack in a Hanoi hospital" according to official reports, but more probably, in the opinion of many observers, during the fighting in the South. With his removal from the political scene, the Politburo was reduced from 11 to 10 full members and the pro- and anti-war factions became more equally balanced. Plainly future policy will be influenced by the views of the man chosen to fill General Thanh's vacant seat in the Politburo, and each of the two rival factions will undoubtedly throw its weight behind a candidate sympathetic to its own views. Nobody has yet been appointed.

The question at issue is not whether S. Vietnam should be annexed, for all are agreed that it should, but how this can best be accomplished, by revolutionary warfare or political subversion. The pro-military faction acquired great prestige from the early successes of the Viet Cong—especially Le Duan, who created that movement—but has lost ground since 1965 when the fighting went against them and the bombing of N. Vietnam commenced. The rival faction is believed to favour an end to the fighting and a return to the situation created by the Geneva Accords of 1954, followed by the withdrawal of American and other foreign troops from Vietnam. In such a situation, it argues, the way would be clear for the disruption of S. Vietnam by political subversion from within and the subsequent takeover of the country by the North without renewed foreign military intervention. Possibly the American decision to construct a "wall" south of the demilitarized zone may strengthen the latter faction's case, for walls are, of their very nature, defensive. While it must reassure N. Vietnam that the United States does not intend an attack on her territory, it does indicate that President Johnson is prepared to fight a protracted defensive war behind the wall.

These are the matters currently exercising the Political Bureau of the Communist Lao Dong Party and the factors which will play a part in enabling that body to make decisions on how N. Vietnam should act next. With the membership of the Politbureau still incomplete and the Saigon government still too recent to assess, no forecast can yet be made of what those decisions are likely to be. A crucial stage has now been reached in N. Vietnamese policy-making, however, and the moment of decision cannot be delayed indefinitely.

P. J. Hone

1 The most outspoken attack to date was published in the Party theoretical monthly, Hoc Tap, in May 1967.
2 NCNA has published several such bulletins datelined Hanoi, which were subsequently broadcast by Peking Radio but not in its transmissions to Vietnam. A typical example is that of 4. 7. 1967 which cites a regimental commander in N. Vietnam's army as the source for the sentiments expressed.
4 From notes of a speech by General Nguyen van Vinh during a visit to Viet Cong head-