

Soviet and China Could Supply Hanoi by Rail, Experts Assert

NYTimes

MAY 13 1972

WASHINGTON, May 12 (AP)—After some adjustments, the Soviet Union and China could get enough war matériel and food into North Vietnam by rail to make up for seaborne supplies cut off by the mining of North Vietnamese ports, United States military and civilian specialists believe.

The specialists also say that the Soviet air-transport system is inadequate to handle a sustained long-range airlift of heavy cargo to North Vietnam.

"The mining will not be enough to tighten the screws so much that the North Vietnamese cannot carry on their campaign in South Vietnam," one analyst said.

These specialists are much less optimistic than top Government officials such as Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., Chief of Naval Operations, who forecast yesterday that "the input of supplies will be a trickle from now on."

System Expanded

Besides the mining of North Vietnamese ports, President Nixon has ordered that "rail and all other communications will be cut off to the maximum extent possible."

But Government analysts said that the North Vietnamese showed during the 1965-68 bombing campaign that they were resourceful in getting train cagoes through.

In the more than three years that it was free of heavy bombing, North Vietnam greatly expanded its transportation system.

"Redundancy is the key," an American specialist said. "Where there used to be one bridge, there now sometimes are three. Where there used to be one road, there may be five. They use pontoon bridges and ferries."

According to American experts, the Communists allow for losses when sending supplies. If they want to get two tons through, officials said, they actually move about five tons.

When the United States was bombing North Vietnam's rail lines and yards from 1965 to 1968, an estimated total of 300,000 North Vietnamese were mobilized to repair bombed-out track so trains could quickly begin running again. In addition, the Chinese stationed 50,000 troops in North Vietnam in those years to keep the rail system running.

Sea Route Is Easier

The Soviet Union, East European Communist countries and China have been shipping about 200,000 tons of supplies a month to North Vietnam by sea and 22,000 tons by rail. The sea route is easier and cheaper for bulk cargo such as petroleum products and food.

But the American specialists say there are enough Chinese railroad cars to handle the entire load. It will, however, be more difficult, in part because cargo must be shifted from Soviet trains to Chinese trains running on tracks of narrower gauge.

Despite serious political differences, the Russians and the Chinese have been cooperating in moving Soviet matériel through China to North Vietnam. American officials expect this to continue.

Weapons Are Stocked

Among the most vital supplies that have been reaching North Vietnam by sea, are petroleum products. United States specialists estimate that the Chinese would have to divert only about 1 to 2 per cent of their railroad tank cars to move the 50,000 tons a month being used to sustain the North Vietnamese offensive.

One senior American analyst estimated that the North Vietnamese had stocks of petroleum

products to last at least three months. "And they can stretch that out," he added.

Specialists also say that the North Vietnamese have stocked enough weapons and ammunition in the area above the demilitarized zone and in Laos to keep going for some time. They declined to give an estimate in weeks or months.

"They are not going to have to live from hand-to-mouth for a while," one analyst said.

He noted that the North Vietnamese fired about 7,000 artillery rounds into the besieged town of Anloc two nights after President Nixon announced his effort to seal off North Vietnam from supplies. This was taken as an indication that the North Vietnamese were not going to reduce their attacks.

Air Force officers who keep close tabs on military airlift developments in the Soviet Union say that its air-transport fleet probably would be used only to carry what they described as "high-value low-bulk items," such as spare parts, to North Vietnam.

The Soviet Union relies primarily on a fleet of 800 AN-12 Cub transport planes, which can carry a 10-ton load nearly 2,000 miles. It has only 10 of the huge AN-22 turboprop planes, which can haul as much as 87 tons about 3,000 miles. The AN-22's are the only Soviet planes that can carry heavy military cargo such as tanks.

Refueling Necessary

The Soviet Air Force has some 50 tanker planes for refueling bombers, but has no aircraft suitable for carrying bulk petroleum products.

A flight between a Soviet air base and Hanoi would be longer than 2,000 miles, about the outer limits of the Cub's range. Therefore, Air Force experts say, the planes would probably have to be refueled in China or India.

They said that to sustain an airlift between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam, an elaborate system of maintenance, logistics and other support facilities would have to be set up along the route.

"The Soviets have not mastered the techniques of long-distance airlift operations, such as prepositioning mechanics and technicians and spare parts to handle difficulties," an Air Force general said.

Any Soviet airlift would also meet serious problems in North Vietnam.

Six of North Vietnam's 13 air fields could handle Soviet transport planes, according to United States assessments. But these air fields, an American technician said, lack instrument-landing systems. As a result, planes would face serious hazards landing in bad weather and at night.

Air Action Hinted

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird has implied that the Soviet Union might also have to contend with United States air opposition.

Some Pentagon officials have said that rather than shoot down Soviet planes, the United States Air Force and Navy bombers would likely attempt to damage North Vietnamese air fields so that the Russians could not land.

"We are not going to let any airlift go unchallenged," one Air Force officer said. "We were harassed during the Berlin airlift, but not shot at. We could not have supplied Berlin if our transports had had to fight their way in."

This officer, and some others, implied they felt that in a crunch American warplanes might be authorized to attack Soviet transports, but they acknowledged they were reading this possibility into Mr. Laird's vague words at a recent news conference about doing whatever is necessary to keep supplies out of North Vietnam.