Peace Probes and the Bombing Pause: 
Hungarian and Polish Diplomacy During the Vietnam War, December 1965–January 1966

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The 37-day hiatus in the American bombing campaign against North Vietnam, from Christmas Eve 1965 to the end of January 1966, marked a significant juncture in the annals of Vietnam War diplomacy. In contrast to the fleeting “Mayflower” bombing halt in May 1965, which lasted less than a week, the 37-day pause in 1965–1966 was long enough for significant diplomatic activity to take place, including direct and indirect contacts and communications between U.S. and North Vietnamese officials. It was accompanied by a full-blown “peace offensive,” as President Lyndon B. Johnson dispatched Ambassador-at-Large W. Averell Harriman, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and other high-level emissaries to meet with foreign leaders. Johnson himself sent personal messages proposing the opening of unconditional negotiations. The emissaries sought to promote the American case laid out in the “Fourteen Points,” which constituted a de facto response to the “Four Points” program issued by North Vietnam eight months earlier. Most significant, however, the pause’s failure led, as anticipated, to further military escalation of the war and, according to then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk, permanently soured Johnson on further bombing stoppages to test the prospects for negotiations.¹

The essential elements of the story of the pause, at least on the American side, have long been known. Over the opposition of military commanders, but with the advice and concurrence of most senior advisers (especially Defense Secretary Robert McNamara), Johnson approved an extension of the Christmas bombing halt largely as a public relations gambit to counter criti-

¹. The failure of the pause, Rusk recalled, “made a lasting impression on Lyndon Johnson because from that time forward he was skeptical that bombing halts could accomplish anything.” Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, in Dean Rusk and Daniel S. Papp, ed., As I Saw It (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 466.
cism at home and abroad that the administration was not sufficiently diligent in pursuing peaceful alternatives to military action. Johnson also was attempting to lay the groundwork (after Hanoi’s expected failure to respond positively) for major escalatory measures planned for early 1966, including “budget increases of many billions of dollars which will become public in January, the deployment of large numbers of additional men during 1966 and the acceptance of stepped-up casualties associated with such increased deployments.” In the fall of 1965 complaints from domestic critics had mounted after bloody encounters between U.S. and Vietcong forces, particularly the battle of Ia Drang in mid-November. Critics also seized on the revelation that the late Adlai Stevenson (Johnson’s former ambassador to the United Nations) had believed that Washington rebuffed an offer for peace talks from Hanoi via UN Secretary General U Thant a year earlier, an impression bolstered by other press reports suggesting an unreciprocated North Vietnamese interest in peace. Allied public opinion was also a consideration, especially because British Prime Minister Harold Wilson (an earlier critic of the bombing) had urged a pause to test Hanoi’s interest in peace when he visited Washington in mid-December 1965.

Despite the clamor for a bombing halt that would be the first step toward negotiations and an eventual settlement of the conflict, most U.S. officials rated the prospect of success as extremely low. Rusk argued that the odds of rapid results were 1 in 20, and Clark Clifford estimated them at 1 in 20 or 1 in 50. Still, hints from both Soviet and Hungarian diplomats that Hanoi might be responsive to even a relatively brief bombing suspension helped tip the balance of discussions among Johnson’s top advisers in December in favor of a pause—not because they really believed that the North Vietnamese would come to the bargaining table, but because calling what they suspected was a bluff might prod the Soviet Union and its allies to take a more active role in pressuring Hanoi. They also hoped that it would spark dissension within the Communist bloc, particularly between Moscow and Beijing with Hanoi trapped between them. McNamara also claims that some officials


took a longer view, seeing a pause as “a step in a process that might ultimately bring about a negotiated settlement.”

Most accounts of the diplomacy of the “pause” focus on the so-called Pinta contacts (channels for peace overtures) between U.S. and North Vietnamese diplomats in Rangoon, Burma. The two sides had exchanged messages via Pinta but had not engaged in substantive talks. George C. Herring describes the Pinta contact as the “most important” of the numerous diplomatic channels through which the Johnson Administration conveyed its interest in opening peace talks. This article, by contrast, highlights the role of two Communist East-Central European countries—Hungary and Poland—in the diplomacy of the “pause.” The article draws on materials that have recently become available from Budapest and Warsaw as well as from American archives; these items were not reflected in earlier accounts. Because of the earlier lack of evidence, even the most important work on the international diplomacy of the Vietnam War during this period, published by the British scholar R. B. Smith in 1991, acknowledges the existence of, yet almost completely ignores, the murky “efforts to make direct contact with Hanoi in the hope of evoking some kind of response which might lead to the prolongation of the bombing pause and then to secret negotiations.” Smith adds: “We still have no details of the communication which took place with the Hungarian and Polish Governments. It is not clear whether they acted as intermediaries with North Vietnam.” Inevitably, any account of Hungarian and Polish actions must also address steps taken by Moscow, and in fact it is clear that the three concurrent lines of activity were coordinated bilaterally between the Soviet Union and its satellites, as was presumed. But what also emerges is a tri-lateral coordination that offers interesting clues about Soviet perceptions of both Washington’s and Hanoi’s position at that juncture.


Without access to East-bloc archives, earlier attempts to recount and interpret East-Central European actions have been forced to rely on a melange of American memoirs and declassified documents, press leaks, and secondary sources (especially *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam*, by David Kraslow and Stuart Loory), as well as a particularly important account by a Communist defector, János Radványi, the top-ranking Hungarian diplomat in Washington during the events in question. In 1967 Radványi stepped down as chargé d’affaires and sought asylum in the United States. In private conversations with U.S. officials and then in his 1978 book, *Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes, and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam*, Radványi argued that the Hungarian peace efforts were a sham perpetrated by Foreign Minister János Peter, who “at no time had any message or authorization from Hanoi!” Radványi also impugned Soviet and Polish sincerity in their claims of seeking to prod Hanoi toward negotiations during the pause. He attributed his own defection to disgust at being involved in this mendacious diplomacy. Senior Johnson administration officials, such as Dean Rusk, have cited Radványi’s exposé when they have dismissed the Hungarian initiative (and Peter’s claims that the North Vietnamese were ready to talk if Washington stopped bombing) as “fraudulent.”

The Hungarian and Polish evidence cited here, while far from complete or exhaustive, raises serious questions about the claims made by Johnson, Rusk, and Radványi. At the very least, the materials presented here will help to resolve the uncertainty, noted by Smith, about whether Warsaw and Budapest were in contact with North Vietnamese authorities or acting as intermediaries between Washington and Hanoi. To explore the Soviet-bloc diplomacy during the pause more fully, this preliminary inquiry should be supplemented by further investigation in Warsaw and Budapest and other Warsaw Pact capitals—where researchers may frequently discover Communist-bloc records or reports unavailable elsewhere—as well as in Moscow, where the key archives regrettably are now much more restrictive than they


were when Ilya Gaiduk conducted the research for his pioneering study of Soviet policy during the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{13} Thanks to the work of such scholars as Zhai Qiang and Chen Jian, our understanding of China's policies, including its belligerent opposition to peace talks, has been significantly expanded, but additional sources could clarify Beijing's dealings with Hanoi and the impact of its apparent efforts to undermine the Soviet-bloc overtures.\textsuperscript{14} Most of all, an assessment of the impact of these initiatives and the reasons for their failure depends on far more access to sources in Hanoi. North Vietnam's rejection of peace talks during the bombing moratorium was ultimately decisive.\textsuperscript{15}

Nevertheless, even as the North Vietnamese redoubled efforts toward a military victory and dismissed Washington's proposals, they had to respond carefully to the diplomacy undertaken by Hungary and Poland with Moscow's evident blessing. Heavily reliant on Soviet-bloc military support and delicately navigating a neutral course in the bitter Sino-Soviet split to preserve maximum aid from both sides, the North Vietnamese for the first time found that their fraternal allies, who were not especially confident about vanquishing the Americans on the battlefield, were interested in pursuing talks for a diplomatic settlement. Although the pause did not open the door to negotiations, it did foster a more intense mutual probing from which the participants—the Americans, the North Vietnamese, and the Soviet-bloc mediators—drew conclusions and gained experience that would inform their subsequent moves, both military and diplomatic.

The new evidence on secret East-West diplomatic activities during the "pause" is important not only for Vietnam War historiography but also for broader Cold War issues. Scholars lately have been devoting renewed attention to smaller powers and superpower allies in key international events, rather than focusing solely on the actions of Washington (and, to a lesser ex-

\textsuperscript{13} Ilya V. Gaiduk, \textit{The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War} (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996). Unfortunately, many crucial materials in the Presidential, Foreign Ministry, state security, postwar military, and foreign intelligence archives remained off-limits to Gaiduk, and many files that he was able to review in the former CPSU Central Committee archives in the early 1990s have since been reclassified.


\textsuperscript{15} On early findings from Vietnamese sources, see Fredrik Logevall, "Bringing in the 'Other Side': New Scholarship on the Vietnam Wars," \textit{Journal of Cold War Studies}, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 77–93.
tent, on the actions of Moscow). Recent studies have examined the actions and impact of U.S. allies, but the present article sheds light on intrabloc maneuvering, alliance management, and tactical coordination within the Warsaw Pact. It also illuminates the degree of autonomy that the East European countries enjoyed in carrying out important diplomatic initiatives (a matter of considerable interest to American analysts at the time).

Moreover, political scientists, international relations specialists, and others interested in topics such as interbelligerent communications, war termination, and third-country mediation have been largely dependent on one-sided case studies from the Cold War era that were based overwhelmingly on Western (primarily U.S. and British) archival sources. Like other research now made possible by enhanced access to East-bloc archives, this article provides more grist for the theoretical mill on such topics. It highlights the efforts by Poland and Hungary to transcend ideological, political, and cultural divisions and broker the opening of peace talks between Washington and Hanoi. These topics remain highly relevant in the post–Cold War era, as witnessed by Moscow’s mediation forays before and during the Gulf War in 1991 and during the Kosovo conflict in 1999.

**Budapest and “The Pause”—A Little “16th Century Hungarian Diplomacy”?**

Thus far, unfortunately, the Hungarian archival evidence has not clarified precisely what Foreign Minister Peter had in mind when he began to drop hints in the fall of 1965 that Hanoi would respond positively to a bombing halt. On 7 October, when Peter was in New York City for the U.N. General Assembly, he told Rusk that if Washington stopped the bombing even for a few weeks, “conditions will improve, and negotiations leading to peace will be possible.” Although Peter boasted of Budapest’s close contacts with Hanoi—a Hungarian delegation was arriving in the North Vietnamese capital that day, he noted—he declined to say whether he himself had recently been to Hanoi. Nor would he cite the sources for his “firm conviction” that the North Vietnamese leadership was ready for talks. According to Radványi, who was


17. For the U.S. record (from which these quotations are taken unless otherwise indicated) of the 7 October 1965 Rusk–Peter conversation, see *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 3, pp. 431–436. The Hungarian record, in the Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archives], Budapest (MOL), Foreign Ministry records, USA-relations, 1965, IV-135–004912/1965, Top Secret, XIX-J-1-j, is now available but has not yet been translated.
present at the conversation, Rusk asked whether Peter had been in contact with Hanoi, and Peter responded:

   Everything that I have said to you I can state with the most complete responsibility. We are in intimate contact with Hanoi; we are completely familiar with the intentions of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. 18

In Delusion and Reality, Radványi says that the foreign minister’s assessment was disingenuous—that Peter’s real goal was to mislead the Americans, entice them into a bombing halt, and boost his own prestige. Moreover, Radványi writes, contrary to the impression Peter sought to leave with Rusk, the foreign minister had not recently visited Hanoi and lacked authorization from the North Vietnamese government to dangle any peace feelers. 19 Rusk, in turn, cites the Hungarian defector for his belief that “Peter was never in real contact with Hanoi and that they had no encouragement from Hanoi on the points Peter was raising.” 20

Declassified Hungarian documents that are currently available do not establish whether Peter was embellishing or conjuring out of thin air this alleged Hanoi “peace feeler,” as Radványi charges, or whether he had some basis for his statements. Some insight might be provided, however, by the records of the discussions between Peter and the North Vietnamese ambassador to Budapest, Hoang Luong, a few weeks after the conversation with Rusk. On 27 October the Hungarian foreign minister received Hoang Luong and gave him a written record of the 7 October conversation with Rusk. Peter suggested that Hoang Luong contact him with any questions after the document was translated into Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese diplomat agreed and noted that some foreign journalists, citing Peter’s public statement in New York, had inquired whether “the Vietnamese viewpoint had changed.” Hoang Luong assured Peter that the North Vietnamese “usually disregard such confusing questions,” but his comments may have constituted an implicit rebuke. (If so, this would seem to support Radványi’s assertion that Peter was dissembling when he flatly promised Rusk that a bombing halt would lead to talks.)

Turning to the military situation, Hoang Luong reaffirmed North Vietnam’s expectation of ultimate victory. He acknowledged that visitors to Hanoi got the impression that North Vietnam was in “bad shape,” but he insisted that the situation actually was “much better” than it had seemed against the French in 1946–1947. Although many Soviet-bloc observers, including officials in Moscow, did not share Hanoi’s optimism, Peter gives no indication

18. Radványi, Delusion and Reality, p. 68. This exchange—and Rusk’s direct question—do not appear in the U.S. record.
19. Ibid., ch. 3.
20. Rusk and Papp, As I Saw It, p. 464.
that he disputed the North’s apparent lack of interest in negotiations. In
stead, he expressed confidence that, as in Korea, sufficient casualties would
cause Washington to call off its “aggression,” and he suggested that the “best”
diplomatic course “right now” would be to “focus our propaganda on [stop-
ing] the bombing,” an issue “on which we can be widely supported and the
U.S. highly isolated.”

Three days later, on 30 October, Hoang Luong (now accompanied by a
Hungarian-speaking embassy official) saw Peter again and assured him that
the record of conversation with Rusk, already translated into Vietnamese, had
been transmitted to the Central Committee (CC) of the Vietnam Workers
Party (VWP) with a message that any reactions could be conveyed via the
Hungarian ambassador in Hanoi or the North Vietnamese ambassador in Bu-
dapest. Hoang Luong then said that as a personal matter, he was interested
in Peter’s answers to two questions: How did Peter evaluate the U.S. position
after speaking with Rusk, and how did he envision the link between the
bombing of North Vietnam and the subject of negotiations? Peter responded
that, in his view, the U.S. government was not yet ready for talks “on a plat-
form that would be acceptable for us.” He added: “They would be willing to
start the negotiations right now, but only with the use of military pressure and
only for the purpose of establishing their own regime in South Vietnam.”
While giving lip service to the notion of accepting a neutral government in
Saigon as a result of free elections, Washington would accept only a regime
that promoted its own regional interests, not Vietnam’s, Peter argued. Thus,
the battle against the Americans needed to be pursued aggressively on three
fronts—on defending the North, on liberating the South, and “on diplomatic
levels.”

It was on this last front—the level of diplomacy—that Peter claimed the
socialist countries were missing opportunities. Hoang Luong agreed that fur-

21. On 12–21 October 1965 a North Vietnamese delegation headed by Premier Pham Van Dong vis-
ited Moscow for talks with Soviet leaders. According to an account of the talks provided to the Hun-
garian ambassador in Hanoi by his Czechoslovak colleague, the Soviet leaders had urged Pham Van
Dong to “carefully examine [U.S.] behavior and statements” toward Vietnam to distinguish between
“propaganda” and “real intentions.” While stressing—as always—that the ultimate decision was up to
the Vietnamese leaders, the Soviet leaders urged Hanoi to investigate “whether the Americans were
playing a game with them or in some cases there was some truth behind their actions.” According to
the Czechoslovak informant, the Vietnamese, under Chinese influence, had rejected the Soviet pro-
posals “and they decided to continue the war.” See the record of 18 November 1965 conversation with
Czechoslovak Ambassador, compiled by the Hungarian ambassador in Hanoi, 20 November 1965,

22. János Peter, Memorandum of Conversation with Vietnamese Ambassador, 27 October 1965,

23. What reaction Peter received from Hanoi, if any, has not been determined.
ther battles were needed before the Americans would drop their concept of South Vietnam as an “important bulwark” against Communism, and he noted that as “tactical” propaganda it would be useful to note that Hanoi was “willing to respect the 17th parallel agreement, the Geneva agreement, and the establishment of a neutral government in South Vietnam once the Americans withdraw.” On the bombing, both also agreed that a halt to raids on North Vietnam would be advantageous, but that Washington would demand an unacceptable price in return. Therefore, the two agreed, Budapest’s goal in “our propaganda and diplomatic tactics” should be an unconditional halt.24

Strikingly absent from these exchanges is any discussion of the point that had so riveted Rusk’s attention, the confident assurance that a bombing suspension would lead immediately to negotiations. Yet the Hungarian foreign minister might plausibly have considered the ambassador’s apparent willingness (even if tactical) to accept the 17th parallel, the Geneva accords, and neutralization in the South as a reasonable basis for negotiations. Another Hungarian document from this period also seems, on its face at least, to provide some circumstantial support for Peter’s claims. To demonstrate Budapest’s bona fides as a mediator with Hanoi, the foreign minister, as noted above, had mentioned to Rusk on 7 October 1965 that a Hungarian mission was arriving that day in the North Vietnamese capital. In Delusion and Reality Radványi ridicules Peter’s statement by pointing out that the delegation, headed by Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP) Politburo member Jenő Fock, met with North Vietnamese leaders solely to discuss economic and military aid as well as matters pertaining to the international Communist movement “and not [any North Vietnamese] conditions for a negotiated settlement.”25 A transcript of the Fock delegation’s oral report to the HSWP Politburo on 9 November 1965, covering its trip to North Vietnam, China, and North Korea, does indeed focus on military, economic, and ideological matters. But Fock, who made the main presentation, also spoke of negotiations in terms that seem consistent with Peter’s statements to Rusk. Urging that the Politburo “should continue what Comrade Peter began, and [in] various ways press for [illegible] to follow the route of negotiations,” Fock reported that “the Vietnamese comrades explained—often going into detail—that they see a return to the Geneva Convention as the basis for negotiations, and were even willing to make significant compromises on specific items.” Fock said he was “certain” that Hanoi would not demand, and did not desire, the immedi-

ate unification of North and South Vietnam—a statement that, if true, would certainly ease the way for a compromise settlement and temporarily remove a fundamental sticking point. Fock urged that the Hungarian “press and our diplomatic activities should pursue this question—though not phrased explicitly.” Intriguingly, the HSWP leader, János Kádár, subsequently alluded to “Peter’s visit” as well as that of the Fock mission, but he did not elaborate. Hence, the transcript does not conclusively show whether Peter in fact had journeyed to Hanoi.26

The document poses a puzzle. Did the Fock delegation really encounter such flexibility in Hanoi regarding negotiations and unification? In light of other evidence suggesting that the North Vietnamese regime was confident about the military situation and was uninterested in negotiations at that time, did the VWP leaders mislead their East European visitors? Was it simply that the Hungarians were putting the best face on standard-issue propaganda? Did they misconstrue innocuous statements that were not authoritative? Comparable questions might apply to Peter, too, if, pace Radványi, his initiative with Rusk stemmed from anything more than pure invention.

Although Rusk and other senior U.S. officials remained skeptical of Peter’s claims, high-level conversations in late November and early December 1965 with Soviet ambassador Anatolii Dobrynin—seen by some U.S. officials as a more important and reliable source—seemed to complement the Hungarian foreign minister’s message. In a “candid and cordial” chat on 24 November, Dobrynin told National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy that a pause of “only 12–21” days would produce “intense diplomatic efforts,” though he could not guarantee results.27 Despite the lack of a guarantee, Bundy felt assured of “quiet but strong Soviet diplomatic support in pushing Hanoi toward the conference table”—a development that U.S. officials be-

26. Minutes of the HSWP Politburo, 9 November 1965, MOL, 288 f. 5/379; obtained by Csaba Békés and translated by David Evans. Other members of the Fock delegation, according to Radványi, included HSWP Politburo member Árpád Pullai; András Gyenes, deputy director of the HSWP CC’s International Relations department; and Major-General László Szücs of the Hungarian army. Fock’s oral summary alluded to a lengthier report on the mission, but this document has not yet been located. Fock argued that there was no need for Hungary to increase military aid to North Vietnam, since the present flow of support already was imposing an excessive burden on transport links via China. He also noted anti-Soviet statements in both China and North Korea and pro-Chinese tendencies (including support for Lin Biao’s “People’s War” doctrine) among some North Vietnamese officials.

27. Bundy-Dobrynin memorandum of conversation, 24 November 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume XIV: The Soviet Union (Washington, DC: GPO, 2001), pp. 356–357. McGeorge’s brother, William P. Bundy, who was then assistant secretary of state for far eastern affairs, recalled in a private oral history interview in 1969: “A very sober and realistic message consistent with my belief that the Russians have never misled us; the Hungarians did, while we were not really fooled; the Poles have played shell-games over and over again—the Russians never!” William P. Bundy Oral History Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, 29 May 1969, Tape 3, p. 16, LBJL.
lieved would exacerbate intra-Communist strains even if it did not convince the North Vietnamese to enter talks. President Johnson was more skeptical than Bundy and McNamara about a pause, saying he “[w]ouldn’t give 4¢ for Dobrynin.” Nonetheless, he authorized a still-doubtful Rusk to probe further the Soviet envoy’s position. After a lengthy conversation with Dobrynin on 8 December, Rusk and the senior State Department expert on Soviet affairs, Llewellyn Thompson, came away convinced. McGeorge Bundy reported to Johnson that the two officials believed Moscow “would make an effort to move things forward during the pause.”

When Johnson finally agreed to extend the Christmas bombing pause for an unspecified period (though with a presumption of resuming the bombing in mid- to late January), Rusk decided to take Peter at his word about the intimacy of Hungarian–North Vietnamese ties. He requested that Budapest inform Hanoi of Washington’s plans to extend the pause and its desire to begin negotiations toward a settlement based on the 1954 and 1962 Geneva accords. “In this way,” observed Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William P. Bundy,

Rusk calculated he could convey the clearest possible picture of the American position, avoid putting the Russians on the spot, and at the same time get whatever the combined resources of the Soviet Union and its close satellites (almost certainly acting in full concert) had to offer in the way of help or information.

When Rusk summoned Radványi to the State Department for a meeting on 23 December 1965, he initiated a series of contacts that would extend throughout the pause. (Other State Department officials occasionally stood in for Rusk.) The basic sequence of these contacts in Washington is fairly clear from the U.S. record. The Hungarian archives include a contemporaneous chronology of those same Hungarian-American conversations as recorded by Radványi, as well as a chronology of contacts during the pause that was pre-

sent by Foreign Minister Peter to the HSWP Politburo after Johnson resumed bombing at the end of January. Although Radványi’s chronology is detailed, it adds little to the U.S. record beyond supplementing the substantive exchanges with sometimes interesting observations about arrangements and atmosphere. Peter’s account appears more significant, describing (alas, less fully than Radványi) various contacts between Budapest and Hanoi and between Budapest and Moscow. U.S. officials had no direct knowledge of these intrabloc contacts.

At the first session on 23 December Rusk pointed out that in October he had encouraged János Peter “to use a little ‘16th Century Hungarian diplomacy’” with Hanoi. Rusk asked whether Peter had anything to add to what he had said in New York City. The secretary of state noted that the envisioned thirty-hour U.S. cease-fire over Christmas would include the suspension of bombing raids against North Vietnam, and he laid out a series of twelve points—soon expanded to fourteen for public consumption—to frame the American position. These included a willingness to settle the conflict on the basis of the two Geneva pacts (including free elections in South Vietnam and possible eventual unification so long as it was “not imposed by force”); a forswearing of any intent to keep U.S. military forces in South Vietnam or bases in Southeast Asia; a readiness for a bombing halt and unconditional talks that would include Hanoi’s four points as well as additional points that might be raised by others; and the “carrot” of a postwar U.S. regional development program in which North Vietnam could share. Rusk called it a basket that contained everything except “Take Vietnam.” While minimizing the import of the thirty-hour bombing pause, Rusk suggested that “if the other side were responsive, we might find a way to move towards peace” by further steps.

U.S. officials presumed that Radványi would transmit this twelve-point message to Hanoi, but they had no idea when, how, or through whom it was done. Hungarian materials indicate that Budapest immediately relayed it to the North Vietnamese in two forms on 24 December. Fock gave the statement to VWP Politburo member Le Thanh Nghi, who by chance was leading a North Vietnamese delegation to Hungary at that time. In addition, at Le Thanh Nghi’s request the Hungarian Foreign Ministry sent the American message to its embassy in Hanoi, where Budapest’s chargé d’affaires gave it to a North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry department:


chief.35 According to Radványi in Delusion and Reality, when the head of the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry’s department of European affairs received the twelve-point message, he “flatly” told Budapest’s representative “that his government did not consider the situation ripe for negotiations.” Radványi claims that the North Vietnamese official stuck to the line that the military struggle was going well and that all Hanoi wanted the other socialist countries to do was to increase their military and economic aid. According to Radványi, the official even wondered whether Peter “really supported Hanoi’s Four Points” or perhaps had fallen victim to the “peace trickery of American imperialists.”36

In Delusion and Reality, Radványi leaves the impression that all subsequent Hungarian contacts with the United States that hinted at the possibility of a dialogue with Hanoi during the pause were no more than Peter’s inventions. Radványi reports that during a visit to Budapest in mid-1966 he studied the Foreign Ministry’s “entire” secret Vietnam file for the previous year and spoke with many Foreign Ministry and HSWP figures. “From my conversations and from the file itself,” he argues, “it was absolutely clear that Peter at no time had any message or authorization from Hanoi.” He claims that Peter, far from being encouraged by the North Vietnamese, contradicted Hanoi’s wishes when he encouraged the Americans to believe that North Vietnam might be willing to engage in diplomatic discussions.37 These serious charges accord with Radványi’s general portrait of Peter as a vain, irresponsible, cynical schemer who was concerned neither about the impact of his actions on Hungary’s reputation nor about ending the war.

By contrast, Peter’s report to the HSWP Politburo suggests that Hanoi’s representatives did not immediately reject the American message and did not ask Budapest to cease its diplomatic activities. Instead, according to the report, the North Vietnamese accepted the message for further analysis. Peter indicated that on 28 December the North Vietnamese deputy foreign minister, speaking for Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh, had thanked Hungary’s chargé d’affaires in Hanoi for relaying the American message. The North Vietnamese official, Peter added, asked for “patience” while VWP leaders studied the matter and promised to relay their “concrete recommendations and views as soon as they are agreed on.”38 According to this version of events,

35. Peter, “Diplomatic steps.” Radványi, by contrast, told U.S. officials that Peter conveyed the message via the North Vietnamese ambassador in Budapest. “Radványi Disclosure.”
36. Radványi, Delusion and Reality, pp. 142–143.
37. Ibid., pp. 142–143. See also “Radványi Disclosure.”
38. Peter, “Diplomatic Steps.” Hanoi’s tone here, as reported by Peter, seems to contradict Radványi’s assertion to William Bundy that the North Vietnamese had been “very unfriendly to what Peter had done through Radványi.” Quoted in “Radványi Disclosure.”
Radványi would have had good reason on 28 December—when, at Peter’s behest, he transmitted a message from Peter to Rusk indicating that the proposals Rusk had conveyed five days earlier were “under careful study”—to emphasize the significance of the phrase “under careful study” rather than “I am carefully studying,” as in the first draft of Peter’s message. Radványi noted the revised language and assured Rusk that a “complete answer” would be forthcoming. The new language clearly implied that the U.S. message was by then being considered not only in Budapest but in Hanoi as well. Counseling the Americans to give the Hungarians time, Radványi lamented the difficulties of “communicating with the jungle.”

In the “jungle,” as it were, the Vietnamese Communist authorities were secretly approving a decision to press ahead with the military struggle, despite the recent escalation of the conflict. On 27 December 1965, according to Vietnamese sources, Ho Chi Minh presided over the 12th VWP CC Plenum, which approved the continuation of “protracted warfare” and the intensification of guerrilla operations while using North Vietnamese forces as a “strategic reserve.” The party faithful displayed no interest in negotiations and affirmed their determination to defeat the U.S. “imperialists,” regardless of how many troops Washington sent. “Now the Americans have 200,000 troops in South Vietnam,” the official Vietnamese history of the war quotes Ho Chi Minh as telling a high-level group a few weeks later. “They may increase this even more, to 300,000, 400,000, or 500,000 troops. We will still win. We are certain of victory.” For diplomatic and propaganda purposes, however, the North Vietnamese could not afford to seem completely uninterested in a peaceful settlement. They had to formulate a response not only to Washington’s probes but also to intimations from their Soviet-bloc allies that it was time to move beyond a purely military approach.

As Washington and Budapest awaited a response from Hanoi, maneuvers within the U.S. government—including a secret trip by McNamara to the

39. William Bundy, “Record of the Secretary’s Contacts with the Hungarian Chargé,” 28 December 1965, \textit{FRUS}, 1964–1968, Vol. 3, pp. 726; and “Radványi Chronology,” 28 December 1965 entry. (In \textit{Delusion and Reality}, pp. 108–109, Radványi writes that he did not know what lay behind his foreign minister’s terse and cryptic message, but “I strongly believed that Peter was in touch with Hanoi and acted on their behalf.”) Peter’s chronology does not clarify, however, why (or on whose behalf—Budapest’s or Hanoi’s) Peter instructed Radványi to ask Rusk on 27 December whether the United States was “ready or willing to enter into negotiations on ‘the platform presented by you’ [i.e., the 12 points] with the NLF?” See Radványi, \textit{Delusion and Reality}, pp. 105–106.


Johnson Ranch to plead for a prolonged bombing halt—had spurred a presidential decision on 27 December to extend the bombing pause indefinitely and to launch a high-profile international campaign stressing Washington’s desire for peace. (Johnson assigned Averell Harriman, the former ambassador to Moscow, the special task of dealing with Soviet-bloc countries; but the Hungarians declined to receive him on the grounds that this might attract publicity and imperil the initiative already under way. Instead, his first stop was in Warsaw, prompting a separate Polish effort discussed below.) On 28 December senior U.S. officials gave Dobrynin the same twelve-point statement that Rusk had given to Radványi, and they sent instructions to the U.S. ambassador in Rangoon, Henry A. Byroade, to inform the North Vietnamese ambassador that the four-day-old bombing pause could extend into January and that a “serious contribution toward peace” by North Vietnam might lead to a “further” suspension.

That same day Rusk informed Radványi of the indefinite extension of the pause. According to Peter’s chronology, the Hungarians then immediately transmitted Rusk’s two-point message (the same text conveyed by Byroade to the North Vietnamese in Rangoon) to Hanoi via its chargé d’affaires in the North Vietnamese capital. The chronology indicates that on the following day the North Vietnamese deputy foreign minister “requested” Budapest “not to reply” to Rusk until the Hungarians received the considered position of the “Vietnamese comrades.” (Heeding this request, Radványi merely conveyed to the State Department a message from Peter on 29 December indicating that the latest American proposal had been received by his government and that a “concrete answer is in active preparation.”) On 30 December Radványi met with Rusk to inform him that Hungary would prefer not to have Harriman travel to Budapest. The ambassador stayed for coffee and a “friendly conversation” with Rusk, whom he described as being “in good spirits and optimistic” during the meeting. Nonetheless, Hanoi’s delay in responding not only exasperated the Americans but also prompted Soviet con-

42. McNamara ruefully acknowledges that it was a successful bureaucratic “end run around my colleagues,” see McNamara and VanDeMark, In Retrospect, pp. 225–226.
43. See “Radványi Chronology,” esp. the entry for 30 December 1965.
44. This came as a considerable relief to Radványi, who the previous evening had believed that the bombing might resume at any time. In his “Chronology” entry for 27 December 1965 he says Rusk “pointed to the clock on the wall and noted, he would not be able to tell when the bombing would start again.”
45. Peter, “Diplomatic Steps.”
47. Ibid., 30 December 1965 entry.
cerns that the Vietnamese were consulting with the Chinese—a prospect that had ominous implications for the peace initiative’s fate.  

On 31 December 1965, according to Peter’s internal account, a response arrived from Hanoi: The North Vietnamese condemned the U.S. “aggression” and restated their usual demands, though they added: “If the Americans want something, they should approach the D[emocratic] R[epublic of] V[ietnam] and the N[ational] F[ront] for the L[iberation] of the S[outh] directly.” The next day, Peter’s chronology continues, Hungary sought clarification by asking North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh whether this last point meant that Hanoi was ready for direct official talks with the United States comparable to the Sino-American ambassadorial discussions that had been conducted regularly, if unproductively, in Warsaw since 1958. According to Peter, Hanoi’s reply arrived three days later:

Our position is the following: we will accept meetings with anyone who asks us, and this includes the Americans, if they can tell us what they have to say. For our part we will convey to them our position and our points of view. These are normal diplomatic actions. Whether these are made public or not depends on the demands of the other side.  

That same day—4 January 1966—the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry released an apparently unyielding public statement reiterating its demand that Washington accept Hanoi’s four points and stop “unconditionally and for good” the bombing and all other acts of war. The statement dismissed the pause as a “trick” and claimed that the United States was secretly preparing to escalate the war. Notably, however, the statement made no explicit reference, positive or negative, to the idea of direct U.S.–North Vietnamese encounters or talks. On that issue at least, the statement did not contravene the exchanges between Budapest and Hanoi and the secret contacts taking place in Rangoon (where the North Vietnamese representative had politely received a U.S. diplomat to deliver the message, in contrast to his Soviet colleagues’ refusal to accept an American message in Moscow the previous May). In any case, the secret message from Hanoi, it appears, is what suddenly

48. Gromyko made his comments during a conversation in Moscow on 31 December with Jerzy Michalowski, the Polish Foreign Ministry official en route to Hanoi whose mission is described below, and the Polish ambassador to Moscow. See the cable from Michalowski (in Moscow) to Rapacki, cyphergram 15848, 31 December 1965, Foreign Ministry Archives, Warsaw; obtained and translated by L. W. Gluchowski.  

49. Peter, “Diplomatic Steps.”  

50. For the text of the 4 January statement, broadcast on Hanoi radio, see Herring, The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War, pp. 131–133.  

51. Thies, When Governments Collide, p. 117.
ended “a few days of calm” for Radványi in Washington. On 4 January he re-
ceived an urgent cable from Peter instructing him to request an immediate
meeting with Rusk to transmit an important message. Upon seeing Rusk, 
Radványi informed him of “our conviction” that the “possibility can be found
for direct negotiation” between U.S. and North Vietnamese representatives
“to explain their viewpoints directly to each other.”52 Whether to publicize the
meetings would be “a matter of mutual agreement.” Rusk reacted with appar-
ent diffidence to what Peter obviously considered a significant communica-
tion. For a long time, Rusk said, the United States had had no problems es-
tablishing contact with Hanoi, and indeed was in direct contact at that very
moment, alluding to the exchange in Rangoon. The problem, he said, was
that Hanoi declined to respond to U.S. messages—perhaps Peter could estab-
lish a “more productive” relationship. Radványi triggered American suspi-
cions when, on Peter’s instructions, he asked Rusk for “any suggestions
[about] who, where, in which circumstances [U.S. officials] would like to
meet the representatives of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and the
representatives of the National Liberation Front.” Rusk evidently viewed
Radványi’s question as just “another attempt to smuggle the NLF into the ne-
gotiations as the representative of South Vietnam.” Rusk answered tersely that
“Hanoi knows better” and that the answer depended on the North Vietnam-
ese themselves. He left no doubt that Washington still completely rejected the
idea of recognizing the NLF as a negotiating partner.53 The tone of the meet-
ing was further strained when, in an exchange mentioned in Radványi’s chro-
nology but not in Delusion and Reality, Radványi stated, presumably under in-
structions, that Peter “strongly disapproves the propaganda campaign made
around the U.S. proposals, which is weakening the trust concerning the sin-
cerity of the U.S. proposals.” Rusk “reacted angrily and sharply” to the criti-
cism, said he rejected the comments “100 percent,” and insisted that the
American peace offer should be taken “very seriously.” Radványi appended
the following comment to the entry in his secret chronology: “Mr. Rusk was
very tense during the meeting. He became very angry when we talked about

52. There are two apparent contradictions between Radványi’s “Chronology” and Delusion and Real-
ity, pp. 111–112, regarding the 4 January meeting. In the book Radványi writes that he received the
cable from Peter in the early morning and was received by Rusk at noon, whereas the chronology indi-
cates that he called Rusk at 7:30 p.m. via the White House switchboard and saw him at the State De-
partment at 8:00 p.m. Radványi’s book states that Peter’s cable directed him “to inform Rusk that the
Hungarian government considered it possible to arrange a meeting to enable the United States, the
Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front [emphasis added] to exchange
opinions”; however, his contemporaneous chronology omits the NLF from this assertion, leaving it to
a follow-up question.

53. The passage “another attempt...South Vietnam” is from Radványi, Delusion and Reality, p. 112.
The passage “Hanoi knows better” is from Radványi Chronology, 4 January 1966 entry.
the propaganda issue. But the meeting was conducted—regardless of the tension—in a correct manner.” 54

As had become customary in the secret exchanges, Radványi transmitted an account of the talk to Peter in Budapest and also briefed Dobrynin. The Hungarian diplomat evidently conveyed his sense of disappointment with the American reaction to his Soviet colleague, for the next day, upon hearing Llewellyn Thompson complain that the Hungarian approach had been “rather vague,” Dobrynin retorted that “so far as he could gather from Radványi, the Secretary’s reply had been rather vague.” The Soviet envoy claimed that the Hungarians had not received a “clear answer” to their question about Rusk’s ideas for direct discussions with Hanoi. 55

Peter obviously agreed, and he ordered Radványi to schedule another meeting with Rusk—a meeting that took place on 5 January—to explain the Hungarian position. The foreign minister said that Radványi should indicate he was not simply referring to exchanges of formal documents as was occurring in Rangoon, but was instead talking “about that type of meeting where the representatives of the two governments negotiate directly and an exchange of views take[s] place between them about their conceptions (ideas).” (Notably, the reference to the NLF, which had aroused Rusk’s ire the previous day, had disappeared.) Peter insisted that after “careful examination” Budapest believed “the possibility of that type of meeting exists.” With the possible exception of the fitful “XYZ” talks in Paris in the late summer of 1965 (involving a North Vietnamese representative, Mai Van Bo, and a retired State Department official, Edmund Guillon), 56 these kinds of conversations had most assuredly not taken place since the war escalated. Nor could Rusk claim, as he had to Radványi, that such talks were “no problem” to arrange. After hearing Peter’s clarification, Rusk said “I understand” that something more than the Rangoon contacts was envisioned. Although Rusk continued to respond cautiously—as he asked for more time to study the message and wondered again “whether the type of meeting we were talking about would be different from the ones they already had”—Radványi sensed that both the secretary of state and William Bundy, who was also present, were “in a positive and optimistic mood.” That evening, Bundy gave Radványi a positive answer, seeking to combine the Hungarian channel with the Pinta contacts. Bundy informed him that Byroade in Rangoon would be available for the kind of discussions

Peter had described and that Washington would consider any other location he might propose.57

Radványi writes in *Delusion and Reality* that he was now “filled with enthusiasm” and was hopeful that negotiations could soon start, perhaps in Budapest rather than Rangoon. But his optimism was dashed when a hardline intelligence officer at the embassy, who had opposed the mediation effort from the start, smugly showed him the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry’s public statement of 4 January denouncing the U.S. peace campaign as a “swindle” and the pause as a “trick.” Radványi says he was dismayed by what seemed a blatant contradiction between Hanoi’s public statement and the private message purportedly relayed on North Vietnam’s behalf by Peter to Rusk. Radványi writes that he cabled Budapest for an explanation, but that none was forthcoming.58

Not surprisingly, the chronology prepared by Radványi—as an official document—does not refer to these abrupt shifts of emotions, from excitement and enthusiasm to disappointment and confusion and even an undercurrent of doubt and suspicion directed at his own foreign minister. Yet, the sudden, stark, even awkward silence that suddenly descended on the channel after a supposedly hopeful exchange emerges clearly even in the chronology. From 5 to 20 January, the only entry is for a telephone call on 8 January from Rusk, who, using “a very polite but strict tone,” asked when he might receive a further message from Peter. Rusk stressed that he could be reached anytime over the weekend through the White House operator. But there is no indication that he ever heard back. All had gone quiet on the Hungarian front, and the locus of East-Central European “pause” diplomacy had shifted to Poland.

**Warsaw and the Pause: Operation Lumbago**

In contrast to Hungary, the Polish government could draw on its recent diplomatic experience in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. Since 1954 Poland had occupied a special position in the diplomacy of the Indochina conflict by virtue of its role, along with Canada and India, on the three country International Control Commission (ICC) set up to monitor the Geneva Accords.59 The Polish foreign minister, Adam Rapacki, had played an active role in the Geneva conference on Laos in 1961–1962, and the Polish government had

periodically floated peace initiatives to neutralize (literally and figuratively) the Southeast Asian conflict. Despite the Sino-Soviet split, in which Poland naturally had sided with Moscow, the Polish authorities had sought to cultivate civil ties with China. Some Poles quietly recalled Mao Zedong’s support for the Polish Communists’ defiance of the Soviet Union during the 1956 “Polish October.”

By late 1965, however, Poland, like other Warsaw Pact countries, had come to see Beijing’s support for a protracted war against the United States as a principal obstacle to convincing Hanoi that it needed to consider a diplomatic as well as military solution. Hence, when Averell Harriman suddenly notified the Polish authorities of his desire to visit Warsaw on 29 December 1965 against the backdrop of the pause, the Polish leaders were ready to cooperate despite their harsh criticism of U.S. policies in Vietnam and especially the bombing of the North. “You are behaving like bandits,” the First Secretary of the Polish Communist party (officially known as the Polish United Workers’ Party, PUWP), Władysław Gomułka, told Harriman. “But if you really want peace then we are ready to help you!” It has long been known, through press leaks and journalistic investigations, that Harriman’s conversations in Warsaw on 29 and 30 December, particularly his discussions with Rapacki and Gomułka, induced the Polish government to take on a mediating role. The Polish authorities secretly dispatched an envoy, Jerzy Michałowski, who was a senior aide to Rapacki and a specialist on East Asia, to Hanoi in early January 1966. Michałowski was supposed to convey Harriman’s proposals to the North Vietnamese authorities and try to convince them to move toward negotiations. Although elements of the story were first disclosed in the mid-1960s, the declassification of formerly secret Polish archival materials, including encrypted telegrams from the Foreign Ministry and Michałowski’s private postmortem of his role in Vietnam diplomacy, enables us to gain a far more detailed and precise picture of those activities.

63. The encrypted telegrams were obtained from the Polish Foreign Ministry Archives in Warsaw and
Michałowski's report, especially his detailed account of conversations with senior North Vietnamese officials, suggests that it was his own trip to Hanoi in early January 1966—not the efforts by Hungary or the Soviet Union and not even Byroade's fitful Pinta contacts—that came closest to spurring movement toward direct peace negotiations. As fellow Communists, the Poles could certainly make the case more credibly than the Americans could. Although the Soviet Union also sent a high-level envoy—a Politburo member, Aleksandr Shelepin—to Hanoi in early January during the pause, records of his discussions have not yet surfaced, and it appears that Michałowski argued more strongly and candidly than Shelepin did in favor of a political approach. Shelepin's mission was hindered by Moscow's desire to avoid taking steps that would lend seeming credence to Chinese allegations that the Soviet Union was colluding with the United States.

Following Harriman's conversations with Gomułka and Rapacki, the PUWP Politburo approved a message to the North Vietnamese leadership stating, after the usual declaration of support, that the final decision was up to Hanoi:

With regard to the proposals for peace negotiations currently put forward by the United States and presented by Mr. Harriman, their value, in our opinion, depends on the U.S. government's motives, which are difficult at this point to characterize definitively.

It cannot be discounted that the U.S. government, faced with the heavy losses it has sustained in Vietnam, faced with the pressure of public opinion and dissatisfaction in its own society, and faced with the limited prospect of a military solution, is beginning to realize that its aggressive military policy in Vietnam has led it up a blind alley, and is endeavoring to find a way out. If this is the case, it would, in our opinion, be worthwhile from the DRV's perspective to undertake negotiations in order to gauge more closely the position of the U.S. government, and, in particular, to judge what kind of concessions that government would be ready to make under the present state of affairs.

Rapacki dispatched Michałowski to carry the message to Hanoi and negotiate with the North Vietnamese leadership. To preserve secrecy, Rapacki spread word among Michałowski's colleagues that the diplomat had suffered an attack of lumbago and required a sudden trip to the mountain resort of Zakopane to recuperate. The encrypted telegrams that Michałowski sent to Rapacki and the report that Michałowski compiled afterward describe his preliminary visits to Moscow, where Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko wel-

comed and approved the Polish plans, and to Beijing, where officials vehemently condemned and even attempted to sabotage the mission. The declassified telegrams and report also give a detailed account of Michałowski's visit to Hanoi, where he relayed the U.S. proposals to Ho Chi Minh and other top figures, including Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh, Premier Pham Van Dong, and military commander General Vo Nguyen Giap. The Polish envoy argued strongly in favor of accepting the proposals at least as a basis for discussions. His talks began on 4 January, and in a concrete manner his presence substituted for the distant (and perhaps more dubious, in Hanoi's eyes) Hungarians as an East-Central European counsel of relative moderation.

Although U.S. officials later received broadly accurate reports that Michałowski had traveled to Hanoi and sought in vain to convince North Vietnamese leaders to open peace talks, the postmortem by Michałowski not only confirms these earlier, vague accounts, but also adds several crucial dimensions to the record.

First, it provides a vivid snapshot of Sino-Soviet differences and tensions over the issue of peace negotiations at this juncture of the war, particularly in

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64. “Michałowski report.” The Americans first got wind of Michałowski's secret mission on 13 January 1966, when Harriman (who had traveled from Warsaw to Yugoslavia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Japan, and Australia to promote the administration's “peace offensive”) met in Vientiane with Prince Souvanna Phouma and learned that the Laotian leader “had just had a surprise visit” from Michałowski, purportedly en route to Hanoi. ICC records showed that in fact the Pole had just come from Hanoi and was on his way to Bangkok, and Harriman speculated correctly that Michałowski had been Rapacki's “messenger” to Hanoi to deliver the message that Harriman had given to him in Warsaw two weeks earlier. See Telegram No. 752 from the US embassy in Laos to State Department, 13 January 1966, FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVIII: Laos (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1998), pp. 438–441. The British ambassador in Vientiane heard that Michałowski had told the prince that the “North Vietnamese were in a most bellicose mood.” Vientiane (Mr. Warner) to Foreign Office, No. 21, (immediate/secret), 14 January 1966, Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, U.K., Foreign Office 371/186337. For unpublished documents on Michałowski's trip, see also the account secretly transmitted to U.N. Secretary General U Thant by Warsaw via its U.N. ambassador in February 1966; and Michałowski's own version a year later: U Thant, “Note on Vietnam situation,” entry for 7 February 1966, secret, folder “Vietnam War (confidential papers), 1965–1966,” and U Thant, “The Question of Vietnam,” entry for 15 January 1967, both in United Nations (UN) Archives, New York City, DAG-1, 5.2.2.3.2, box 1, Rest. Strictly Confidential. In recounting the trip in September 1967 to Harriman, Michałowski recalled that in Moscow he learned “that the Russians would not take too much initiative for fear of Peking's accusation that they were working for the Americans,” described his experience in Beijing as “most disagreeable,” and said the North Vietnamese discussed the idea of negotiations “very seriously” but, having “been burned twice on negotiations, . . . the authorities are fearful of undertaking another discussion for fear they would be 'sold out' again.” See Harriman-Michałowski memorandum of conversation, 26 September 1967, Library of Congress (LC), W. Averell Harriman Papers, box FCL 33, folder: September 1967. Michałowski gave a roughly similar, albeit more detailed, account to Harriman in early 1969. [N.B.: The Library of Congress staff recently integrated the “FCL” series of boxes into the main Harriman collection, and the latest version of FCL citations can be found in the revised finding aid to the collection.] See Memorandum of Conversation, Governor Harriman’s Home, Wednesday, 19 February 1969, Amb. Michałowski, Gov. Harriman, and Daniel I. Davidson (NSC Staff), secret/nodis/Marigold, in folder “POL 27–14 VIET/MARIGOLD 1969,” box 2739, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), 1967–1969, RG 59, NA II.
the vignette Michałowski relates of the Chinese effort to delay his mission to Hanoi by a day (on the false pretext of fears of U.S. bombing) in order to send an emissary ahead of him to pressure the North Vietnamese to reject his entreaties. The report also underscores Hanoi’s delicate balancing act as it tried to retain the support of both Communist patrons, albeit with what Soviet-bloc and U.S. analysts regarded as a tilt toward Beijing. “Goddamn those Chinese,” Michałowski reportedly said after returning to Warsaw from Hanoi.65 His report and his contemporaneous cables explain why he was so frustrated. The North Vietnamese, apparently alerted by the Chinese envoy, rejected his arguments with almost exactly the same arguments used by the Chinese, albeit more graciously.66 “Everything points to the mobilized pressure of the [Chinese] neighbors,” he cabled Warsaw from Hanoi on 5 January.67 To his evident relief, the North Vietnamese leaders, unlike the Chinese, explicitly approved of Michałowski’s mission and the argument he made that only those experiencing bloodshed—that is, the North Vietnamese themselves—had the right to decide how to react to the Americans’ proposals. (According to Michałowski, a “visibly angry” Pham Van Dong, after being informed that the Chinese foreign minister had criticized the Polish diplomat for carrying the U.S. proposals to Hanoi rather than rejecting them out of hand, had said “it was not Chen Yi’s business to make such an observation and added that he (Michałowski) was quite right in coming to Hanoi to convey Harriman’s message.”68)

Second, the documents indicate that Michałowski detected tensions between the North Vietnamese authorities and the leaders of the National Liberation Front (NLF), who favored a more decisive rejection of any peace talks. The Polish envoy noted that in addition to expressing confidence about ultimate military victory, General Giap “also said—which was very telling—that the beginning of talks by the DRV with the USA could provoke objections within the NLF in the South and accusations of ‘selling out’ their interests in return for the ending of the bombing in the North.”69 According to a secret Polish account of the trip given afterward to UN Secretary General U Thant, Michałowski also met with NLF representatives during his stay in Hanoi and found them to be “very militant,” sure of a battlefield triumph, and in “no

66. “Michałowski report.”
69. “Michałowski report.”
mood to negotiate,” in contrast to the “not so belligerent” North Vietnamese leaders. The report to U Thant added:

When Michałowski told the Front representatives that if they persisted in fighting it might even lead to World War 3, they replied that they were aware of this but because they have been fighting for the liberation of their country for 20 years, World War 3 would not make any difference to them. If their objective of complete independence is not achieved, they will continue to fight.70

Such comments further corroborate scholarly reports of divergences between the NLF and North Vietnamese approaches to the war at this stage. The Front and Beijing were implacably opposed to negotiations, whereas Hanoi was more ambivalent and was willing to listen to advice from Moscow and some of its East-Central European allies to explore a diplomatic solution to the war.71 In a farewell conversation with Michałowski, Deputy Premier Nguyễn Duy Trịnh said that the visit had “improved the proportion between the military and political struggle,” and he promised to “think about planning a transition to peace initiatives.”72

Third, Michałowski’s detailed recounting of conversations with North Vietnamese officials offers one of the clearest pictures yet of Hanoi’s rationales at that time for rejecting U.S. overtures to start peace negotiations. The North Vietnamese leaders believed that the military situation had not sufficiently ripened and that North Vietnam first had to inflict a military defeat on the United States—a defeat akin to that inflicted on the French at Dien Bien Phu on the eve of the 1954 Geneva Conference. During Michałowski’s visit to Hanoi, the Polish ambassador in East Berlin relayed the substance of his conversations to a senior East German Communist official, Erich Honecker. The memorandum of the conversation, stored in the archive of the former Socialist Unity Party of Germany, crisply expresses the outcome:

Comrade Michałowski believes that the [North] Vietnamese comrades underestimate the enemy and overestimate the pressure generated by world public opinion and American public opinion. They are still under the influence of the Dien Bien Phu military victory. The [North] Vietnamese comrades assume that the DRV is not yet strong enough to be able to enter negotiations. The only way to come to a conference, the [North] Vietnamese comrades believe, is as a victor, and to this end more military successes must be achieved.73

72. “Michałowski report.”
73. Memorandum of Conversation between Honecker and Polish Ambassador to the GDR
During Michałowski’s initial talks on 4 January—the same day that the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry issued its uncompromising public statement—the Polish envoy heard from Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh a refrain that would come up repeatedly during his trip (as it later did during Shelepin’s visit): “The DRV will achieve victory. At a certain time it will be necessary to transfer the military successes to the political plane. That time has not yet arrived. More victories are still necessary. Then we will enter into talks.”

Michałowski tried many different arguments to shake the North Vietnamese from their refusal to engage the United States. He urged them to open contacts so that they could at least probe the seriousness of the U.S. initiative and expose it as false if in fact that proved to be the case. Michałowski’s discussions evidently came the closest of any initiative to persuading North Vietnamese leaders to consider the Johnson administration’s proposals in the best possible light. (In that respect, his talks were far more substantive and effective than the relatively low-level “Pinta” contacts in Rangoon.) The Polish envoy’s account of his conversation with a “stubborn” (and, he believed, Chinese-influenced) Ho Chi Minh indicates that Michałowski was unusually persistent even when confronted by fierce resistance:

On 6 January, I was received by Ho Chi Minh for a discussion lasting an hour-and-a-half. In comparison with the last declaration by Pham Van Dong, Ho Chi Minh’s arguments were considerably more negative regarding the prospects for peace negotiations. Ho began with lavish expressions of gratitude to our leadership and a complete understanding of our motives. However, he stated that it is too early to think about a peaceful resolution and that it is still necessary to fight the enemy. Victory is certain, world opinion supports us, the entire [socialist] camp is helping us. We are the victims of aggression, which we have to repulse militarily, just as we did with the French, and then we can think about peace. Ho sees only one eventuality for peace: the complete withdrawal of the USA. And regarding the peace offensive he sees only one reply: the [Foreign Ministry] statement of 4 January 1966. He has no doubt that the whole world will appraise it as a peace gesture. Ho asserted that he was thoroughly informed by Pham Van Dong and Nguyen [Duy Trinh] about all of our opinions and discussions, but he believes that he is absolutely correct and that he is fully capable of winning the war and imposing peace on the enemy.

During the next hour-and-a-half of my discussion with Ho, I put forth all possible arguments. [I mentioned] the benefits of knowing the intentions of the opponent; the reply was that they are well known anyway. [I mentioned] the OP.


74. Michałowski (Hanoi) to Rapacki, Encrypted Telegram No. 74, 4 January 1966, Polish Foreign Ministry Archives, Warsaw; obtained and translated by L. W. Gluchowski.
portunity to expose the pseudo-peace slogans; the reply was: “It is not necessary, world opinion understands who the aggressor is.” [I mentioned] the slowing of the process of escalation; the reply was: “The United States talks about peace and constantly sends reinforcements.” [I mentioned] the possibility at the very least of prolonging the pause in the bombing; the reply was: “They must completely stop.” [I mentioned] the increasing losses suffered by the Vietnamese nation; the reply was: “There can be no victory without sacrifice and if we die our children will be victorious.” [I said that] rejection [of the proposal] would lead to an increase in U.S. engagement that will make it difficult for the United States to withdraw in the future; the reply was: “We will talk when we decide it is appropriate.” [I said that] if the great military potential of the U.S. is set in motion, it may change the balance of forces in the South; the reply was: “The same was said before Dien Bien Phu. Now we are stronger and we have the support of the socialist family.” [I said that], unfortunately, the [socialist] family is not united; the reply was: “On the matter of assistance to us, there is no discord.” Regarding the opportunity to take advantage of the internal political situation in the USA and the differences among U.S. allies, the reply was: “The nations will decide for themselves who is in the right.” Regarding the benefits of accepting the peace proposals, the reply was: “We will accept them when the time comes.” Regarding the value of unconditional forms of contacts, the reply was: “We will undertake contacts with the American nation when they leave Vietnam.”

Fourth, Michałowski’s contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of his mission to Hanoi offer some rare glimpses, from the perspective of a “fraternal” ally rather than a Western journalist or diplomat, of the main figures in North Vietnam’s wartime leadership. The Polish envoy came away deeply impressed with Pham Van Dong, who received him in an “exceptionally cordial atmosphere.” Michałowski later told U Thant that the premier was “the real master of North Viet-Nam . . . very much in control of the situation,” and he told Harriman that Pham Van Dong was “one of the best statesmen he had ever met,” the “leader of the doves” with a “humanistic approach.” Giap, in Michałowski’s view, was like a “Polish cavalryman, full of fantasy, very brilliant, very temperamental and very enthusiastic.” Although the gen-

75. “Michałowski report”; and Michałowski (Hanoi) to Rapacki, no. 299, 6 January 1966, Polish Foreign Ministry Archives, Warsaw; obtained and translated by L. W. Gluchowski.

eral seemed confident and “very cheerful” and was even “relishing the fight with the Americans,” he reputedly had undergone “several changes of heart,” sometimes being “certain of military victory,” and at other times on “bad terms with the Chinese faction.” After the unproductive meeting with Ho Chi Minh, Michałowski described the revered leader, who by this point was evidently something of a figurehead, as “stubborn,” “aging,” “obstinate,” “sermonizing,” and even somewhat “incoherent” and “a bit senile.” In successive meetings with the Polish emissary, Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh at times acted “stiff” and formal, and at other times was “friendly,” “flexible,” and open to Michałowski’s arguments. In assessing the readiness of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho to embark on negotiations, Michałowski judged the former to be “very rigid and definitely pro-Beijing” and the latter to be more “reasonable, not a hawk.” But he emphasized that despite the strength of the “Chinese faction,” which favored military over diplomatic options, “all the North Vietnamese are first and foremost Vietnamese nationalists.”

**Moscow’s Role and Soviet-Bloc Coordination During the Pause**

Soviet documents pertaining to Moscow’s diplomacy during the bombing suspension have not yet been released from the Russian archives, but the newly available Polish and Hungarian materials illuminate the process of diplomatic and political coordination among Warsaw, Moscow, Budapest, and other East-bloc capitals. Although the Polish documents reveal that Poland’s initiatives were approved rather than instigated by the Soviet Union, they also indicate that Warsaw closely coordinated its activities with both Moscow and Budapest. Of particular note are Michałowski’s comments on the Shelepin

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78. The phrase “stubborn” comes from “Michałowski Report,” p. 33. The phrases “stubborn,” “aging,” “obstinate,” “sermonizing,” and “unrealistic” are from Encrypted Telegram No. 209 from Hanoi, 6 January 1966; translation from Polish by L. W. Gluchowski. The phrases “incoherent” and “a bit senile” are from U Thant, “The Question of Viet-Nam, 15 January 1967; and Michałowski-Harriman conversation, 19 February 1969.

79. “Michałowski report”; and contemporaneous encrypted telegrams.


81. During the pause Poland tried in vain to dissuade the East German and Bulgarian authorities from prodding Hanoi to enter peace talks. The Poles wanted to avoid “the impression of organized action and pressure with a tone expressly anti-Chinese in character.” “Michałowski report.”
mission, about which the Soviet authorities remained mum despite acute American interest. After the conversations with Dobrynin in late 1965, most U.S. officials had presumed or at least hoped that Shelepin’s mission was a diplomatic reward for the bombing pause and was a serious effort by Moscow to push Hanoi toward peace talks and toward more limited objectives in the South. By contrast, other observers, who pointed to the military and economic aid agreements that were signed during the visit, argued that Shelepin failed to make a serious pitch for moderation or negotiations. In Delusion and Reality, Radványi asserts that Michałowski lost any remaining hopes for success on his mission “when he learned from [the Soviet ambassador to Vietnam, Ilya] Shcherbakov, that Shelepin had offered substantial new military aid to Hanoi and had refrained from recommending negotiations.”

After noting that Shelepin was unflinching in his public support of Hanoi’s hard line (including the Foreign Ministry statement of 4 January 1966), Radványi contends that Shelepin “made no attempt to modify” North Vietnam’s resistance to negotiations and instead merely reached a behind-the-scenes consensus on the U.S. peace proposal.

Michałowski’s report suggests less divergence between his own and Shelepin’s objectives. The Polish envoy believed that Shelepin, who held talks with the North Vietnamese leaders just after the Polish meetings, would “receive orders similar to ours” and would “exert influence in the same direction that we did.” When Michałowski recounted his conversations in Moscow on 15 January on his way back to Warsaw from Hanoi (via Vientiane, Bangkok, and Delhi), he quoted Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Kuznetsov as saying that Shelepin’s “findings overlap with our own [those of Poland],” and that the Poles deserved credit for helping to nudge Hanoi toward a “stronger acceptance” of the need to “take up peace initiatives at the right moment.” On the other hand, Michałowski sent a cable to Rapacki indicating that “Shelepin had instructions not to exert pressure and not to condition assistance on a uniformity of views regarding the matter of peace actions.” Although the discrepancy between these sources cannot yet be resolved, it seems likely that Michałowski argued far more ardently in support of negotiations than did Shelepin.

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82. Radványi, Delusion and Reality, p. 128. Although Radványi mentions no specific source detailing Michałowski’s reaction, he cites reports from the Hungarian embassy in Hanoi on Shelepin’s visit in general.

83. He also stresses the military and military-industrial composition of Shelepin’s delegation, which included future defense minister Dmitri Ustinov (who in the mid-1960s was in charge of the vast Soviet defense industry) and Col.-General Vladimir Tolubko. See Radványi, Delusion and Reality, pp. 160–169, 276 n. 12, 17.

84. Michałowski (Moscow) to Rapacki, 15 January 1966, Encrypted Telegram No. 586, Polish Foreign Ministry Archives, Warsaw; obtained and translated by L. W. Gluchowski.
The Michałowski report also reveals that the Poles and Hungarians attempted to coordinate their activities with one another, or at least to keep each other informed on an almost daily basis. On 7 January, during Michałowski’s visit to Hanoi (where he met regularly with the Hungarian ambassador, Imre Pehr), János Peter traveled to Warsaw at his own initiative to see Rapacki. According to Michałowski, “Peter agreed with our pessimistic evaluation of the Vietnamese position.” Peter told Rapacki that during preliminary contacts the North Vietnamese had seemed ready to consider talks with the United States if the Americans took the initiative—a statement consistent with Peter’s own subsequent report to the HSWP Politburo (and contrary to the accusations leveled in Radványi’s Delusion and Reality). Peter then said that in the second phase, after the Hungarians delivered Rusk’s “concrete proposal for a meeting by both sides in Rangoon,” the North Vietnamese had retreated, claiming that they needed to weigh their position. Peter also said, in a comment that might help explain Dobrynin’s reference to Rusk’s “vague” reactions, that Washington and Hanoi might not have “identically” understood the proposal for direct talks. He acknowledged that the North Vietnamese seemed to be waiting for a direct approach from the Americans and seemed to be “trying to restrict the eventual subject of the talks to a presentation of positions” (à la the Rangoon contacts that the Hungarians and Americans wanted to move beyond).

Peter and Rapacki agreed that it would be necessary to see what Hanoi would say. If it turned out that the North Vietnamese “continue to uphold their readiness to meet with the USA, but do not want to take the initiative or would prefer to meet somewhere other than Rangoon,” the Polish and Hungarian foreign ministers resolved that their countries would jointly take the initiative to organize a meeting in Warsaw, Budapest, Geneva, or elsewhere.

In mid-January, however, North Vietnam largely dispelled any lingering hopes Peter and the Hungarians—as well as the Americans—might have had that the channel would produce results. On 15 January the North Vietnamese ambassador in Budapest, Hoang Luong, visited Peter. According to the Hungarian notes from the conversation, the North Vietnamese envoy repeated Hanoi’s usual confident assessment of the military struggle and its dismissal of the U.S. peace proposal as a mere subterfuge for intentions to escalate the war. In addition, Hoang provided a fresh analysis of the American proposals sent to Hanoi by Rusk via the Hungarians. Hoang said that regardless of the extent of “misinformation” in Rusk’s overtures and their relationship to U.S. losses on the battlefield, the VWP CC was certain that Washington would try to step up its military operations and—despite its twelve or fourteen points—would refuse to accept a neutral South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were
unwilling to alter their basic demands, including acceptance of the four points and an unconditional bombing halt, and they urged the Hungarians to condemn the American peace proposals.85

Hoang Luong also told Peter that the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry was about to issue a formal memorandum responding to the Hungarian initiative, and the document arrived the next day. The memorandum, according to Peter’s report to the HSWP Politburo, expressed concern that the United States might exploit the Rusk-Radványi conversations to sow dissension within the Communist world. “This would have grave consequences,” Hanoi warned. Although Peter did not totally exclude the possibility of future contacts, he concluded, after hearing what the North Vietnamese leaders had told Michałowski and Shelepin, that “we do not see much point in a further exchange of messages.”86 Although Peter did not explicitly mention China, one can infer that he, like Michałowski and Rapacki, believed that Chinese pressure was a key factor in Hanoi’s decision to back away from its initial glimmer of interest in negotiations.

Despite the obstinacy of Hanoi and the de facto failure of Hungary’s initiative, U.S. officials were not yet aware that the contacts had come to naught (since Peter had not instructed Radványi to let them in on the bad news). With the bombing pause still under way, Peter sought to coordinate strategy with Moscow and Warsaw by convening a secret trilateral meeting of the Soviet, Hungarian, and Polish foreign ministers. His report discloses that this meeting took place in Moscow on 24–25 January 1966. The session was timed so that Gromyko, Peter, and Rapacki could also receive a report from Shelepin, who had just returned from Hanoi.87 When Gromyko summarized the Shelepin delegation’s talks, he noted that they had focused mainly on the signing of new “large-scale” aid agreements, but he added that Shelepin in secret talks (like Michałowski before him) “drew attention to the need to reach a

85. János Peter, “Visit of the Vietnamese Ambassador Hoang Luong,” Budapest, 15 January 1966, MOL, Foreign Ministry documents, Top Secret, IV-146–1/Pe/1965, 107.doboz, XIX-J-1-j; translation by Susan Weinberger. The “Michałowski report” also notes that on 15 January Hanoi gave Budapest “a sharp rejection of a proposal to meet, and in this manner the Hungarian channel was also closed.”

86. Peter, “Diplomatic steps.”

87. This Soviet-Hungarian-Polish consultation was apparently unknown to senior U.S. officials. Contributing to later confusion, Radványi told William Bundy that a secret Rapacki-Peter-Gromyko meeting took place, but the date he cited for the conference—in late December 1965—was incorrect. Radványi speculated that the three foreign ministers had reached a decision to designate Michałowski as the “Eastern Bloc’s ‘pause’ representative.” See “Radványi Disclosure.” As the account here shows, the foreign ministers could not possibly have met in the brief interval between Harriman’s talks with Gomułka and Rapacki and the departure of Michałowski for Hanoi. Michałowski merely conferred with senior Soviet officials in Moscow en route to Hanoi.
political solution.” The North Vietnamese, according to Gromyko, had reiterated to Shelepin (as they did to Michałowski) that negotiations would be appropriate only after further military victories, “but in the interests of a political solution they saw the need for improving diplomatic and propaganda work.”

The Polish and Hungarian sources also suggest that Soviet leaders took a relatively positive view of the Johnson administration’s latest Vietnam proposals but were unwilling to go out on a limb to pressure Hanoi to respond positively. When Michałowski passed through Moscow in late December on his way to Hanoi, Gromyko said that he “personally agrees with the assessment that the Americans [realize they] have led themselves up a blind alley in Vietnam and judges that in fact they are ready for a political solution with conditions that are possible for them to accept.” Gromyko surmised that Washington would want to keep military forces in South Vietnam at least for a while, would seek guarantees for the South’s continued independence, and, in classic American fashion, would try to “rescue the situation” with a massive aid program. The Soviet foreign minister declined to predict Hanoi’s response, but a few weeks later, after it had become clear that the North Vietnamese were unwilling to pursue negotiations, Moscow felt obligated to support them. According to Peter’s account of the 24–25 January meeting, Gromyko claimed that in various meetings with U.S. officials during the bombing pause—including a discussion in New Delhi on 13 January between Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin and Vice President Humphrey, who were attending the funeral for Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri—the Soviet Union had rebuffed the U.S. government’s “defensive and imploring” requests to deliver messages to Hanoi, insisting that Moscow “would not take on any sort of role as a postman.”

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88. Peter, “Diplomatic Steps.” Gromyko’s summary, as reported by Peter, is similar to the above-cited Michałowski documents insofar as it appears to contradict Radványi’s assertion that Shelepin made no effort to advocate negotiations or a political course. The summary also seems consistent with a contemporary U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memorandum claiming that Shelepin likely “encouraged the North Vietnamese to give more serious consideration to recent US moves toward a political solution” but “was unable to persuade them to modify their tactics.” See Intelligence Memorandum (prepared by the CIA Office of Current Intelligence), “Communist Reaction to the US Peace Offensive,” 20 January 1966, FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. 4, pp. 92–94 (quotation on p. 94).
89. Pszczolkowski (Moscow) to Rapacki, Encrypted Telegram No. 15848, 31 December 1965, Polish Foreign Ministry Archives, Warsaw; obtained and translated by L. W. Gluchowski.
any further progress: “Comrade Gromyko assessed the situation as follows: The American proposals have honest elements to them, and they are looking for a way out, but the last word for us is with our Vietnamese comrades.”91

Although Gromyko’s comments implied some faint pangs of sympathy for the American position, the three foreign ministers by this point believed their principal task was “to put pressure on the United States in support of extending the suspension of bombing of the DRV.” They agreed to exchange information and coordinate actions to this end.92 Thus, well after Hanoi had made clear by mid-January that it was not seriously interested in talks with the United States, both the Hungarians and the Poles continued to string Washington along in the hopes of forestalling a resumption of bombing.

In the case of Poland, this effort included the so-called “translation controversy” and a last-ditch gambit involving the editor of The Saturday Review, Norman Cousins, who was an associate of President Johnson. Cousins was seeking to establish contact with the North Vietnamese, and Michałowski discloses that Polish officials tried to persuade North Vietnamese leaders that Cousins was a potential direct link to Johnson. The Poles attempted to stage a meeting in Warsaw in the final days of the bombing suspension (the end of the pause was forecast by Cousins on the 28th citing “the highest authority”), and this effort led to sleepless nights as diplomats awaited final word from Hanoi. Michałowski describes how Rapacki, “striving at all costs to prevent the resumption of bombing,” called in a U.S. official the next day to claim—without any evidence from Hanoi—that a mistranslation had arisen in the English text of Ho Chi Minh’s open letter of 28 January. The letter insisted that the United States “accept” or “recognize” North Vietnam’s “Four Points” for a settlement, but Rapacki insisted that an errant translation had blurred the “signal” that the United States was seeking as a legitimate basis to extend the bombing pause. It was only a matter of days before Hanoi authoritatively rejected (via the Pinta contacts and other channels) the more conciliatory interpretation that Rapacki had claimed to find, a development that hardly bolstered the foreign minister’s credibility in Washington.93
that last pretense gone, the 37-day bombing halt came to a close at the end of January.  

As for the Hungarians, they, too, argued forcefully against a resumption of the American bombing, though to equally negligible effect. Even as Gromyko, Peter, and Rapacki met in Moscow, a Hungarian Foreign Ministry official in Budapest sharply rejected an American diplomat’s contention that Hanoi had failed to respond to U.S. peace overtures and had instead escalated its military activities and infiltration of troops and supplies, leaving Washington with no alternative but to consider ending the bombing moratorium. In response to what was clearly a final warning intended to be passed to the North Vietnamese, the Hungarian official countered that the situation was “exactly the opposite” of what the Johnson administration claimed—that it was the United States that had substantially hiked its troop levels in the South and had begun implementing plans to raise spending on the war and to expand operations into Cambodia and Laos, all under the cover of a false peace offensive. Such arguments had little impact in Washington, especially because the Hungarians, while denouncing U.S. actions, were unable to offer any convincing evidence that Hanoi was ready for negotiations. According to Radványi, Peter expressed a degree of satisfaction afterward to János Kádár: “If the Hungarian effort resulted only in the bombing being suspended for a few more days, this at least saved a few North Vietnamese lives.”

A message from the Hungarian ambassador in Hanoi, transmitted just after the bombing resumed, adds an interesting postscript to Peter’s futile efforts to extend the pause. In a cable on 3 February 1966 Imre Pehr reported that during the Soviet–North Vietnamese “inter-party talks”—evidently a reference to a meeting said to have taken place in December 1965 or January 1966—“Hanoi had in fact withdrawn a division from the South during the pause, but that the Pentagon had refused to admit this, and the Americans had missed the signal.” Bundy, however, dismissed this claim as “an invention of the fertile Polish imagination,” and more evidence that the Poles “were playing games with us throughout this period” and that the “only honest Polish behavior” was the acknowledgment that the Michałowski mission had failed to produce positive results. See “Radványi Disclosure.”

94. “Michałowski report.” See also Rangoon 394 (to SecState), 31 January 1966, in Herring, ed., The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War, pp. 141–142. In a conversation with William Bundy in May 1967 Radványi recalled that a few days after the U.S. bombing resumed a Polish diplomat at the UN had said “that Hanoi had in fact withdrawn a division from the South during the pause, but that the Pentagon had refused to admit this, and the Americans had missed the signal.” Bundy, however, dismissed this claim as “an invention of the fertile Polish imagination,” and more evidence that the Poles “were playing games with us throughout this period” and that the “only honest Polish behavior” was the acknowledgment that the Michałowski mission had failed to produce positive results. See “Radványi Disclosure.”


96. Radványi told Bundy that Kádár informed him of this conversation in Budapest in the summer of 1966. See “Radványi Disclosure.”
ence to Shelepin’s mission—the North Vietnamese had praised Hungary’s efforts on their behalf and had said that the information conveyed by Budapest was serving them well. Pehr added, however, that in his judgment “the Vietnamese comrades were not entirely honest with us in their answers and the information they provided to us.” For example, he complained that Hanoi had informed them only belatedly and incompletely about the contacts in Rangoon—information that could have been useful in conducting Hungary’s own dialogue with Rusk in Washington.  

**Conclusions**

As noted at the outset, a fuller analysis of East-Central European diplomacy during the 37-day bombing pause must await the opening of sources in Hanoi and Moscow. For now, only a few tentative conclusions are feasible.

First, despite Radványi’s allegation that the Hungarian initiative was completely “fraudulent,” the evidence suggests that Peter did in fact have genuine contacts in Hanoi and did receive at least some indication (in the private statements of 31 December 1965 and 4 January 1966) of a willingness to establish contact with the United States. But the evidence also indicates that Peter was less than candid once he became aware that North Vietnam no longer had any interest in responding to the bombing suspension with a move toward negotiations. The jury remains out on Peter’s initial efforts in October 1965 to persuade Rusk that a bombing halt might pay off.

Second, the Poles, and Michałowski in particular, made a good-faith effort not only to relay the American proposals for talks, but also to urge Hanoi’s acceptance of them. Like Peter, however, Rapacki was not above trying to mislead the Americans about Hanoi’s position in order to prolong the bombing pause—a tactic that undermined his credibility in ways that would redound against him during the “Marigold” diplomacy less than a year later.

Third, although it appears that neither the Poles nor the Hungarians were acting strictly at Soviet instigation, they closely coordinated their initiatives with Moscow (as well as with each other) in a manner carefully designed to fit...
the Soviet Union’s known policy preferences. Their actions also suited the more active role endorsed by Moscow—a role that Soviet leaders might have been inclined to play directly if they had not been wary of leaving themselves vulnerable to Chinese criticism. Although the Polish and Hungarian documents highlight the importance of the link with Moscow, they also tend to bear out the view that Poland and (to a lesser extent) Hungary had motives of their own for seeking to prevent further escalation of the Vietnam War.99 These motives included a desire to preserve the nascent détente in Central Europe that had given them somewhat more room to maneuver and to improve their political and economic relations with the West, especially in Europe. Many East European officials feared that this relaxation would be imperiled if a further escalation in Southeast Asia led to increased East-West tensions. Other motives of the Polish and Hungarian governments included a desire to achieve greater prestige by helping to bring peace to Vietnam (what Johnson scornfully referred to as the Nobel Prize syndrome) and an effort, albeit somewhat halting, to seek better relations with the United States. Clearly, far more research is necessary to delineate whether, and to what degree, Moscow’s allies were pursuing national interests and not simply marching in lockstep with their superpower patron.

When the mediating efforts failed to convert the bombing moratorium into a permanent halt and when the attempt to establish direct U.S.–North Vietnamese negotiations proved futile, officials in Moscow, Warsaw, and Budapest all blamed the Chinese for either pressuring Hanoi not to accept peace talks or at least reinforcing the belligerent outlook that precluded a positive response to the pause. The Soviet Union and its East-Central European allies seemed to want the North Vietnamese to open a political/diplomatic front, enter peace talks, and back away from what was seen as a Chinese-inspired insistence on a military struggle until total victory. At the same time, because Soviet and East-Central European leaders viewed the American military campaign as fundamentally illegitimate, they were unwilling to pay a high price within the Communist movement or to risk further ire from the Chinese by exerting overt pressure on Hanoi or by linking military, economic, or political aid to a more moderate position on negotiations.

Nothing that has emerged from the former East-bloc archives has altered the view that there was no "missed opportunity" for peace during the bombing moratorium of 1965–1966. Influential forces on both sides still hoped to achieve mutually incompatible objectives through continued military escalation, and they tended to view any hints of compromise by the other side as a sign of weakness that should be exploited, rather than a genuine concession that could be reciprocated as a step toward peace. Nevertheless, the documentation now available in East-Central Europe raises anew the question of whether the initial faint indications of a willingness in Hanoi to hold direct talks in the event of a bombing halt (as Peter claimed in October 1965)—or possibly even a willingness to hold talks as part of “normal diplomatic activity” (the thrust of the message that Peter supposedly received on 4 January)—were genuine or merely a chimera or invention all along. If in fact these indications did exist, further research will be needed to determine why they were overturned or deferred—whether it was a consequence of internal arguments in Hanoi, perhaps reinforced or influenced by Chinese pressure (as Warsaw, Budapest, and Moscow suspected), or was instead the result of some other factor.

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