"GULF OF TONKIN"

The most recent crisis in South Vietnam has now quietened. It is most likely that there will be many more crises in this area.

People have been asking why the North Vietnamese gunboats attacked destroyers of the United States 7th Fleet because this seems difficult to understand. It was clear that such an attack could not be thoroughly successful, and it might appear to the casual observer that it was a silly thing for the North Vietnamese to do. I have even seen one commentator suggest that the North Vietnamese were getting jittery, that they were expecting an invasion and that they thought they had better do what they could. Such an analysis really makes nonsense of the facts. If the North Vietnamese were jittery or fearful of what the United States might do, they could at one stroke destroy any threat to themselves by keeping out of the South Vietnamese conflict. Nobody would be interested in what the North Vietnamese did within their own boundaries if they stopped sending troops and equipment into South Vietnam. Since they have shown no signs of this I cannot believe that this abortive attack was undertaken from fear of some invasion.

There is a much more likely explanation, and one that I have not seen published. In the past six months the United States has toughened her policy in South Vietnam and in south-east Asia. This has been done deliberately. The Communists were making advances in Laos and in South Vietnam - they were flagrantly breaking agreements that were meant to ensure the neutrality of those areas. It was clear that a greater involvement by the United States was going to be necessary. For the first time in ten years I believe the United States has contemplated the use of ground forces on the mainland of Asia. For the decade to May, 1964, the United States has had a policy of not having ground forces committed to the mainland and, under these circumstances, of course, Peking and Hanoi could go ahead with their plans for subversion and conquest of south-east Asia.

The United States has done several things to make it well known that her policy has changed, that she has become stronger and tougher. Various operations have been undertaken in and over Laos. The Secretary of State and the President had changed the tone of their statements. It was necessary for the United States to do this because it is no good having a policy based on strength if your opponents do not believe it; if they do not believe that you have a policy of strength they will miscalculate - they will think they can get away with things which you are determined to stop, and nothing would lead more quickly to war.

Some sort of message about this changed United States policy has obviously got through to Peking and Hanoi, but it would be a fairly legitimate question for them to ask themselves - "Has the United States really changed her policy? Is she now really determined to act from strength? If pressed, how will the United States respond? Will she just speak, or will she use force?"

It would be reasonable to expect that Peking and Hanoi would want to test this changed United States policy for themselves. If they did want to test it for themselves the operation in the Gulf of Tonkin starts to make sense.
There are several things about this particular naval battle that are difficult to understand. The torpedo boats missed the destroyers. I am told that with modern torpedoes you either get close enough to hit a destroyer or you let the torpedoes go too far away. I am also told that if the torpedo boats did press their attack close enough to hit a destroyer it is unlikely that they themselves would survive. Since the torpedo boats missed the destroyers and were not themselves all destroyed, it would appear that they did not press their attack too closely. This, too, would be consistent with the suggestion that I have put forward, that this whole operation was mounted by the North Vietnamese and the Chinese quite deliberately to test the strength and the resolution of the United States.

There was an interesting sideline to this particular episode. You may have seen a report in last Wednesday's paper that Dr. Cairns had handed over a cheque for £100 to a certain charity. This was the result of a challenge he issued in the Parliament. The argument arose over a statement reported in the "Age" of August 10th, where Dr. Cairns was reported as having said - "No one can properly claim that America is being attacked or that what is being done is being done in self-defence. This would be different if the North Vietnamese torpedo boats were on the other side of the Pacific."

Dr. Cairns had said in the Parliament that he would give £100 to any charity in this country if it could be proved that he had used those words, or if a newspaper could be produced that had printed them. Of course, the fact that the speech was reported in almost identical terms in three newspapers does not prove that Dr. Cairns said what was reported in the newspapers, but he did pay up the £100 because these words were published.