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Gerald Ford on Vietnam

If the North Vietnamese army makes another attack on South Vietnam on the scale of that of 1972," The Economist of London asked Vice President Ford recently, "what should the United States do?"

It should, Mr. Ford replied, "review the obligations set out in the Vietnam peace accords. I was present when they were signed, there were 11 signatories besides the United States, and the United States should work with the other signatories. It should review the obligations of all and act in concert with all to make the violator stop—yes, with the Russians and the Chinese, they were there, and the French and the British, too. Our obligation is to go back to that document and utilize the good offices of all the signatories."

"What contribution could the U.S. make?" The Economist added.

"That is speculative," said Mr. Ford, "no one in my position should start discussing military supplies and military measures and matters of that sort. The accords are there, and they would give us a legal loophole if we thought it in our best interest."

Now, it is not altogether clear what is the relationship

of Mr. Ford's remarks to administration policy; in particular, the relationship to the warnings by Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger that, in such a contingency, the President would seek authority from Congress to resume bombing North Vietnam. We single out Mr. Ford's answer, however, because it is the definitive statement on a critical issue by a man who may become our next President, in 1976, if not before.

Vice President Ford's statement does not rule out, in Vietnam, a later resort to the threat or use of American power. But it does accept that by the Paris accords, the keeping or making of the peace in Vietnam became—in formal terms, at least—an international responsibility and not a responsibility to be shouldered any longer by the United States acting alone, whether by diplomatic or military means. This always was, to us, the principal virtue of the Paris accords: they signified that the U.S. had completed its own self-appointed mission of preparing South Vietnam to fend for itself. It is gratifying to learn that Mr. Ford seems to agree. In any event, he has had the good sense to take a responsible and discreet position now.