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The Soviet Role in Vietnam Offensive

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THE WHITE HOUSE is reading the enemy offensive in Vietnam as a prelude to a new set of peace offers that will surface in President Nixon's talks at the summit in Moscow next month.

So it makes sense to consider an assessment of the offensive and its diplomatic consequences being made by hard-line Kremlinologists in government.

Both the optimistic White House view and the hard-line assessment rest on the same set of facts. At the center is the massive Soviet assistance that went into the preparation of the latest North Vietnamese offensive.

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PRIOR to the attack there was an extraordinary volume of interchange between Hanoi and Moscow, with Peking not far in the background. On February 11 Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin received the North Vietnamese Ambassador in Moscow and had what Tass called "frank discussions" — the Communist code words for disagreement.

On March 5 a visit to Hanoi by Prince Sihanouk, the deposed ruler of Cambodia who now lives in Peking, concluded with a tough communique that pledged "brotherhood in arms" against the Saigon regime and the American presence in Vietnam.

In the next three weeks before the offensive began, a large number of high-ranking Soviet officials visited Hanoi.

After the offensive got underway, the Russians, in marked contrast to the Chinese who egged the North Vietnamese on, maintained a careful diplomatic silence. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin almost certainly reassured the White House that Moscow wanted the summit meeting tog o ahead.

The hard-line Kremlinologists believe that through the delivery of equipment the Russians came to know that Hanoi was cranking up a major offensive. The initial Soviet reaction was to steer the North Vietnamese toward a more peaceful approach.

The North Vietnamese refused. In the March 5 communique, Hanoi intimated to the Russians that any lack of backing would cause North Vietnam to lean toward Peking.

Faced with that kind of blackmail, the Russians decided that, instead of trying to head off the offensive, they should play it down as a mere bagatelle which need not get in the way of detente with the West.

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HOWEVER once at the summit, the Kremlinologists believe, President Nixon would find himself in an awful fix. There would be serious fighting still in Vietnam, ebbing support at home, and the prospect that, with failure at the summit, the President's diplomacy and hopes for reelection would collapse.

In these circumstances he would be faced with two bad alternatives. On the one hand, Mr. Nixon could yield to a very tough Soviet approach, accepting arms control terms highly favorable to Russia, and at best disguised surrender in Vietnam. On the other hand, he could dig in very hard, bombing North Vietnam flat, breaking off negotiations for detente, and forcing a return to the cold war.