

Most Distinctive Crisis

Russians and Chinese Are Agitated, But Bolstering of Ties Is Going On

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 18—There has been much debate here in recent days about both the value and the wisdom of the resumption of air strikes against Hanoi and Haiphong. The news from the battlefield in Vietnam and from the campuses and election trails in the United States suggests that the sense of crisis will continue for some time. But as Vietnam crises go, this one has a most distinctive and complex configuration.

News

Analysis

The Kremlin and the White House are exchanging sharp notes about the bombings and the damage to Soviet ships, but they are also eagerly proceeding with preparations for a historic meeting and an arms-control agreement in Moscow next month.

The Chinese are denouncing the attacks on what once was their intimate ally, but their table-tennis players were enjoying the sunshine with President Nixon in the White House Rose Garden this noon.

Once again threats of political challenge are being uttered in Congress and organized around the country, but Mr. Nixon is holding back his rhetorical fire, allowing his aides to provide only the most perfunctory explanations of his tactics and diplomacy, and waiting for battlefield developments to redeem a four-year Indochina policy on which he has staked all.

Saigon Expected to Hold

For the moment the Administration is going ahead in the conviction that the South Vietnamese army will hold against the frontal assault from the North and in the hope that the heavy damage inflicted by American air power will gain months if not years before another such challenge can be organized.

The immediate battle aside, Mr. Nixon appears to believe that he is succeeding in the overriding objective of demonstrating to the Russians and to the rest of the world that, despite the weariness of his people, the election-year challenge of the Democrats, the opposition in Congress and the risks to his tenderly planned journey to a Moscow summit, he will not desert the Saigon Government under pressure or alter the chosen pace of his disengagement from the war.

Analyses by American officials and the demeanor of Soviet diplomats here suggest that thus far at least, the President is correct in his estimate of the Soviet reaction to the raids.

He expected protest, but he discounted it as merely the counterpart of his own resentment over the Soviet role in helping equip the North Vietnamese for their push into the South. But he also expected that the Russians would share as well.

his desire to protect the Moscow meeting and the scheduled agreements on arms control, European security and trade.

It is thought here that Mr. Nixon's primary purpose in bombing Hanoi and Haiphong was to serve notice that he would not go to Moscow without somehow balancing the challenge to his Vietnamese ally. White House officials acknowledged that it was too late to force a recall of the North Vietnamese armies and their Soviet missiles and tanks, but the hope is that at least the war's psychological impact on the Moscow meetings has been blunted.

Less Than Complete

The subtle and in many ways highly personal Presidential jousting with the Soviet leaders cannot be publicly explained without risking overt confrontations with the Russians. Therefore, the formal explanations of the bombing given to Congress by Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird have been less than complete.

They have stressed the need to protect American troops, though the forces are not engaged in much combat, because that remains the only constitutional basis for military action in Indochina. To justify a return to the bombing policies abandoned by President Lyndon B. Johnson three and a half years ago, they have stressed Hanoi's alleged violation of a much-disputed 1968 "understanding" on the rules of engagement. And they have stressed the idea of "invasion" from North Vietnam in a new pattern of attack to justify the expectation that the bombings will be more effective militarily than the prolonged raids from 1965 to 1968.

Some of the explanations appear to have had some appeal, even to otherwise forceful critics of the President's war policies. At least the doves in the Senate appear less united and the Congressional challenge to Mr. Nixon's tactics appears less formidable so far.

How the country will respond to the criticism from the President's Democratic challengers remains to be seen. Mr. Nixon had hoped that the strikes into Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971—made at considerable domestic cost—would yield a season of calm with the journeys to Peking and Moscow.

Angered by the Russians because they could not or would not collaborate in that design, he set out to underline his annoyance and to make them equally uncomfortable on the eve of the summit conference. He apparently worked through private channels to make sure they understood, and he hopes that in time the results will lead the country to understand that the Russians would share as well.