

Vietnam crisis is growing; potential for disaster seen

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WASHINGTON—As President Nixon tries to save his Moscow summit from the Vietnam crisis, evidence grows every day that U.S. intelligence grossly underestimated both Hanoi's resources and its goals in the invasion of South Vietnam.

Authorities here now concede those miscalculations may result in enemy successes within the next three weeks that could so weaken Mr. Nixon's bargaining position as to force him to cancel or postpone his visit to Moscow. Such a calamity, coupled with the precarious political balance in West Germany, might in turn lead to a dangerous resumption of a full-scale Cold War and an end to Mr. Nixon's careful movement toward East-West detente.

Hanoi's real objective

When the offensive was launched, American officials predicted limited enemy objectives—the capture of three underpopulated provincial capitals. Now five weeks later, these same officials privately speculate that Hanoi's real objective is no less than the destruction of Saigon's Army (ARVN).

That was precisely the Communist strategy in encircling and destroying the flower of the French Indochina army at the critical base of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Although the French did not know it at the time, the Viet Minh had committed nearly all their frontline troops to Dien Bien Phu. In short, had the French held out and turned the tide of that historic battle, the road to the defeat of the Communists would have been open.

Go-o-broke decision

Today, Hanoi's go-for-broke decision to commit nearly all its major combat units to the invasion of South Vietnam seems cut from the same cloth: destruction of Saigon's best fighting units, notwithstanding the great risk of leaving the homefront unprotected.

The second miscalculation in the hazardous intelligence game was gross underestimation of the types and amounts of military equipment available—in seemingly endless supply—to the North Vietnamese.

Thus, basing forecasts on intelligence estimates from the field, officials here felt the offensive launched across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) March 30 would run out of steam within five or six weeks. The reason: Hanoi could not keep its troops supplied with tanks, long-range artillery and artillery shells.

Tanks and guns destroyed, it was felt, could not be replaced. Accordingly, it would

only be a matter of weeks before the Communists, denied back-up supplies in critical equipment, would fall back.

Underestimating the enemy

As of today, officials here know they underestimated the enemy's ability for re-supply, either from stockpiles far larger than imagined or via truck convoy from the north, less vulnerable to U.S. air interdiction than expected.

Accordingly, the early estimate of only "weeks" before the offensive would run out

Destruction of Saigon's army Hanoi's goal, U.S. officials speculate

of steam has been radically revised. Hanoi is now believed capable of waging full-scale aggression at least into early June, possibly much longer.

A third miscalculation, well known by everyone, was the assumed knowledge that the spring offensive would be launched into the unpopulated Central Highlands. A direct assault across the DMZ was ruled out as an unthinkable breach of the understandings reached in Paris in the last days of the Johnson Administration.

After five nervous weeks, military officials here now worry about the safety of the 69,000 U.S. troops still in South Vietnam. For example, some 2,500 Americans at the airbase in Phu Bai, near Hue, may soon be imperiled by Hanoi's famed Division 324B, presumed to be moving eastward toward Hue.

Airlift for U.S. troops?

An emergency airlift to take the Phu Bai Americans out of the fighting zone is a 50-50 possibility. Such a rescue operation would heighten the crisis at home and possibly reverse the temporary halt of retaliatory bombing against Hanoi and Haiphong. It might also encourage talk of landing ARVN troops, Inchon-style, in North Vietnam.

Although some officials here believe battlefield reports are far too pessimistic, the majority of top-level experts privately concede that a potential for real disaster exists. The potential disaster is diplomatic as well as military, considering Mr. Nixon's strong aversion for undertaking sensitive negotiations with the Russians from a position of grave weakness.

It is no wonder, then, that one shrewd foreign diplomat here describes the month of May 1972 as the most dangerous time in world politics since Hitler's invasion of Poland 33 years ago. That is something U. S. intelligence scarcely imagined five weeks ago.