

Military Planners View Nixon Decision as Sound

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WASHINGTON, May 1—Senior military planners today viewed President Nixon's decision to assault major sanctuaries in Cambodia as strategically important and tactically sound.

Strategically, they tended to agree, the bold and unexpected move may go a long way toward convincing Hanoi that Mr. Nixon meant his frequent warning that he could not sit by and allow the North Vietnamese and Vietcong to prepare for a crushing blow in South Vietnam after hundreds of thousands of American troops had been withdrawn.

"This offensive should give some real credibility to the President's threat to act decisively if our whole effort suddenly appears to be in jeopardy," one general said.

The offensive is viewed as an effort to improve the chances for turning over the war to South Vietnamese forces in the next two years.

Tactically, military planners suggest that if the campaigns under way in the area called the Parrot's Beak and Fishhook result in the destruction of large stores of weapons and ammunition, it could take North Vietnam up to a year to replace its supplies sufficiently to pose a major military threat in the southern half of South Vietnam.

Political Risk Is Seen

But high Pentagon officers also saw a political risk for Mr. Nixon, and one commented:

"We're supposed to base our advice on purely military considerations. But anyone who has followed the course of this war knows how vital the attitude in the Congress and among the electorate is to the basic character of our strategy. If the casualty rate suddenly shoots up, political dissent could rise meteorically."

For at least three years American commanders have been urging attacks on the enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. They argued that the enemy should not be allowed to strike and then flee to a safe area whenever casualties became high and that the massive supplies in these areas were what allowed the enemy to fight on indefinitely.

There is a general feeling that North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops have gone down both in strength and in quality since the Tet offensive in February of 1968. But officers and officials generally agree that it was not because

of this weakness that a decision was made to extend the fight to the base areas.

"It's ironic," said one Army general. "If after the fall of Sihanouk six weeks ago the enemy had merely turned around in their foxholes along the Cambodian border to protect their rear, chances are we wouldn't have done a thing."

Enemy Reaction Weighed

In fact, the initial Washington analysis was that the enemy would slightly expand base areas to protect against the possibility of harassing attacks from troops on Cambodia's Premier, Gen. Lon Nol, who led the coup that ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk as Chief of State March 18.

The prince's proclaimed policy was one of neutrality, but the 30,000-man Cambodian army did little to prevent the North Vietnamese and Vietcong from using Cambodian territory.

The new Government, too, proclaimed neutrality. But it called on the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to leave and asked for arms aid from abroad.

As enemy units started cutting roads from the port of Sihanoukville to Pnompenh and appeared to be attempting to surround the capital, Washington's assessment changed. There was considerable apprehension that the enemy might try to take over Cambodia to turn the country into a massive supply base and staging area.

"Had that been permitted, we would have been outflanked and our strategy of Vietnamization would have had very little chance," one planner declared.

Called Headquarters Area

According to intelligence reports here, the fishhook area contains the main headquarters for all enemy military operations in South Vietnam. Sources say a series of hills on both sides of Highway 4 have been honeycombed with caves and tunnels containing communications equipment, war rooms, hospitals and copious files.

"It's dug in too deeply to bomb out, even with B-52's," according to one officer. "We have to go in on the ground."

An effort will be made to remove or destroy all war material and communications equipment, to secure papers on future plans and lists of units and secret operatives, and to capture some members of the headquarters staff.

Officers say there are alternate command posts, much less elaborate, just across the border in South Vietnam, but most of these are being watched. Most of the headquarters staff may be able to leave the attack area, officers concede, although helicopter units were chosen for the operation to try to cut off escape routes.

Efforts will be made to blow up as many command facilities as possible. Those that cannot be destroyed will probably be seeded with persistent tear-gas crystals to make them difficult to re-occupy.