

Planners See Big Risks for '72 in Vietnam

By WILLIAM BEECHER

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Senior military planners generally believe that President Nixon's announcement of substantial new troop reductions makes it clear that 1972 will be the riskiest year in Vietnam since disengagement started two years ago.

The dwindling number of American servicemen in the war zone will be increasingly jeopardized, they say, and Saigon's ability to handle the major share of its own defense will be vested for the first time since the American buildup started in mid-1965.

As United States troop levels fall precipitously from about 300,000 today to what key planners say will probably be about 50,000 to 60,000 next summer, the South Vietnamese will be called upon increasingly to protect the remaining American troops and bases against attack.

Temptation for Hanoi

And as the few remaining American combat divisions are withdrawn the temptation may mount in Hanoi to try a major offensive next year aimed at demoralizing and possibly toppling the Saigon Government and undermining the Nixon Administration during a Presidential campaign.

When the withdrawals began, President Nixon recognized these dangers and repeatedly warned the north not to take

advantage of the American pullout.

The controversial offensives into Cambodia and Laos and the three massive bombing strikes on North Vietnam starting last May, the planners concede, were meant to achieve more than the disruption of North Vietnam's supply system and a delay in any large enemy operations. The offensives, they say, were also aimed at convincing Hanoi that Mr. Nixon was willing to order harsh military measures — even though unpopular at home — to achieve his limited goals in Vietnam.

"Next year, 1972, should provide the acid test for all that we have tried to accomplish over the last two years," one official said. "Some people were afraid President Nixon didn't really intend to get out of Vietnam, but was shooting for some kind of military victory. Now, after tonight's speech, they must realize he means it. We're getting out."

"But will Hanoi pull out all the stops to try to make it appear we're being driven into the sea? And if it does, will Saigon be strong enough, with our air support, to blunt any offensive?" he asked.

Opinions vary widely on both questions.

Troops Stay in North

Some high officers are convinced that Hanoi cannot move sufficient heavy supplies into South Vietnam to mount and sustain a country-wide offensive next year. An exception, many say, may be in the five

northern provinces, where Hanoi's supply lines are shortest and reinforcements nearest.

A few analysts, however, insist that if Hanoi decides that the psychological impact of an all-out offensive is of overriding importance, it might be willing to take awesome casualties, sending poorly supplied troops against South Vietnamese positions throughout the country.

Most planners express confidence that the South Vietnamese could turn back such attacks, but this opinion was far from unanimous. In any case, it was recently decided not to return to the Saigon area many of the airborne and Marine units that participated in the Laos campaign but to keep them in the northern provinces.

And some officials are hopeful that the implicit threat of heavy retaliatory bombing in North Vietnam will deter Hanoi from a large-scale thrust into the south.

Many planners say that Hanoi is more likely to concentrate on relatively small-scale terrorist and rocket attacks on military installations, particularly American bases, to demonstrate that it can maintain pressure on the United States to get all the way out of Vietnam.

No Decision Taken

In order not to expose American units, there are plans to draw together the remaining United States air, artillery and supply forces into a handful of secure areas. These would be mainly along the coast in places

like Danang, Camranh Bay and Tansonnhut air base in Saigon.

Planners hope that South Vietnamese units will be willing to perform enough of the tiresome and often dangerous night patrols around these bases to prevent enemy sniper and rocket units from moving in close and inflicting heavy casualties on American troops. But they are not sure.

Officials concede that no firm decision has yet been made on the precise size, composition or length of stay of the so-called American "residual force" that will remain in Vietnam to help train and support Vietnamese forces.

Will this force include tactical air squadrons, artillery battalions and helicopter companies in addition to trainers and advisers? Will it stay for a limited time, or until a deal has been made on return of American prisoners of war, or indefinitely?

One defense official commented: "If by next summer the enemy is not able to pull off anything dramatic, and the South Vietnamese comport themselves well both in battle and in their presidential elections, if, in short, the Saigon regime looks viable, then congress might very well support some sort of residual force for an indefinite period."

"But if we find in 1972 that despite all we've done, South Vietnam is not going to be able to hack it, than I don't think we'd want to keep a bunch of American troops sitting around in Vietnam like sitting ducks."