NYTimes JAN 27 1975

THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, JANUARY 27, 1975

U.S. and Indochina: A Crossroad

By JAMES M. MARKHAM
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 26—On the second anniversary of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, the United States appears to be nearing a crossroads in its Indochina policy.

News Analysis

In both South Vietnam and Cambodia, Communist-led forces are pressing military advantages. In both countries there is a chance for deepening American involvement, or continued disengagement and a search for political solutions to war.

But, as options force themselves on American policymakers, Congressional restrictions imposed in Washington—on American personnel committed, on money spent, on military initiatives—have seriously limited room for maneuver by the executive branch.

A little more than two years ago, President Richard M. Nixon personally ordered one of the heaviest bombing campaigns in history, over North Vietnam, to reassure President Nguyen Van Thieu of continued support and to obtain alterations in the draft of the Paris peace agreements that, in retrospect, were insignificant.

Like Gunless Diplomacy

Earlier this month, for the first time since their 1972 spring offensive, the North Vietnamese seized a province capital that had been controlled by the Saigon Government.

The State Department fired off an angry protest; President Ford and Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger hypothetically discussed the idea of renewed American bombing; according to one account, Secretary of State Kissinger privately expressed regret that an American aircraft carrier had not steamed into Vietnamese waters, as had been erroneously reported by a news agency. Mr. Kissinger later denied having said this.

To many Vietnamese, the Americans seem reduced to a form of gunboat diplomacy without guns.

"The policy of Vietnamization and Khmerization of the war requires abundant assistance in the level of the years preceding the Paris agreements—and this is a thing that the U. S. Congress cannot accept," commented the Saigon opposition newspaper Dien Tin. "As assistance is reduced, this policy collapses and is threatened with total bankruptcy."

Now the Ford Administration is preparing a request for a $300-million supplementary military appropriation for the Saigon Government. As Mr. Ford put it, the extra money is important for the South Vietnamese Army's morale as well as its fighting capability.

Some Americans here carry the argument farther—that if the bill does not pass, Hanoi will assume that Washington can no longer significantly buttress South Vietnam—and will send its main-force divisions into large-scale action.

But in Washington, liberal and not-so-liberal members of Congress fear that the $300-million, or some share of it, will only deepen American involvement in Vietnam and prolong the war. Some question the need for the money.

"It is very easy to make fun of the Americans," said a high-ranking Western diplomat here, "because their policy in Vietnam consists in not having one.

"The United States policy since the Paris accords is extraordinary. To pretend that there is peace, and to pretend that this situation could last."

More Involvement or More Aid Are Among Choices

An American diplomat, asked to define his Government's policy since the Paris accords, smiled and said, "Aid and prayer."

In the view of senior diplomats the United States would, broadly speaking, appear to have three options in South Vietnam and, to a certain extent, Cambodia.

The first would be to step up sharply the level of military and economic assistance to the Saigon and Phnom Penh governments. In Cambodia's case, this might mean a huge airlift from Thailand, orchestrated by the Air Force. In the case of South Vietnam, where the Government's position is still fairly firm, it would mean accelerated deliveries of munitions and weapons.

The end result would be to enhance military capacities of the two governments and, possibly more important, reassure them of American support. Such a policy would also reverse a slow trend to disengagement.

The second option, as sketched by knowledgeable diplomats, would be to push the Saigon and Phnom Penh authoriites firmly in the direction of negotiations to end the wars and seek solutions on the model of Laos, where a coalition government holds power.

In Phnom Penh, American officials say that the recent United Nations vote sparing the Lon Nol Government's seat has generated momentum for negotiations. But there is as yet no sign that the Americans have made overtures to the leadership of the Cambodian insurgents.

In Vietnam, the Communists continually clamor for the "strict" implementation of the Paris agreements, which, in contrast to Cambodia, at least provide a framework for political talks. There is no assurance that in a political "solution," if one could be reached, the fragmented "nationalists" might not eventually crumble before the disciplined Communists.

Kissinger's Reluctance

Somewhat paradoxically, the negotiation option would inevitably entail renewed American involvement, to twist arms and hammer out details. Men who claim to understand Mr. Kissinger's thinking on Indochina say that it is this prospect, as much as anything else, that deters him from pushing for negotiations.

A cornerstone of America's post-Paris Vietnam policy—to the extent that there is one—has been to turn decision-making and diplomatic initiative gradually over to the South Vietnamese. In Cambodia, however, the Americans sometimes seem to be quarterbacking the war.

Many diplomats here believe that the Ford Administration will simply pursue its third "option"—more of the same. Aid will slowly decline, the killing will continue and the United States will not intervene, politically or militarily.