

Experts Doubt Saigon Can Go Over to the Offensive

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Stubborn and successful fighting, on a limited front, by South Vietnamese Government troops should not be taken as an indication that Saigon is in a position to reverse the present military situation, United States military sources warned today.

Military

Analysis

North Vietnamese forces on the Saigon front retain the tactical initiative and have demonstrated an ability to deploy stronger concentrations of artillery, armor and infantry at key points than the defenders can muster, the sources said.

Neither current situation reports nor logistical and technological resources indicate that South Vietnam's forces are capable of turning the war around, as they did in 1972 at An Loc, Hue and Binh Dinh during a major North Vietnamese offensive.

Tactical Flexibility

South Vietnam's forces, particularly the 18th Infantry Division and an airborne brigade, have shown aggressiveness and tactical flexibility in the fighting around Xuan Loc. Analysts noted that in the Xuan Loc battle the defenders had used helicopters to conduct a mobile defense and fighter-bomber strikes to balance the invaders' superiority in artillery.

The gains on this limited, if important, front should be seen, however, in the perspective of South Vietnam's overall military power today and in 1972, the sources said.

Three years ago, they emphasized, the South Vietnamese forces could still call on a wide range of United States

support, no longer available. "If Thieu had as pure a democracy as Norway and troops as highly motivated as the Israelis," one source said, "he still wouldn't be able to do much more than hold selected points because of the supply and technological weaknesses of his forces."

In 1972, the process of "Vietnamization"—turning the defense of the country over to the South Vietnamese—was incomplete.

The United States still maintained an extensive logistics and communications network built up during the preceding seven years, although there had already been some reduction in forces and functions.

American liaison and advisory missions were working with the South Vietnamese combat units in 1972, coordinating firepower and air strikes. Reinforcements could be moved not only by helicopter but also by the Air Force's C-130 transports still in the country. Navy gunfire and Marine helicopter gunships were available to support South Vietnam's marines in their fighting north of Hue.

U. S. Bombers a Factor

Finally, South Vietnamese deficiencies in number and weight of field guns could be compensated for by the United States Air Force's fleet of B-52's.

There were plenty of shells for what guns the South Vietnamese had deployed in that campaign, the sources said, enabling gunners to expend ammunition at the high rate required by the American doctrine they had been taught. Tanks and guns lost in the first weeks of the offensive

of 1972 were promptly replaced.

Even the present contraction of the defenders' front has not balanced the inferiority in military technology and materiel.

Should the North Vietnamese shift the weight of their attack on Saigon from Xuan Loc to a new point, as many analysts believe they will, the South Vietnamese will not be able to shift forces rapidly enough to thwart a new drive before it is well under way.

One source noted that 48 helicopters had been employed to lift airborne units to a threatened position south of Route 1 running from Xuan Loc to Bien Hoa. But three times that number would be needed, he said, to transfer adequate reserves from Xuan Loc to other points on the defensive perimeter.

South's Air Force Active

Saigon's air force has been more active in the last 72 hours than at any time during the campaign, attacking Communist troops and tanks around Xuan Loc and bombing a truck convoy moving toward the battle.

But earlier aircraft losses in the northern provinces and the Central Highlands as well as slow and inefficient maintenance limit what the air force can do. With its present numbers, one source said, it would be incapable of striking effectively on more than one front at a time.

There are no reports, he added, that South Vietnamese losses in aircraft are being made up by shipments from the United States, as they were three years ago.

A rebuilding by the United

States of the logistical support and the military infrastructure of 1972 would take many months, even if Congress sanctioned it. Consequently, Saigon's problem is to fight on an effective defensive campaign without the mobility and supplies of the past.

The consensus among military sources is that South Vietnam's immediate needs are the "meat and potatoes" of defensive war—barbed wire by the mile, land mines by the thousands, tons and tons of ammunition for rifles, machine guns and field guns as well as anti-personnel bombs and air-to-surface missiles.

The South Vietnamese, the sources maintained, cannot assume an offensive defense, employing sharp counterstrokes to keep the invaders off balance, because it lacks the technology and the advanced weapons necessary for such tactics.

From now on the defenders must dig in and protect the main routes into the capital, particularly the Saigon River corridor, the sources said. The South has neither the equipment nor the manpower for complicated maneuvers.

Should Congress approve President Ford's request for \$722 million in military aid, the sources emphasized, it would be weeks, perhaps months before the aid could have a tangible effect on the battlefield.

During that period, they expect the North Vietnamese to retain the tactical initiative, to continue to move more forces into the Saigon area and to attack "when they please and where they please" with solid hopes for success.