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'Vietnamizing' in Cambodia...

Reports from Saigon indicate that substantial numbers of South Vietnamese troops have been fighting alongside Cambodian forces against North Vietnamese and Vietcong units in Cambodia.

Although there is no evidence that American troops are directly involved, the participation of American-trained, equipped and advised South Vietnamese troops in the Cambodian conflict raises serious questions about Washington's determination to stay clear of this new extension of the Southeast Asian war especially since it is now admitted that American officers have crossed the border "to exchange pleasantries."

The Saigon Government and some American military men in Vietnam have long wanted to attack the Communist sanctuaries across the border—which is perfectly understandable from an immediate military viewpoint but highly dangerous in the political context. If Americans or South Vietnamese are permitted to pursue this objective, they could help precipitate and become entangled in a wider struggle for all of Cambodia. The South Vietnamese are particularly dubious partners in such a risky venture, not only because of Saigon's military unreliability but because Vietnamese of any stripe are anathema to most Cambodians.

If President Nixon means what he has repeatedly promised about withdrawing from Southeast Asia, he will keep American military planners and the troops of Saigon out of Cambodia. Vietnamization cannot possibly proceed in Vietnam if President Thieu is permitted to Vietnamize the Cambodian conflict.

...and 'Protective Reaction'

While South Vietnamese troops have been extending their operations into Cambodia in contravention of declared American policy, a new incident has raised similar questions about Washington's control over allied military activities elsewhere in Southeast Asia. That is a recent air action over North Vietnam in which an American fighter-interceptor, escorting an unarmed reconnaissance plane, shot down a North Vietnamese MIG-21.

A United States military spokesman in Saigon described the incident as a "protective reaction," based on "an inherent right of self-defense." To claim "self-defense" in this situation is straining credulity since the action took place deep inside North Vietnamese territory seventeen months after the United States called a halt to offensive air operations against that country.

Few would question the desirability of some kind of American aerial reconnaissance over North Vietnam as long as United States troops are fighting North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. But if there is an earnest desire in Washington to de-escalate the war and limit its scope, every effort should be made to conduct reconnaissance missions in the least provocative manner possible.

In view of the remarkable development of spy satellites—one of which has been reported in stationary orbit over Southeast Asia—there is some reason to question the need for the daily reconnaissance flights that have been flown since the November 1968 bombing halt. But even if these flights are militarily necessary, armed escorts that penetrate North Vietnamese territory ought to be held on a tight rein consistent with Washington's avowed policy of de-escalation. The ambiguous doctrine of "protective reaction," already being asserted as a justification for forays by American troops operating along the Cambodian border, leaves dangerous latitude for intemperate local initiatives that could provoke a new escalation of the conflict.