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President's Gamble: Widen War to End It

By MAX FRANKEL

WASHINGTON, April 29—As so often before in the Indochina war, an American President has chosen to expand the conflict in the hope of ending it more quickly.

That is President Nixon's gamble against the certainty of a domestic outcry and the possibility of a counterthrust by Hanoi or even Peking. He is counting on a quick thrust to secure Allied advantages in both South Vietnam and Cambodia before the heavy rains halt all major military operations in late May. And he hopes thereby to achieve a position of strength for the bargaining that he still thinks may develop this summer and fall.

News
Analysis

Argument Brushed Aside

Thus Mr. Nixon and his advisers are brushing aside the argument that they are risking an even deeper and longer involvement in the war. On the contrary, they contend, the boys will come home sooner this way. The conditions are al-

together different, they argue, from those on successive occasions when President Kennedy and Johnson tried to turn the tide by constantly expanding the size and range of American combat operations.

But, like their predecessors, Mr. Nixon and his advisers are stepping up the action with the acknowledged aim of achieving what is privately being called a "turning point."

As finally presented to President Nixon, the issue was whether to let the Communists gain the upper hand in Cambodia and turn it into a full-fledged base of operations as the United States was drawing down its forces in South Vietnam, or whether to take advantage of the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk by depriving North Vietnam of its Cambodian supply routes and base camps.

Those base camps, from which Hanoi's troops have long menaced the southern part of South Vietnam, were tolerated here so long as Washington had a strong incentive to con-

tain the areas of conflict. Holding South Vietnam had seemed difficult enough.

But now, with North Vietnam's fortunes judged to be declining in South Vietnam, the problem was how to prevent Hanoi from massing in the rest of Indochina for the final assault on South Vietnam after most Americans had left.

Finds Risks Minimal

The Administration is banking on the judgment that the overextended North Vietnamese army is neither willing nor able to overrun all of Laos and Cambodia in quick response to the new American challenge. It seems to have given little weight to the possibility that Communist China would rush to the aid of Hanoi at this stage of the war. All told, it finds the short-run risks to be minimal and the potential gain considerable.

The longer-term calculations here resolved essentially around the question of whether a major new effort in Cambodia was more likely to stimulate than to discourage Hanoi's

interest in negotiation. The North Vietnamese are thought to be in such a weak position in South Vietnam that they may prefer to bargain about all of Indochina rather than about the future government in Saigon.

Malik Hint Recalled

The recent hint at the United Nations by Yakov A. Malik that Moscow was interested in a new Geneva conference on Indochina is still taken here as a clue that Hanoi is also toying with the idea. The Soviet retraction of that overture is not taken as final and is thought by some to reflect a behind-the-scenes argument between the Russians and the Chinese.

There are some signs that at least one other major, though unacknowledged, consideration weighed on the president as he made the decision to expand the war. He and his advisers are plainly disturbed by the thought that Moscow now sees the United States as exhausted and weak, retreating on all fronts, crippled by domestic

More Quickly

dissension and rebellion in Congress.

In discussing the Soviet decision to take over Egypt's air defenses, for instance, officials here have wondered whether the United States is now reckoned to be a "paper tiger" by a hard-line faction that appears to be rising to power in Moscow.

All Presidents in the nuclear age have worried about the effect of major decisions on the respect they would earn or lose in the Kremlin. Given the chance to act decisively in defense of American military interests, even against great opposition in Congress, Mr. Nixon is thought to have found these considerations a further inducement to show himself as tough.

As so often before, therefore, the stakes at decision time in Southeast Asia have come to seem vastly greater than the risks. The opposition this time is greater, too, but Mr. Nixon is counting once again on his ability to explain it his own way on television and to carry the country along.