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## And Now Laos

A drive of South Vietnamese troops into the southern panhandle of Laos would, if it should occur, have profound implications for the future of the Southeast Asian conflict, none of them encouraging for the prospect of American disengagement from the area.

If it were to be just a limited thrust, like last spring's Cambodian "incursion," it would at best buy a little more time for the hard-pressed forces of Cambodia and for the still uncertain army of South Vietnam. However, such an extension of the fighting into a new arena would represent an admission of the failure of earlier sorties into Cambodia and of massive American air interdiction throughout Indochina to achieve decisive results. Once the South Vietnamese withdrew, no matter how successful their mission, it would only be a matter of time before they faced new challenges along a lengthy, porous front—challenges they will have to meet with steadily decreasing American support if Administration promises about Vietnamization are to be believed.

But Washington and Saigon may have higher stakes in mind. This still unconfirmed allied action could be the beginning of a long-term effort to choke off Communist supply routes to the south by throwing a defensive line across the narrow neck of the Laotian panhandle between South Vietnam and Thailand. Such an attempt to Koreanize all of Southeast Asia, dividing not just Vietnam but the whole area between a Communist north and a non-Communist south, could provoke strong reaction from North Vietnam's major Communist allies. It could invite flanking moves against Thailand which has defense commitments from the United States that have never been satisfactorily spelled out.

Whatever else it does, Vietnamizing Cambodia and Laos will not speed the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. It can only raise the risk of a wider war and deeper American entanglement in an endless conflict throughout Southeast Asia.

The best hope for restoring the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos—which has been outrageously violated by both sides of the Vietnam conflict—lies in moving more positively than the Nixon Administration has yet done toward a political solution in South Vietnam. In this connection, reports that the United States Mission in Saigon is actively supporting efforts of President Thieu to predetermine the results of the coming South Vietnamese national election are hardly encouraging.