



Are Things Going Almost Too Well?

— Joseph Alsop

THE PREVAILING official view is that Chou En-lai's visit to Hanoi did not portend Chinese military action in Southeast Asia. But if the Chinese mean business, there are only two courses they can take. They can make a demonstration in northern Laos — which would be just a demonstration. Or they can help out the hard-pressed North Vietnamese inside North Vietnam.

There is need for help in North Vietnam, providing the members of the Hanoi politburo are willing to have Chinese troops in their midst once again.

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IN BRIEF, all the North Vietnamese divisions immediately available, have been hurled into Laos to fight the big battle for the Laos trails. Between the division-equivalent guarding the DMZ, and the actual Red River delta — the area around Hanoi and Haiphong — there is therefore a military vacuum.

Hence it may be that the three North Vietnamese divisions remaining in the Hanoi-Haiphong area will be moved south, to fill the military vacuum in these jaybird-naked coastal provinces. Chinese units from Yunnan Province could then move in behind, to form a garrison in the crucial region of the Red River delta.

Because of the military vacuum, the talk in Saigon about "invading" the north must have made the Hanoi leaders exceedingly nervous. The kind of arrangement above-described, to safeguard "the integrity of North Vietnam," might therefore be considered to make sense. But it would not make a great deal of difference outside North Vietnam.

It would also be the most single possible proof of the potentially fatal meaning of the battle for the Laos trails, at least with respect to Hanoi's wider aspirations in Southeast Asia. That is also proved by the simple fact that Hanoi has already engaged close to half of the North Vietnamese divisions that always used to be kept on homeguard-duty.

The North Vietnamese now have five divisions in action in Laos. The South Vietnamese, meanwhile are as yet employing in Laos rather less than three divisions.

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EVERY FACTOR, such as the huge logistical system already in place, in truth favors the North Vietnamese — except one. The southern troops have the vital advantage of the superior mobility and firepower, conferred by airplanes and helicopters.

But everyone seems to forget that ARVN has always had this vital advantage, from 1965 onwards. It is a dramatic turn about, in fact, that three ARVN divisions can confront five divisions-plus of the enemy, in the enemy's own backyard.

About the eventual result, it is early, as yet, to say very much, but if the thing goes well, the Hanoi war planners are going to have to take the hardest kind of new look at the real meaning of Vietnamization.

"If the thing goes well" — that is the key phrase. In the Pentagon at the moment, they are somewhat superstitiously saying that it is going almost too well.