

Any Enemy Offensive Expected to Be Long

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 10—Senior Pentagon officials say that if North Vietnamese forces open a major offensive in the South, as has been widely predicted in Washington and to a lesser extent in Saigon, they expect it to last as long as three months.

The officials tended to dismiss reports from the field that the offensive might already have begun as premature. "The major units that we are watching are not yet moving into final attack positions," one of the officials explained.

That thought was echoed by Henry A. Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security affairs, who said of the enemy at a news briefing yesterday: "That offensive could start at any time. We are not saying it will start. We are saying he is putting himself into a position in which he has the capability to start and we expect it may well start."

In a series of recent interviews, ranking Defense Department military and civilian planners said they believed that Hanoi, in preparing to shift its strategy to an all-out showdown in the South, appeared to have put political considerations ahead of military ones.

Better Off to Delay

Their comments were made against a backdrop of mixed reports from Indochina, some of which contended that Washington had been overestimating the likelihood of a major offensive.

The Pentagon analysis holds that from a purely military point of view Hanoi would indeed be better off to delay major combat operations for a year. But the officials here believe that the North Vietnamese see political advantages in a widespread military showdown that would extend beyond merely embarrassing President Nixon at the time of his visit to China, beginning Feb. 21.

One general said: "Preparations for the spring offensive began before the President's announcement of his Peking trip, and the offensive is expected to be pressed well after he returns."

The officials concede that there are political motivations behind Washington's statements on the possibility of an offensive.

Pressure on the U.S.

The American public was so surprised by the extent and ferocity of the so-called Tet offensive four years ago, they noted, that the reaction played an important role in turning around United States policy, leading to the ending of the

daily bombing of the North and of the troop build-up. This time, they said, Washington is taking no chance that even a lesser offensive will surprise anyone.

Hanoi's larger political objectives in an offensive, according to the officials, include putting pressure on the United States to take the following steps:

¶Cancel plans to keep a residual force of roughly 25,000 to 35,000 men in South Vietnam beyond 1972.

¶Withdraw Air Force B-52 bombers and Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers from Southeast Asia.

¶End or sharply curtail military aid to South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Troop Shifts Described

The intelligence data on which the Pentagon officials base their projections of North Vietnamese intentions over the next few months report the recent movement of three divisions—the 320th, the 324-B and the 304th—into positions along the Laotian-South Vietnamese border; a fourth, the 308th, is reported poised just above the northwestern end of the demilitarized zone.

About 50,000 replacement troops are said to be strung out along the infiltration "pipeline" from North Vietnam through Laos. Since the trip normally takes about three months, the replacements should enter South Vietnam in February, March and April, the intelligence reports say.

The level of infiltration, up more than 10 per cent over last year, appears channeled toward units in the northern half of South Vietnam rather than those in Cambodia and the southern half, as were most replacements last year, intelligence analysts say. They discern plans for major combat in the two northern military regions of the South.

Because they believe the enemy's supplies are deficient, they expect the offensive to be focused close to sources of supply. Operations in the southern half of the country are expected to be limited to rocket and terror attacks.

'Probably Into May'

The continued movement into the northern end of the pipeline, the analysts add, leads to the conclusion that operations will not end after a week or two of heavy fighting. "We look for repeated assaults throughout the dry season, probably into May," a general said.

The intelligence reports said that the flow of trucks along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos is at record levels, with each truck carrying about four tons of supplies. In two nights last

week, it was said, American gunships damaged about 200 trucks a night.

"This won't stop the flow," an analyst said. "They merely feed more trucks into the system. But it reduces and slows the delivery effort, without doubt."

The American planners believe that United States and South Vietnamese fighter-bombers could play a decisive role in efforts to meet the expected assaults. Whether this would be coupled with limited-duration heavy strikes against supply depots in North Vietnam, as hinted in recent Presidential speeches, has not been decided, the officials said.

"But if North Vietnam moves the 308th Division through the DMZ into South Vietnam," a ranking official said, "I would expect a decision to bomb supporting supply targets as far up the peninsula of North Vietnam as is necessary to stop the flow. That, at least, is what we'd recommend to the President."

The Political Advantages

The analysts say that, from Hanoi's perspective, an effective campaign this spring and summer might offer a real prospect of eliminating the last vestiges of American force and making moot the question of the United States presence as a negotiating issue.

The officials believe the North Vietnamese have concluded that the political advantages of such a result would outweigh whatever military risks might be entailed. They analyze North Vietnamese thinking in this way:

Besides embarrassing President Nixon during his visit to Peking starting Feb. 21, bloody combat after a hiatus of nearly four years should rekindle the Vietnam issue during the Presidential campaign. Widely publicized defeats of South Vietnamese troops, furthermore, might convince the American public that Mr. Nixon's policy of Vietnamization—turning the war over to Saigon in the expectation it could protect itself—was a failure.

North Vietnam could well view that as enhancing the prospects of the Democratic candidates for the Presidency, most of whom, according to the Pentagon theory, might be expected to pledge a quick and total withdrawal of American forces. Alternatively, if President Nixon considered his reelection endangered, he might decide to shift his strategy to take the issue away from his Democratic rival.

The prospect of a series of enemy attacks this spring, particularly in the Central Highlands and the northern provinces of South Vietnam, has been suggested in recent weeks

by the President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, Mr. Kissinger and various generals and civilian advisers.

More recently some local officers in the field, Vietnamese and American, have said they believed the speculation had been overstated.

Brig. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commander of South Vietnam's First Division, at Hue, voiced doubt that the North Vietnamese in his sector would be adequately supplied to begin a major offensive for at least a couple of months. The commander of the nearby Third Division, Brig. Gen. Vu Van Giai, voiced similar doubts.

Officials in Washington say that even though enemy forces do not have what a cautious planner would regard as requisite supplies for a major assault, they may still be ordered to proceed, depending more than usual on infiltration for enough ammunition and replacements to continue the attack.