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Vietnam Test NYTimes

Two weeks after President Nixon suspended the Paris peace talks, Communist forces in Indochina have hurled a severe challenge against Mr. Nixon's alternate strategy for disengagement through "Vietnamization."

The initial results of a Communist offensive that is likely to become more intensive and widespread do not support the confidence that the President and other Administration officials have expressed in the ability of the South Vietnamese to fight their own battles. Deprived by bad weather—and not by Administration restraint—of American air support, South Vietnamese troops have retreated with haste from bases along their northern frontier that were long doggedly defended by American forces.

Washington betrayed its concern by convening a special foreign policy panel yesterday and by dispatching two additional aircraft carriers to join two carriers already on station off the Vietnamese coast. Charges that the North Vietnamese have violated a 1968 agreement which led to the suspension of American air attacks against the North—an unwritten understanding that the United States itself has repeatedly abused—appear to be laying the groundwork for punitive air strikes.

The resumption of large-scale aerial warfare against North Vietnam would not stabilize the perilous situation on the ground in the South. Such use of American power could generate fresh international sympathy and support for Hanoi, particularly in Moscow and Peking, further undercutting any lingering prospects for a negotiated settlement.

Massive air attacks in the ground combat areas, weather permitting, might still succeed in stemming the current Communist drive. This would not end the Communist threat or prove the "success" of Vietnamization. It would merely demonstrate the continuing deep United States involvement in a war that has not "wound down," against an enemy that will not "fade away."