

Bombing Decision Is Near; U.S. Aides Weigh Targets

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WASHINGTON, April 5 — High officials said the Nixon Administration was weighing three potential target areas in North Vietnam today as a decision neared on whether to expand the air war there.

A decision by President Nixon is likely this week, they said. If the decision is to extend the bombing, they added, the principal remaining questions were how far north the bombers might range and for how long.

For the first time since the halt in daily air strikes late in 1968, these officials said, the United States is seriously weighing a resumption of daily bombing mission against ports of North Vietnam, for as long as the current enemy offensive continues in the south.

High officials of the Defense and State Departments said the Washington Special Action

Group, which met for the third day today at the White House under the chairmanship of Henry A. Kissinger, is focusing on three geographic areas of North Vietnam into which expanded air strikes might be authorized by President Nixon.

According to these sources, these choices are under study:

¶ An area extending "several miles" north of the demilitarized zone along the border between North and South Vietnam, in which the principal targets would be military supply concentrations, tanks and cargo trucks headed south, and long-range artillery and surface-to-air missiles firing into the South.

¶ An area extending about 140 miles north of the border, to the 19th Parallel, including the key trans-shipment points of Donghoi and Vinh.

¶ An area extending to the

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20th Parallel, some 200 miles north, including the major supply center of Thanhhoa.

At a news conference at the Pentagon today, Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, broadly hinted that at least the first of these areas might soon be attacked.

He pointedly and repeatedly described the area several miles above the buffer zone as constituting the "immediate battle area," as much as the coastal region 10 miles south of the zone, where fighting has been going on.

Mr. Friedheim said that in the first five days of the North Vietnamese offensives, about 100 surface-to-air missiles were fired from the DMZ and north of it against American and South Vietnamese planes in the south.

He also characterized this area as "sort of a sanctuary" being used to resupply the 50 to 100 tanks—models PT-76, T-34 and T-54 (very light, medium and heavy)—operating in the northern reaches of south Vietnam.

Other Government sources said that a number of additional planes and warships had been ordered to the combat zone to reinforce further United States firepower.

They said these include 18 F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers, 18 B-52 bombers, the cruiser Oklahoma City and additional destroyers.

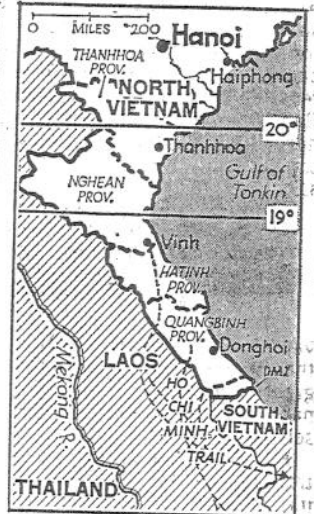
These are in addition to a fourth aircraft carrier, 34 B-52 bombers and 18 F-4's sent as reinforcements in February.

Would Near 1968 Figure

When these B-52's arrive at bases in Guam and Thailand, officials said, the total B-52 force will nearly match the 102 operating there at the peak of the war in 1968.

The State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, declared today, "I'm not in a position today to talk of decisions which have or might be taken, or decisions which have not been taken."

He expressed growing concern about the civilians who are fleeing the fighting in Quangtri Province, estimating that their number might reach 40,000 or more.



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U.S. air raids reportedly being considered would be limited to just north of DMZ, or extended 140 or 200 miles to the north.

"Either way, Hanoi has succeeded in reintroducing the Vietnam war as a major issue in the Presidential campaign," one Pentagon official said.

Military planners said that bombing conceivably could be more effective than before in the present situation, in which North Vietnam is depending for the first time in the war on large numbers of tanks and artillery with a consequently great need for substantial resupply.

Some intelligence analysts have estimated that the North Vietnamese have been able to move sufficient ammunition, weapons and fuel into forward areas so only 7 to 10 days of sustained heavy combat.

Hanoi's Intent Weighed

Continued resupply across the border, they suggest, is critically important if the offensive is to continue much longer.

But if Hanoi intends to taper off in the north and shift its offensive thrusts to the Central Highlands and to Tay Ninh Province west of Saigon, bombing in North Vietnam might become relatively less important than air strikes along the Ho Chi Minh supply in Laos.

State Department sources say that in recent days the South Vietnamese have driven off about five North Vietnamese trawlers loaded with ammunition and other supplies, that attempted to slip into inlets along the western coast of the southern Camau Peninsula. The cargoes were believed destined for the three enemy divisions reported to be in Cambodia, west of Tay Ninh.

Pentagon sources concede there are military risks in moving quickly into bombing strikes in the North.

"If our planes struck at dawn on the first clear day," one official said, "they'd surely be waiting and our losses might be heavier than otherwise."

Heavy Missile Defense

Sources say there are now 28 surface-to-air missile battalions between the DMZ and the 20th Parallel. Each battalion includes several missile launchers. "Each battalion can now fire six to eight missiles at one passing aircraft," one general said.

Despite the missiles, military men generally are anxious to attack supply dumps, vehicle parks, airfields and air defense sites in North Vietnam, and the farther north the better, from their viewpoint.

They say that after the halt of daily raids in November of 1968, North Vietnam shifted the hub of its military supply operations from the Hanoi-Haiphong area south to Thanhhoa, to shorten delivery times to the front.

They said that Thanhhoa, along with Vinh and Donghoi further south along the coast, have large supply and petroleum dumps.

"But our first priority," one military planner said, "is to stabilize the battlefield in Quangtri Province."

Pentagon sources said the helicopter carrier Tripoli, with about 1,000 United States marines aboard, was about 100 miles offshore.

"We always keep one such carrier in the area, but we certainly have no thought of putting marines into this fight," a defense official said.

He would not rule out, however, the potential use of the carrier and its troop-carrying helicopters to land South Vietnamese marines behind enemy lines in Quangtri Province.

Under the Nixon Administration there have been two types of air strikes against the north:

Might Lift Saigon Units

When unarmed reconnaissance planes flying over the north have been fired on, the fighter escorts accompanying them normally have fired back. And since May, 1970, much larger raids have been conducted on eight occasions. These "limited duration protective reaction" strikes have involved 15 to 250 fighter-bombers, bombing for one day to five days at a time.

Although official spokesmen initially insisted that these raids were principally against air defenses that had fired at American planes, more recently they have explained the rationale to include supply targets and artillery that were thought to threaten the dwindling number of United States troops in Vietnam.

For days, Administration spokesmen have been intensifying their rhetoric in describing the North Vietnamese offensive as an "invasion," "a blatant invasion," and a "a naked t-tck" with tanks and self-propelled guns across the border.

Officials privately conceded this was a conscious attempt to prepare the American public both for South Vietnamese reverses and for a possible decision, to expand the war against North Vietnam.

Officials pointed out that the President faces a political dilemma on renewing heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

He must weigh the adverse public reaction to expanded bombing, they note, against the possibly greater effect of a major military defeat in which Mr. Nixon's policy of Vietnamization — gradually turning the war over to the South Vietnamese—might be labeled a failure.