

Foe's Options APR 17 1972

Increased Shelling of Cities In South Vietnam Feared

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SAIGON, April 16—The big question in the wake of the deep penetration bombing of North Vietnam by B-52s is what the response of Hanoi and its allies will be.

The possibilities on the negative side range from trying captured American pilots as war criminals to arming Hanoi with better weapons for knocking down high flying B-52s and other aircraft.

In between those options and easy for Hanoi to order in a hurry is intensified shelling of South Vietnam's population centers and American bases, with Saigon and Danang the likeliest targets.

Like so many other new developments in the Vietnam war, the dynamics and argumentation of this one

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have been played out before. The past, therefore, may indeed be repeated with only minor changes.

On April 12, 1966, the Strategic Air Command bombed North Vietnam for the first time, although it did not involve deep penetration like this weekend's raids against the port city of Haiphong and Hanoi.

See SAIGON, A9, Col. 4

U.S. Bombing May Cause More Shelling in the South

SAIGON, From A1

On April 25, 1966—only two weeks later—Communist Mig-17s appeared in strength for the first time to defend North Vietnam.

Soviet Response Weighed

Now, six years later, the Soviet Union could make the same kind of response by giving North Vietnam more Mig-21s or the faster Mig-23.

Or, similarly, North Korea—whose pilots already have done some flying for Hanoi—could come through with both fighter aircraft and the pilots to fly them.

On June 29, 1966, American fighter-bombers—not the giant B-52s—started the first of a series of raids against petroleum storage areas near Hanoi and Haiphong. Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, in justifying the raids at a Pentagon press conference, stressed the careful aiming by the pilots.

On July 6, 1966, the Hanoi government paraded captured American pilots through the streets and mobs demanded their punishment. North Vietnamese ambassadors in Peking and Prague said that the pilots would go on trial as war criminals.

But on July 23, 1966—after stern warnings from President Johnson—Ho Chi Minh backed off by asserting there was “no trial in view” for the pilots.

This time, the Nixon administration most likely will have trouble convincing the world that the B-52 raids were done with precision since, unlike fighter-bomb-

ers seeking maximum accuracy, B-52s, which carry four times the bomb load, do not dive down on a single target that the pilot sees in his sights.

Criminal Act

Thus, Hanoi propagandists will be in a stronger position to claim that the latest B-52 bombing was a criminal act—even if it turns out the bombs fell far from populated areas.

Given those and other risks—including the immediate one of Moscow slamming the door on the President's planned visit to Russia—why did Mr. Nixon approve the B-52 raids with their attendant political risks to his re-election this year?

His primary objective, as the military command's announcement of the raids today made clear, was to retaliate for North Vietnam's invasion of South Vietnam.

The communique did not resort to Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird's rationale given Dec. 28, 1971 that the heavy bombing raids against North Vietnam then were “limited duration protection reaction strikes” to protect “the remaining forces of Americans that are in Vietnam today.”

President Nixon, before this weekend's raids, had ordered ships to stand off Vietnam's coast and shell North Vietnamese advancing into South Vietnam. Also he had sent some fighter-bombers back to South Vietnam. He obviously concluded that was not enough.

Air Power Only Way

Unless he was willing to

see the Ellipse behind the White House fill up with war protesters again, he could not send in American combat troops to help South Vietnamese troops stop the invaders. Sea and airpower were thus the only way to show Hanoi his military muscle, with the B-52s certainly a dramatic display of force.

As one usually hawkish American official said here, “The President was not willing to let the invasion be a true test of his Vietnamization program. He had to go in for stunts, like that armada of ships.”

Not that there are no lucrative military targets around Haiphong. There are and always have been. The military joint chiefs of staff long have wanted to hit them.

The President's desire for a “hard knock” of retaliation and the chiefs' military arguments coincided.

Bombing or mining Haiphong, some administration officials have warned in the past, might impel the Soviet Union to put pressure on the United States elsewhere in the world. It might also force the Soviets to counter-measures in North Vietnam, such as arming Russian merchant ships going to Haiphong.

President Nixon no doubt calculated these risks and decided the potential gains outweighed them. But the next few weeks will be a time of testing for this political calculus, with the future intensity of the war one of the indicators.