

FORD NOW FACING VIETNAM DECISION

Issue for Four Predecessors
Confronts New President
—Hanoi Drive Seen

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 13—In their first official foreign-policy briefings, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon were told that Indochina would be their most serious headache and that immediate decisions would be required.

Now President Ford may be approaching his own Vietnam decision a few days after taking the oath of office.

There are predictions in the Pentagon and the State Department of another North Vietnamese offensive in South Vietnam. At the same time Congress is moving to reduce United States support for the Saigon Government.

In dealing with the problem President Ford will have several factors to take into account, most of them of fairly recent origin:

¶Administration officials report that there are slightly more North Vietnamese combat troops—in excess of 180,000—in South Vietnam than at any time.

¶Senate and House committees have reduced requests for economic and military aid to Saigon.

Today the Senate Foreign Relations Committee cut the Nixon Administration's economic aid request for Indochina from \$940-million to about \$550-million; in the process aid to Saigon was cut from \$750-million to \$420-million.

The committee also put language in the bill to place an over-all ceiling of \$1.28-billion on all aid to South Vietnam and lowered the restriction on American civilians working there from 5,200 to 3,000.

The committee also called on the Ford Administration to urge China and the Soviet Union to reduce military aid to all parties in Indochina and to restore the cease-fire agreements.

The House of Representatives voted last week to cut military aid to South Vietnam by \$300-million, to a total of \$700-million—\$900-million below the Nixon Administration's original request.

Military Stalemate

Secretary of State Kissinger has briefed President Ford on the Vietnam situation. Nothing could be learned about what was said or decided, but all officials continue to report a mili-

tary stalemate in South Vietnam.

Before Congress last night the President promised "allies and friends" in Asia "continuity in our support for their security, independence and economic development." He also called for strict "observance of the cease-fire in Vietnam."

By law, President Ford cannot employ Americans, civilian or military, in combat in, over or off the shores of Indochina without the express approval of Congress.

Mr. Ford's record indicates that he would strongly oppose a Communist military take-over of South Vietnam but would also work hard to avoid direct American military involvement. He is certain, informed officials said, to strive to restore Congressional cuts in military aid. Officials had already been trying to convince the Senate to restore the cut by the House.

According to the officials, reports from Saigon describe possible movements of certain North Vietnamese divisions and actual relocations of headquarters and foresee a major offensive. Fighting has raged in the Danang area, with heavy losses on both sides.

"Any of these alone is not cause for alarm," a ranking official explained, "but taken together they are worrisome."

Mr. Kissinger is said to be saying that Hanoi might be using the period of transition in Washington to test American resolve.

Usual Time for Offensive

Officials at the working level who seem somewhat less worried, note that this is the dry season in northern South Vietnam, the usual time for Hanoi's offensives in that area.

Several of these officials predict that Hanoi will step up fighting in northern South Vietnam, with subsidiary action in the central and southern regions, but they expect it will be well below the levels before the cease-fire in January, 1973.

The Pentagon has played the situation in a low key. Its spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, has said merely that "there is some indication of increased readiness" and that the situation is being watched.

If North Vietnam does launch a countrywide offensive, official estimates are that the battles will find both North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese forces stronger, larger, more mobile and with more firepower.

Over the last two years Pentagon officials have stressed the belief that Saigon's forces can hold their own against Hanoi's. In recent months, however, they have called attention to a North Vietnamese build-up in tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft guns and missiles. In recent days American military men have told journalists about possible ammunition shortages for Saigon's forces.