

More than military considerations

N. C. STATES-ITEM

WASHINGTON — President Nixon has kept silent this weekend on his new bombing policy in Vietnam to avoid overt challenge to the Soviet Union, which he still hopes to visit next month, and to avoid further inflammation of public opinion at home.

But it is acknowledged here that more than military considerations lay behind the decision to resume air strikes against North Vietnam's major cities. Specifically, it is said that the President's demonstration of resolve is aimed at both Moscow and the American electorate, as well as at the governments of Hanoi and Saigon.

As far as can be determined from secondary sources here, the important strands of Nixon's calculations are as follows:

—The President is portrayed as deeply disturbed by the apparently indirect but nonetheless vital Soviet support for the massive North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam. The timing of the offensive, though probably not determined by Moscow, had the effect of making the United States appear weak and failing in Indochina at the very moment when Nixon was heading for the Kremlin to conclude new agreements on arms control, trade and credits and European security.

—If despite the atmosphere of summitry the Soviet leaders insist on a right to give maximum support to their ally in Vietnam, the President is said to be telling himself that he can do no less. The extended bombing may chill the mood of the scheduled visit to Moscow, starting May 22, but no more than it was already chilled for the President by Soviet support of the North Vietnamese challenge. Nixon assumes, from his study of Soviet statements so far, that the Russians share his eagerness to avoid collapse of a promising summit. It is thought that he may have conveyed that eagerness directly to the Kremlin in recent days, but there is no confirmation of any secret contact.

Feared reaction

—Without a resolute response to Ha-

noi's offensive, Nixon is said to have feared an angry political reaction to the scheduled agreement with Moscow on arms control — a reaction possibly fed by an already unenthusiastic group of military advisers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The President is also said to have feared the reaction to his plan to give the Russians credits to finance trade expansion at a time of Soviet support for an all-out military challenge in Indochina.

—Moscow aside, Nixon is said to have felt that Hanoi needed a firm reminder that the continuing withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam and disillusionment with the war in the U. S. would not assure it immunity from massive air attacks in the foreseeable future. The raids against Hanoi and Haiphong, like the invasions of Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971, were intended to serve notice that even diminishing American resources could exact a heavy price for military offensive.

—The raids were intended also, it is said, to give psychological as well as military support to the South Vietnamese government, whose troops are described

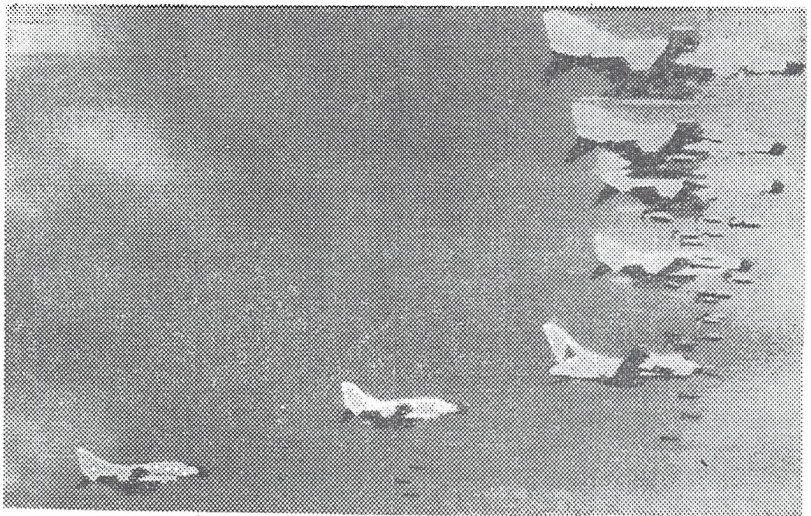
here as performing well above expectation.

—And finally, in strictly military terms, the air attacks are said to have been designed to hinder Hanoi's offensive and to gain time between onslaughts. They are expected to have little or no effect on the current fighting in South Vietnam, but are said to promise battlefield benefits between June and election day in November. The destruction of fuel supplies and depots around Hanoi and Haiphong will be felt by troops farther South in about two months time, officials say. Strikes against truck yards and other targets should be felt at the fighting front in the months thereafter, it is said.

Nixon remains silent

Nixon is believed to have been persuaded that the "pitiful, helpless giant" speech with which he justified the invasion of Cambodia two years ago was a serious mistake, even though the invasion itself was not. Though many of the same motives inspired his new bombing policy, he has been cautious against making a direct rhetorical challenge of the Soviet Union and the kind of belligerent statements that might rekindle protest in an already war-weary electorate at home.

Accordingly, the President has not in-



Bombers over North Vietnam again

behind bombings

volved himself in any of the administration comments on the fighting in Vietnam this month. He has twice reproached the Soviet Union for encouraging and aiding Hanoi in its offensive, but without any direct reference to the Russians. He has even said — in Canada last Friday — that arms control and other accords have little value so long as “the aggressive use of existing weapons is encouraged.”

But he has left the news of his bombing strategy to the Saigon commanders and held the comment of the State and Defense Departments here to a minimum. He has held back to let the public grow accustomed to the new bombing, to let the Russians choose the level and tenor of their protests and response and to let his rivals in the Democratic party take positions without benefit of guidance or explanation from the White House.

Massive bombing has always been the last available weapon in the President's Vietnam arsenal as he withdrew Americans from combat there. He has warned all along that he would use it, and he has pleaded with both Moscow and Peking that if they cannot help negotiate an end to the fighting they at least urge restraint upon their friends in Hanoi.

Indeed, the President scheduled his summit meetings in Peking and Moscow in this election year with the hope that the improved international atmosphere would becalm the Indochina front.

Officials here believe that the Chinese tried to warn Hanoi against a frontal assault during Nixon's year of political vulnerability, to the obvious annoyance of the North Vietnamese. The Russians' apparent unwillingness to give similar advice has been particularly nettling to the President, it is said.

The early reactions here this weekend make it virtually impossible to predict the consequences of the President's decision. Much will depend on how frequent and how massive will be the air strikes of the coming weeks and whether the attacking planes can avoid direct damage to Soviet and other foreign shipping in Haiphong Harbor.

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