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'Quarantine' of Haiphong studied as first option

WASHINGTON — A "quarantine" or blockade of the port of Haiphong to stop the flow of Soviet war materiel pouring into the battlefields of South Vietnam is under intense study as the likeliest, most dramatic response to Hanoi's invasion now available to President Nixon.

A second option — all-out bombing to destroy Haiphong's port and dock facilities — is viewed as more politically dangerous. If battlefield conditions in South Vietnam continue to deteriorate and Mr. Nixon decided he could no longer delay a political-military reaction, a major bombing campaign before the May 22 Moscow summit would almost certainly cause the Kremlin to cancel the summit.

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were in danger of being sunk by American bombs and the principal port of Moscow's ally in North Vietnam was under severe attack.

Symbolically vital

And yet for his part, Mr. Nixon could scarcely go to Moscow as Hanoi's invading armies were about to crush the city of Hue. Hue, a few miles south of the enemy-held city of Quang Tri, is symbolically vital to Saigon.

What, then, can President Nixon do within the extremely narrow margins available if, in fact, Hue is successfully attacked before May 22 — or if, to the south, the Communists split South Vietnam in two or starting advancing toward Saigon itself?

The answer as of now: Declare Haiphong "quarantined" to all war shipments and order the U.S. fleet to enforce the quarantine, much as President Kennedy did in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

A credible warning

That dramatic military action would be coupled with a credible warning to Moscow and an appeal that, to save the summit and a possible U.S. — Soviet confrontation, the Soviet Union must respect the quarantine.

As some top-level experts now view this admittedly high-risk scenario, Moscow might be persuaded to accept it. The most persua-

**Rowland Evans
and
Robert Novak**

sive part of the U.S. argument is this: That after a full generation of the nuclear arms race and off-and-on Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union cannot permit their first successful effort at bilateral negotiations on arms control and trade agreements to be wrecked by a small Asian country.

Thus, both American and Soviet officials are saying privately that if the summit meeting between Mr. Nixon and Communist Party chief Leonid Brezhnev collapses now, it could be a long time — perhaps years — before the climate for detente becomes favorable once again.

The Soviet balance

Moreover, in addition to a nuclear arms agreement and trade with the U.S., Moscow also regards the summit meeting as essential to restore the Soviet balance in the dangerous game of triangular politics now being played between Washington, Peking and Moscow. Mr. Nixon's spectacular visit to Peking in February had a distinctly uneasy audience in Moscow.

If the command shake-up in the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), following the fall of Quang Tri, actually results in stiffening ARVN'S combat capability, the quarantine option could be postponed until after the summit meeting or indefinitely.

The most sensitive point today is still the city of Hue, where the Communists are now regrouping and re-equipping after severe losses. It is at least possible, in short, that the North Vietnamese will not be able to repeat their successes of the past five weeks.

Dismal failure

But every political and diplomatic effort by the Nixon Administration to slow down the defensive (particularly Mr. Nixon's efforts to revive the Paris peace talks with at least a "tacit" slowdown of the enemy offensive) has dismally failed so far.

Some officials here are arguing that Mr. Nixon cannot wait to react with extreme toughness to Hanoi's invasion even without any new Communist successes. As of today, the President is acting more cautiously. But if Hue falls in the north or if there are major new enemy successes in the south, Mr. Nixon will feel he must react and react hard and the option at the top of the list is the quarantine option.