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New Nixon Strategy: Pressure on Moscow

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WASHINGTON, May 9—President Nixon's newest tactics in Indochina derive from a recognition that three years of military and diplomatic maneuver against North Vietnam have failed.

Accordingly, the tactics combine a military and diplomatic challenge to a new adversary—the Soviet Union—and a further retreat from the terms demanded of Hanoi.

Analysis

News

At bottom, Mr. Nixon blames the Russians for the failure of his plan to end the war—not only the Vietnamization of the ground combat but also the efforts to negotiate a settlement with the help of Soviet and Chinese pressure upon the North Vietnamese.

Since Moscow, in his view, has provided the arms for his diplomatic and political humiliation, it must now be subjected to overt pressure to find him an acceptable way out.

Failing that, Mr. Nixon expects to make the Russians suffer at least some of the same frustration that he himself feels at this point. If he is to be forced to leave an ally struggling for survival with diminishing American help, he wants the Russians to be forced into the same position toward their ally.

And if setbacks in South Vietnam results in a loss of respect for American power, as he has said they will, then he intends at least that the Russians also suffer a comparable demonstration of impotence.

The Price for Progress

The underlying effect of the challenge to Soviet shipping into North Vietnam, in the President's calculation, is this demand that the Russians share his Vietnam agony as the price of progress on arms control, tempting trade arrangements and other agreements that had been prepared for the Moscow meeting this month.

In essence, Mr. Nixon is switching attention from a war he was losing to a confrontation in which he feels himself more evenly matched. And thus far, at least, he hopes to manage that confrontation by indirect means, with a relatively low level of military

risk, so as to gain time for intense diplomatic maneuver.

While the United States implants its delayed-action mines in Haiphong Harbor and while the Russians try to circumvent or even to disarm the mines, there will be ample time for Soviet-American consultation and for further fierce battle between the North and the South Vietnamese in South Vietnam.

If the Moscow meeting still begins on schedule two weeks hence, then the situation in Vietnam will now be a principal item on the agenda. Mr. Nixon will have forced the Russians to swallow some of their pride and he will have achieved that elusive "linkage" of all East-West issues by which he had hoped to resolve the Vietnam war in the first place.

Negotiated Peace Is Aim

In the name of "saving the peace" between themselves, the major powers could finally attempt to impose a bargained peace on Indochina.

If the Russians deny the President their hospitality under these circumstances, they will still have to move into negotiations with him at some point, in the United Nations or directly. They may wish to raise the temperature of confrontation in Vietnam's waters or demonstrate that they can circumvent the blockage, and they may wish to await further successes by the North Vietnamese military forces. But they cannot long avoid a more direct role in the diplomacy surrounding the war.

One way or another, therefore, Mr. Nixon will seek from the Russians what he has been unable to obtain from the North Vietnamese—an agreement covering only military actions by each side while the political future of South Vietnam is left to the subsequent bargaining of the Governments in Hanoi and Saigon.

In his direct talks with Hanoi, the President and his representative Henry A. Kissinger, had despaired of exchanging a total

American troop withdrawal and cessation of bombing for the return of prisoners, a cease-fire and withdrawal of major North Vietnamese units from Laos and Cambodia as well as South Vietnam to their home territory. Hanoi had always demanded also a halt in American military aid to the Saigon Government and help in deposing its head, President Nguyen Van Thieu.

Old Proposal Revived

Beneath the cover of his tough talk and challenge to the Russians last night, Mr. Nixon revived the idea of an agreement covering only military actions—"acts of force"—and retreated from his earlier position on those issues. He offered to withdraw all American troops and to stop bombing throughout Indochina in exchange for the release of prisoners and an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina.

By not insisting on the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese troops, even from territories conquered during their current offensive, the President was in effect holding out the prospect of an informal partitioning of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to enhance the long-run political and military position of Hanoi.

It is doubtful that Hanoi would find this attractive or fair compensation for its latest military successes. But the President appears to be moving toward an offer that would let Moscow either persuade or force the North Vietnamese to settle for less than half a loaf now and to take their chances on the future.

Moreover, if Hanoi continues to demand an end of American arms supplies to Saigon, the new confrontation with the Russians will probably lead Mr. Nixon to propose that all outside powers, and notably the Soviet Union and the United States, cease to supply offensive weapons to the rival Vietnamese regimes.

Even a week ago, the President was not prepared to of-

fer such terms, for at that time he still seemed to believe, as he said, that the South Vietnamese were sure to "hold" against a Communist "take-over," provided only that they had American air support. Hanoi could win, he said, only through a failure of American will.

But implicit in Mr. Nixon's moves last night was the recognition that American intelligence had woefully underestimated Hanoi's capacity of sustained offense, just as American diplomacy had overestimated the help it could obtain from the Soviet Union. The scheduled Moscow meeting added its own imperative to this reappraisal, for even if the President still thinks that Saigon's army can hold, he had to assess his arrival in Moscow against the possibility that it would not hold.

Hanoi Likely to Stand Firm

The difficulty with the Administration's new course is that neither the American carrot nor the Soviet stick seems likely to suffice to persuade Hanoi to entrust its fate to the major powers.

Having felt betrayed by the Russians and Chinese, as well as Americans, after the 1954 partition of Vietnam, the survivors of that experience will not lightly agree to a new partition along altered lines.

And having absorbed the worst punishment that the United States could give for seven years and virtually discredited the Vietnamization program of three years, they must now weigh the pressures to yield in their terms against the prospects of further gains on the ground and possibly the defeat of Mr. Nixon in the November election.

Thus the chances are that the President will be pressed to combine still further military pressures with additional concessions. On both tracks, he has now almost exhausted the alternatives that he would regard as either militarily plausible or politically honorable.