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Nixon Jeopardizes His Own Program

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THE SMELL of defeat in Vietnam pervades Washington these days. The Pentagon is sick at the failure of South Vietnamese forces to counterattack. Even senior White House officials rate the chances of keeping Saigon out of Communist hands in the next year at no better than 50-50.

A sensible policy would control the damage and minimize the breakage. And the offer made by President Nixon in his broadcast Monday night seems to move in that direction.

But the President, by linking his offer to the mining of Haiphong, presents it in a way unacceptable to the other side. He is thus maximizing the losses. He has been making hostage to his Vietnam policy thousands of American soldiers, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, the structure of world order, and the temper of opinion in this country.

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CONSIDER, first, the American troops in Vietnam. Since the repeal of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the President is constitutionally authorized to take military action in Vietnam only for the purpose of saving the lives of those men. He could do that very simply by a withdrawal now. The more so as the North Vietnamese have been at special pains not to hit American installations during their current drive.

Instead, Mr. Nixon has massively increased this country's air and sea operations in Vietnam. He has been exposing American soldiers to enemy fire directly and practically asking for Communist attacks on U.S. installations. In plain contradiction with his congressional and constitutional mandate, he is putting at risk American lives that could be saved.

The slaughter of Vietnamese is augmented directly, and on a wholesale basis, by the increased American operations. The latest claim from Hanoi about attacks on the dikes has to be taken seriously, if only because it has never been made before.

More importantly, American operations, as Mr. Nixon himself recently acknowledged, are all that keep South Vietnamese forces in the field. A withdrawal move by this country would inevitably yield a South Vietnamese regime prepared to come to terms with Hanoi.

Maybe there was a time when a Communist takeover of South Vietnam might have tipped the balance of world order adversely, exposing weak countries to pressure that would cause them to fall — as the well known phrase goes — like a row of dominoes. But that danger, thanks in some part to Mr. Nixon's diplomacy, has long since been averted.

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THE PRESIDENT has blocked out with the Soviet Union a series of basic strategic agreements that buttress treaty arrangements covering Berlin and Germany. He has established a rapport with the leaders of China.

Washington, Moscow and Peking share an interest in limiting Hanoi's gains to Indochina. And they can easily enforce that interest — the more so since there is no evidence of North Vietnamese ambition outside Indochina.

But the latest military steps against Hanoi put all these prospects in jeopardy. However eager Moscow may be to achieve strategic parity with this country, the Russians will have to react negatively to the drastically increased military action against North Vietnam.