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Loser Take Nothing

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

PARIS—The Vietnam campaign has now attained a "go for broke" aspect perhaps never before reached, not even during the 1968 Communist Tet offensive with its enormous losses, quantitative on Hanoi's side but qualitative on our own, headed by President Johnson's scalp.

The last of twelve North Vietnamese combat-ready divisions, now marching southward, is expected to cross the DMZ and to appear in the battle zone somewhere between Quangtri and Hue within days. This leaves only two untrained Communist units to defend the People's Republic. All others have been committed in the South.

If this tremendous gamble fails, Hanoi and its Vietcong allies have only two alternatives: they can seek the least unfavorable peace terms; or they can lick their wounds, retreating northward, as they did after the Tet assault, to prepare another attack some three or four years hence.

The latter choice seems more difficult than ever for the little Asian neosparta. There has been evidence of a recent argument between young "economists" and an older faction of ideologues and military leaders in Hanoi's Politburo. To date, the latter "hawk" group has maintained a majority, but this could change. The youth minority wants to slow down the war and concentrate on rebuilding North Vietnam.

The present offensive has two focal points but one goal. The points are the northern "T" Corps area where Hanoi's regulars are attacking across the DMZ, relying on a short line of supply, and the southerly drive toward Anloc, near Saigon, where the Vietcong is more directly involved.

A maximum success would be to smash the Saigon army and break South Vietnamese morale, forcing the Nixon Administration in Washington to accept settlement terms before the U.S. elections that it would not be prepared to take if it regains office.

The minimum sought is capture of a provincial capital and surrounding area so the Vietcong could proclaim a "liberated" region with its own "government" and demand negotiations on a new basis recognizing such a situation.

But even if that minimum goal is initially achieved, it would be exceedingly difficult for the Communists to hold and administer such an area. And, should Washington accept a static armistice, it might be unable to impose this on Saigon.

The Communist forces want Hue,

former imperial capital, as a seat for their regime, even if they can't disintegrate President Thieu's defenses. They would probably accept Quangtri as a poor substitute. But they have not yet achieved either and are several days behind their known schedule.

Mme. Binh, the Vietcong Foreign Minister, returned to Paris after a seven-month absence from negotiations here, ready to proclaim a "free" South Vietnam regime. But the day before her return the United States broke off negotiations. Since then both sides have been bickering about how, when and why they should or should not recommence.

If, from Hanoi's viewpoint, all chips have been piled on the bloody table, the American risk is almost comparable. Initial reactions from Moscow and Peking have been relatively restrained, but that is no sure guide to the future. Russia wants a Nixon summit meeting; at what price? It wishes to reassure peace in the West while it faces up to China. However, if it can split Europe away from Washington, it might reckon the objective had been doubly attained.

Likewise, there seems to be a conviction in Washington that any risk of deteriorating U.S.-Soviet relations will be offset by improved relations with China—and vice versa. Following diminished American prestige after Soviet-backed Indian forces triumphed over U.S.-and-China-backed Pakistan forces in South Asia, there is evidently a desire to refurbish the United States image of resolution and toughness. Nixon wants to underscore in Indochina the threat to his Nixon doctrine: Uncle Sam helps those who help themselves.

All the greatest powers are involved in the Vietnam proxy war: America directly, Russia indirectly, China inferentially. Each could lose or gain massively. President Nixon even stakes his political head. But for the Vietnamese, North and South, the risk is far more immense. It is ultimately a matter of existence for their respective regimes.

Whether Washington should bet so much on cards being played by others is arguable. Perhaps for the first time since the massive U.S. involvement in Vietnam began—certainly for the first time since 1968—the stakes transcend the value of the game itself: Winner take all; loser take nothing. But the implications of victory or defeat are global.

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