

Open-Ended War

The strong offensive by North Vietnamese troops that resulted in capture of Quangtri, undertaken almost simultaneously with the trip to Paris of Hanoi Politburo member Le Duc Tho, could not have been coincidental. The military-diplomatic character of the current Communist offensive has been evident from the start. That Communist offensive, designed to improve the Communist bargaining position in Paris, is now challenging President Nixon's Vietnam policies as never before in this long and fruitless war.

The challenge is hardly answered by the President's rhetorical posturing of recent days. Mr. Nixon's warning in Texas that North Vietnam was "taking a very great risk"—presumably a threat to resume bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong heartland—is not likely to have any more effect than the futile bombing itself last month and in the 1965-68 period.

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What is needed now is a reappraisal of the Administration policies that, since 1969, have given Vietnamization of the war and other military measures priority over efforts to negotiate peace. From the beginning, the President has held his negotiating price high—nothing less than the preservation of Saigon's anti-Communist regime—on a double assumption.

One assumption behind Vietnamization was that the withdrawal of most American ground troops from Vietnam would remove the war from the forefront of political issues in the United States before November 1972. The other assumption was that President Thieu's million-man army by 1972 could hold South Vietnam securely with American air and naval support, plus economic and arms aid. The belief was that these optimistic assumptions, if borne out, would favor Mr. Nixon's re-election and confront Hanoi with a choice between negotiating on Mr. Nixon's terms or facing four more years of war.

There never was much valid reason to accept either assumption; but in any event both are now being cruelly blown apart by the current Communist offensive. The war not only has rebounded as a political issue in the United States, but the Administration's war policies appear from the primaries to be losing even their former supporters. Mr. Nixon's stated assumption that South Vietnam's army would be able to "hack it" is now being severely tested to the point that it is apparent that only American air and sea power has saved the South Vietnamese from even more devastating defeats than they have already suffered.

Hanoi's diplomatic offensive, meanwhile, is probing the essential contradiction in Mr. Nixon's two-track policy of Vietnamization and negotiation. Vietnamization of the war requires strengthening and supporting the Thieu regime. The negotiation of a peace settlement requires its replacement with a compromise government acceptable to both sides.

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All this is certain to be affected now by the probably irreversible change in the nature of the war that has just occurred. From a civil war within South Vietnam, aided clandestinely at first, then more substantially, by Hanoi, the struggle has been transformed by the large-scale North Vietnamese crossing of the demilitarized zone into virtually a conventional war between the armies of both Vietnams.

The "open-ended" character of the war led Senator Mansfield many years ago to urge Washington to abandon dreams of victory and seek a negotiated compromise. That advice is even sounder today.

Further delay will not improve the American bargaining position, which has declined steadily with the reduction of American forces in Vietnam. The time has come to explore seriously North Vietnam's proposal for a tripartite "government of national harmony" and Le Duc Tho's insistence in Paris Sunday that it would not "impose a 'Communist regime' in South Vietnam as Mr. Nixon claims."

Agreement will not be easily reached on the composition and duration of a caretaker regime in Saigon to be confirmed by elections. But it is the key to a political settlement. It will still be the key when the present battles are over, even if the military stalemate can be re-established.