

Aircraft Pullout to Be Slow, U.S. Says

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 22 — Pentagon planners report that United States air power is scheduled to be withdrawn from Southeast Asia very slowly in the initial period following any cease-fire in the Indochina war.

"Until every one of our prisoners of war has been returned and the missing accounted for," one high-ranking defense official declared, very few of the approximate total of 1,000 Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps combat aircraft will be pulled back in the first 60 days of any truce.

Thereafter, the Pentagon officials say, many B-52 and fighter-bomber squadrons will be reassigned. But, they add, a force of several hundred strike aircraft probably will remain for several months while American analysts study events in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to see whether any serious truce violations occur.

Over the longer run, assuming there are no major military operations by North Vietnamese forces, the planners continue, the United States will probably scale down to a presence in Thailand of three to six combat squadrons, totaling 72 to 144 aircraft.

This plan would also include one aircraft carrier with 70 to 90 planes aboard that would occasionally cruise off the coast of Indochina to demonstrate the availability of additional air power to respond to any possible invasion of the South by tanks and troops from the North.

Although there are now about 50 B-52's in Thailand, well-placed sources said that the future scaled-down force there would probably consist exclusively of fighter-bombers.

Laird Asks Curb on Arms Flow

In a farewell news conference last Friday, the retiring Secretary of Defense, Melvin R. Laird, was asked: "do we have further commitment to re-invoke American air or sea power in Vietnam should things to badly in the next year or two?"

Mr. Laird dodged a direct answer, saying the South Vietnamese only that had been armed and trained to provide for their own defense. he also spoke of the need for efforts among the major powers to restrict large new deliveries of weapons to North Vietnam or South Vietnam so as not to upset the balance of power in Indochina.

Other Administration officials, in the Pentagon and other departments, said Henry A. Kissinger had made it clear during his negotiations with North Vietnamese representatives in Paris that President Nixon would not hesitate to reapply air and sea power in Indochina if Hanoi should violate any cease-fire agreement in a blatant way.

Mr. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser, has been Washington's principal negotiator in Paris. His last warning of this sort, officials said, was made before the heavy B-52 raids in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas late in December.

The purpose of the warning, ranking officials say, was to try to discourage the North Vietnamese from feeling that once American troops have been withdrawn from the South and most air and sea power has been removed from the region, they could plan a major new invasion of South Vietnam a year or so from now if events in the South do not go as they hope.

Goodwill Stressed by Hanoi

The warning was given, the officials continued, after Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's principal negotiator, argued that it mattered little what the actual cease-fire agreement said.

If there is goodwill on all sides, he reportedly told Mr. Kissinger, any agreement will be effective. If there is no goodwill, Mr. Tho was reported to have said, the language of the agreement will not deter North Vietnam and the Vietcong from further military "initiatives."

Mr. Kissinger, according to this account, reminded Mr. Tho that it was President Nixon who ordered the unexpected military drives into Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971, who resumed heavy bombing of the North and who had its harbors mined. The actions were taken even though it was foreseen that they would stir an uproar on the home front in America and despite the danger that such actions might upset delicate and important negotiations with both the Soviet Union and China, Mr. Kissinger was said to have emphasized.

Warning Given by Laird

In the view of several top-level Administration officials, there were several factors that led North Vietnam to break the negotiating impasse last October. As they see it, these included the following:

¶The United States rapidly doubled the size of its air

armada in Indochina after the Communist offensive last spring, and threw its full weight first against the invading forces in South Vietnam and then against military targets in the North.

¶South Vietnam's 1.1-million-man army withstood the enemy onslaught, by and large, more resolutely than had been expected.

¶Neither Moscow nor Peking responded to the heavy American bombing and mining by calling off talks with the President or otherwise challenging the American actions, except with perfunctory declarations of disapproval.

Senior Washington planners do not expect the fighting in Vietnam to end with the signing of a cease-fire agreement. Rather, they expect the nature of the struggle to shift to what one official described as "lower-intensity struggle involving assassination and political skulduggery, on both sides."

Many officials thing the South Vietnamese should be able to deal with this sort of struggle.

If "they do not have the will and the desire to handle that security problem," Mr. Laird said in his news conference last week, "they would have a very, very difficult time getting further support from the United States." This view is widely shared in Washington.

But the Administration wants to avoid a situation in which Hanoi might again be tempted into an overt invasion of the South if things go poorly for the Vietcong in this "lower-intensity" struggle.

For that purpose, officials said, the decision has been made to keep some air power in the region for at least a few years to back Washington's warning against a resumption of full-scale conventional warfare.

At present, the Air Force operates more than 600 combat aircraft in the Southeast Asian theater, including more than 200 B-52's and more than 240 F-4 fighter-bombers. The Navy maintains three to five carriers offshore, with 70 to 90 warplanes each. The Marines have about 75 combat aircraft in the war zone.

"Once the cease-fire comes and we're not dropping bombs, it won't cost any more to maintain this force in Indochina rather than elsewhere," one Pentagon official said. "And as long as bombs aren't dropping on them, we don't think the North Vietnamese will object. But we do plan to scale down this forward presence as the situation warrants."