

The Indochina Impasse

The U.S., Its Concern Clear, Adopts a 'Wait and See' Approach

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN APR 14 1973
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WASH. (Times) (AP) April 13—Nixon Administration officials are saying these days that they are concerned over the worsened military situation in Cambodia, angered by Hanoi's swift military build-up in South Vietnam and distressed by the reluctance of the Soviet Union and China to do much to uphold the 76-day-old Vietnam cease-fire agreement. But when News Analysis asked what they plan to do, the officials equivocate.

"We continue to assess the situation," Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, said again today, repeating what Henry A. Kissinger and others have been telling Congressmen, and newsmen for more than a week. "We have no deadline for action," another aide said. "We can wait and see."

For the moment uncertainty prevails in Washington. Middle-level officials say frankly that they are preplexed, and that they believe Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger, his national security adviser, must be struggling with a new quandary.

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger would clearly prefer a course of action that preserved their "peace with honor" without provoking accusations that the United States was tearing to shreds the already-ripped Vietnam accord.

Signals to Hanoi

But officials close to Mr. Nixon assert that he would rather risk alienating his critics further than allow Hanoi to make a fool of him and a farce of the agreement. This would happen, he is said to believe, if the United States did nothing while the Communists increased their holdings in Indochina by force.

Mr. Nixon has already signaled Hanoi in a number of ways that he will send the bombers back if necessary. He has also deliberately attracted press attention by warning that "vigorous action" will be taken to offset grave violations.

Apparently the Administration is now awaiting Hanoi's response. The quick fact-finding trip to Indochina by Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. increased the expectation here that something might happen fairly soon in Cambodia. But since his return yesterday, officials have striven to take some of the crisis out of the headlines by reminding newsmen that the situation in Cambodia, while of "concern," is not like the invasion of South Vietnam last year.

Cambodia has always been regarded here as something of a sideshow to Vietnam. For the moment, it appears to the intelligence community that the 30,000 to 60,000 Cambodian insurgents—of different leftist complexions but all armed by the North Vietnamese—have the initiative. The 180,000-man army of President Lon Nol has been forced into a defensive position to protect Phnom Penh and try to keep supply routes open.

Behind the Bombing

The army is believed capable of holding out indefinitely in Phnom Penh with continued American air support. Few officials believe the North Vietnamese main-force units intend marching on the Cambodian capital. Most serve as rear support for forces in neighboring South Vietnam, although some North Vietnamese have trained the Cambodian insurgents and given them technical assistance.

The purpose of the American air strikes in Cambodia, the officials say, is to bring about a cease-fire. Essentially, Mr. Kissinger asserts that Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's negotiator, undertook in the last stages of the Paris talks to insure an early cease-fire in Cambodia. Hanoi has been reminded of this, and Washington is hoping it will soon deliver.

Part of the problem in achieving a cease-fire in Cambodia has been the imprecision of the political line-up there. It had never been clear who is fighting the Lon Nol army. Is it a force loyal to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the deposed chief of state? Or a force directed by Hanoi and paying only token respect to the Prince? Or a combination of both?

Recently, there have been

signs that the situation may be clarifying.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk showed up in Hanoi after making what he said was a secret one-month trip to Cambodia. He said that while in the Cambodian countryside he received the allegiance of all the factions opposed to General Lon Nol. His speech was given wide coverage by the Hanoi radio, indicating, perhaps, that North Vietnam was supporting the deposed Prince. Up to now he has found most of his backing in Peking, where he has his government-in-exile.

A key Administration official said it was possible that Hanoi was finally preparing the way for Cambodian negotiations.

Concern for Saigon

A cease-fire in Cambodia would end the need for American air support and relieve some of the anxiety, here. But it has been evident from Administration officials' remarks that they are more concerned with the situation in South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese, according to the latest intelligence reports, have shipped enough equipment there to give them the capability in another month's time of carrying out a major attack against Saigon's forces.

Washington has been weighing, among possible options, various pre-emptive strikes. For the moment, however, Administration officials have been saying that Saigon can take care of itself and that American air forces would have to be used only as a last resort.

President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam echoed those views when here last week.

Moreover Mr. Nixon reportedly told Mr. Thieu that the United States would not support him if his forces were the first to begin a major offensive, thereby giving Hanoi an excuse to retaliate.

Washington's caution was also due to uncertainty over Hanoi's intentions. Officials here are not sure whether the North Vietnamese build-up in South Vietnam presages a new attack or whether Hanoi is simply keeping open its alternatives in case the political road to power, provided by the cease-fire agreement, proves too arduous for the veterans on the Hanoi Politburo. The men have, in Mr. Kissinger's words, known nothing but war for 25 years.

This uncertainty may be cleared up, at least temporarily, in the next six weeks. The rainy season begins in South Vietnam about June 1, and Pentagon officials say that any offensive must take place before then. If the middle of May passes without more than the current low level of fighting, it would seem to indicate that the Hanoi Politburo is willing to see what a political struggle might achieve.