

Hanoi: A New Offensive?

All Mr. Nixon needs now to fill his cup to overflowing is a North Vietnamese offensive—and there are signs that Hanoi is getting ready to oblige.

What is happening on the ground in South Vietnam is only part of the story, but an important part. North Vietnamese troop strength has increased by about 70,000 men from the 200,000 at the beginning of the year. Since the signing of the cease-fire agreement, large numbers of tanks and anti-aircraft guns and missiles have been smuggled in from the North.

The details were recently "leaked" to the press by a high intelligence official in Washington. It made a good story, but his real target was Hanoi, not American newspaper readers. The purpose of the story was to warn Hanoi that "even" American intelligence officials were "not certain" how Mr. Nixon would react to a Communist offensive.

There is disagreement in the Washington intelligence community about the likelihood of an offensive, but even those experts who think that one may be coming expect it in December at the earliest. Some would put it as late as 1975. The North Vietnamese forces are said to be too weak in some of the key strategic areas which they would have to hold in order to claim success.

But the intelligence experts judge mainly from what they see on the ground, which is a mistake they have often made before. The situation on the ground indicates an adversary's capability. But his intentions have to be divined from political intelligence, because the decisions are made by political leaders who are, even now, engaged in a debate about the course they should take.

The debate has now reached the point where Mr. Nixon's political troubles, and his ability to respond to a challenge in Vietnam, have emerged as an issue in the Hanoi press. Already in August, the Hanoi army paper published an article which was ostensibly an analysis of the existing military sit-

uation, but if the analysis was correct then it followed—though the article did not say so—that a major new offensive should be launched.

The article was signed by Chien Thang, which stands for "Victor"—a pen-name under which some of the most authoritative pronouncements on strategy have appeared in the course of the war. It is believed that General Giap, the defense minister, has used the pen-name for some of his articles. In the present case the article was obviously part of a leadership debate in preparation for a policy meeting held only in September.

This was the first time in months when the Hanoi leaders, many of whom had been traveling abroad, could meet to resolve the major issues of policy raised by the failure of the cease-fire. The result soon became evident in the much sharper tone of Hanoi propaganda on the war, with a menacing undercurrent which seemed to suggest that more fighting was coming. As Washington's preoccupation with the war in the Mideast grew, so did the ferocity of Hanoi's language.

Finally after Mr. Nixon's black weekend of Watergate firings, on the very day the Washington intelligence official's "leak" appeared in the press, Dr. Kissinger ruefully conceded that "one cannot have a crisis of authority in a society for a period of months, without paying a price somewhere along the line."

On the same day, in Hanoi, another authoritative military commentator, writing under the pen-name Chien Binh ("Fighter") discussed "the Watergate deluge." He saw it as the greatest political crisis that ever hit the United States and "a landmark reflecting the decline of U.S. imperialism." He argued that the Nixon strategy derived from "a position of defeat" which was becoming progressively weaker. "Nixon himself had to admit," he wrote, "that the U.S. could no longer shoulder the burden throughout the world."

What follows from his analysis? The United States, Chien Binh explained to

his readers, was not now "ready to jump into any trouble spot." Hanoi has said things like this before, but for a military expert to discuss it in the context of Watergate, during the Mideast war, at a time when Hanoi is deciding what to do about its own broken cease-fire, is to say that the time really has come to strike—and to strike while the iron is hot.

From the military point of view this is not the best time for an offensive, which is why the intelligence experts don't believe it will come just yet. But the North Vietnamese strategic doctrine dictates that the final, grand offensive should be launched only when the enemy is in political disarray. From Hanoi, the state of the Nixon administration would seem to fulfill that condition. Those who favor action now would argue that to wait is to let the best opportunity slip by.

While the military evidence may suggest that an offensive is not imminent, the analysis of the political evidence suggests the contrary. At the beginning of last year, when the intelligence community was predicting with one voice that a major offensive was about to be launched, to coincide with Mr. Nixon's trip to China, the political evidence suggested the contrary—and part of that evidence was an earlier article by Chien Thang.

When the offensive failed to materialize, the intelligence experts began to say that the big push would not come until the summer. But the political evidence made it possible to argue that it was imminent, and it came indeed with a big bang at Easter. Now the government analysts are skeptical again—which might lead some people to argue that this is a good reason for assuming that the balloon is about to go up.

There is not much Mr. Nixon can do to strengthen the Hanoi doves in the debate with the hawks. Hanoi wants him to force Saigon to comply with the political provisions of the peace settlement which Dr. Kissinger negotiated. If he does not, Hanoi will itself use force, sooner rather than later.