

NYT

NYT 9/20/70

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# What Is Hanoi Planning After the Rains Stop?

## Three Communist Military Options in Indochina

SAIGON—It is now two and a half months since the Americans concluded their dramatic move into Cambodia and the monsoons began turning the Ho Chi Minh trail into a ribbon of mud and the Mekong Delta into a lake.

Now the clouds above the trail are beginning to thin. The road network will soon begin drying and hardening, and it will soon be Hanoi's turn to take the offensive again.

If the war in Indochina follows its traditional pattern — one largely designed around the weather — the allies should be able to tell within the next two or three months how much emphasis Hanoi will place on restoring its capabilities to wage war in the South. By January or February, the allies should know how badly their enemy has been hurt by the loss of Cambodia as a sanctuary, how well he has been able to recover and what his intentions are on the battlefield.

Though the tempo of fighting throughout Indochina has been low in recent weeks, allied officials here already were considering these questions about the Communists last week:

Will they make their major move in Laos, repulsing general Van Pao's army of hill tribesmen and tightening their noose around Vientiane?



With the monsoons ending in much of Indochina, military experts in Saigon were trying last week to forecast what Communist moves are in the offing. Map shows three possibilities.

Will they use their newly established supply network through southern Laos and into Cambodia to spread and strengthen their hold on the countryside, defeat Cambodia's fledgling army and restore Prince Norodom Sihanouk to power—and thereby regain their supply route by sea to wage war against Saigon?

Or will they focus their efforts on the ultimate plum — South Vietnam — and do only what is necessary in Laos and Cambodia to protect their curtailed supply network?

#### No Firm Signs

Perhaps they will do all three things, or a combination of one or two, although observers of the North see an increasingly tired country, economically. To date, according to military and political analysts, there are no firm indications of Hanoi's designs.

In the meantime, in Cambodia the Communists have been reacting, regrouping, countering and assessing. In the southern half of South Vietnam they have been inactive — some say out of necessity. And in the northern half of South Vietnam it has been war as usual.

Throughout the Indochina theater, the level of violence has lessened. Judging by the available casualty reports, the

daily level of conflict in recent weeks has been about one-third lower than it was a year ago; and American casualties have been about half over-all as South Vietnamese troops have assumed the brunt of frontline combat. Last week's casualty report showed only 54 Americans killed, compared with 143 during the same week a year ago.

A consistently high level of fighting has been going on in northern South Vietnam, near the Ashau Valley, for the last two months. It is dry there now. As usual, the allies pushed westward, attempting to force the North Vietnamese back from the coastal population and over the border into Laos. Last year they did it. This year they did not.

Despite massive B-52 bombing strikes and daily pitched battles, the North Vietnamese remain stubbornly entrenched in the hills east of the Ashau. In another month, if not sooner, rains will probably force the allies to abandon their western defense bases, leaving the northerners free except for air strikes — to consolidate, resupply and begin inching eastward toward Hue. They will have a shorter distance to travel this year than last year, if they choose to assault the coast.

Hanoi could, of course, simply wait it out. There is no reason to believe that American

troops will not continue to leave South Vietnam at the current rate. Nearly 40 per cent of the American combat strength is now gone. In another year the American combat role in South Vietnam is supposed to be history.

Yet North Vietnam has much ground to recover in the South. All the indices the allies have to measure progress—some of them admittedly irrelevant—show the Saigon Government to have unprecedented strength in the countryside. And the lines on the charts are continuing to go up, not down. Hanoi has sensed this, and in the last year has devoted its policy statements toward a reversion to an early phase of the struggle movement—guerrilla warfare.

There are still nearly 2,000 lives lost per week through violence in Indochina, but the war is much less violent than it was a year ago. Whether or not it stays that way is now Hanoi's decision. —JAMES P. STERBA