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U.S. strives to cover exit

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The United States is using military strength in the air, in Vietnam, to cover its growing military weakness on the ground. It is entering the dangerous stage of troop withdrawal when the remaining American forces would not be able to deal with a determined assault by the North Vietnamese.

This is the major significance of last week's "limited" bombing raids in the southern part of North Vietnam. They were a calculated warning to Hanoi not to take military advantage of the American withdrawal.

The abortive attempt to rescue American prisoners of war near Hanoi was indirectly related. It was more than an effort by the Nixon administration to divert attention from the recent elections in the United States and to build momentum for its test of strength with the new Congress.

The United States sought to put Hanoi dramatically in the wrong before world opinion, on a sensitive issue like that of war prisoners, to cover the tough military threats and actions which may be required, in its judgment, to protect the latter phases of American withdrawal.

Debate in prospect

Senators who favor a speedy and clean military break with South Vietnam were quick to see the significance of the Nixon maneuvers. A major debate now is in prospect on the precise issue of whether the United States should risk a renewal of the war during a period of weakness, in order to stave off a Communist power drive in South Vietnam, or should avoid this by getting out fast.

The issue now is clearly posed, by the measures the administration is taking to get ready for the period of declining strength ahead.

These measures include diplomatic and political maneuvers of the utmost delicacy, which are bound to draw criticism both abroad and at home.

By stressing "violations" by Hanoi of the "understandings" which ended the continuous bombing of North Vietnam and launched the Paris peace talks, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird is preparing the ground for releasing the United States from the "understandings." The United States would then be free to threaten the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, in the hope of forestalling an offensive by North Vietnam as the American troop strength sinks low.

Deliberate move

Hanoi may have done the United States a favor in canceling at least this week's session of the Paris talks in protest against last week's bombing raids. Or it is possible that both sides are playing a game of maneuver, and that the North Vietnamese themselves want to be released from the "understandings" which laid the foundation for the Paris talks.

It was plainly a deliberate move when Secretary Laird and his Pentagon spokesman cited "violations" by Hanoi of two of these understandings — that unarmed American reconnaissance planes would continue to overfly North Vietnam, and that Communist forces would not send rockets into the large South Vietnamese cities.

An American reconnaissance plane had been shot down on Oct. 13 with two killed, and the cities of Saigon and Hue had been subjected to small-scale rocket attacks earlier this month.

Only the third understanding — that neither side would engage in ground attacks across the demilitarized zone — was unmentioned. But since substantial North Vietnamese forces are quartered north of the DMZ, and American troops to the south are being drawn down and replaced by South Vietnamese units, the DMZ "understanding" also is becoming a danger point for the American military and diplomatic planners.

Clearing the boards

The Laird charges amounted to a case for clearing the boards of earlier pledges and restraints, and opening a period of diplomatic offensive and military threat to protect the diminishing American force in Vietnam.

The planners of the Nixon administration are greatly concerned that the United States might be forced into a Dunkirk type of evacuation under fire, as its troop levels approach the 50,000 or so men who probably will be left behind.

This would face President Nixon with an almost intolerable choice between accepting military defeat and humiliation or reentering the war in force — or a third and quite possible alternative of threatening to wipe Hanoi and Haiphong off the map in retaliation.

Since the Communist leaders in Vietnam have shown themselves to be resourceful and tough, and have the military capability to force such a situation on the United States if they go all out, the planners in the White House and Pentagon have to conclude that a final effort to humiliate and expel the United States is not impossible or even improbable.

Whatever the trend of the coming debate, it seems clear that the political and diplomatic — as well as military — battle of talk, maneuver, and action over the final phase of the American intervention in Vietnam has begun.

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