

Saigon's Power Grows Despite Thinner U.S. Ranks

By GEORGE MCARTHUR

The Los Angeles Times

SAIGON—A recurring theme in President Nixon's campaign to end the war in South Vietnam is the acceptance of risks to achieve peace.

From a cautious beginning on Midway Island in June, 1969, when he announced the withdrawal of 25,000 men from South Vietnam—the President has orchestrated his theme with ever greater withdrawals. Most recently he added a five-point peace plan including a cease-fire proposal which would have given his generals the nervous shivers one year ago.

It is a measure of Mr. Nixon's past success and luck that his proconsuls in South Vietnam, once apprehensive, are now embarking with some confidence on a period of possibly even greater risks than the first phase of Vietnamization.

This period will extend through late 1972 and cover the reelection campaigns of both President Nixon and South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu.

No longer will Mr. Nixon be trimming a military machine of half-a-million men that many observers felt was already in need of trimming. From now on he will be cutting ever closer to the bone, with ever-mounting risks for his hopes for peace and for his own political future.

By Christmas, American troop strength will be down to 344,000. On average, the troop level is being cut by more than 10,000 monthly. The drop in maneuver battalions is even more. The U.S. forces in Vietnam once numbered 112 maneuver battalions. By Christmas this will be down to about 55 — in other words, about half the ground combat troops will have gone.

Without the blow given to Hanoi's forces in Cambodia, it is unlikely that Mr. Nixon could maintain his rate without protest from his advisers in Vietnam. Barring an unexpected resurgence in Hanoi's fortunes, however, the military establishment in South Vietnam is confident the withdrawal rate is feasible and can be maintained and possibly even speeded up.

By the end of 1972 it is possible the level will be down to 50,000 men. Although this force will probably still contain some ground combat troops, it is intended that they be used sparingly, as reaction forces, and to provide security for American installations.

Despite this drop in U.S. strength, American officials insist that the "power curve" of the Saigon government is going up and that of Hanoi is dropping.

Officers at U.S. Commander Gen. Creighton Abrams' headquarters, who were apprehensive about a possible Communist offensive only a few months ago, now see no such possibility for a long time ahead.

The ranking civilians in the U.S. establishment see serious political and economic problems as the major threat to the Vietnamization program. However, it is no longer just cocktail party chatter to hear ranking officials say, "We've won the war, let's announce it."

While Gen. Abrams dampens such talk and says "we've still got a long way to go," he also is known to feel that no serious Communist offensive is currently likely in either South Vietnam or Cambodia.

That scenario is generally accepted in both the South Vietnamese and American establishments. It is based largely on the belief that Hanoi is seriously strained in the military field and has badly misjudged its political strength in South Vietnam. Most observers look to the coming dry season for proof of this Communist weakness. If Hanoi fails to cause serious disruption in Cambodia or South Vietnam, the cautious optimism among American officials in both countries would possibly give way to almost jubilation.

Although the monsoon winds are changing even now, the floods will not subside and the terrain dry out until about January along the lower Mekong area of Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Then Hanoi will have favorable weather to restore the Ho Chi Minh trail and make an effort to reestablish its supply sanctuaries as far south as possible.

The American military establishment

believes that Hanoi will put its major effort into restoring its supply line through Cambodia, which was disastrously rolled back following the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk last March. Gen. Abrams feels that it will take two dry seasons, at best, for Hanoi to do this.

It is no secret also that the South Vietnamese Army is planning to disrupt Hanoi's efforts. While the U.S. forces are under restrictions from Mr. Nixon to stay out of Cambodia, no such order applies to South Vietnam. Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, the flamboyant commander who spearheaded the South Vietnamese drives beginning last May, wants to launch equally extensive operations as soon as the weather permits.

Although the million-man South Vietnamese army is now operating close to its probable limits, American planners feel it can handle limited operations in Cambodia without "losing sight of the real ball game in Vietnam."

Abrams' headquarters also feels that whatever threats are posed by the coming dry season's campaign, American withdrawals can proceed. There were 542,500 in Vietnam the day Mr. Nixon made the first withdrawal announcement on Midway. By next May, which is as far as official announcements cover, the troop level will be down to approximately 250,000 men. That will be when a possible crunch arises. It will not concern total manpower so much as the number of fighting maneuver battalions available to Abrams, then probably down to fewer than 40.

That force could easily handle the level of operations which is now foreseen.

The problem is, of course, whether Hanoi is capable or willing to step up that level.

American military intelligence assessments do not now indicate that Hanoi intends any such military boat-rocking in the foreseeable future. Infiltration into the south has practically ceased in the past few months. Most of the military effort is going into Cambodia and even that is marginal.

This is in keeping with Hanoi's shift in strategy — temporarily, at least, abandoning big unit military warfare in South Vietnam in favor of guerrilla activity, terror and political subversion.

This is the strategy in which Hanoi is now pouring its major efforts. Some veteran analysts believe Hanoi's timetable is also aimed at 1972. By that time the Communists hope to have restored their supply lines. Consequently their renewed

FILE SUB
DATE SUB-CA
11-10

military strength on the frontiers could then again be effective to support internal guerrilla activity or political subversion. This campaign would be aimed as much at U.S. public opinion as at the Saigon government.

Neither the Americans in Saigon nor President Thieu's government discounts this internal threat. Along with the country's economic crisis it is considered a major factor that could shake the regime and Mr. Nixon's hopes for successful disengagement.

Some experts say that North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces to the south still number perhaps 250,000 men. The Viet Cong infrastructure, called VCI, may number as many as 60,000 hard core party members. A Central Intelligence Agency report compiled in Washington (and disputed by officials in Saigon as misleading and, as published, lacking balance) said that perhaps 30,000 Communist "agents" had infiltrated the South Vietnamese army, intelligence services and government structure.

These figures are not as alarming as they seem, officials in Saigon claim. Nor are they very accurate, being informed estimates at best. The so-called "agents" include such oddments as militia privates and government clerks. The actual number of hard-core "spys" within the Saigon government's ranks is probably closer to 6,000. Even this number is ominous, officials admit, but it is one that the Saigon government has lived with for years. Barring a political upheaval it does not represent a serious threat to the government.

On the other hand, Communist agents are making serious trouble in the political field. Hanoi has made a renewed drive to get "legal" people into the fragmented political parties and into such organizations as labor groups.

While they have met with relatively little success thus far, authorities expect that some of these legalized agents will probably enter the political race for South Vietnam's assembly next year. Some have already been elected to provincial councils and to lesser village and hamlet posts.

As of now, the Communist apparatus is making every effort to conserve and enlarge these forces. They obviously form a valuable asset.

It is consequently problematical whether any of them would be "surfaced" next year to disrupt, if possible, South Vietnam's presidential election campaign. The likelihood is that they would remain "in the woodwork," doing what they could but not risking disclosure.

The campaign itself, however, will offer plenty of opportunities.

It is taken for granted in Saigon, and privately welcomed by the American establishment, that Thieu will run for reelection.

Some officials candidly admit Thieu could not win a majority right now. By voting time in September, however, he is expected to have done enough fence mending to be able to forge a majority built on rural, military and Catholic support.

Although the opposition is fragmented as usual it is expected that it will center around Duong Van Minh, the general known as "Big Minh" who led the 1963 coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Assuming that Thieu wins a second term, and the American establishment is working on that assumption, he would then be expected to do all he could to insure President Nixon's victory one year later.

It is possible, however, that Thieu might lose.

If Thieu did lose, the fate of South Vietnam and Mr. Nixon's Vietnamization program would be in serious jeopardy. In the eyes of the U.S. establishment, the blow would be even more serious than a military reverse.

While taking account of North Vietnam's immediate military strength and likely intentions, the general Nixon-Thieu scenario outlined by authorities in Saigon is weak on two points: the likelihood of progress in the Paris peace talks and the political situation in Hanoi.

In general, however, authorities in Saigon feel that progress in Paris, if it comes at all, will come with glacial slowness. Similarly, the collective leadership in Hanoi is not seen as unable to make any sharp policy changes. While party leader Le Duan is admittedly the first-among-equals and has approved the new line which gives equal priority to Hanoi's domestic problems as well as the war in the south, he is unlikely to change Hanoi's determination to win reunification by force if necessary. On the other hand, this policy is temporarily stalled, and Le Duan can do nothing about it.

In that light, it is felt likely that Hanoi will simply continue as at present, keeping up as much pressure as it can hoping for an opening that might develop should the Saigon regime simultaneously be unable to cope with its problems. As of now, with withdrawals running at the rate of 10,000 monthly, President Nixon is betting that the risks are acceptable. For the foreseeable future, his military advisers in Saigon agree.

Oriental Puzzle

117

