

Carter heats the 'hot spots'

by Daniel Snider and Mark Burdman

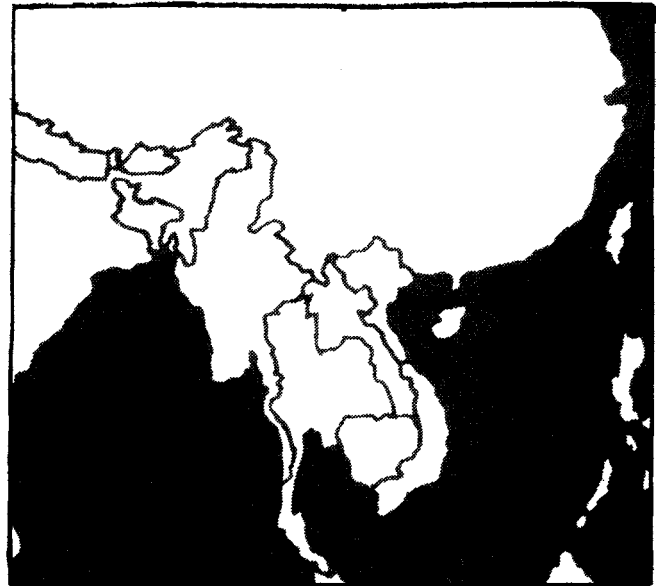
In a recent column in the *New York Times*, William Safire made some interesting speculations on the ways and means by which President Carter might try to revive his sagging popularity before the election and the convention. One of his 'scenarios' called for a crisis around which the nation would 'rally to the President.' Safire posed a situation where: "The President gets a small, clean, quick popular war with no draft needed."

The events of the past week suggest that the columnist was close to the truth but wrong in one essential element. There are in fact now several 'hot spots' which have been severely heated up to the point of crisis and war. But it is doubtful whether any of them will remain, if heated further, a "small, clean, quick" war. All of them have the immediate potential of propelling Carter's little crisis into a major superpower confrontation of global dimensions.

The irony of Mr. Safire's—and Mr. Carter's—miscalculation on this point is that the outcome of the President's effort to use available "hot spots" to restore his popularity would undoubtedly be the opposite—the destruction of Mr. Carter politically. The most likely outcome of any confrontation over available "hot spots" would be, at best, a massive strategic humiliation as the United States backed down from the awesome military superiority of the Soviet Union. Of course, if Mr. Carter chose, he could make himself, if not the next President, then the last President, by ordering nuclear war.

The key points of crisis are five principal hot spots: the Caribbean; southern Africa; the Persian Gulf; the Middle East; and Southeast Asia. In southern Africa major contingents of South African troops have invaded Angola and remain within Angolan territory at this moment. In the Persian Gulf speculation continues of a renewed raid into Iran. In the Middle East the Begin government, narrowly surviving a vote of confidence, is actively threatening to draw Syria into a war triggered off the Lebanese situation. And in Southeast Asia the phony war on the Thai-Cambodian border has set into motion a U.S.-Chinese alliance poised against the Vietnamese who have firm Soviet backing.

The two most active and dangerous hot spots are clearly in the Middle East and Southeast Asia where all the major powers are deeply involved and the jump from a 'local war' to thermonuclear confrontation is very short. It is these two situations then that we examine in more detail here.



Southeast Asia

The events on the Thai border last week were variously described in the world's press as a "Vietnamese Invasion of Thailand," a "war," or an "incursion." Whatever the actual extent of the engagement between Vietnamese and Thai troops along that ill-defined border, it died down quickly. Was it a phony war? Or a skirmish before a larger battle?

The evidence suggests that both are true. The charges of large-scale Vietnamese invasion and aggression do not stand up to the faces—at this point neither the extent

of Vietnamese forces nor of their penetration into Thai territory is verified by any objective reports. The timing of the phony war, coming just two days before the annual Foreign Ministers conference of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Kuala Lumpur, raises suspicions that the Thais were quick to make the most of the situation to force into line members of ASEAN, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, who are increasingly inclined to seek a negotiated solution to the Kampuchea problem and ASEAN-Indochina detente. The eagerness of Washington and Peking in similarly calling for a united front against Vietnam (and the Soviets) was also all too convenient.

However the stage is now set for a much larger conflict in Southeast Asia that would indeed make the events appear as a skirmish before the real war. What emerged out of the border battles, aside from the diplomatic rebuff given Hanoi at the ASEAN meeting, was an open alliance of the U.S. and China. In effect there was an activation of the de facto military-strategic alignment of the two that had taken an important step forward earlier in the year with the visit of Chinese defense chief Geng Biao to the U.S.

Both the Chinese and the Carter administration have used precisely the same formulations in their policy toward Vietnam and Indochina. Carter, in his Rome speech, and recent high level commentaries in the Chinese Communist Party press have linked the Afghanistan situation with Vietnam and Kampuchea. The formulation used by Carter and again by Secretary of State Muskie before the ASEAN meeting was that the U.S. was ready to resist "direct" Soviet "aggression" in Afghanistan and "indirect" Soviet aggression by Vietnam in Kampuchea.

The pinpointing of these two situations and their linkage has been accompanied by declarations by both Peking and Washington of their readiness to come to the defense of Thailand (or any other Southeast Asian nation) "attacked" by Vietnam. The Chinese have made clear that this means direct Chinese attack on Vietnam, a statement accompanied by threats still made to "teach Vietnam a second lesson" and concretized by the continued presence of large-scale Chinese forces on Vietnam's northern border. According to diplomatic sources in New Delhi there were about 100 separate violations of Vietnamese territory, including airspace and naval waters, by Chinese forces carrying out probing actions during the week or so before the incidents on the Thai-Kampuchean border.

For Washington's part, the administration quickly announced their intention to speed deliveries of arms shipments—light weapons, artillery and tanks—to Thailand including an airlift into Bangkok announced by the White House. More ominous though were the reported remarks of U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Morton Abro-

mowitz in a meeting with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach in Bangkok; he "reminded" Thach that the Manila Treaty, the U.S. mutual assistance treaty which was the basis for SEATO (the defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), is still in force.

A summit in Peking, and a meeting in Moscow

The clearest indication that something much bigger than mere border skirmishes is in the works is the news that Carter will make a sudden trip to Japan on July 9. The ostensible reason is to attend the official state funeral for the recently deceased Premier Ohira, with accompanying explanation that the State Department felt it important "at this time" to emphasize the importance of our ties with Japan. But as was the case with the Tito funeral, the occasion is a convenient pretext for something else.

The important event will be a meeting in Tokyo with top Chinese officials, particularly Prime Minister and Party Chairman Hua Guo-feng. That this is the case is demonstrated by the arrival in Peking on July 6 of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Richard Holbrooke, for talks with the Chinese leaders previous to the Tokyo meeting—no casual encounter there! Interestingly enough, also present in Tokyo will be the Thai Premier General Prem and probably the Australian Prime Minister Malcom Fraser as well.

The Tokyo get-together is probably matched in importance by an interesting gathering now going on in the Soviet Union. With almost no previous announcement, the three top Vietnamese leaders—Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Party leader Le Duan, and Deputy Prime Minister and Vietnamese military leader General Giap—are all now in Moscow. Also there at the same time is Kampuchean Foreign Minister Hun Sen. There is no announcement so far from either Moscow or Hanoi that a strategy session is going on but clearly these men are not there for a summer vacation.

The view of the Vietnamese, according to high level diplomatic sources in both New York and New Delhi, is that the Thai events were a prelude to possible large-scale Chinese invasion of Vietnam. At the least Vietnamese planning is premised on that possibility. The border fighting, according to these sources, was aimed at breaking up staging areas along the border where large-scale reinforcement for the Chinese controlled Pol Pot Khmer Rouge and the other, Khmer Serai and Son Sann groups, were being funneled across the border.

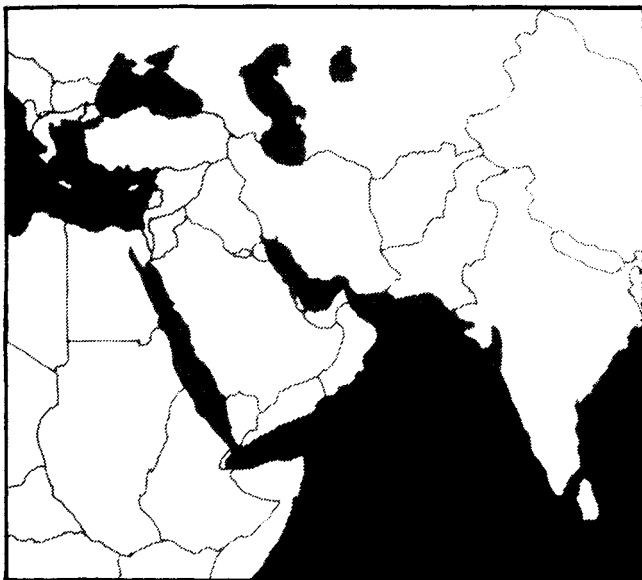
The Thais are actively aiding this reinforcement effort, including the much publicized "repatriation" of some 8,000 Khmer refugees who came from the Sa Keao camp, a camp controlled by the Khmer Rouge and a recruiting ground for fresh levies for their forces.

The rainy season is now coming on in Kampuchea,

traditionally a breathing space for the anti-Vietnamese forces after the dry season, and a time that makes it easier to intensify their activity inside Kampuchea. Thailand has become not only a rear base area for them, with ready supplies of food, medical assistance, and arms from China, but also a place to impress manpower.

The Vietnamese moves were intended not only as a warning to the Thais against this kind of increasingly open assistance to Chinese military attacks on Vietnam and Kampuchea, but also to actively break up the staging operation. In this they seem to have partially succeeded although at some diplomatic cost.

What comes next may well be determined in Tokyo by Peking and Washington—while Hanoi and Moscow prepare their own response. The stage is set, and dangerously so.



The Golan front

Washington analysts warned this week that Israel is on the brink of launching an escalation in Lebanon with the intention of drawing the Syrian armed forces into combat. Seeking to undermine Syria's military capability, Israel may trigger a wider regional war and U.S.-Soviet confrontation in the process, these sources warn.

According to one well-informed diplomatic source, what is unfolding is the following: "Israel will launch a preemptive attack, with or without White House support, directed at Syria and Jordan, beginning with provocations in Lebanon. As a result of the conflict, the Persian Gulf will be closed and oil exports shut down. Then, the U.S. military will intervene in the Gulf, using the Rapid Deployment Force, and world war will likely ensue."

A Washington strategist with close ties to the Israel Defense Forces and leading Israeli thinktanks reported that "there is an increasingly vocal faction in Israel arguing that now is the time to draw Syria into conflict to knock the Syrian capability out for a few years, since Israel's budget cuts and economic crisis will enable the Arabs to achieve qualitative superiority in the next few years."

The key thinktank peddling this line, the strategist noted, is the Tel Aviv Center for Strategic Studies, headed by former Israeli Military Intelligence chief Aharon Yariv.

"Yariv's boys, acting as a tight-knit military-intelligence special-interest group, have released a report urging that Israel must intervene more vigorously in Lebanon," he revealed. "The hope is that the regime in Damascus will be undermined, and that the Syrian army, in the words of the report, 'will be dealt a telling blow.'"

A July 1 article in France's *Le Figaro* indicates that the Washington analysts' forecasts have begun to come true.

Citing both Palestinian and Western diplomatic sources, *Le Figaro's* Beirut correspondent, Jorge Stocklin, reports a massively stepped-up Israeli intervention into Lebanon, including raids against Palestinian camps north of the city of Tyre; infiltration of the Shi'ite population of southern Lebanon to expedite the logistics of anti-Palestinian operations; the setting of booby traps in cars at Palestinian refugee camps; and at least 10 assassination attempts against Palestinian political leaders in Beirut.

Stocklin links this pattern to simultaneous destabilizations inside Syria, capped by recent reports of an assassination attempt against Syrian President Hafez Assad. He notes Syrian charges that the destabilizations are being coordinated by Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood, and "certain Arab regimes."

In response to this situation, Stocklin reports, the Syrian press is revealing that the Assad regime is "seeking a new equilibrium in the region and a strengthening of its military, political, and economic capacities."

Specifically, this is likely to mean the establishment of a Syrian-Soviet "treaty of friendship and cooperation modeled on the military-security pacts the Soviets have signed with South Yemen and Ethiopia" and the development of "closer and closer" Syrian-Soviet relations.

Stocklin's account is corroborated by signs of the great mutual concern being shown by Syria and the U.S.S.R. over the deteriorating situation.

A Syrian press editorial last weekend called for a "qualitative upgrading" of Syrian-Soviet relations. On June 27, the Soviet military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* reported that the chief of staff of the Soviet navy, Georgi Yegorov, will soon visit Syria "at the invitation of the Syrian armed forces."