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offensive 1 (normass/deepe)

(This is the ~~first~~ last of a series on the mood, preparedness, strategy and significance of Khe Sanh).

KHE SANH, VIETNAM, March 22--Military sources here are ~~amazing~~ pressing for a king-sized American offensive operation around Khe Sanh--and a possible ~~ma~~ sweep into Laos, along the ~~mountain~~ *Communists* Ho Chi Minh invasion trail.

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offensive 3 (normass/deepe)

Clearly, ~~American~~ the military options—with their ringing political overtones, break into these three rigid categories: to retreat, to sit, or to advance.

1. Almost all American military leaders here—the country's frontline hawks—follow the ~~Joint Chief of Staff~~ Pentagon's Joint Chief of Staff's statement that Khe Sanh should be held. This is true both in their official and private discussions. At this time, there seems to be no consideration among military leaders to withdraw the American Marines and to abandon the northwestern corner of Vietnam to ~~the~~ further Communist invasion. ~~It~~ Among the officers and men in Khe ~~Sanh~~ Sanh, the JCS recommendation is commonly used in jest. One officer, trapped in his bunker most of the day because of ~~incoming~~ incoming Communist artillery and mortars, mused: "Things could be worse. Think how you'd feel if the Joint Chiefs ~~hadn't said~~ and President Johnson ~~had~~ had not said Khe Sanh would be held at all costs."

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offensive 4 (normass/deepe)

Given its political build-up by the President's and JCS statements, Khe Sanh could probably not be abandoned without rather widespread, adverse repercussions inside the United States and, secondarily, inside South Vietnam. A Marine ~~real~~ retreat from there, however, could be camouflaged, and politically ~~su~~ cushioned, by ~~using them to link up with other American units on a search-and-destroy operation—and then being returned to another base, rather than Khe Sanh, later.~~ using them to link up with other American units on a search-and-destroy operation—and then being returned to another base, rather than Khe Sanh, later.

Some American civilian officials, however, either question or disagree with the strategy of holding ~~the~~ ^{the U.S.} Khe Sanh. "At General Westmoreland's headquarters the other day, I ~~asked~~ ^{asked} 'what is so important about Khe Sanh,'" one civilian explained. "You'd have thought I'd asked to see the doctor's certificate about the Virgin Mary."

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offensive 5 (normass/deepe)

2. Continuing the present course of the Marines sitting and waiting for a Communist assault is becoming less and less militarily attractive to the leadership level here, and is ~~is~~ likely to become ~~and~~ more and more difficult politically to hold to this line. The longer the Marines must wait before the Communists assault—when they ^{hope} hold to gain a stunning victory—the more attrition of forces, material and prestige they suffer, without the counter-balance of actually knowing how many Communists are being killed or wounded by the American counter-punch of air and artillery power.

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offensive 6 (normass/deepe)

Even within recent days, the situation here has worsened markedly. For the first time, the drop-zone, where most of the Marines urgently needed supplies are slimmer down from parachutes, has come under sustained Communist attack--with several several hundred rounds of close-in mortars and recoilless rifles rounds striking daily. The supply crisis was one of the crit-most critical ones faced y^l by the French at Dien Bien Phu--and one on which hinged many of the other factors leading to their defeat there. While the Americans are not yet in such a perilous stance, because airdrops ~~are still being made,~~ ^{CAN BE} the ~~a~~ dangerous and difficult ^{part of the} job is picking up and moving the supplies by the ~~ground crews.~~ ^{MARINES.}

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offensive 8 (normass/deepe)

3. Unwilling to retreat and being eroded by just sitting, the Americans should launch a massive offensive, some military officials argue.

"The only purpose of Khe Sanh now is as a springboard for an offensive," one official explained. "Khe Sanh has lost its ~~original~~ original purpose—we are no longer stopping any invasion, and in fact from the tops of bunkers, we can see Communist trucks moving along Route 9 with their ~~lan~~ ^{NIGHTLY} lights on. It looks like the Los Angeles freeway. ^{OT} And there's an estimated 100 ~~to~~ Communist tanks around Khe Sanh. "When the Communists seized the Lang Vei (Special Forces camp ~~on~~ ^{AND} astraddle Route 9 in early February), and overran Khe Sanh district town, the ~~Marine~~ ^{base} ~~base~~ Marines were ordered to stop patrolling, then the Communists got exactly what they wanted—^{into South Vietnam} to open up their ~~own~~ the roads and supply trails ~~around us~~ without detection and we became sitting ducks."

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offensive 7 (normass/deepe)

"Charlie has changed his tactics in the past few days," one American officer explained, referring to the Communist North Vietnamese. "Instead of simply dumping in artillery and mortars on us constantly, he's starting to maintain a withering blanket of machinegun and rifle fire across the whole base. At some times, it's virtually impossible for anyone ~~on the perimeter~~ in the perimeter to stand up and get out of their holes. As Also, before, Charlie would aim in areas, against concentrations of troops or trucks. Now, he^{is} starting to aim at one jeep or one Marine walking along. We're increasingly getting that hemmed-in feeling. His trenchlines are getting so close, I can could hit them with a five-iron ~~on~~ if this were a golf course and for the first time ~~re~~ Charlie ^{Practically} maintained an all-night firefight with the ~~Marines~~ Marines. We've just gotten in 1000 Bru hillsmen fleeing into Khe Sanh ~~to~~ from west near Laos—which means they must ~~be~~ have gotten the word either something's going to happen or else more NVA are moving in."

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offensive 9 (normass/deepe)

The three original arguments against an American-initiated offense offensive were first, ^{if} American troops would be fighting in the Communist's Khe Sanh--the miniature of defn defensive fortresses sprinkll sprinkled dispersed and sprinkled through the jungled hills; ^{HAND B. THE} in which ^H high American casualties would result. Second, it would be better to let the Communists assault Khe Sanh, which the Marines would be counted on holding, and then American ground troops would be rushed in as a reaction, giving chase to the retreating Communists. Third, if General William Westmoreland commits large numbers of American battalions, presumably from the U. S. Army 1st Air Cavalry airmobile division ^g or from the 101st Airborne Division; then he will be in a weak position to react if the Communists should strike again in ^{northern} the coastal cities, such as Hue and Quang Tri.

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offensive 10 (normass/deepe)

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These arguments are losing some of merit, in official eyes, now as the Marines at Khe Sanh ^{Allies} ~~at Khe Sanh~~ must have waited ~~too long~~ ^{longer than} for the attack and receive heavier, deadly shelling.

Some sources argue that a major American search-and-destroy operation around Khe Sanh would be pointless without ~~wide~~ sweeping (and perhaps ~~than~~ staying) across the border into Laos. The ~~local~~ location of Khe Sanh ^{is} ~~always~~ ^{is} ~~the~~ ^{the} main point of criticism about Westmoreland's ^{is} ~~h~~ whole strategy of holding there—has forced the tactical commanders into an ~~impo~~ impossible job, they argue. Khe Sanh is situated seven miles from ~~the Laotian~~ ^B Laos on the west and 14 miles ~~W~~ south of the demilitarized zone and North Vietnam.

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offensive 11 ~~9~~ (normass/deepe)

Militarily, these two political boundaries ^{restrict American} give tactical commanders ~~maximum flexibility~~ in maneuvering their troops, especially if the American airborne, for example, is used to drop behind ^{Communist lines} the enemy lines to surprise them. Also, sources argue, the supply and ^{Some} artillery ~~bases~~ ^{bases} lie in Laos; the long-range Communist weapons, used with ~~forward~~ ^{forward} observers for visible spotting, could rain heavy shells upon American ground troops, ^{who} operating around Khe Sanh, ^{who} would not even have the trenchline trenchline protection offer inside the besieged Marine base.

"Our overwhelming military presence in South Vietnam allowed us a ~~small~~ ^{small} military presence in Laos for some time," ^{one} military source explained. "Without that small Laotian presence, we could not have remained in South Vietnam as strong as we ^{have}. But now, without a stronger military presence in Laos, ^{we} still not be able to hold South Vietnam. Khe Sanh is our key to the Communist invasion-- ^{HOWEVER} the doorway of the invasion is Laos."

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