

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5—The official assumption here is that a negotiated political settlement in Vietnam is impossible and maybe even dishonorable, but how do they know?

Nobody has tried to find out. So far as can be determined, there has been no contact, direct or indirect, with Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader in North Vietnam. Everybody here is just settling down behind Duong Ban (Big) Minh in Saigon and insisting that only a military settlement is feasible.

This may or may not be true. The origin of this policy goes back to the surprise of the Korean War. It was assumed then that the Soviet Union had made a radical change in Asian policy from peaceful subversion to open warfare. And it was further assumed that we had therefore to be prepared for similar moves anywhere else on the periphery of the Communist world from Korea to Iran.

The Changed Positions

Since then there has been considerable evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union did not plan the North Korean attack as the first of a series of assaults on the borderlands. Also the internal problems in the Soviet Union and Communist China and the ideological differences between them have raised even more serious doubts that they are eager now for military adventures beyond their frontiers.

It is not at all for sure, for example, that the Soviets would be too pleased with Chinese domination of North Vietnam. On the contrary, there are reasons for believing that Moscow has intervened in Southeast Asia to keep the Chinese influence from growing, and lately there have been some indications that the Soviets were trying to increase their contacts with Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam.

None of this is solid enough to justify much hope of a Korean-type truce along the 17th parallel, but it would be interesting to try. The United States went into South Vietnam with a single purpose: to halt the expansion of Communist subversion and penetration below the 17th parallel.

Washington has demonstrated in the last year that it has the will and power at least to create a stalemate in that peninsula. No doubt the war effort will be improved under Big Minh if Saigon concentrates on "killing Communists" instead of Buddhists and its own politicians, but what is the objective of the exercise? Is it merely to pacify the country south of the 17th parallel, and if so, is guerrilla warfare the only way to achieve this objective?

There is, of course, another possibility. This is to conquer the whole peninsula, compel the unconditional surrender of the North Vietnamese Communists, and establish a powerful Western military base right up against the frontier of Communist China.

Peking, however, is no more likely to tolerate this in North Vietnam than it did in North Korea, but it might accept a truce at the 17th parallel in Vietnam as it negotiated a truce at the 38th parallel in Korea.

A neat and tidy military conquest of the whole peninsula by the South Vietnamese, backed by 15,000 Americans, is not very likely. The French couldn't do it with 380,000 troops,

and finally concluded that no settlement was possible in Vietnam that China was not prepared to tolerate.

General Eisenhower at least saw this point in Korea. Not prepared for a long stalemate, he created the conditions for a negotiated settlement by letting the enemy know he was ready to risk an expanded war. This, he claims in his memoirs, led to the truce.

President Kennedy, however, is apparently not prepared either to expand the fight, or negotiate. Why a truce at the Korean 38th parallel is acceptable to Washington but a truce at the Vietnamese 17th parallel is not acceptable is not clear. No doubt the Communists would try to break it, but in this event North Vietnam is even more vulnerable to air and sea attack than North Korea.

For years there has been talk of a "neutral belt" of states including Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, backed by the major powers, and protected by small military missions in the capitals of North and South Vietnam.

This may not be possible now, but before we embark once more on the purely military policy of "killing Communists," who in turn have a nasty habit of killing Americans, it would be interesting to find out.