

Cambodia's proposal for a nine-power conference to guarantee its independence and neutrality deserves serious consideration. The United States last year was cool to similar proposals and Britain followed the American lead. But London now seems to feel that a meeting could be useful and Paris agrees.

The real issue is not Cambodia—on which agreement should not be difficult—but Vietnam. Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk proposes a neutral South Vietnam, with which his country would be prepared to confederate. Even if this were not part of his plan, it would be impossible to exclude the war in Vietnam from discussion, in some form, at a conference of the United States, Britain, France, Russia, Communist China, Laos, Cambodia and North and South Vietnam.

The United States has no reason to fear an international discussion of this issue. The Communists clearly are the aggressors in South Vietnam. A neutral Vietnam, North and South, need not mean an attempt at early reunification or the inclusion of Communist ministers in the Saigon government, as was attempted with poor results in Laos. The

aim should be a return to the core of the 1954 Geneva settlement, which postponed the difficult reunification issue and brought about the evacuation both of Communist guerrillas and foreign troops (then French) from South Vietnam.

The central question is whether there is a possibility of a negotiated settlement of the Vietnamese war in the near future. President DeGaulle evidently thinks there may be. There have been a number of peace feelers in the past year from North Vietnam, which is undergoing an economic crisis. Fear of ~~negotiation~~ neighboring China is traditional there. Hanoi has maintained an uneasy neutrality in the Moscow-Peking feud and may well be worried over an extension of Peking's influence in a prolonged war.

= An international conference on Cambodia would provide an opportunity to probe this situation without arousing premature hopes of a Vietnamese settlement. The danger is that peace talks might weaken the <sup>war</sup>/morale of South Vietnam. The best way to avoid that would be for Washington and Saigon to reach early agreement on their peace aims—something that is long overdue. Once there is unity and clarity on what we are fighting for, there should be no fear of negotiating for the same objectives.

The political climate in South Vietnam is healthier now than it has been for several years. The war against the Vietcong is being prosecuted more efficiently than under the Diem Government. The new regime in Saigon may need time to get its house further in order. But its present momentum already argues against delaying too long the exploratory peace talks that a Cambodian conference would bring.