



President Nixon's Unplayable Hand

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V IETNAMIZATION is not the only casualty of Hanoi's latest offensive. Great power diplomacy built by President Nixon around the theory of linkage has also been knocked into a cocked hat.

The President's aim was to use his connections with Russia and China to advantage in Vietnam. Instead, he finds that the burden of Vietnam now strains his ties with the great powers of Communism.

Mr. Nixon never concealed his intention to try the great power game in Vietnam. All through the 1968 campaign he spoke of using the resource of "total diplomacy" to make peace.

Once in office, Mr. Nixon played the hand with great skill. He let the Russians know he would not deal with them on arms control unless they behaved in a peaceful way all over the globe. The Soviet Union was thus promoted to the role of co-policeman of the world. The linkage theory had, in effect, been deployed.

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F OR THREE YEARS thereafter the President worked Moscow against Peking in a masterpiece of careful staging. By the beginning of this year he had powerfully frayed Hanoi's ties with its principal allies in the Communist world.

Russia was engaged in two sets of negotiations critically important to Moscow — the German treaty providing for a boundary settlement in Central Europe and the arms control negotiations providing for strategic parity with the United States. Both were due to come to a head in a summit meeting with President Nixon set in Moscow for this May. The Russians had to know their treaties would be in

jeopardy if peace was violated in Southeast Asia.

China, too, had been drawn into negotiations with the United States. The President's chief foreign policy aide, Henry Kissinger, had visited Peking twice. He had come away convinced that China did not support North Vietnam's designs to take over South Vietnam by force.

Despite Mr. Nixon's visit to Peking and what he called "the week that changed the world," the Chinese did not modulate North Vietnam's behavior.

With their Chinese rivals egging Hanoi on, the Russians were in poor position to assert a restraining influence.

The administration is still going through the motions of great power diplomacy based on linkage. The President, Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird are all blaming their troubles in Vietnam on the Russians. But the complaints have a distinctly hollow ring.

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I N SUM, the basic fact is that the hand Mr. Nixon set out to play — the hand of great power diplomacy in Vietnam — was unplayable. Not because of the players, but because the cards just weren't there. The government of South Vietnam is a losing proposition. No diplomatic combination can change that.

The only thing that will work are negotiations with North Vietnam based on recognition of the fact that the regime of South Vietnam cannot be sustained in its present form. The sooner Mr. Nixon settles to such negotiations, the sooner he stops playing diplomatic games, the better for everybody.