

Mr. Nixon's Vietnam Strategy

12 NOV President Nixon's developing Vietnam strategy increases the risk of indefinite American involvement in an unending Indochina war. While the President added nothing fundamentally to the old policy mix by his announcement of a withdrawal target of 45,000 troops over the next two months, his press conference remarks tend to confirm fears about where he is heading.

The President made repeated references to his continuing desire for a negotiated settlement, hinting at "other channels" than the Paris talks and possible Chinese or Soviet "assistance" with Hanoi. But he made no new move to re-activate the direct channel he already has to Hanoi in Paris. Nor did he make any effort to respond to the openings offered in July by the Vietcong's seven-point proposal, which has remained largely unanswered for more than four months.

Counterproposals are needed at Paris that face up to the real issue: what kind of compromise political settlement can be arrived at? Short of that, private talks could be opened with Hanoi by setting a final withdrawal date conditional on serious negotiations for concurrent release of prisoners and achievement of a cease-fire. The implication would be that agreement must be reached before American forces were reduced below some minimum "residual force" level.

Instead, Mr. Nixon has announced his intention to maintain a residual force without making any negotiating advance. If anything, he has stiffened his negotiating objectives as well as his tactics. Instead of the "reasonable chance" for survival that he previously sought for the Thieu regime, Mr. Nixon now appears to be seeking a greater degree of certainty that South Vietnam "will be able to defend itself from a Communist take-over."

It is to achieve this greater assurance of a non-Communist South Vietnam in the future that Mr. Nixon now for the first time has flatly and publicly committed himself to the concept of an American "residual force." In addition, as long as the war goes on, Mr. Nixon has committed himself to continued use of American airpower on a large scale. The re-engagement of American ground forces in a crisis clearly would not be ruled out either.

The two tracks of Vietnamization and negotiation in Mr. Nixon's policy remain inherently contradictory. It is the failure to face up to that contradiction that has led to the present impasse.

Vietnamization requires strengthening the Saigon Government to take over the main role in a continuing war. A negotiated settlement to end the war involves replacement of the Thieu regime with some compromise arrangement acceptable to both sides.

President Thieu, unwilling to risk sharing political power with his non-Communist opponents, is unlikely on his own to take the even greater risks of a political settlement with the Communists. Mr. Nixon, too, has been unwilling to face the risks in the latter course. He has seen negotiations so far as a means of accepting the surrender of the other side.

Another chance will come in January. The two-month troop withdrawal schedule just announced would appear to be a holding action to get Mr. Nixon through his Peking visit. In the likely event that this visit does not produce a Vietnam solution, Mr. Nixon can still take the negotiating course he avoided last week by opening private talks with Hanoi in Paris.