

Negotiation Again

The return of the United States to the Vietnam peace conference in Paris and the imminent arrival of North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho, presumably for renewed high-level private talks, are the first fruits of President Nixon's critical decisions in the wake of the Kissinger-Brezhnev talks in Moscow. These decisions—to resume negotiations and to continue withdrawing American ground troops from South Vietnam—outweigh in significance the unfortunate rhetoric with which Mr. Nixon surrounded them in his television address to the nation. For the moment, what the President does is far more important than what he says.

Mr. Kissinger reportedly remains convinced that the North Vietnamese military offensive in South Vietnam is an attempt to improve the Communist bargaining position in Paris and that there is a possibility of a settlement once the relative strength of the forces on the ground is established. It is in the deepest interest of the United States and the South Vietnamese people to explore this possibility steadily, persistently and without deadlines as long as the other side is prepared to negotiate.

The period now opening, up to the November election, offers a better prospect for a compromise settlement in Vietnam than has existed for a long time or may exist for a long time afterward. Hanoi knows that President Nixon's interest in ending the war will never be greater than it is now and that his military reactions after November, if re-elected for four years, are less predictable.

Washington, for its part, now knows that Communist military power in South Vietnam has not faded away. Vietnamization clearly can not end the war—or the American involvement, so long as a President determined to back Saigon with airpower and seapower remains in office. Only a negotiated settlement can terminate this disastrous conflict.

The basis for a settlement exists. The Kissinger-Le Duc Tho talks last year reached agreement in principle on seven points of the nine-point Communist peace proposal. The critical issue that needs to be resolved is the nature of the interim coalition government, to be confirmed by elections, that will replace the Thieu regime. Private talks on this are vital.

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It is a tragedy that more lives are going to be lost and more destruction rained on the Vietnamese countryside while the talks proceed. But if there is to be a chance of de-escalation and a negotiated settlement, it is vital to avoid confusion—of the kind both Mr. Nixon and the North Vietnamese have sowed in recent days—about the linkage between fighting in the South and the halt in bombing the North that was established in the so-called “understandings” of October, 1968.

The North Vietnamese, despite their current denials, clearly understood that the United States reserved the option of resuming the bombing unless they accepted Saigon at the peace table, negotiated seriously and avoided major attacks across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and against South Vietnam's larger cities, Saigon, Danang and Hué. But there was no understanding on Communist military action elsewhere in South Vietnam. Intermittent Communist offensives have continued since 1968, and so has allied military action in the South.

President Nixon is setting new conditions, which are not at all in the American interest, when he insists that the Communists halt their offensives other than that below the DMZ and threatens to continue the bombing and withdraw again from the peace talks unless they do.

The President's revival of the discredited “domino” theory, his renewed lip-service to the supposed American interest in preserving the anti-Communist Saigon regime and, in general, his re-statement of exaggerated war aims—reminiscent of President Johnson—complicate the negotiating task that lies ahead.

If the North Vietnamese are prepared to make a compromise settlement—and no one can be sure of that—Mr. Nixon will have to eat much of Wednesday's rhetoric to meet them halfway. That rhetoric may be designed to hold Congress in sway and to appease the President's conservative constituency and his military advisers. But it also echoes the deeply-held views of his own past, a past with which it is painful—but possible—for him to break.

The imaginative openings toward Peking and Moscow that Mr. Nixon has initiated in the past year show him to be capable of negotiating peace in Vietnam, if the opportunity arises. What is essential is that the opportunities that may exist for negotiating a compromise be pursued now with determination and vigor.