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A New Geneva

The Administration's rapid and positive response to a hint that the Soviet Union favors a new Geneva conference on Indochina—as the French have proposed—is a hopeful sign that the need to revitalize peace negotiations is fully recognized in Washington.

Soviet Ambassador Malik has already pulled back from his mention of a Geneva conference, which aroused the world's peace hopes, by describing it as “unrealistic at the present time.” But neither his disappointing retreat nor the negative Vietcong comment in Paris reduces the necessity for revived negotiations; nor in fact does the announcement of further American troop withdrawals. Only a negotiated settlement can end the war.

The Paris peace talks have bogged down, in part, because Washington and Hanoi have each insisted that the other make the next concession. President Nixon showed his displeasure by refusing to replace Ambassador Lodge with another high-level representative and Hanoi responded by reducing the level of its participation in the meetings. A move to Geneva could help to overcome both obstacles.

The United States and North Vietnam also could upgrade their delegations at a new conference and make new proposals without loss of face. Perhaps equally important, the addition of other countries to the negotiations would provide badly needed mediators, who could advance new proposals of their own without foreclosing smaller meetings both within the conference framework and outside.

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No one can object to the three-point agenda the French evidently have suggested for the Geneva meeting. A political settlement in South Vietnam is the key to a solution both of the Vietnam war and of the widening conflict in Cambodia and Laos. Withdrawal of all external forces will have to be agreed to at the same time and timetables worked out. Guarantees that the agreements will be carried out—and not reversed—are an essential part of the package, including revitalization of the International Control Commissions in both Vietnams, Cambodia and Laos.

Mr. Malik's initial comment last week that “only a new Geneva conference could bring about a new solution” also favored revival of the I.C.C., made up of India, Poland and Canada. Those three countries would participate in the Geneva conference suggested by France, as they did in the fourteen-power Laos conference of 1961-62. But the core of the new Geneva meeting, as at the 1954 conference, would consist of the Big Five—the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China—and the Indochinese contestants.

An agreement on which of the Indochinese elements will participate may be difficult to reach. France, for example, proposes that Prince Sihanouk take part as well as the new Cambodian regime. A dispute over who should speak for Laotian neutralists—Premier Souvanna Phouma or a pro-Communist group of “neutralists” advanced by the Pathet Lao—would require some discussion. But these problems should not be insuperable.

What is important is that France be encouraged by the United States to pursue its initiative; whether or not the Soviet Union is prepared at this time to take a bigger role in working out the details.