

The Question: Why Now?

Nixon Aides Say Military Situation, Not Elections, Spurred Peace Offer

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 7—There are two new elements in President Nixon's latest proposal for peace in Asia: a standstill cease-fire throughout Indochina and a change of venue from the frustrated Paris talks to a large, international conference at which the Soviet Union and Communist China would be welcomed. Both ideas have been around for a long time. Although they raise dozens of questions as out-

News
Analysis

lined tonight, the critical question is, Why now?

That is what North Vietnam will ask, if it gives any serious consideration at all to the President's suggestion, or if Moscow and Peking, for reasons of their own, could be persuaded to urge Hanoi's acceptance.

The White House quickly explained this evening that it did not expect an early favorable response, but that it nonetheless believed the President's speech could in time become the basis for a settlement.

Turn Rule for Insert A, pik up Not only Hanoi but some observers in the United States and elsewhere will be tempted to explain the timing by the schedule of American Congressional elections.

Since North Vietnam and the Vietcong have themselves timed both negotiating proposals and military offensives with American elections in mind, no United States President could be denied the right to defend his position by the same means. But the President's aides insist that peace in Vietnam is much too important to be subject to that kind of partisan consideration and their answer to the question of timing deals in the military realities instead.

Cite Shift in Situation

They contend that this is the first time in the long history of the war in Indochina that the United States could safely accept the risk of a standstill cease fire in the war zone. By this they mean that the American and South Vietnamese forces have finally gained the upper hand in the most important and populated sectors of South Vietnam and that a cease-fire, according to all their studies, would enable them to retain, and perhaps even extend, that position.

Extensive studies that are said to have been conducted over the last six months show that the southern half of South Vietnam can be effectively managed by allied forces without major battles against the enemy's forces.

The cease fire would prevent the enemy from rebuilding disrupted bases in Cambodia and would also deny him the right to infiltrate new men and supplies.

The enemy has been stronger in the northern and more remote regions of South Vietnam, but a cease-fire and standstill would prevent not only a further build-up but also the use of that strength against the coastal and populated regions.

Thus, despite the enormous difficulties that would be encountered in arranging, administering and supervising a standstill among the jumbled

pieces on the Vietnam check-board, Mr. Nixon clearly feels that he could indeed profit from a cease-fire and, with an end of the shooting, even enhance his staying power at the conference table. Moreover, the clear and simple suggestion to stop the shooting has an obvious appeal not only to Americans but to people everywhere, an appeal that the Administration plainly hopes to translate not only into political support but also diplomatic strength.

Why, then, should North Vietnam be interested? Mr. Nixon's proposal does not significantly alter the United States position on Hanoi's principal two demands. The first has been for a deadline for the unconditional withdrawal of all American and allied forces. The second has been a demand for American help in decapitating the Saigon Government.

Repeats Earlier Offers

Mr. Nixon repeated earlier offers to negotiate the mutual withdrawal of allied and North Vietnam troops and his preof political power in South Vietnamese themselves devise a process for the distribution of Vietnam. But he emphatically rejected as totally unacceptable the Vietcong's demand that President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam and his two principal deputies be eliminated from the Saigon regime before even a provisional Government is established.

In fact, therefore, the essence of both military and political proposals made so far by the United States would give the Thieu Government the lion's share of military and political power in the populated regions of South Vietnam.

For Hanoi to accept this condition as part of a cease-fire package would have to signify a calculation by North Vietnam that its resources and opportunities in the war were exhausted, at least for the time being, and that it had better get the Americans out and take its chances on political action over a very long run.

Hanoi and the Vietcong have also referred at times to an eventual cease-fire, but only in the context of their principal objective—gaining a coalition government in Saigon while the Americans depart.

The White House said the cease-fire proposal could stand alone without acceptance of the larger peace conference or the other elements of Mr. Nixon's television address. The call for a conference was not further explained here this evening, but it appears to be a throwback to private maneuverings between Moscow and Washington last spring. The French proposed a larger conference at that time, and one Soviet diplomat, apparently on instructions, said it was a good idea.

But the initiative collapsed, apparently because Hanoi balked and then was engulfed by the move into Cambodia. Mr. Nixon seems to be testing the possibility that Moscow still wants to deliver the North Vietnamese to such a larger meeting as part of its effort to contain Communist China.