

NYTimes MAY 1 1975
Long Road to the Paris Pacts Had

By **FLORA LEWIS**

Special to The New York Times

PARIS, April 30—Throughout the long Vietnam war there were probes and talks—on a scale probably unparalleled in military history—to find an alternative political settlement.

Sometimes they got nowhere. Other times they sparked hope and brought disappointment. And, finally, when they led to a solemn ceremony in which the foreign ministers of four belligerents and eight guarantor states signed a "peace," they were followed by more years of fighting.

Part of the negotiations took place in public, or over the heads of the public in speeches and press conferences. Part was semipublic at the regular Paris talks, which lasted four years. And part was so ultraprivate that allies and even officials in the same governments did not know what other officials were up to.

Some important details remain secret or the subject of contradictory reports. From what has been told, officially or privately by those involved, here is the story of the United States' Vietnam diplomacy from the time of its deep involvement.

U.S. Contacts With Ho Chi Minh

The United States had contacts with Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communist leader, before the end of the Japanese occupation of Indochina in World War II. But the French returned and played the major Western role in the peninsula until, after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, they abandoned efforts to retain the colony.

There was increasing United States support for the French effort to stay in Indochina from the beginning of the cold war in 1946 until the 1954 Geneva peace agreements. The United States attended the Geneva conference but refused to sign.

In early 1955 the United States began to take over the job of military assistance. From then on it backed and sought to strengthen a non-Communist government in Saigon.

Washington saw no reason to negotiate with North Vietnam during that period. But it has now been fairly well established that President Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon offered Hanoi coexistence in return for calling off the South Vietnam-

ese Communists' National Liberation Front.

There is no evidence that Mr. Diem's secret offer led to Washington's green light for the coup that overthrew him, but some French historians think so.

After that, the situation deteriorated rapidly. In May, 1964, the United States began bombing the North Vietnamese infiltration routes southward through Laos. That summer, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, leader of Cambodia, met with President de Gaulle in Paris and urged him to reconvene the Geneva Conference, saying the situation was very dangerous. A number of Communist participants—China, the Soviet Union, Poland and North Vietnam—agreed.

But before the proposal for new negotiations went further, reports reached Washington on Aug. 4, 1964, that two United States destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Lyndon B. Johnson got the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress and ordered the first bombing raids on North Vietnam itself. Serious doubts arose later whether the destroyers had indeed been attacked, but Air Force and Navy bombers were already in action.

In the winter of 1964-65, North Vietnam's Health Minister went to Paris to tell French officials of Hanoi's concern about the United States buildup. There were several other discreet probes, but President Johnson refused contact at that time, partly at the urging of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, who felt that it was unwise to enter talks while the Saigon Government was threatened with defeat.

Bombing of North Began

Operation Rolling Thunder, the systematic and increasing bombing of the North, began on March 2, 1965, and on March 8 the first United States combat troops arrived in Vietnam to support the 23,000 United States military advisers who were there at the start of the year.

Almost immediately, in a speech April 7 at Baltimore, President Johnson offered unconditional negotiations and \$2-billion in economic aid. Hanoi replied April 8 with a four-point peace plan. Each considered the other's offer a virtual ultimatum, but as was to happen throughout the war, the talk on terms was kept going behind the thunder of the guns.

The first bombing pause came in May, 1965. The French Foreign Ministry served as a message center. To President Johnson's question, "What will you do if we stop bombing?" came Hanoi's reply, "Stop bombing and we will talk." But it came one day too late.

That was more or less the pattern in the course of a bewildering series of contacts through all sorts of intermediaries until the Tet offensive of 1968. Essentially, the American effort was to block infiltration, either through fighting and bombing or through negotiations. Hanoi's effort was to get the bombing stopped and then to bargain about the future of South Vietnam.

The goals of the two sides were contradictory. By peace the United States meant conditions to assure the maintenance of an anti-Communist South Vietnam. Hanoi meant a less costly opportunity to pursue its revolutionary aims.

There were nine bombing halts—some only 24 hours for Christmas or New Year's—from then until March 31, 1968. Meanwhile, the number of United States troops in Vietnam increased to 525,000, and Nguyen Van Thieu was established as President.

Dramatic Shift of Policy

On March 31 1968, President Johnson announced a dramatic change of policy. There was to be no more escalation, bombing was halted above the 20th Parallel and there was a renewed call for negotiations. Mr. Johnson gave his new decision credibility with the startling declaration that he would not run for re-election.

On April 3, Hanoi agreed to the opening of a conference in Paris. On April 7, bombing was stopped above the 19th Parallel.

The Paris talks opened on May 10.

The negotiations dragged on all summer, with Washington demanding that Hanoi promise not to infiltrate across the demilitarized zone and Hanoi demanding an unconditional halt in all bombing of North Vietnam. Finally, an ambiguous agreement that Washington called a "mutual understanding" and Hanoi called a "unilateral" end of bombing was reached on Oct. 31.

On Nov. 1, six days before the Presidential election, Mr. Johnson stopped the bombing.

The crucial issue in the talks was the participation of Saigon and the Vietcong Liberation Front, later the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

In the Communists' eyes, the United States gave Saigon a veto over political issues. On its side, Hanoi demanded equal status for the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

The issue, expressed in the battle over the shape of the table, was set aside by ambiguous compromise, never to be resolved either during the talks or in the final accords.

In June, 1969, President Nixon undertook American troop withdrawals, starting with 25,000 men.

"Talking and fighting" continued. Washington decided to try the "double-track" tactic favored by Henry A. Kissinger, then Mr. Nixon's national security adviser. Mr. Kissinger's first trip to Paris for a highly secret meeting with the North Vietnamese Ambassador, Xuan Thuy, was on Aug. 4, 1969.

There were 12 such meetings before Mr. Nixon decided to "go public" with the secret in a speech on Jan. 25, 1972. He said that by publicizing United States peace offers, he hoped to break the deadlock. He also made it clear that he was appealing primarily to American public opinion, which had grown increasingly impatient with the war and hostile to the Administration despite his policy of stretching the support for Saigon by pulling out troops and cutting casualties.

From Hanoi's point of view, the United States had never been "serious" in these talks since it had insisted throughout that it would negotiate only military issues, not political ones.

Cambodia Involved

In the meantime, the war had spread to Cambodia with the American invasion in May and June, 1970, and the American antiwar movement had become increasingly vociferous.

The intensive bombing of Cambodia was ordered secretly in 1971 to avoid public demonstrations, with official military reports falsified to make it appear that the targets were in Vietnam.

Then came the North Vietnamese spring offensive in 1972. The South reeled and the United States renewed heavy bombing of the North.

Mr. Kissinger went to Moscow in April to seek a resumption of diplomacy, offering an important concession: The United States would drop its demand for withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces in return for a cease-fire in place. Hanoi then agreed to another secret meeting in Paris.

Misleading Signs, Pitfalls and Dead Ends

Saigon's military situation was still deteriorating, so Washington decided to bomb Hanoi and mine the Haiphong harbor, running the risk that the much-heralded Nixon-Brezhnev summit would be canceled by Moscow.

Neither Moscow nor Peking reacted with any vehemence to the American escalation—a fruit of Mr. Kissinger's engagement of their interests elsewhere.

Hanoi agreed to further secret talks, and on May 25 Mr. Kissinger offered the first tempting glimpse that the United States might compromise on the political issue, suggesting a "tripartite commission" in the South, composed of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the Saigon administration and the neutralists.

What the commission would do was unclear, but when President Thieu found out about it he was furious. Mr. Kissinger stepped up his travels, distributing promises and threats as the 1972 Presidential campaign gained momentum. The semi-public Paris talks, boycotted by the United States during the spring offensive, also resumed.

The North Vietnamese made an important offer on the record—to separate military and political negotiations—but it was put so subtly that its meaning was unclear. Mr. Kissinger continued his probes in secret talks with Le Duc Tho, by then Hanoi's representative, and in September the Vietcong made the next key offer, again couched in ambiguous language

—"two armies, two administrations and other political forces."

Mr. Kissinger flew to Moscow and asked the Russians if this meant that the demand that the United States overthrow Mr. Thieu had been dropped—the breakthrough he was seeking. The Russians said they thought so, but Mr. Thieu sent word he would never accept a tripartite commission because that would mean a coalition.

The negotiations entered the climatic stage in October. Mr. Tho presented a draft agreement, the first full document either side had offered. It provided for a cease-fire in place, a tripartite political body to prepare elections in the South and full American withdrawal, with release of American prisoners.

After the years of slow-motion fencing, the pace became frantic. On Oct. 11, there was an agreement in principle with two points outstanding—whether, as Hanoi insisted, South Vietnamese civilian prisoners would have to be released on the same timetable as prisoners of war, and terms for continued United States military aid to South Vietnam. Mr. Kissinger went home to seek Mr. Nixon's approval.

Another meeting was set for Oct. 17, with the understanding that the agreement would be signed by Oct. 31.

Apparently, Mr. Kissinger had totally misjudged President Thieu's position. He had kept most of the details secret from Saigon and took only the English text of the draft with him;

Mr. Thieu had to wait for his embassy in Paris to send him the vital Vietnamese text. It remains unclear whether Mr. Kissinger really thought he could persuade Mr. Thieu or was determined to push the agreement through regardless of Saigon's objections.

Nonetheless, Mr. Kissinger advised President Nixon from Saigon that their plans could be carried out. The President sent a message to Hanoi saying that, despite a few remaining details, "the text of the agreement could be considered complete" and could be signed on Oct. 31, which was six days before the United States election.

Just what happened in the next three days remains unclear. There was confusion and possibly deceit. On Oct. 24 Mr. Nixon told Hanoi that the deadline could not be met.

In bitter disappointment North Vietnam decided in its turn to go public. On Oct. 26 it released the text of the draft as it had stood at the end of the last Paris session, the agreed timetable and Mr. Nixon's message of agreement. Washington was appalled.

With Mr. Nixon's endorsement, Mr. Kissinger held a news conference, saying that "peace is at hand" but that Washington required just one more negotiating round of only "three or four days" to finish the details.

On Nov. 20, after President Nixon's landslide victory, Mr. Kissinger returned to Paris for the "last round" with Mr. Tho, but he presented a South Vietnamese document demanding 69 changes in the text.

Only 'For the Record'

Afterwards, American officials, including Mr. Kissinger, said that this was only "for the record" to pacify Mr. Thieu.

Nonetheless, according to North Vietnamese sources, the United States continued to demand 44 changes, some of them major, after having said the text was complete. Mr. Kissinger leaked a story that the new difficulty was over Hanoi's refusal to accept the demilitarized zone as a "political boundary" and thus confirm Saigon's sovereignty.

It was a remarkable idea. From the beginning, Hanoi had been fighting the war against the notion of a permanent division of Vietnam. It has repeatedly said, and in public, that it would accept the 1954 Geneva language drawing the demilitarized zone as a "military demarcation line"—that is, explicitly not a political border.

Later, Mr. Kissinger spread

word in Washington that the columnist to whom he had leaked the story, James Reston of The New York Times, had misreported his remarks. Perhaps that too was a signal, this time to Hanoi, not to take the demands seriously.

On Dec. 4, Hanoi withdrew a number of previous concessions. Mr. Kissinger later spoke of Hanoi's "perfidy" and complained that he had never dealt with such tricky negotiators.

The talks broke down on Dec. 15, and on Dec. 18 President Nixon ordered heavy bombing of Hanoi and the rest of North Vietnam, which was to continue through Christmas and New Year's.

No Major Alterations

The initial public explanation for the bombing was that it was necessary to extract further essential concessions from Hanoi. But the final document did not contain major changes involving the central issues of the negotiations. Other versions of the reason, more or less official, were that the bombing served a dual purpose of reassuring Mr. Thieu that the United States would stick by him and demonstrating that the United States had left Hanoi in the weakest possible position at the moment of cease-fire.

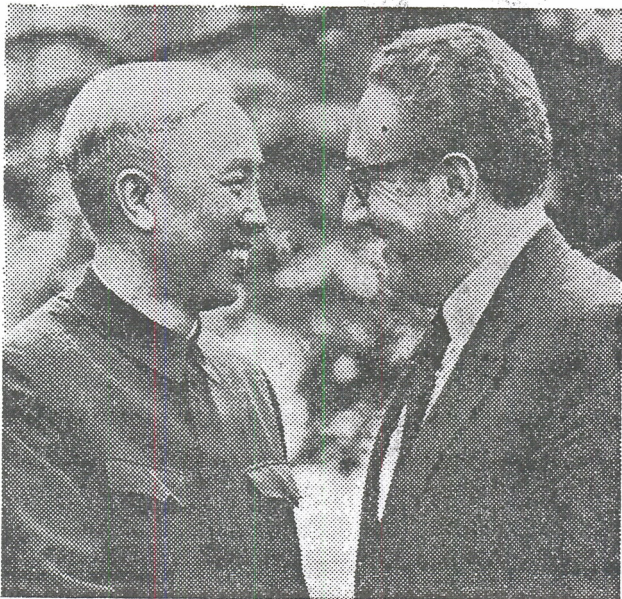
The record of the bombing decision remains secret. When the campaign stopped and Mr. Kissinger met Mr. Tho again, on Jan. 7, 1973, the critical issues were not those that had been stressed in public as the reason for the resort to force—the details of the International Control Commission and restoration of the Geneva phraseology on the demilitarized zone.

Agreement was reached on Jan. 13. There remains a heated argument whether the final terms added anything that Hanoi was not prepared to concede in October and whether the United States actually obtained critical new concessions.

President Thieu remained adamant; the final struggle was mainly between Washington and Saigon. President Nixon sent a number of letters and messages to President Thieu in that period, the theme, according to a senior Saigon official, being "if you don't go along with us, we will each go our own way."

On Jan. 27, 1973, the cease-fire was signed in Paris, to take effect that night.

The war sputtered on, with mounting casualties, until it flared again early this year. There had been no compromise.



Gamma

Le Duc Tho, North Vietnamese negotiator, and Henry A. Kissinger at one of their meetings near Paris in 1972.