

U.S., Russ Both Need to Save Face

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WASHINGTON — President Nixon's new military challenge to Moscow and Hanoi has offered North Vietnam the most generous peace terms of the war — terms that Hanoi could regard as major American concessions.

The U.S. offer was twofold — "complete" military withdrawal from Vietnam and an end to all "acts of force" in Indochina within four months of a ceasefire and the release of U.S. prisoners of war.

Meanwhile, he will use mines and bombs against ports and Communist rail lines.

In proposing a ceasefire in place, Nixon appeared to have abandoned the previous U.S. demand for withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from the South.

Also, for the first time, he talked of "complete" withdrawal, raising the possibility that the United States would negotiate on Hanoi's No. 1 demand — an end to U.S. air and Navy bombardments as well as withdrawal of troops.

Face-Saving for U.S.

But there was considerable doubt here today whether Hanoi and Moscow would see through the military challenge of the blockade to Nixon's real concern in finding a face-saving way for the United States to extricate itself from Vietnam.

Attention also focused on ways the Soviet Union could save face in the changed situation. These avenues included

the possibility of resuming the Paris peace talks or a call for an urgent UN Security Council session.

While neither of these options had yet been called for, the obvious need was to find some way for the Kremlin within the three-day deadline Nixon has set to preserve the Moscow Summit without making it appear that North Vietnam was being sold out by its major ally.

Moscow's Crucial Choice

An Eastern European ambassador here explained that the real need was to find some mechanism to gain time for both sides to take another look at each other's negotiating proposals and to consider the consequences.

Ironically, and perhaps at great risk, Nixon has attempted to turn the tables on the Soviet leadership, and apparently has now confronted Moscow with a monumental choice and a practical problem.

The choice revolves around what is more important to Moscow—its stake in seeing the Indochina conflict continue and threaten to involve the superpowers, or the Kremlin's interest in negotiating agreements, such as Strategic Arms Limitations and trade, that directly benefit the Soviet people.

The practical problem arises once Moscow has made a decision to help end the war. The problem then becomes how to do so.

President Nixon may have complicated that problem

by giving the Soviets almost no avenue to retreat without appearing to be capitulating to American power.

That is why Kremlinologists as well as Communist envoys here today were predicting a harsh Soviet reaction, possibly even an attempt to defy the blockade by escorting freighters with Russian troop ships or sending minesweepers to clear Haiphong harbor.

But other officials believed there was a way out for Moscow and for the United States.

Another Communist ambassador even suggested that the spectacle of Nixon coming begging to Moscow to save U.S. "honor" was exactly what the Kremlin wanted as its price for assistance.

The way out — resumption of the Paris peace talks with what could be regarded here as "serious" North Vietnamese interest in negotiating a settlement.

Way Out of Hanoi

If Hanoi so chooses, Nixon's new terms can be seen as concessions, providing North Vietnam with the avenue it needs to raise serious questions about the proposals at resumed peace talks.

This, in turn, would provide the President with the opportunity to tell the American people that Hanoi had returned to the negotiations "in good faith" and therefore the United States was either ending or curtailing its blockade of Haiphong.