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Triangulating the Circle

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PARIS—Unable to square the Vietnamese circle, President Nixon apparently hopes to triangulate it. Addressing himself particularly to Russia and China, Hanoi's great power backers, he opened wider the doors marked "war" and "peace" and seemed to suggest a choice. Judging by their actions, not their protestations, the Communist behemoths have so far chosen peace.

Nixon offered both an implicit pledge of more generous terms for compromise and an actual demonstration of tough resolve if this pledge is ignored. Should Moscow and Peking accept the embargo imposed on arms shipments or do nothing violent to try and break it, Washington hopes to enlist their tacit support in bringing the conflict to an end.

Just what this could mean is hard to say. Britain urges Russia to join in reconvening the lapsed Geneva conference on Indochina. Meanwhile the Paris peace talks are suspended—but not dead.

The diplomatic game around the bloody battlefield is apparently being played in quiet among Washington, Moscow and Peking rather than near the Paris discussions. Only sound and fury emerge from the stalemated conference's periphery.

One is led to suspect that Moscow still plans to welcome President Nixon this month, is calmly continuing the SALT negotiations and wishes to avoid a naval confrontation with the United States. Thus a Kremlin decision appears to have been taken to join in constricting Vietnam's global risks.

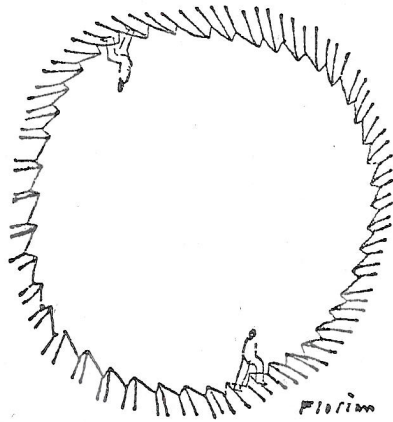
One cannot help wondering if a preliminary undertaking to limit these risks was not agreed upon by Brezhnev and Kissinger before Nixon announced his blockade. Secret contacts between Washington and Peking have also been exceptionally active. It is safe to assume that American assurances were given that military activities would be kept adequately far from China and that Chinese concern with Southeast Asia is understood.

The policy of triangulating the interests of the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R. and China involves imagination and risk. However, Washington claims it is making insistent efforts to limit that risk and describes it as "acceptable."

Zealous aviation and naval commanders over and around North Vietnam must now be cautioned to avoid anything that might enrage either Moscow or Peking. This adds a difficult but not insurmountable responsibility to officers in charge of the air-sea operation designed to slowly induce a more compromising mood in Hanoi.

The immediate problem facing the United States and still threatening its new effort to achieve settlement by

FOREIGN AFFAIRS



diplomatic triangulation is the problem of the battlefield itself. One knows that General Giap, a great captain, is painstaking in repositioning the supplies his forces require. Therefore it is axiomatic that large stockpiles still exist in and near South Vietnam on which Giap can draw for at least another month.

If during that time the Communists are able to roll up Saigon's forces at Hue, in the Central Highlands, or near the capital itself, the entire South Vietnamese political and army structure might crumble before Nixon's new diplomatic effort has even a chance to take effect.

Should Giap produce a climactic victory during the next few weeks he could disintegrate the Saigon state. Then no diplomatic settlement—except ratification of chaos—would be left, either among the three great interested capitals or in Paris or London.

On the other hand, if Giap is not able to destroy southern defenses with fresh hammer blows, the American naval blockade would be left and Hanoi would have to reduce its sights. Then, as Nixon hopes, the basis for an acceptable compromise solution could be found and Washington, Moscow and Peking might all in one or another way endorse if not actually guarantee it.

Neither Hanoi nor Saigon would be entirely happy about such an outcome but Washington would be hugely relieved to find itself at last rid of an uncomfortable burden. Peking cannot say as much but obviously welcomes a solution that doesn't give all Indochina to tough and militant Hanoi.

Even Moscow, while seeing its dream of a pro-Soviet Southeast Asian bloc fading, is interested in peace to the west of Russia and a reduction in rearmament expenses. Its primordial problem remains the long-range competition with its only worrisome neighbor, China. Vietnam is only one piece in that puzzle.