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Vietcong Bid Dilemma for Nixon

By **TERENCE SMITH**

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Whatever its eventual outcome, the seven-point proposal put forward by the Vietnamese Communists at the Paris talks yesterday has transformed the climate of the negotiations and has intensified domestic political pressure on the Nixon Administration. The stalemated talks, for which most officials here had all but abandoned hope, have been thrust back into center stage overnight as a result of the new offer. With equal speed, President Nixon has been confronted with a major diplomatic dilemma.

News Analysis

By offering a flat commitment to release all American prisoners in exchange for the withdrawal of United States forces, the other side has put Mr. Nixon in the position of having either to negotiate on the basis of the Vietcong offer or come up with a counterproposal of his own.

It is clear from the initial reaction in this country that the Administration cannot simply dismiss this proposal out of hand, as it did an earlier offer, as "old wine in new bottles." The positive response the proposal has evoked from a bipartisan roster of Congressmen and former negotiators, such as W. Averell Harriman, has precluded that response if in fact the Administration ever entertained it.

It seems more likely that the Administration will first probe the meaning and motive behind the other side's offer, and then perhaps respond with a proposal that conforms more closely to its own goals.

Henry A. Kissinger, the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, may already be preparing the groundwork for a new American position.

He left Washington last night for Saigon, where, officials here said, he will sound out the South Vietnamese on their view of the Vietcong offer. After stops in Thailand, India and Pakistan, Mr. Kissinger will fly to Paris, where he will discuss the proposal in detail with David K. E. Bruce, the chief

The U.S. Is Expected to Respond With a Counterproposal

United States negotiator at the talks.

From Paris, Mr. Kissinger is scheduled to fly to the summer White House at San Clemente, Calif., where he will report to Mr. Nixon. Secretary of State William P. Rogers is expected to be on hand and a major review of the American negotiating position is probable.

An Administration official said today that he thought it was "very possible" that a new United States offer might emerge from that review, but that it would depend on the results of the intensive inquiries about the Vietcong proposal that Mr. Bruce will undertake in Paris over the next several weeks.

Among other points, the Administration is anxious to learn what the Communists mean in Point 1 of their proposal, in which they call for the unconditional withdrawal of "all troops, military personnel, weapons and war materials of the United States and other foreign countries in the U.S. camp."

Does this mean simply the withdrawal of the non-Vietnamese allied forces and the equipment they have with them, or does it mean that the United States must strip South Vietnam of all its military hardware and cut off all further military assistance? This is one of the critical questions that will be raised in Paris.

If the answer is the former, then this will represent a major

softening of the other side's demands, in the opinion of the Administration's analysts. If it is the latter, there is little prospect for agreement.

Another central question that will be asked at Paris is whether the American withdrawal and release of the prisoners can be agreed upon without relation to Point 2 in the Vietcong proposal, which calls on the United States to cease all support for the Saigon Government.

The American fear is that the Communists will in fact make one issue conditional on the other, despite the fact that they have separated the two in their new proposal.

Before probing the details of the new offer, the Administration also must consider what impact even a partial agreement in Paris might have on the South Vietnamese political situation. Presidential elections are scheduled for Oct. 3, and so far Mr. Nixon has been reluctant to take any steps, such as announcing a withdrawal date, that might prejudice those elections.

Finally, the Administration must examine what impact an agreement on withdrawal would have on its long-term goals in South Vietnam. As outlined by Mr. Nixon, these include a "reasonable chance" for the South Vietnamese to be able to defend themselves and the withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

At the very least, the new Vietcong proposal will force Mr. Nixon to reconsider those goals and decide whether, in the face of mounting domestic opposition to the war, they are worth the price he will have to pay to achieve them.