

Vietnamizing the Peace ^{JUL} 8 1971

The statement of a high-ranking North Vietnamese in Paris that the latest Communist proposal on war prisoners and withdrawal is not dependent on a political settlement in South Vietnam removes a major obstacle to serious negotiations. The peace plan was not clear on this point when it was introduced by the Vietcong delegate last week. By suggesting that political questions could be discussed with the Saigon Government after the American withdrawal, the Communists in effect have proposed to Vietnamize the peace.

This would be a logical sequel to President Nixon's own program for Vietnamizing the war. Indeed, Mr. Nixon himself has suggested on several occasions that Hanoi should negotiate with Washington while United States forces remained in Vietnam, because otherwise they would be compelled to deal with the Saigon regime alone once the Americans were gone. If the Communists are now ready to take that chance, the President should have no objection.

Le Duc Tho, senior adviser to the Hanoi delegation in Paris, did repeat the old Communist objection to dealing with the existing regime of President Thieu in Saigon. Mr. Tho made the totally unacceptable suggestion that President Nixon use his influence to unseat Mr. Thieu in the forthcoming South Vietnamese presidential election. What the United States should do, of course, is to maintain strict neutrality, and certainly not do what it has been accused of doing—more or less openly support the Thieu candidacy. In any event, if the United States agrees to withdraw from South Vietnam by the end of this year, as the Communists propose, or soon thereafter, Mr. Nixon is not likely to have much leverage left in Saigon by the time the election is scheduled to take place next October.

Vietnamizing the peace entails risks all around. But it offers the most practical and honorable way to extricate the United States from this miserable conflict. The clarified Communist proposals, although still not without potential pitfalls, constitute a most promising basis for serious discussions in Paris.