The War of the Peace Talks

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 10 — This is the third week of the bitter public argument between the United States and North Vietnam over the merits of their respective secret peace plans an dover what each told the other in two years of on-and-off secret negotiations in Paris. On the American side, this unusual and confusing diplomatic del has already personally engaged President Nixon on four occasions — from his surprise speech Jan. 25, when he divulged the existence of the secret talks and the rival secret peace proposals, to his surprise news conference today. It has also engaged the President's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's chief negotiator, and assorted ambassadors and spokesmen on both sides.

News Analysis

Although each side apparently wants to keep negotiating channels open, the vituperative leel in these public exchanges led today to a temporary suspension of the next round of the peace talks.

Adding to the confusion this week was a mounting argument between Washington and Saigon over whether the United States had been undermining President Nguyen Van Thieu in its eagerness to promote its peace plan.

Mr. Nixon's secret eight-point plan provided for a new election within six months of a settlement and a pledge that President Thieu would resign 30 days before this balloting. But Secretary Rogers suggested last week that the United States could be "flexible" on this time frame. This led Mr. Thieu to remark angrily that Mr. Rogers "misunderstood" the situation.

Today, President Nixon sought to reassure the South Vietnamese.

One point on which the United States and North Vietnam could agree was that the peace negotiations had become deadlocked principally over Hanoi's insistence that President Thieu be removed as a condition for a settlement and Washington's steadfast refusal to accept this demand.

Aside from this central dispute, almost everything remained in some doubt, with both sidees unwilling to let the dead-lock interfere with the continuation of the Paris peace talks.

The American delegation, in fact, was being instructed to ask additional questions about the plans of Hanoi and the Vietcong, now made public and expanded with clarifications.

Several Clarifications

Mr. Thuy, who complained about President Nixon's disclosure of the secret talks, refused to state flatly that his side was ruling out a future round of secret talks. The impression here is that Hanoi is just as eager as Washington to preserve the secret hannel.

¶Aside from the dispute over President Thieu's future, the Washington-Hanoi exchanges seemed to clarify these points:

¶North Vietnam was no longer prepared to free the American prisoners in return for the setting of a specific date for the total withdrawal of United States troops from Vietnam and the halt of all military activities. Hanoi was holding out for a full-fledged political settlement.

¶The United States took the view that to accept the North Vietnamese political demands would be tantamount to surrender. Washington argues that it was not defending President Thieu, but the South Vietnamese right to self-detrmination.

¶The North Vietnamese emphasized their belief that Washington's support for Mr. Thieu's unopposed re-election last October demonstrated that the United States was not "really" interested in a fair settlement.

¶Hanoi made it clear that it regarded American proposals for an Indochina cease-fire as a trap—unless Mr. Nixon first took the United States out of the war.

An important aspect of the deadlock was Washington's intrepretation of Mr. Thuy's statements that American prisoners would be released only in the context of an over-all settlement after the ouster of the present Saigon regime.

Administration Feels Vindicated

The Nixon Administration, rejecting suggestions by critics at home that the prisoners would be freed if a specific date were set for total withdrawal of United States forces and the end of all American military activity, insisted all along that Hanoi demanded a political package. Now it feels vindicated by Mr. Thuy's words.

Nevertheless, the Administration is not convinced that Hanoi's attacks on the latest American peace plan are the last word. Senior officials still insist publicly and privately that Mr. Nixon's eight-point plan has not been formally rejected.

There is serious speculation here that North Vietnam is not ready to offer its final reply to the plan Mr. Nixon sent last October. No actual answer has yet been received.

Diplomats thought that the Hanoi Politburo preferred to await the outcome of Mr. Nixon's visits to Peking this month and to Moscow in May before committing itself to a negotiating position.

American officials made it clear, on the other hand, that in the absence of a reply from Hanoi, President Nixon had to disclose the secret negotiations before flying to Peking and Moscow.

The view in Washington, therefore, is that active talks in Paris—secret or public—must await Mr. Nixon's return from his travels. And his advisers believe that Mr. Nixon may have been right in suggesting in his speech that "public disclosure may help to break the secret deadlock."