

Excerpts From Kissinger News Conference on U.S.-North Vietnamese Exchanges

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WASHINGTON, May 9—Following are excerpts from the official transcript of the news conference held today by Henry A. Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security, in the White House. Mr. Kissinger's opening remarks are followed by questions and answers.

In order to put into perspective where we are in the peace negotiations, I would like to go through with you the exchanges that have taken place between us and Hanoi since the end of last year, that is to say, since the North Vietnamese canceled the private meeting that was scheduled for Nov. 20, when they canceled it three days before.

As you remember, the President in his speech on Jan. 25 pointed out that after Le Duc Tho had been suddenly taken ill, we offered to resume negotiations any time that he recovered, either with him or any other representative of Hanoi's political leadership, in order to bring about a rapid end of the war.

We insisted on a representative of Hanoi's political leadership because our experience had been that the delegation in Paris simply did not have sufficient authority to make these private talks useful. We never received a reply to this message of Nov. 19.

On Jan. 26, or the day after the President's speech revealing the secret talks, we sent a message to Hanoi indicating our readiness to resume private negotiations. On Feb. 14, there was a reply in which Hanoi indicated its willingness to meet any time from March 15 on.

March Date Is Suggested

On Feb. 17, that is to say, three days after we received the message, we accepted this proposal and suggested the date of March 20. The reason we suggested March 20 is because it is easier to travel on a weekend and we picked the first weekend after March 15.

In this message we said the following, which has characterized our attitude. We said, "The United States believes that (at this meeting) the proposals of both sides should be considered." In other words, we indicated our readiness to discuss their points. "It expects to negotiate on this basis with an attitude of justice and generosity and with a view to bringing about a rapid end of the war."

On Feb. 29, Hanoi accepted the date of March 20. On March 6, Hanoi postponed the March 20 meeting until April 15. We accepted this on March 13, only pointing out that there were other commitments on April 15 and proposing instead April 24. The other commitment

was the trip to Japan that had been planned and which we did not wish to cancel.

We did not hear from Hanoi to our acceptance of their own proposal. So after 10 days, Porter interrupted the plenaries on March 27. Four days after Porter had interrupted the plenaries, Hanoi accepted the date of April 24, provided the United States returned to the plenary.

We called Ambassador Porter back and we sent a message which was delivered on April 2, but which was in fact drafted on March 31, in which we agreed to resume the plenary sessions on April 13 and confirmed the meeting of April 24.

Unaware of Offensive

When that message was drafted we were not aware of the fact that a major offensive had in fact started at the demilitarized zone, and therefore, some of the press reports that we were tying the resumption of the plenaries to the end of the offensive are totally wrong. In fact, I will read you from our message to the North Vietnamese which will confirm this. It said as follows:

"In order to demonstrate its positive attitude and explore every possible opportunity for progress in negotiation, Ambassador Porter will propose a plenary session of the Paris conference on Thursday, April 13, 1972.

"On this basis the United States reaffirms its agreement to a meeting between Dr. Kissinger and special adviser Le Duc Tho and Minister Xuan Thuy on April 24 at the usual location.

"The United States side points out that the military operations launched by the North Vietnamese in recent days near the demilitarized zone and elsewhere and the firing of missiles from North Vietnamese territory into South Vietnamese air space are inconsistent with the purpose of this meeting. The United States side has been showing great restraint in its response in order to give the negotiations every chance to succeed."

At that time, some of you who called me will know, we were not sure that this was a full-scale offensive until Easter Sunday. Maybe we should have. But we were not certain that this was an offensive across the demilitarized zone.

Move to Avoid Pressure

The purpose of this message was to prevent military pressure from being put by either side.

I would also like to point out that during March, while we knew that a military build-up was going on, we nevertheless showed very great restraint. In fact, we did not authorize at-

tacks into North Vietnam except the normal protective reaction, but nothing against supply installations or missile

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relationships that had been established in Peking and that we were trying to develop in Moscow.

I have mentioned all of this to stress that what has happened was not done lightly, whatever judgments people may make.

Then during April there was an exchange of many messages which revolved around the question of whether there should be a private meeting before a plenary session or a plenary session before a private meeting, which did not however add a great deal to the substance that I have already pointed out to you.

Six Messages Exchanged

There were a total of six messages that were going back and forth in April. This was the situation when I went to Moscow.

As has been reported, the problem of Vietnam was discussed at considerable length. We pointed out to the Soviet leader the extraordinary complexity that was posed for us by a massive invasion of the entire North Vietnamese field army against South Vietnam, an invasion that if it achieved its objective was bound to jeopardize the security of 60,000 Americans, and the impact that such developments had to have on our attempts to move forward on a broad front.

While I do not want to go into the details of the discussion, the Soviet leaders felt that every effort should be made to resume negotiations, and on this basis, and in order not to be hung up on a procedural point, we proposed that we would return to the plenaries, if we received a firm assurance that a private meeting would follow rapidly.

We left no doubt that we were not concerned only or primarily with the fact of a private meeting, but with the results of a private meeting. We made it very clear that we were prepared to consider any reasonable approach that would lead either to a reduction in the violence, to an end of military operations, to a discussion of the military issues alone or to a discussion of the entire complex issues with only one proviso. We would not impose a Communist government on Saigon; we wanted a genuine political solution. With that one proviso we indicated a readiness to discuss any possible approach.

The meetings took place, as you know. There were two plenary sessions and a private session. We again went through every conceivable approach for ending the military situation and we indicated a readiness to examine any political proposal other than the imposition of a Communist government.

We were confronted by the reading to us of the published Communist statement. It had taken us six months to set up the meeting and innumerable exchanges and when we got there, what we heard could have been clipped from a newspaper and sent to us in the mail. This was the situation we confronted last week.

Demands Are Listed

What is it that the other side is asking of us that we have rejected? The



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Henry A. Kissinger, Presidential adviser, at White House news session.

other side has asked us, prior to a cease-fire, that the following steps must be taken:

The President of South Vietnam must resign. What is called the other side "the machinery of oppression of the government must be disbanded. Pacification must be stopped. Vietnamization must be stopped, which means the end of American military and economic aid. All persons who have been arrested on political grounds should be set free. Then a government should be formed which is composed of all those who favor peace, independence, neutrality and democracy, presumably, by definition, including the Communists.

In that government, in other words, the Communists would be the only organized force, since all the organized non-Communist forces would have been disbanded by definition.

All of this is prior to a cease-fire. Then this government is supposed to negotiate with the Communists a final solution. In other words, this is only the thinnest veneer; this government, which already contains the Communists, is then supposed to negotiate with the provincial revolutionary government, which at that moment will be the only force in the country which has an army, which is backed by the North Vietnamese Army. It will be the only force in the country that has any physical strength, and it is supposed to negotiate with them a final settlement. And all of his, ladies and gentlemen, is before a cease-fire.

A Refusal to Discuss

That is what we have rejected. That is what we call the imposition, under the thinnest veneer, of a Communist government. This is the ending of American economic and military aid, the disbanding of the government that exists in South Vietnam, as a prelude to negotiation. That is the only issue on which negotiations have broken down.

On the whole complex of military issues, we have indicated total readiness for discussion and our proposals have not been rejected; there has been a total refusal even to discuss them. We have not been told what is wrong with our proposals. There has been an absolute unwillingness to discuss any one of them, or to give us any reason why it was unacceptable so that we could continue the discussions.

This was the background against which the Presidential decision had to be seen. No one can believe that two weeks before a summit meeting that it has taken us two years to set up that the President would lightly engage in the sort of decisions he had taken.

We were confronted with the fact that an opponent was insisting on continuing an all-out military offensive which he would stop only on terms that no American President can be asked to accept, and this is why, with enormous pain and great reluctance, this Administration was forced into those decisions.

For two years we have been engaged in negotiations on a broad range of issues with the Soviet Union. We are on the verge not just of success in this or that negotiation, but of what could be a new relationship of benefits to all of mankind, a new relationship in which, on both sides, whenever there is a danger of crisis, there will be enough people who have a commitment to constructive programs so that they could exercise a restraining influence. But in order for such a policy to succeed, it cannot be accepted that one country can be oblivious to the impact on another of the actions of its friends, particularly when those friends are armed with the weapons of this country.

I ask you to consider what you would think, in the months before a summit meeting, if an American ally, armed with American weapons, attacked a Soviet ally and put into jeopardy the tens of thousands of Soviet troops, whether you would not ask yourself whether we should have exercised some restraint.

'Decision Was Very Difficult'

I am not saying that at the point when I was in Moscow the Soviet ability to exercise restraint was very great. I am saying that the decision was very difficult, but it had to be taken for these reasons:

First, you must not conclude from this decision that we are assuming that the battle in the South cannot be stabilized. What we are trying to prevent by this decision is an endless continuation of this process by which one attack after another takes place over a period of months without serious negotiation, and without any prospect for a settlement.

But we also want to be in a position that if our assessment is incorrect, and things should turn out not as well as we hope, that we have some bargaining position left on behalf of the Americans who will then be threatened, and of the Americans who are now prisoners.

What we have done must be seen not in the context of a country which is trying to impose its will. It has to be

'Difficult Problem' Recognized

We recognize it is a difficult problem. We know that some of our Western forms have another connotation in Vietnam. Maybe we don't have enough imagination. We are prepared to listen to another proposal. We have never had one except this particular formulation, despite repeated attempts on our part to suggest our best judgment or to invite them to make an alternative proposal.

If the political route is closed, we are prepared to discuss the military issues alone, and on that hypothesis, we would negotiate our disengagement from the war on the terms I have indicated, and leave the political negotiations to the Vietnamese.

Q. May we infer from the President's third numbered point that rail and all other communications would be cut off to the maximum extent possible, that the restrictions on Air Force strikes of rail lines close to the Chinese border have now been lifted?

A. I obviously cannot go into the details of operations, but we will take great care that the People's Republic will not misunderstand our actions.

Q. In the light of the long history of misassessments about the Vietnam War, on what does the President base his confidence that this present move will work or might work?

A. These decisions have to be seen in the context of the choices that are available. No action is also a decision and no action is subject to exactly the same question which you have just raised, and therefore, this was the decision reached prayerfully and on the best belief that it will work, but only events will prove whether it will.

Q. The proposal of the concept of mining the harbors and seeking the cutoff of supplies into North Vietnam has been kicking around ever since we became involved in that conflict nearly 10 years ago, and it has always been rejected by this Administration and the previous Administration up until now on the ground, as far as we're able to learn, that it imposed an unacceptable risk of conflict with the Soviet Union or confrontation with the Soviet Union. Can you tell us what has changed to make that risk now acceptable? Is the risk less than it has been in the past or are the circumstances such as to warrant greater risks than we have been willing to undertake in the past?

A. The question is, do we believe it involves unacceptable risks with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. As I pointed out, it of course involves some risks. The judgment was that it did not involve an unacceptable risk, especially compared to the risks of the situation where for the second time since the summit meeting was arranged Soviet arms fueled a military upheaval, and no one has pretended that this decision was lightly arrived at. The judgment has been, obviously, that the risks were not unacceptable.

Q. Do you still rule out the possible reintroduction of U.S. ground forces and the use of nuclear weapons?

A. That has been ruled out by the President, yes.

No Mention of Elections

Q. Last night he said nothing whatever about the previous conditions of free election country-wide. What is our attitude now toward that particular proposal?

A. Our attitude is that if the other side is prepared to discuss political issues, we will discuss our proposal of Jan. 25, or some variation of it, or listen to their counter-proposal to it. If the other side insists that the only political solution is the one that they have proposed, which is a de facto imposition of their Government by us, then we suggest we have a deadlock in the political field and we solve the military problem.

Q. The President told us many times that his preference was for negotiation but that he is willing to go the Vietnamization route if that didn't succeed. Did that Vietnamization program assume that the North Vietnamese would not at some time fight with all of their might and means?

A. We had hoped that in the light of the proposals we had made that there would be a possibility for a negotiated outcome. We had also, perhaps underestimated the massive influx of offensive weapons, particularly from the Soviet Union, weapons that came in in quantities and of a type that changed the military balance and that in many respects, especially artillery and heavy tanks, tipped the balance in the North Vietnamese direction.

Let me give you our assessment of the Soviet role so that we don't misunderstand each other.

There are two schools of thought. One school of thought maintains that this operation was supplied, conceived, and planned by the Soviet Union in order to impose a maximum humiliation on us prior to the summit.

Another school of thought maintains that, to be sure, the Soviet Union supplied the weapons, and therefore has to be held responsible for some of the consequences but that it did not plan this operation, that it could not have considered it in its interest for it to take this extreme form, and that what we face here is one of the problems great powers have in dealing with their clients—that the client looks at problems from its own regional or national perspective, while the great powers may take actions in a much wider one.

We tend to lean towards the latter interpretation. We do not argue that this was a deliberate plan to inflict a humiliation on the United States. We are saying that any thoughtful national leader looking at the masses of offensive equipment might have considered the consequences and, prior to a meeting that had, and still has such high prospects, one should ask oneself whether it can be in the interest of either party to impose a major setback on the other.

No 'Dunkirk' Foreseen

Q. Do you foresee the possibility of a victory by the Hanoi forces of such magnitude that we would have to have a Dunkirk type of operation to withdraw our troops?

A. No, we do not foresee a victory of such magnitude, but one has to say that their behavior suggests that such a victory may be their intention and therefore it had to be considered by us.

Q. For months you have expressed a personal view that this war will be resolved by negotiation. Two parts in this question: Do you still feel that is a probability and, secondly, given the breaking off of this private session, have you hopes that it can be reviewed in the future, the idea of private negotiations, with yourself playing a part?

A. Leaving aside how possible it is to have really complete private meetings under present circumstances, we believe that the most effective way of ending the war, the most certain way, is by negotiations. We respect Le Duc Tho as a serious, dedicated spokesman for his side, and we are prepared on our side to resume negotiations with him at any time that he is prepared to discuss propositions that are consistent with our principles. And we would make every effort to understand his point of view.

Do I still believe that there is hope for negotiations? I have always based my hope of negotiations on the fact that even in Vietnam there must be some realities that transcend the parochial concern of the contestants and that a point must be reached where a balance is so clearly established that if we can make generous and far-seeing proposals that a solution may be possible.

I still have hope that we can do this. And that we may be able to do it soon. I expect that when the present turmoil has subsided that both sides will make efforts to resume the negotiation.

seen in the context of the proposals which the President made in his speech.

Effort to End 'Agony'

What is it that we are asking of the North Vietnamese? What is it in those proposals that a country cannot honorably accept? We are saying that if our prisoners are returned, and if there is an end to the fighting, that we will withdraw all our forces from South Vietnam in four months, and that we will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina. Why is it that these proposals should not be accepted?

They would leave the determination of the political future to the Vietnamese. They would enable us to withdraw with honor and they would at least put an end to the fighting. So it is incorrect to say that we have embarked on a course designed to impose our solution. We have embarked on a course to try to bring an end to this agony, and, in a way, to this deception, where there is the constant delusion that there is just one formula that has somehow eluded us, where for months we have attempted in good faith to set up a serious negotiation, where our proposals are not even discussed, and where everything is staked by the other side on a pure military move. So both we and other major powers are at this moment at a critical decision.

It is this decision that is compared by some to the Cuban missile crisis, but there are very important differences.

We do not view this as a confrontation between us and the Soviet Union. We are not attempting by these actions to impose a one-sided solution. We are trying to work out some principles of international conduct and an end to a conflict which threatens, alike, our interests as well as the interest of other countries that have a stake in the preservation of peace.

Those were the reasons, in summary, that led to the President's speech last night, and now I will be delighted to answer questions.

'In a Generous Spirit'

Q. Would a cease-fire have to be established along the present line of military forces or would the North Vietnamese have to withdraw to North Vietnam?

A. We will be delighted to spell out the details of our proposal as soon as a serious negotiation starts, but I can only repeat that we would approach negotiations in a generous spirit and with the attitude of bringing about a rapid end to the war.

Q. Do you expect the summit meeting with the Soviet Union to go forward, and have you had any indication either way?

A. To take the second question first, we have had no indication from the Soviet Union, and it will probably be a day or so before we receive one.

With respect to the first question, we are proceeding with the summit preparations, and we see at this moment no reason from our side to postpone the summit meeting. We recognize that the decisions we have taken present some short-term difficulties to the Soviet leaders, but we also believe that the

situation that they permitted to evolve presented massive difficulties for us, and both sides have faced the problem throughout of making some real choices; that is to say, if one wants a genuine improvement in relations, as we do, one cannot also at the same time maximize the pressures all around the periphery.

The Discussion in Moscow

Q. When you were in Moscow, did you inform the Soviet leaders of the possibility of the military action which you have now taken?

A. I cannot go into the details of the discussion. I do not believe that there could be any doubt in the minds of the Soviet leaders of the gravity with which we would view an unchecked continuation of a major North Vietnamese offensive and of an attempt by the North Vietnamese to put everything on the military scales.

The precise action we would take had obviously not been decided upon at the time, and, therefore, could not be discussed. But I do not believe that the Soviet leaders could be under any misapprehension of how seriously it would be viewed if this offensive continued.

Now, let me point out, in addition, that after my visit to Moscow, and after we agreed to resume talks, the North Vietnamese launched three major onslaughts. They launched an attack on Kontum the day we informed them privately that we would return to the plenaries. They launched an attack on Dongha four days later on the eve of the plenary session, and they launched their attack on Quangtri on the eve of the private session. Now, these are facts.

Q. Did anyone in the inner councils dissent from this decision, and did anyone point out that Senator Goldwater offered this solution in 1964 when it was rejected by the country?

A. I never discuss the internal deliberations of the Government.

Issue of Stopping Ships

Q. Could you spell out for us, with some more degree of clarity—the President, I believe, did not use the word "blockade." What have we said that we would do should Soviet vessels bearing war matériel, bear down and enter into one of the ports? Will we stop that ship, and how?

A. No, I will not go into the precise rules of engagement. At this point, the instructions are to warn all foreign ships of the existence of these minefields, but not to interfere with them if they decide to proceed into the minefields at their own risk.

Q. Is it now fairly safe to conclude that Vietnamization has been pretty much of a failure?

A. No. What it is safe to conclude is that when there is a massive attack by the entire North Vietnamese field army, every last division equipped with the most modern weapons, that a very precarious situation will develop, the outcome of which is uncertain. That is the only thing that it is safe to conclude at this moment.

Amount of Supplies

Q. Could you give us an estimate of the amount of supplies, in terms of days, that are actually in the pipeline

now, that have already been unloaded off of Soviet ships, and based on that, how long do you think it will take before the blockade, or whatever you want to call it, takes effect?

A. These assessments, of course, would differ in relation to critical items, and it has happened before that our estimates had a certain margin of latitude, so I do not want to tie myself to any specific figures. But it has to be analyzed, whatever the figure is, in two ways: There is a tendency to say that there are X months of supplies, and, therefore, they can go for this many months before there is any effect. That is probably a wrong way of looking at it, because if there are only so many months of supplies, it must affect decisions before they run out.

It is unlikely that anybody would run down his supplies to the zero level before he made another decision. Now, at what point that decision has to be made, it is difficult to predict. We do not believe that anything that was done will affect the battle that may now be taking place in the next three weeks. It could affect and should affect the next round.

This modification of our peace proposal, a modification which corresponds with what was the accepted wisdom everywhere only a little while ago, has to be seen in the context of the cut-off supplies. So we think that in this next round, the effect would only be indirect. In the round after that, the effect should make itself felt.

Areas of Unloading

Q. Will the U.S. Navy attempt to prevent the offloading of supplies outside the minefields?

A. In reply to your specific question, there is only so much you can offload across the beaches, and if your remember that a large percentage of the imports concern petroleum, I think there are certain physical limitations, but we would interfere with it to the maximum degree possible.

Q. This concerns the President's speech and something you said before about the Vietnamese can negotiate a settlement between themselves after a cease-fire and withdrawal. Does this mean we would totally withdraw from the negotiating table?

A. We have always indicated that we are prepared to pursue two courses: we are either prepared to negotiate a comprehensive settlement, or we are prepared to negotiate the military issues alone.

Now, the difficulty has been that the only comprehensive settlement that the other side has ever proposed to us is the one I described to you earlier, the one that begins with de facto imposition of a Communist government, after which they settle all other issues. After that, there are no other issues left to settle, because after that, we won't have any negotiating power.

If the other side is prepared to discuss with us a political process which gives the real political forces an opportunity to express themselves, we are prepared to discuss it.