

Negotiating Season

Presidential adviser Henry Kissinger has repeatedly predicted that serious negotiations with Hanoi will resume when the current Communist offensive in South Vietnam comes to an end. The offensive, after some spectacular gains, now appears to be slowing down with the beginning of heavy monsoon rains. The season for negotiations appears to be approaching again.

President Nixon evidently has tried to prepare the way for the next negotiating round during his Peking and Moscow visits. In Moscow, he later reported, Vietnam was one of the "most extensively discussed" subjects on the agenda. Whether China or the Soviet Union will exert some pressure on Hanoi to help bring about a settlement has yet to be seen. But Hanoi clearly has been concerned about this possibility as well as about the welcome given Mr. Nixon by Peking and Moscow, North Vietnam's two chief allies and arms suppliers, at a time when the United States has been escalating its air and naval war against North Vietnam.

In an unusual number of press conferences and interviews in Paris before and after Mr. Nixon's Moscow visit, North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho has emphasized that the war will have to be settled with Hanoi, not Moscow or Peking, and that he looked forward to early resumption of his talks with Mr. Kissinger. He has denied that Hanoi wants to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam, while insisting that President Thieu's resignation and a political settlement must precede the ceasefire, release of American prisoners and withdrawal of American troops in four months as proposed by President Nixon.

Mr. Tho has now made it clear that Hanoi's objections to the latest American peace proposal are twofold. He has indicated that a ceasefire without a political settlement would see the United States continuing to arm and supply South Vietnam. Secondly, if the ceasefire broke down during negotiations for a political settlement, American air and naval intervention might resume, as Secretary Laird has indicated.

These two concerns clearly will have to be met in some way if negotiations for a military settlement with the United States are to precede negotiations among Vietnamese for a coalition government in Saigon. It is in helping to meet these concerns, rather than in imposing a settlement on Hanoi, that the Soviet Union perhaps can play a useful role in ending the war.

Moscow took a hand on half a dozen or more occasions during the early negotiations in Paris in 1968-69 to help resolve deadlocks between Washington and Hanoi. The State Department analysis of Moscow's role then, as revealed in a secret National Security Council study, suggests what might well happen again.

The Soviet Ambassador's most important moves occurred in helping to bring about the October 1968 agreement that halted the bombing and the January 1969 agreement on the shape of the conference table. But on several other occasions as well, the Russians either suggested or elaborated the formula ultimately accepted.

The State Department's analysis stated that the Soviet diplomat "intervened constructively, acting under both general guidelines and explicit instructions from Moscow." "What is not clear," the analysis said, "is whether it was necessary for [the Russians] to bring pressure on the North Vietnamese to bring about a compromise." The possibility could not be ruled out that the North Vietnamese at times "employed the Soviets as intermediaries to convey positions upon which they had already decided themselves, so that they would not have to 'lose face' by making concessions directly to us."

If President Nixon found some encouragement about Vietnam in Moscow, as he has hinted, it is essential to resume negotiations as soon as possible. A return to the semipublic peace conference in Paris is the necessary preliminary to the private talks with Le Duc Tho which alone could advance a settlement.