

First half of two-part editorial; second part, " ... but Who's in Charge?" filed
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The return to Paris of the American negotiator, Ambassador William Porter, and the prospective return of North Vietnam's delegation chief, Xuan Thuy, suggest the approach of another monsoon negotiating season. Now that a new military equilibrium has emerged on the ground and the weather is too soggy for decisive battles, both sides may be ready for some serious talking about a compromise settlement.

The important talking is unlikely to be done in the semipublic conference at which Messrs. Porter and Thuy preside. But its resumption is Hanoi's precondition for renewing the private talks between North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho and President Nixon's security adviser, Henry Kissinger. Last year at this time, the most productive period in the two-year Kissinger-Tho series, the two emissaries met secretly six times between May and September and, according to Mr. Kissinger, reached agreement in principle on several points of the nine-point Communist peace plan. Since then, both sides have made new public proposals and President Nixon has discussed a Vietnam settlement at length in Peking and Moscow.

Mr. Nixon undoubtedly sought Soviet support last month for the next round of Paris peace talks. The fact that Mr. Kissinger's chief Vietnamese expert will accompany him to Peking next week suggests an effort will be made again there to enlist Chinese help as well.

If there is reason for hope about renewed talks, it stems from two factors. First, Hanoi knows that President Nixon's interest in ending the war will be great between now and the November election. He accepted a Soviet edge in numbers of strategic missiles in the Moscow SALT agreement that, however safe in sophisticated military terms, few Democratic Presidents would have found politically feasible. He might do something comparable in Vietnam but his military reactions, if re-elected, are unpredictable. All this makes Hanoi's interest in a settlement before November equal to Mr. Nixon's.

Secondly, the military situation in South Vietnam has settled back into a stalemate after some spectacular Communist gains, despite the open entry of the bulk of the North Vietnamese Army into the battle. "A respectable argument can be made that, as long as the Communist-bloc countries continue to supply the North and the United States to support and supply the South, the war could continue indefinitely," Times correspondent Charles Mohr has reported after a thorough investigation of the military situation on key fronts.

Neither side wants an indefinite war. The question that now must be faced in Paris is whether both are prepared to give up hopes of early victory and settle for a compromise coalition government. Only a compromise government could bind up the wounds of war, reconstruct the country with Great Power aid and seek eventually to achieve a political accommodation within Vietnam to match that now evolving internationally among the Communist and non-Communist world powers.