

NYTimes

JUN 20 1972

The Prospects for Vietnam Talks: Nixon Telling Hanoi Time Is Now

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 19—

The briefcase that Henry A. Kissinger took on his Peking visit today is bulging with position papers on everything from the suitability of basketball for diplomatic Ping Pong to the cash-and-carry possibilities of some big Chinese-American trade deals. But there is not much mystery about his overriding interest: Vietnam. Mr. Kissinger's continuing purpose in Peking, like much of President Nixon's purpose there and in Moscow earlier this year, has been defined on many occasions by Mr. Kissinger and the few other informed Administration officials. It has been to enlist the Russians and the Chinese in an elaborate exercise, both diplomatic and military, to persuade the North Vietnamese that the summer of 1972—meaning the weeks between now and Labor Day—is the optimum time for negotiating an end of the war.

A Vulnerable Saigon

The argument, in essence, is that Mr. Nixon's terms for a deal will be more generous now than ever again because he would like to enhance his chances of re-election. When pitched in reverse, it is a suggestion that the President feels more vulnerable on the war issue now than he has ever before or will ever be again and that Hanoi should try him out, as it tried out Lyndon B. Johnson's terms in 1968.

The corollary argument is that North Vietnam should also feel more tempted to settle for less than before because its military offensive has been blunted, its supply lines

have again been crippled and its major allies seem much more interested in pursuing better relations with the United States than in taking serious risks to bail out a struggling ally.

The reverse side of that coinage is that Hanoi's armies could be arrested only because of extensive American help for the South Vietnamese and that the end of American military activity in Indochina will leave Saigon vulnerable to the North's maneuvers for many years.

So the President wants Hanoi to calculate that it can accomplish many of its objectives in the long run if it will help him look good, or at least save face, in the short run. And he wants it to reckon that the only alternative is to expend yet more lives and treasure with the real risk that he will be re-elected for another four years of bombing and mining and military aid to the Saigon Government.

Mr. Nixon, having withstood the greatest onslaught of which he deems the North Vietnamese capable in the foreseeable future, is asking that they deal with him now that he too needs to deal — or risk having to deal with him in a much stronger position in another term.

There have been many indications over the last six months that this logic has been understood, with varying degrees of sympathy, in both Moscow and Peking. At least as perceived here, the Russians feel they have much larger fish to fry in the world than Indochina and the Chinese feel confident of Hanoi's long-term success in any case.

What the President has wanted all along from the two giant Communist nations is some help in persuading the North

Vietnamese that they can trust the American President to hold out for little more than his sense of honor in retreat. At best, from the American point of view, the Russians and Chinese are offering such advice in the current round of jet-borne diplomacy.

Another Indochina Summer

It is doubtful that even the President and Mr. Kissinger can be sure of the manner in which that advice is being rendered. They almost certainly know nothing yet about how it is being received.

For the North Vietnamese have emblazoned in their memories another summer of negotiations, in 1954, when the Russians and Chinese pressed them to settle for half a loaf—and half a country—with the mistaken promise of more later. Moreover, they remember having had to topple a French Government to get that far, and they must believe that they deserved the credit for toppling President Johnson and forcing President Nixon to withdraw half a million men from battle.

Nor can they get their minds off the second wave of aerial destruction to which they have been subjected by a President who seeks a bargain. Are they really tempted by his peace offers? Or do they already taste his defeat?

If the North Vietnamese hope to contribute to a Nixon defeat this year, they must commit themselves to a vast military or guerrilla effort, with more enormous sacrifice, in the September-October dry period.

Much of the American bomb-and mining in recent weeks has been designed to prevent that effort and also to advertise the further destruction with

which it would be met. Indeed, most military men here believe Hanoi incapable of effective action again so soon, but they have been wrong before and Mr. Nixon is not relying on their judgment alone.

Another Round of Talks

So it is taken for granted here that another round of serious negotiations will occur, and soon. Getting the parties to the table under those circumstances—at least to feel each other out before they abandon diplomacy altogether—will not be difficult. Mr. Kissinger has long predicted an intense round of bargaining for this summer, and the Soviet President, Nikolai V. Podgorny, was not taking sides when he promised to help arrange a favorable climate for the talks.

The central issue of trust remains — especially trust in the terms of future competition for political power in South Vietnam. Mr. Nixon has said the United States will end all acts of force for a supervised cease-fire and the return of prisoners. Hanoi has offered a deal only if it obtains a share of power—the lion's share, Mr. Nixon fears—in Saigon.

Hanoi wants the United States to abandon President Nguyen Van Thieu and his closest associates. Washington sees that as tantamount to the destruction of the South Vietnamese Army, the only effective non-Communist force in the country. Technically, there is some middle ground between the positions, but how far each side moves into that middle ground depends less on diplomacy than on psychology, more on emotion than on jet-plane commotion.