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Henry Kissinger's consultations in Saigon and the return to Hanoi of North Vietnam's chief Paris negotiator, Le Duc Tho, suggest that a moment of truth is approaching in the long quest for peace in Indochina. After three secret Kissinger-Tho meetings in six weeks, both sides are reviewing the bidding in preparation for the final round of settlement talks before the American election.

Both Washington and Hanoi are under maximum pressure to reach some agreement by October. President Nixon would welcome a cease-fire before American voters go to the polls. Hanoi knows that, if he stays in the White House, American peace terms and military action are more likely to stiffen than ease after Election Day. Meanwhile, the two sides are compelled to continue talking—both to avoid missing the opportunity October may bring and to be able to blame the other if the outcome is failure. But the fact of talks is less important than whether Washington and Hanoi are talking to the point.

The point is political—Vietnamese politics, not American. President Nixon's May 8 proposals for a military settlement—withdrawal of all American troops in return for release of prisoners of war and an all-Indochina cease-fire—have been rejected by the Communists. They insist that an agreement without a "political element" is unacceptable. While that insistence is not likely to change, it is also wholly improbable that the complex political solution proposed by Hanoi could be negotiated in the few weeks before November, even if Washington were prepared to go that route. Unless a simpler first step can be devised, agreement in October already is out the window.

In the past the Communists have insisted that a cease-fire and release of prisoners must wait until a three-party coalition government is formed, made up of elements of the Saigon Government, the Vietcong and neutralist groups. They now say they would negotiate the composition of such a coalition with a new Saigon Government rather than the United States, and that Washington's political responsibility could end once President Thieu resigned and was replaced by a regime more congenial to Hanoi.

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It is unclear, however, whether this new two-stage proposal means that American prisoners of war would be released and a cease-fire declared prior to negotiation of a coalition government. Nor have the Communists, up to the last Kissinger-Tho meeting at least, been willing to indicate whom in Saigon they would consider acceptable as negotiating partners.

If these questions could be answered reasonably, a formula for an October agreement is conceivable. At a minimum, the political element would have to comprise a broadening of the Saigon Government, the opening of talks with the Vietcong and third groups on a coalition

and a pledge by President Thieu to resign when agreement is reached, rather than five months later. The military element then could be an immediate cease-fire, which would halt the bombing of North Vietnam, and the release of American prisoners in parallel with the withdrawal of all remaining American troops.

With flexibility in Hanoi and Saigon, such a formula to transfer the struggle in Vietnam from the battlefield to the conference table by November is clearly feasible. Moscow and Peking, which have made their peace with President Nixon, undoubtedly favor it. But Hanoi remains a cipher. And in Saigon, President Thieu has called publicly for the bombing to go on—a position fortified perhaps by President Nixon's February pledge that "any future proposals we make will be joint proposals of the Government of South Vietnam and the Government of the United States."

As long as that implied veto is left in President Thieu's hands, chances for a negotiated settlement either in October or later will remain small. Another discouraging, but we hope not totally prohibitive impediment to Mr. Kissinger's efforts to reach an accommodation is the hard line on Communist participation in a new Saigon Government that is set forth in the White House-drafted Republican platform.