

Is Paris Happening?

By ANTHONY LEWIS

BOSTON, Sept. 29—Outside of the small circle officially involved, none of us can really be informed on the stage of the talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. But among some people who have thought about Vietnam for years there is now a feeling—a tingling sensation, as one put it—that something just could happen in Paris.

After all the disappointments of past years, any hope of a negotiated end to the war must be shadowed by skepticism. Doubts are strengthened by the knowledge that President Nixon will use the very fact of the talks going on for political purposes.

"On the basis of experience," one man long concerned with the Vietnam problem said, "you have to think that any sign of possible success in the negotiations is a combination of false hopes and game-playing by Nixon and Kissinger." The North Vietnamese have publicly discounted talk of progress in Paris, and sources close to them still speak of election-year American politics.

On the other hand, one has to ask why Hanoi is playing the game if that is all it is. Le Duc Tho does not do things by accident: Why are he and his colleagues helping to re-elect Richard Nixon?

Western observers who have been in North Vietnam recently report no slackening in the expressed determination to bear the burdens of the war, including American bombing, indefinitely if necessary. Nor is there any convincing sign of a crippled capacity to fight. Richard Dudman of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch saw long lines of trucks bearing weapons and supplies between Haiphong and Hanoi.

But a continuing war effort would not be consistent with a decision by the North Vietnamese leaders to try seriously for a settlement. They may have a different perception now of American political and psychological realities. They may be feeling more pressure from the constituencies that matter to them—in Moscow and Peking. French officials, who have as good contacts as anyone with the two sides in the peace talks, are expressing a high degree of optimism.

What, then, could be the framework

realize the immense intellectual difficulties involved in trying to compro-

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mise positions so deeply opposed in political objectives, fears and pride.

In President Nixon's declared view the only appropriate way to change the legitimate government in Saigon is by elections. The United States will not join in imposing a coalition government because that could be a cover for Communist control and a "bloodbath." After an internationally supervised cease-fire and the return of prisoners, the U.S. would withdraw all its forces and leave a political settlement to the Vietnamese.

Hanoi, for its part, rejects elections managed by the Saigon administration. It fears that its own people would be the victims of a bloodbath if left to the control of President Nguyen Van Thieu and his police. It wants the United States to agree to a coalition by way of final settlement before leaving, so the Americans will have no excuse for returning—specifically for resuming the bombing—if unwelcome political change occurs in Saigon.

In general terms one can begin to imagine ways of closing those wide differences. President Thieu could resign a much longer time before elections than the one month the U.S. has offered, but leaving the Saigon administration otherwise intact. The political future could be fudged by leaving each side in control of its own areas, offering some form of guarantees for physical safety and protection from arrest on both sides and having elections not under the present Thieu constitution but for a constituent assembly to draft a new one.

The trouble is that stating such ideas exposes the real difficulties. For example, would the United States continue to supply massive military assistance to a Saigon government after a cease-fire? Would President Nixon accept any effective limit on that role? How could Hanoi conceivably accept the continued existence, even without President Thieu himself, of the army, police and bureaucratic

opposition?

Most difficult of all would Nguyen Van Thieu be willing to resign for the sake of a settlement, betting that he will come back to power in the political process started by the agreement? Thieu's total disinclination to do so has been made plain by his recent speeches excoriating the ideas of cease-fire and coalition—speeches that must have been directed largely at the U.S.

Even such a sketchy canvas makes plain the delicacy of Henry Kissinger's role. For he must not only convince Le Duc Tho that the chance of winning politically is good enough now to end a generation's military effort. Kissinger also has to persuade his own side to accept real risks: persuade the American military, President Thieu, President Nixon. Success in Paris will depend not on detail but on basic attitudes.

The problems are so hard that even new intentions on both sides, if they exist, may not succeed. If they do, it will be because the North Vietnamese are made to believe at last that the Americans are going to leave and stay away—and because President Nixon comes to that determination himself in his view of Saigon.