



## A Political Question To Vietnam Talks

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RECENT TRIPS by Henry Kissinger reflect undoubted movement in the Vietnam peace talks. But the Vietnam road show also makes it clear that the deal which can be cut is highly vulnerable to opposition from the Saigon regime under President Nguyen Van Thieu.

So the Vietnam prospect is now shadowed by a new question. It is a question whether President Nixon's political interest isn't better served by waiting until after the election before bringing the negotiations to a head.

The starting point for all this is the position of the Communists. Many signs show that the Communists have not changed their basic outlook.

The North Vietnamese still want to achieve a change in the government of Saigon as a condition for coming to terms. They will go for a cease-fire only after agreement that President Thieu and his team be replaced by a neutral regime.

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RECENTLY the Communists have been far more reassuring and explicit about two features of the neutral regime they seek to have installed in place of the Thieu government. For one thing, the Communists have been saying that it would be a truly neutral government with power evenly shared among different groups — not merely a front for a Communist takeover. Secondly, the Communists have been indicating that the neutral regime would be given a long lease on life before any further change toward a regime more friendly to Hanoi supervened.

These points have been stressed by the

Communists in talks with those of us who have recently visited Hanoi. It seems clear that, in their long talks at Paris, Kissinger and the chief Communist negotiator, Le Duc Tho, have been exploring in considerable detail the possibilities for a new regime in Saigon and a cease-fire on the ground.

At that point Kissinger's recent trip to Russia comes actively on scene. Apart from pushing the North Vietnamese to talk seriously in the Paris negotiations, Moscow can play one more important role. The Russians can underwrite any settlement worked out between the Americans and the North Vietnamese.

In particular, the Russians can undertake to use their influence in support of a neutral government and on behalf of the maintenance of the cease-fire.

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FOR THE TIME being, however, President Thieu can probably block any agreement. Details galore have to be worked out, and President Thieu is in good position to be obstructionist on small points.

But given Senator George McGovern's dismal campaign, President Nixon has no special need to get a deal before election day. Indeed, it is hard to think of anybody now opposing the President who would be won over by a Vietnam settlement.

So the best timing for President Nixon is a settlement made sometime after the election when he is invulnerable to pressures from President Thieu. And the best bet about Kissinger's Vietnam road show is that it will stay on the road until, and after, election day.