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# Don't Cheer Yet, But...

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17—The Vietnam peace talks are now reaching the critical point where an "interim peace agreement"—not a final settlement—may be under serious discussion.

It has been the hope of some officials at the top of the Nixon Administration—and the conviction of others—that the Hanoi Government would agree to a preliminary arrangement before the Nov. 7 election rather than risk the prospect that a re-elected President Nixon would feel free to carry on the bombing of the North indefinitely, or give Saigon the means to do so.

It has also been assumed here that, to get an "interim agreement" that would limit the President's freedom to bomb as he likes, it would be necessary to negotiate this week before the election rather than at the last moment so that the President would have some political incentive to compromise.

Now there are several signs that support this scenario. In his early secret talks with Le Duc Tho in Paris, Henry Kissinger spent most of his time listening, not to practical negotiations, but to what the American negotiators called Hanoi's "three epic poems"—propaganda themes in homeric language and almost always in exactly the same words. This was not Kissinger's experience in the four meetings he had in Paris last week.

Instead, the Communists discussed some of the practical details of what a preliminary agreement might be—what guarantees Hanoi would give that there would be no punitive massacre of South Vietnamese, that the so-called coalition "government of concord" would last for several years and not be dominated by the Communists; and on the other side, what guarantees Hanoi would have that the Communists would be able to hold the territory now in their possession, that Washington did not want to destroy the Communist regime or the industries of North Vietnam, and that Saigon would not be given the bombers to carry out such a policy on its own.

No doubt there are many other practical questions to be discussed—too many to justify hopes of any final peace agreement before Nov. 7—but the point is that the tone and pace of the Communist diplomacy has changed sufficiently to justify another visit by Dr. Kissinger and General Abrams to Saigon.

The negotiations there are likely to be extremely difficult, for the Saigon regime has always feared that the time would come when President Nixon's interests and General Thieu's interests would diverge, and that Mr. Nixon

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would be willing to settle for less than General Thieu's demands.

For example, Thieu's interests are not served by getting rid of the American Air Force under almost any circumstances, but even President Nixon in his present confident mood is not committed to stay there indefinitely.

Also, General Thieu wants sovereign control over every ridge and valley of South Vietnam at the very least, whereas President Nixon would find it hard to get support for rejecting a settlement which would leave Saigon in charge of all the populous areas. How could he insist on American air power to drive the Communist guerrillas out of every field and hamlet?

So there is obviously plenty for Dr. Kissinger and General Abrams to discuss with Thieu. Especially since there is increasing evidence in the Hanoi official press that Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap and the other "total victory" advocates in the North have been seriously weakened by the failure of their Easter offensive.

Not only has Giap's power been reduced by the appointment to the eleven-man Politburo of two men who are said to favor concentrating on the reconstruction of the North—Gen. Van Tien Dun, chief of staff of North Vietnam's armed forces, and Tran Quoc Hoan, the Minister of Public Security—but there is some evidence that key Communist cadres are being moved into positions the Communists would naturally try to hold after a cease-fire.

All this is bound to worry General Thieu in Saigon more than it worries President Nixon or Dr. Kissinger, for while it is natural that Thieu would want total control of all his territory, the official view here is that once the threat of a serious Communist assault on the major cities is removed by negotiation, General Thieu, with over a million men under arms, should be able to handle any break in the peace by scattered guerrillas.

Maybe this is too optimistic a report, and obviously there are many other even more difficult problems to be resolved, such as the main one about the future of General Thieu, but at least there is now some movement toward practical discussion of an "interim settlement" and some evidence that more moderate elements are having some influence in Hanoi.

Nobody here will say even an "interim agreement" is likely before the election, but Kissinger does not rule it out. Something is happening anyway and at last, and it is obviously something more than election propaganda.