

U.S. as War Mediator

It Seems Less a Party to Conflict Than Seeker of Truce Between 2 Foes

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 24 —

The peace terms for Indochina that are now under such active discussion have been variously defined by Hanoi and Saigon, but Washington remains silent, as if it were a mediator rather than a party to the war. Indeed, mediation may be Henry A. Kissinger's essential role at this point as he seeks a cease-fire and exit for the United States, with or without a promising deal on the political future of South Vietnam.

News
Analysis

It is not tacitly acknowledged here that the North Vietnamese gave Mr. Kissinger enough encouragement, after he exchanged concessions with them, to produce the hard-sell gathering of American officials this week in the Saigon office of President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam.

It is also evident from Mr. Thieu's report to his people that he is unhappy with the prospects, unreconciled to the proposed political deal but fearful that an undesirable cease-fire may now—"unfortunately," as he put it—occur.

What would be wrong about a cease-fire? In Mr. Thieu's calculation, the apparent intention of the United States to leave 200,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam while American forces end their bombing and go home for good, their prisoners in tow.

Pullout Possibility Weighed

It may be that Mr. Kissinger knows better—that he has a promise or an indication that Hanoi intends to recall its forces as well and let the Vietcong take their chances on political competition against their adversaries. Having never acknowledged the "invasion" of South Vietnam, Hanoi may never wish to acknowledge any withdrawal.

But until the Nixon Administration clarifies the point, there is at least some ground for President Thieu's concern. The concept of a "mutual" withdrawal of forces from South Vietnam disappeared from the American negotiating package sometime last year and was replaced by the offer of American withdrawal in exchange for prisoners and a cease-fire.

When Mr. Kissinger, as asked last May whether the North Vietnamese could remain in South Vietnam under a "cease-fire," he said he would define the term only in "serious negotiation," but he promised to approach the question "in a generous spirit" to facilitate a "rapid end to the war."

There the question hangs. Premier Pham Van Dong foresees "two armies and two administrations" in South Vietnam, while the Saigon and Vietcong forces struggle for political power from the territories under their respective control. That implies the backing of Hanoi's army for the Vietcong. And President Thieu fears that he is being forced into a contest against an army that he has held at bay but never defeated even with the massive aerial support of the United States.

Four years ago, negotiations for the Johnson Administration contended that North Vietnamese forces were being moved out of South Vietnam, at least to nearby Laos and Cambodia, to promote a cease-fire. Accordingly, President Nixon's original peace terms contained a demand that all of Hanoi's troops must return all the way home, to North Vietnam.

Type of Withdrawal Focal

A partial withdrawal may again be under discussion now. President Thieu said today that under a "serious cease-fire," the North Vietnamese must go home to the North, not just withdraw to Laos and Cambodia, from where they could strike again or, in any case, infiltrate and resupply the Vietcong.

This question, and not just the nature of a future coalition government in Saigon, appears to have been near the center of Mr. Kissinger's arguments with Mr. Thieu. The South Vietnamese President said again that he might step aside for another political process if the Vietcong were left to fend for themselves and with the promise of no more than a 10 per cent of share of power, as he argues they deserve. But a new process while Hanoi's troops remain poised, he argued, would be to "impose" Communist control on much of his country, as President Nixon has promised he would never do.

How much more Mr. Kissinger can bargain on this point with either Hanoi or Saigon is unknown. The assumption here is that he will soon meet again with the North Vietnamese.

The difficulty of bargaining with Saigon lies in the fact that both Mr. Nixon and Mr. Thieu can resort only to extreme measures. If he were to

denounce Mr. Thieu's resistance or cut off aid upon which the South Vietnamese army and economy depend, Mr. Nixon would only risk the kind of humiliating collapse he has been trying for four years to avoid.

If Mr. Thieu were now to denounce the Americans or cause his generals to suspect an American betrayal, he would only play into the hands of the adversaries he has fought against for so long.

That leaves one line of potential leverage for Washington:

It can declare its intention to observe a cease-fire, with or without Saigon's consent, with or without at least some ground rules for future political competition in South Vietnam. Mr. Nixon could argue that Mr. Thieu's risks would be fewer in truce than in a go-it-alone fight. Indeed, Mr. Kissinger may already have argued precisely that and challenged the South Vietnamese leaders to choose between a threatening and uneasy peace and an unwinnable war.