

A Veto in Saigon?

North Vietnam has put the Nixon Administration in a difficult position with its insistence that before the end of the month the United States sign the agreement that has been made public by Hanoi and essentially confirmed by Washington.

If this country's lingering reservations are as minor as Presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger has indicated, it should not be impossible to resolve them quickly. If, however, President Thieu's demands for substantive changes in the terms of the accord is permitted to inhibit American policy, the momentum toward peace could be stalled if not shattered.

Mr. Thieu is demanding, among other things, the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops as a condition for a cease-fire. This used to be President Nixon's condition also. Its abandonment by President Nixon some time ago was undoubtedly a key factor among the mutual concessions that made the present agreement between Washington and Hanoi possible. Any attempt to resurrect this issue would certainly imperil the whole accord.

The Saigon regime is understandably apprehensive about the vague provisions for a political settlement in South Vietnam which—significantly—need not be accomplished before completion of a total American military withdrawal. The proposed National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord has no clear definition or responsibilities—at least as described so far—and the provision that it can act only in unanimity could be a formula for chaos. Nevertheless, Hanoi's undertaking to leave Thieu's Government intact, at least in the initial stages of a settlement, represents a major concession from that side.

Americans should be under no illusions—as Mr. Thieu obviously is not—about the possible consequences of the proposed solution. Undisclosed provisions for international supervision of a cease-fire are so complex that Mr. Kissinger conceded that “only my colleague, Ambassador Sullivan, understands [them] completely.” The chances for a breakdown in the cease-fire and political arrangements must be regarded as high. The most likely prospect is for a prolonged period of political chaos after the last G.I. departs.

But this was always so. The unambiguous core of the agreement lies in those sections which provide for the speedy withdrawal of all remaining American military personnel from South Vietnam and the concurrent release of American prisoners of war. This is no more nor less than critics of the Administration's Indochina policy have been seeking for years.

It is notable that the freedom of American prisoners is not tied to the release of political prisoners by Saigon, as formerly demanded by the Communists. This fact, plus the Administration's ability to withhold crucial air support from South Vietnamese troops if they should attempt to upset any cease-fire arrangement, sharply curtails President Thieu's leverage in his efforts to obstruct a settlement. But it is not yet clear whether the Administration will proceed to end the conflict with Hanoi in case Mr. Thieu should continue to withhold his cooperation.