

That Elusive Peace: Some Questions and

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More than two weeks have passed since President Nixon's chief adviser on foreign policy, Henry A. Kissinger, said "peace is at hand" in Vietnam. The Administration remains optimistic but a settlement has so far remained elusive. The following is an effort to sort out what is known about the current situation:

Q. What is the background to the present activity?

A. Mr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's chief negotiator, agreed early last month on a nine-point draft agreement, which Washington says needs some additional work, which Hanoi says should have been signed on Oct. 31, and which Saigon is unhappy about.

Q. What is being done to resolve these differences?

A. Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., Mr. Kissinger's deputy, is in Saigon to press President Nguyen Van Thieu to drop his objections. And Mr. Kissinger, his bags packed, is hoping to meet Mr. Tho once again, maybe as soon as next week, to wrap up the agreement.

Q. Has Hanoi actually said that Mr. Tho would meet Mr. Kissinger for additional negotiations?

A. Not publicly. But North Vietnam has apparently hinted—through an interview with Xuan Thuy, the leader of its delegation in Paris, in The New York Times and through diplomatic channels—that it will agree to one more meeting so long as the United States doesn't try to back out again.

Q. Did the Administration really go back on an agreement to sign by Oct. 31, as Hanoi charges?

A. Complete information is still lacking. Mr. Kissinger says no, but acknowledges at the same time that the Administration had made "a major effort" to meet the Oct. 31 deadline. It proved impossible, he said, to resolve everything in so short a time.

Q. Why did Hanoi set Oct. 31 as a deadline?

A. The best diplomatic guessing, is that Hanoi, reading the polls accurately, was convinced Mr. Nixon would be re-elected, and decided to deal with him before the Nov. 7 election rather than afterwards.

It brought forth a conciliatory plan on Oct. 8 in Paris and insisted that it be signed by the end of the month.

Q. What effect did the elections have on Mr. Nixon's decision not to meet Hanoi's deadline?

A. Obviously Mr. Nixon would have been delighted to have a solid agreement in time for Election Day, but by Oct. 22 he had decided there were too many holes in the accord to risk signing it without one final negotiating session. Mr. Nixon clearly did not want to have the agreement run into a storm

of criticism on the eve of elections.

Q. Does this mean the President deliberately decided not to sign before Election Day?

A. Not exactly. What happened, according to all accounts, seems to be this: On Oct. 22, Mr. Nixon told Hanoi that another negotiating session was needed. Efforts were being made through diplomatic channels to arrange such a session when Hanoi, on Oct. 26, broadcast the outline of the nine-point accord and demanded that the United States sign by Oct. 31. The effect was that there were no negotiations between Oct. 26 and Oct. 31; from the Administration's point of view there was no sense in trying to rush negotiations in the last week before elections.

Q. Why did Hanoi publish the agreement and why did it get so angry over the Oct. 31 deadline?

A. Hanoi does not trust the United States, and may have felt that Mr. Nixon was trying to back out of the agreement while leaving the impression with the American people that an accord was close at hand. By publishing the accord, Hanoi was, in a sense, forcing the Administration to say publicly what it thought about the agreement.

Q. And what does the Administration think about it?

A. Mr. Kissinger on Oct. 26 said that the United States basically stands by the draft agreement and still hopes to sign it after remaining details are resolved.

Q. What "details" are most pressing?

A. Mr. Kissinger wants the international control group to be in place on the day the cease-fire begins to reduce the chances of last-minute grabbing of land and assassination as the Vietcong tries to widen

its area of control. He also wants Hanoi to acknowledge that the accord does not oblige Saigon to participate in any "colition government" with the Communists and neutrals, something anathema to Mr. Thieu. These problems arose along with others when Mr. Kissinger was in Saigon from Oct. 18 to 23 trying to get Mr. Thieu to drop his objections to the accord.

Q. Why is Mr. Kissinger afraid of last-minute fighting?

A. While he was in Saigon, according to a key official, he received up-to-date intelligence that Hanoi had told its cadres to open attacks as soon as the cease-fire began. This alarmed Washington and was a cause of the delay in signing the agreement.

Q. What are Mr. Thieu's objections? And how significant are they?

A. Mr. Thieu is in principle opposed to any settlement short of total victory. Specifically, he wants all North Vietnamese troops withdrawn from South Vietnam to match the total American withdrawal. But the United States has told Mr.

Thieu that Hanoi cannot be expected to surrender at the negotiating table what is has not lost on the battlefield. Thus, in Washington view, Mr. Thieu should settle for an agreement giving him a better than even chance both politically and militarily with the Communists.

Q. Does Mr. Thieu really have a chance to survive without direct American military support, or is this an attempt by Washington to provide a rationale for "selling out" Mr. Thieu?

A. Only time will tell. The United States believes that North Vietnam has decided to seek a political instead of a military victory in South Viet-

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nam, because its main-force units have been battered since it launched its offensive last spring. What is unknown is how much political strength the Communists can muster, and whether the non-Communists in South Vietnam can unite around Mr. Thieu or another leader to keep power away from them. Militarily, South Vietnam is believed in relatively good shape, bolstered by last-minute injections of up-to-date aircraft and other military equipment.

Q. What if Mr. Thieu continues to refuse to sign? Will Washington go ahead without him?

A. The Administration's line is that it will not be "stamped" into an accord by Hanoi nor "deflected" from one by Saigon. In a word, yes. But the Administration believes that, in the end, Mr. Thieu will come along. He knows, and he knows the United States knows, he knows, that he cannot stay in power long without economic, political and limited military support from the United States (all allowed by the agreement).

Q. What's the best guess on the timing of an agreement?

A. Mr. Kissinger says it will take several weeks once Hanoi resumes talks with him. It is possible by Thanksgiving, more probable by Christmas, and virtually a certainty by Inauguration Day, officials here say.