

The View From Hanoi

By Tom Hayden

HANOI, North Vietnam—There is growing skepticism in North Vietnam about Washington's willingness to sign the nine-point peace agreement—or to implement it, if signed.

I found in my third trip here since 1965 that the peace agreement is viewed as a major step forward in a long struggle against American intervention in the South. Since they wrote and proposed the agreement themselves, it can be assumed that Hanoi's leadership finds the accords favorable.

In substance, indeed, the agreement represents more of the Hanoi-N.L.F. position than that of Washington or Saigon. Complete U.S. military withdrawal, agreement on the principle of a three-segment administration in the South, recognition of the unity of Vietnam: these points embody the long-standing demands for an end to U.S. involvement and for self-determination, after eighteen years of a U.S.-dominated regime in Saigon. Compared to Geneva in 1954, when they had to demobilize their armed forces and enter into a political process organized by the U.S.-Diem regime, the Vietnamese view these pending accords as a major victory.

They consider the agreement part of their "military, political and diplomatic" offensive which began in March with battles in Quangtri Province. Even by Western press accounts, they have destroyed more than half the conventional armed forces of Saigon, and the spectacular desertion rate of that army has jumped by 50 per cent to 22,500 per month since August. The liberation forces control virtually all the countryside and contend there are even greater military moves to come if the agreement is not achieved.

The issue for the Vietnamese revolutionaries is how to win the cities, where four million people live, perhaps a million of them "middle class" with fears of Communism, the rest impoverished and without civil liberties. If the forces of the Provisional Revolutionary Government were to attack Saigon, the U.S. probably would bomb and kill tens of thousands of people. If President Thieu was assassinated, the U.S. would likely replace him with a new dictator. If urban demonstrations were attempted, as in Danang in May, Thieu's response would be more of the same brutal repression which has taken 15,000 people monthly since May, including most of the urban opposition groupings.

The agreement contains a solution to this problem from the Hanoi-P.R.G. viewpoint: a period of guaranteed political struggle in the cities after the U.S. departs. With the U.S. military power gone, they feel, Thieu would

find it hard to continue police and military repression in the face of a popular desire for peace.

Given their position of strength, the Vietnamese believe they can modify their insistence on an immediate coalition government in the South. Instead, believing they have defeated Vietnamization through their offensive, they propose to allow the weakened Saigon regime to exist until after its U.S. military support is withdrawn, giving Henry Kissinger the "fig leaf" or "decent interval" he has so long desired to cover a U.S. departure.

This outlook is entirely different from that of Washington, and this is why the agreement may be delayed to the point of collapse. President Nixon confuses damage with defeat. In pounding Vietnam's cities to rubble, making refugees of millions, he thinks Hanoi's war-making capability has been broken.

He is even more liable to think so when the terms of the other side become more conciliatory or appear to be compromised. The tendency is to confuse Hanoi's flexibility with weakness, then to intensify military escalation instead of taking the opportunity to negotiate.

If the illusion persists, the war will continue and, as the 1976 elections approach, will become a heavier burden for the incumbent government.

Mr. Nixon must know how badly hurt his allies have been, but seems to believe his enemies have been hurt even more. Therefore the President may feel that Hanoi has to have the agreement, but he wants to delay signing in order to rebuild "Vietnamization" or obtain a guarantee that Thieu can rule for four more years. But the Vietnamese will certainly not allow the rebuilding of the same "Vietnamization" apparatus which they have shed so much blood to destroy this year. Mr. Nixon cannot have the agreement and Vietnamization as well. If he thinks he can, he will either lose the agreement or, signing it, have to resume the bombing when the Saigon regime begins to collapse afterwards. He can only have the agreement work if he wants a face-saving retreat from Indochina.

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