

Nixon Is Expected To Override Thieu

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President Nixon now must make the ultimate decision on whether to approve a cease-fire settlement with North Vietnam over the objections of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu.

That decision is expected to be affirmative — to override Thieu. The South Vietnamese leader's objections to the proposed cease-fire accord are basic, not marginal. They cannot be reconciled by changing a word here or there in the draft, U.S. officials agree. To persist in demanding the major changes that Thieu seeks would overturn the fundamentals of the agreement to which the Nixon administration has committed its prestige.

As presidential envoy Henry A. Kissinger returned to Washington last night from his prolonged renegotiations in Paris, the Nixon administration avoided giving any direct sign of its next move in the extended maneuvering over a war settlement.

The overwhelming expectation among administration specialists, however, is that President Nixon will tell President Thieu that in nearly a month of resumed negotiations, the United States has gone as far as it could hope to go toward perfecting an agreement, except perhaps for last-minute technical modifications.

Thieu's Comments

President Thieu's own comments in the last two days indicate that he recognizes that the negotiations have reached a climax for the Nixon administration.

Thieu was reported yesterday to have told a group of parliamentarians in Saigon, following his Tuesday speech in which he registered profound objections to the proposed accord, that "They (the Americans) have faced us with a fait accompli concerning Vietnam . . . The cease-fire agreement will be signed whether we want it or not."

According to South Vietnamese sources, it is vital for President Thieu's political interests to convince his supporters, especially his generals, that he held out as long as possible against an accord that falls far short of his regime's own goals. It is equally vital for Thieu, these sources said, for Thieu to demonstrate as well that he extracted from the United States all possible concessions, in war material, aid and post cease-fire involvement of the Nixon administration in sustaining the Saigon regime in the political-military struggle that every expert expects will come after an accord is signed.

In the opinion of many independent experts, Thieu has done a brilliantly shrewd job in this form of behind-the-scenes bargaining with Washington in the

weeks since Oct. 31 when the cease-fire accord might have originally gone into effect.

Retains Leverage

This bargaining by Saigon may now even become intensified, for Thieu still holds the leverage of the Nixon administration's desire for his acquiescence, if not support, of the proposed accord.

Thieu's strongest card is his ability to charge that the United States "imposed" a settlement upon him, over his adamant objections. While the Nixon administration can disagree, President Nixon apparently wants to avoid, if he can, the charge on his record of history that he reneged on reiterated commitments to an ally.

The extent to which the Nixon administration has made new commitments to the Thieu regime for post-cessate-fire U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, in order to try to avoid a public flare-up with Thieu, has yet to be fully discussed in public.

With Congress out of session, the congressional reaction to the unexplained degree of continuing U.S. involvement in South Vietnam has yet to be plumbed.

American and South Vietnamese sources both report that the Nixon administration has committed itself to use American air power in the defense of the Saigon regime if there is a serious breach of the cease-fire accord that Saigon's forces cannot handle alone.

The critical point of just where the "threshold" would be for using American air power against a cease-fire violation, however, remains a matter of intense speculation among Americans and South Vietnamese in Saigon. All indications are that the Nixon administration deliberately has avoided defining this reentry point, in order to preserve President Nixon's options. This subject could well be a prime topic for bargaining between Washington and Saigon in the days ahead.

Saigon' Position

No responsible American source holds out any hope, however, for reconciling President Thieu's asking price for a cease-fire accord with the basic terms that Kissinger and Le Duc Tho have negotiated.

What Thieu asks, as he publicly repeated Tuesday, is recognition that the Saigon government's writ of sovereignty runs throughout South Vietnam; that North and South Vietnam are "two separate states" and not a single nation temporarily divided by a military demarcation line (as the 1954 Geneva accords stated), and that North Vietnamese forces are in the South "illegally."

This is not merely a technical or a theological argument; it is what the entire war is about.