

The Peace Talks: Questions and Answers

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — With another round in the Paris negotiations ended and with Henry A. Kissinger back in Washington briefing officials, many important questions remain unanswered publicly, and uncertainty and confusion continue to surround the talks. Following are some of the questions and an attempt to define the situation that now exists:

Q. What has the Administration told the public about the negotiations to end the Vietnam war?

A. Very little. There has been no substantive public discussion since Mr. Kissinger's "peace is at hand" news conference of Oct. 26, which led nearly everyone to believe that only minor matters remained to be settled and that the war would soon be over—probably by Christmas. There have been carefully managed disclosures since then to some newsmen—including some at The New York Times—but since Mr. Kissinger returned on Wednesday night, there has been only silence.

The press has served a double function in recent months. It has reported whatever news has been made available, and has acted as a sounding board not only for Washington but for Saigon, Hanoi and the Vietcong. The various factions have sought to influence public opinion and to bring pressure on the others by deliberately supplying "inside" information to the press. Some of this information has been accurate, some has been distorted in the telling, and some has turned out to be false.

Because of these competing views, the ordinary reader has often been confused. Moreover, many key areas dealing with the negotiations themselves, such as the arguments at the negotiating table, have remained a mystery to this day.

Q. Do the current silence and the departures of Mr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the Hanoi negotiator, from Paris mean that the chances for a negotiated settlement in the near future have dimmed?

A. That's the way it seems at this moment. But no one really knows. It appears as if something happened in Paris during the last round, from Dec. 4 to Dec. 13, to dissipate the optimism that had been fostered by the Administration. All we know is that Mr. Kissinger returned from Paris without concluding an agreement.

Q. Is it known for sure what happened in Paris in the last week?

A. We know very little. Responsible officials have told The Times that the last round was unproductive because Mr. Kissinger raised a new element: To get Hanoi to agree in writing to either withdraw its forces from South Vietnam or at least acknowledge that they were there "illegally" by conceding that the Saigon Government had complete sovereignty over all of South Vietnam. Even this point has never been publicly acknowledged.

Q. What did Mr. Tho say when Mr. Kissinger raised this issue?

A. He refused to agree to the request and, according to The Times's sources, still unconfirmed publicly, he said, in effect, that if the United States seeks to make an issue out of such a fundamental point, Hanoi will reopen questions that Washington had already agreed to—such as a simultaneous cease-fire in Cambodia, the sanctity of the buffer zone between the two Vietnams, and the rules for the international supervisory team that will check on the cease-fire.

Q. Why did Mr. Kissinger raise the "sovereignty" issue at this point in the negotiations, when, apparently, it was not included in the original nine-point draft agreement made public on Oct. 26?

A. He did it because Mr. Nixon instructed him to do so. And Mr. Nixon apparently decided to do so to satisfy President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, who has made North Vietnam's presence in South Vietnam the major reason for his refusal to accept the Hanoi-Washington draft accord. But even this was a deduction.

Q. Does this mean that Mr. Thieu has a veto over the final terms of a settlement?

A. That, too, is unclear. On Oct. 26, Mr. Kissinger seemed to indicate that while the United States would take into account Saigon's interests, it would decide for itself "how long we believe a war should be continued." No one in the Administration has ever defined what factors would go into that decision. Certainly, Mr. Nixon has gone to great lengths to gain Mr. Thieu's concurrence.

Q. Does this apparent impasse mean that nothing

has been accomplished in the negotiations?

A. There is the view, particularly in Paris, that the negotiations are back at the starting point. But it seems from what is known that progress has been made in many areas of the projected agreement, which deals with the cease-fire terms and the future situation in South Vietnam after a cease-fire. Yet evidently something is holding up the completion of the package.

Q. What happens next?

A. Presumably, this is what Mr. Nixon, Mr. Kissinger, and other top officials are talking about now. The next move seems to be Washington's and specifically what comes next appears to be up to Mr. Nixon.

Q. Why does Mr. Thieu object to the October package?

A. Mr. Thieu fears that if North Vietnam can maintain a presence in South Vietnam, this will give heightened legitimacy to the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong, and that because the Vietcong are masters at subversion, they could eventually undermine the anti-Communist fabric in South Vietnam.

But Mr. Kissinger has consistently said—since well before the current negotiations—that North Vietnam could not be expected to give up at the conference table what it had not lost on the battlefield. The United States has said publicly that its aim was not to get rid of the Communist forces in South Vietnam, but to secure a settlement under which Saigon did not have a Communist or coalition government imposed on it.

Q. Does the United States believe that an agreement that does not call for complete North Vietnamese withdrawal can work?

A. The Administration argued, before the last round of talks, that the nine-point agreement gave Saigon a good chance to survive. Its intelligence reports said that, militarily, Saigon could more than hold its own at the present time, and, politically, that Mr. Thieu could secure a wide following of anti-Communist groups that would defeat the Vietcong at the polls.

Moreover, the United States would have planes in Thailand and at sea to counter any flagrant violations by North Vietnam and American economic and military aid would continue.

Q. Since it is now mid-

December, and, in late October, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger both promised a settlement, does the delay indicate that the Administration perpetrated a hoax, possibly for election purposes?

A. The Administration denies the hoax theory. It says, first, that Hanoi initiated the move toward a settlement when it brought in new proposals on Oct. 8 that formed the basis for the original nine-point draft agreement. Hanoi also insisted that the agreement be signed by Oct. 31, in advance of Election Day. Thus, the effort to get a settlement by Nov. 7 was mostly Hanoi's doing, not the White House's.

Q. But didn't the Administration know that the draft accord would not be acceptable to Saigon and that an agreement could not be signed by Oct. 31, and if it did, why did Mr. Kissinger say on Oct. 26 that "peace is at hand"?

A. Two matters are being confused here. The Administration has said in private that it was fairly certain that Saigon would balk at the draft accord, but it hoped that Mr. Thieu would yield to persuasion. It became evident at the end of October that Mr. Thieu would not yield. The original target date of Oct. 22 passed.

Then Hanoi, on Oct. 26, published the terms of the nine-point draft accord.

Mr. Kissinger says that when he spoke later that day, stressing that "peace is at hand," he did so to assure Hanoi that the United States was not trying to pull away from the general outline of the nine-point accord. But it cannot be ruled out that Mr. Nixon was aware of the political fallout that might accrue from such an optimistic statement.

Q. Will Mr. Nixon authorize an agreement with Hanoi if Saigon still objects?

A. That is a key question. All he has said is that he will not be "stampeded" into an accord, and will sign it when it is "right." He knows that if he signs it over the head of President Thieu, he runs the risk of being criticized for having prolonged the war unnecessarily.

Critics such as Sen. George McGovern have long maintained that the United States should drop its support for Mr. Thieu and get out of the war. But if Mr. Nixon does not get an accord, he runs an equally grave risk of being accused of deception.