

A War of Nerves

Flurry of Conferences Indicated Decision Imminent on Peace

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President Nixon appeared to be on the verge of a decision yesterday in what one diplomatic source described as "a war of nerves" between Washington and Saigon over a cease-fire settlement of the Vietnamese war.

A series of high-level conferences on Vietnam is under way inside the Nixon administration, White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler reported yesterday. This pattern is often the prelude to a major presidential decision, although Ziegler foresees no announcement. He said there is "no plan . . . at this time" for President Nixon to speak on Vietnam before Christmas.

Kissinger conferred with the President for the fourth time yesterday since Kissinger's return Wednesday from his Paris negotiations with Le Duc Tho, who also left Paris yesterday saying that he and Kissinger agreed not to make any statement on the negotiations.

The Kissinger-Tho agreement would indicate that any public comment about the state of the prolonged negotiations between Washington and Hanoi

on taking the United States out of the war will be limited.

The critical issue at this stage is South Vietnam's strong objection to the nine-point package negotiated between the United States and North Vietnam, or alternatively, the possibility of a separate peace settlement between Washington and Hanoi, over the head of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu.

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**VIETNAM, From A1**

In addition to Kissinger's meetings with the President, Ziegler said, Kissinger talked Thursday with Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kissinger had breakfast yesterday with Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and later scheduled meetings with Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and with Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"The purpose of these meetings," Ziegler said, "is for consultations on the negotiations."

Kissinger, it appeared, was canvassing senior officials on the course that President Nixon will take in dealing with the Saigon government's opposition to the proposed war settlement.

There was speculation in Paris and Saigon yesterday that the United States now may seek, or threaten to seek, a separate peace settlement with North Vietnam. That would be an extremely difficult choice for President Nixon to make, many diplomats noted. To do so would jettison the Nixon administration's plans for a con-

siderable post-cessate-fire role in South Vietnam, and rekindle dispute about the massive American investment in the war.

President Thieu discussed that possibility himself in addressing the South Vietnamese National Assembly on Tuesday.

Thieu said "only three things can happen."

South Vietnam either could accept or not accept what Thieu called "this unfavorable solution" proposed in the nine-point plan made public in summary form on Oct. 26, and reexplored by Kissinger and Tho in their new negotiations between Nov. 20 and Dec. 6.

Third, the United States could come under pressure, said Thieu, "forcing the U.S. government to unilaterally sign an agreement on the release of [American] POWs, in exchange for ending the bombing and mining of the north, for U.S. troop withdrawal and for an end to U.S. military and economic aid to the south."

This possibility of a total cutoff of U.S. aid, Thieu conceded, is the major danger that signing a separate U.S.-North Vietnamese peace settlement holds for South Vietnam.

Said Thieu:

"If we, the Republic of Vietnam, did not accept an unreasonable formula allowing North Vietnamese troops to stay in the south, in addition to the points the United States must carry out, the Communists would at least demand that the U.S. government end its military and economic aid to the Republic of Vietnam."

South Vietnam "must continue to fight for its independence, freedom, survival and peace," said Thieu. "The RVN does not hesitate to continue the struggle," he said, "but it needs assistance to fight alone, because this is the only way it can save itself."

Having posed the dilemma of adverse choices for the Saigon regime, Thieu avoided stating which road it would take. Instead, he counter-proposed an experimental cease-fire starting at Christmas with an exchange of prisoners and direct talks between Saigon and the Communist parties. The White House on Thursday explicitly spurned that formula.

Thieu, in turn, holds the card for blocking, or at least seriously impeding the internationally supervised standstill cease-fire in the U.S. North Vietnamese settlement plan.

That cease-fire is the starting point for a total U.S. troop withdrawal from South Vietnam in 60 days, the release of American prisoners of war, and the creation of a three-segment National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to supervise elections for a new government in South Vietnam.

By witholding agreement to the cease-fire, Thieu could impair the whole package. On Thursday in Paris, North Vietnam's spokesman said the Saigon regime must sign that accord.

The United States and South Vietnam, therefore, each appears to have the capacity to block the other's intentions, unless one or the other breaks the stalemate by a new move. This is the decision that is awaited from the White House.