



But Will the Peace Agreement Stick?

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LE DUC THO, the chief North Vietnamese peace negotiator, acknowledges that the Communists are still "heading for reunification." President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam asserts that "the South and North are two separate nations."

So while rejoicing in the cease-fire signed in Paris, there are questions yet to be posed. Will the agreement stick? And if it doesn't, will the United States be once more sucked into the conflict?

The prospect is not altogether gloomy. Many forces are presently working to make the Communists stick to the letter of the Paris agreements.

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FOR ONE THING, there is the international diplomatic alignment. President Nixon's supreme success has been to persuade both Russia and China to support his efforts to reach a Vietnamese settlement. All present signs indicate that Moscow and Peking do not want any new flareup of the fighting, and that they are in good position to press their views on the Communists in both North and South Vietnam.

Secondly, there is the prospect of what President Nixon called "a major effort" by the United States to develop a reconstruction program for both North and South Vietnam. Obviously aid will not be tendered to Hanoi unless the Communists abide by the Paris agreements.

There is also a stick, brandished by the 12-day bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in December. The bombing put the Communists on notice that, if they break the cease-fire, President Nixon can make them pay a heavy price for the transgression.

Unfortunately, the only danger to the cease-fire does not come from the Communist side. Another source of difficulty lies in the weakness of the Saigon regime.

President Nguyen Van Thieu heads an unpopular military regime which rules more by force than through consent. It has a powerful apparatus of coercion in the form of military and police forces numbering a million men, but it does not have an effective apparatus of civilian administration or political mobilization.

Because the cease-fire initiates an era where Saigon is obliged to engage the Communists in a political process, the agreement spells trouble for Thieu. Perhaps he will be able to accommodate the Communist demand for release of 30,000 political prisoners. Maybe he will agree with their demand for elections to a parliament that will cut into his presidential powers.

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BUT THE ODDS are against it. Indeed, Thieu is already moving to abort the political process. The trouble is that Thieu's steps to tighten control are sure to look like violations of the cease-fire to the Communists. The agreement could break down through any one of a number of actions apt to be taken by President Thieu. Among them are refusal to release political prisoners; refusal to agree on elections; or refusal to allow resettlement of refugees in Communist-held areas.

A prudent guess, accordingly, is that the cease-fire agreement probably will break down, maybe in a couple of months. So the United States needs to start a barrier against new pressures for military reengagement.