

Vietnam Now: Pact but No Peace

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PARIS, April 25—Three months after the Vietnam cease-fire, the fundamental issues of the Indochina conflict remain as sharp as ever and the firing has not ceased. The sides have exchanged charges of widespread violation, for which each blames the other. It is obvious that the fighting is continuing. Hanoi and Washington, Saigon and the Vietcong have marshaled detailed arguments, claim-

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ing to have observed the Paris accords while their opponents broke them. Their contradiction lies in the contradictory nature of the cease-fire itself, a document on which agreement was reached only by finding words and formulas to paper over continuing deep disagreements.

The dispute persists on two levels. The basic one is who is to control South Vietnam. It is reflected in a series of arguments on interpretation of the many carefully ambiguous or artful provisions of the agreement.

Although no official would say so publicly, for form is held dear by Vietnamese, it is evident that both the Communists and Saigon consider the war unsettled and are not going to concede any power they did not lose on the battlefield.

Look for More Battles

Many South Vietnamese exiles, attached to neither side, have concluded sadly that a settlement is not likely until more battles provide an unarguable decision.

The one firmly spelled out and easily operable provision of the cease-fire has been implemented—the end of United States combat activity in Vietnam, withdrawal of combat troops and release of American prisoners.

But the Communist aim in the agreement was to achieve at least a big first step toward ending the American role in Indochina, and they point to a number of facts as proof that the United States has not kept its promise. The bombing of Cambodia, occasional bombing of Laos and reconnaissance over North Vietnam are activities that Hanoi considers forbidden by the agreement.

President Nguyen van Thieu's trip to the United States and the myriad forms of continued American support for the South Vietnamese leader, especially the heavy flow of military supplies, are taken by the Communists as signs that the United States has not really abandoned its ambition to make sure that the war ultimately comes out the way Washington wanted it to in the first place.

As U.S. Reads the Pact

Washington never read the agreement that way. It presumed that Hanoi had read the fine print with full understanding, making concessions to get itself out of the war rather than just to get the Americans out.

So the United States now insists that military as well as economic and political support for Mr. Thieu meets the letter of the agreement. It promised to dismantle its bases and facilities by March 28, but it had turned them over to Saigon before cease-fire day and so, in Washington's eyes, they are not covered by the pact.

The United States promised to stop sending military supplies except to replace existing stocks. But it built up such huge arsenals in the crash delivery program late last year that "replacement" has turned out to mean full provision of

Thieu and Vietcong Taking Stock of Their Positions

everything that the Saigon force can use and then some.

Hanoi, it is now clear, did not intend to let the promise of an "end to foreign interference" in Indochina mean that its forces and those it supports could slowly be ground down by America's allies and associates in Laos and Cambodia, with American bombs and bullets.

Goals Unchanged in South

The essence of the deal made at Paris was that the United States could get out of its active Vietnam role with its prisoners and without upsetting the Thieu regime. In return, the United States abandoned the effort to get the North Vietnamese out of the South.

It was a compromise only in the sense that each side thought it had won a substantial advantage. Apparently, at this point neither side is prepared to make an effective settlement for less than it thought it was getting.

The South Vietnamese rivals never really compromised at all, except on language. Both remain committed to their original goals—for Saigon, removing the Communist challenge, for the Communists, winning enough power to provide a chance of dominating Saigon in the longer run.

The hope of the cease-fire was that the exhausted, tortured people of Vietnam would somehow find a way to make sure that the struggle to govern them would be converted from a military to a political fight. That hope has not begun to be realized.

Some things have changed since the hectic Paris negotiations and the euphoria of a formally pronounced end to formal war. The most important change affecting the situation in South Vietnam has been a parallel reassessment of their circumstances by Mr. Thieu and the Communists.

President Thieu was reluctant to accept the cease-fire. He judged that it would weaken his regime, then he decided

that time was against him and that he could hold if he could push through elections fairly quickly.

Nobody knew what would happen when the South Vietnamese were told that their long ordeal was over. There were fears of rapid crumbling, but nothing much happened. It was as if the people, so used to wartime life, needed long and gradual adjustment to the notion that peace might be different.

The Communists were obliged to reassess their position by the same light that gave Saigon new confidence. They have not been able to emerge as triumphantly popular as they thought they would, so they are depending on time and the sense of relaxation that a prolonged semi-cease-fire might bring to erode Mr. Thieu's tight hold.

Supplies Are Crucial

There are solid reasons underlying the President's new eagerness for an early political settlement, and for the Vietcong's insistence on first obtaining a considerable period with full freedom for political activity.

Whether or not the Vietnamese can inch their way to political instead of military conflict without a battlefield decision, the minimum hope of the cease-fire was that their fight could be contained in their own country on a reduced scale.

That depends primarily on the supplies sent to them from outside. This was always the only international guarantee that anyone might expect to prove effective. Only Canada seemed to imagine that foreign truce supervisors would make a real difference.

It still is not clear whether there is any understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union on withholding supplies that would permit resumption of big offensives and large-scale battles, and, if so, just what that understanding entails and where the American obligation lies.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese seem no nearer the promised "reconciliation and concord" than when the bombs were falling north and south, instead in Cambodia next door.