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NORTH VIETNAM’S OBJECTIVES

The immediately preceding CNA quarterly issue on North Vietnam reviewed the long history of negotiating a peace settlement in Vietnam and concluded that N. Vietnam evinces interest in peace negotiations only at times when a major communist military operation fails, when losses are great, and when N. Vietnam is in grave difficulty because of American bombing. The article was written when the terms of the October draft settlement had been pronounced unacceptable by the US and N. Vietnam was loudly proclaiming that these terms were the only ones which could secure peace, that she would refuse to change a single comma of them. In the words of Xuan Thuy, leader of N. Vietnam’s delegation to the Paris talks, “We reject all allegations aimed at modifying the contents of the agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam. We demand the United States strictly abide by what has been agreed upon and rapidly sign that agreement.” N. Vietnam no longer sought a cease-fire agreement with the same sense of urgency she had displayed a few weeks earlier, and the reason was that President Nixon had ordered the cessation of all bombing north of the 20th parallel. The Vietnamese communists had achieved some measure of respite from their pressing difficulties and showed signs of being prepared to call President Nixon’s bluff—if, indeed, it was a bluff—even if that should mean postponing a settlement of the war. Nevertheless Le Duc Tho left Hanoi for Paris on November 14th for further meetings with Dr. Kissinger.

Dr. Kissinger arrived in Paris on the morning of November 20th and commenced his new round of talks with Le Duc Tho early the following morning. These ended with the sudden return of Kissinger on the night of November 25th amid a welter of speculation but without any official disclosure about the reasons for his departure. A hint of difficulties was, however, given by a White House announcement on November 30th that US troop withdrawals from South Vietnam would be delayed pending the outcome of the peace negotiations. On December 3rd Kissinger again flew to Paris for what the press described as ‘final’ peace talks and met Le Duc Tho on December 4th. On December 13th he again returned to Washington, first informing the press that the two sides would remain in contact and would decide later whether he should return to Paris. One day later it was announced in Paris that Le Duc Tho would return to Hanoi, though no word of explanation accompanied the announcement. He departed on December 15th and, later, there began the heaviest bombing raids ever carried out against N. Vietnam. Not only did the raids take place north of the 20th parallel, in hitherto inviolate territory, but were concentrated on the country’s two largest cities, Hanoi and Haiphong, destroying military targets previously ‘off limits’ to American aircraft because of their proximity to densely inhabited areas. It was disclosed
by Kissinger some time later that, during the last round of talks in Paris, Le Duc Tho had gone back on a number of points already agreed and repeatedly made new changes in the agreement, some of them frivolous. "The President decided that we could not engage in a charade with the American people."13

All of this is set out in detail because it is the only information currently available about what took place during this crucial juncture of the Vietnam war. The behaviour of Le Duc Tho in Paris indicates beyond all possible doubt that, since October, a very important change had been made in N. Vietnam's policy. His own helpful and constructive attitude at the October meetings had altered radically by December to become just the reverse. Because no individual N. Vietnamese can today decide and implement policy by himself, this change in Le Duc Tho's behaviour cannot but reflect a decision taken by the Party Politburo in Hanoi.

The reason for that change, and what it was intended to accomplish, must remain matters for speculation. It is, nevertheless, worth trying to fathom out the probable reasons because of the light these can throw on the Politburo's thinking. As already stated, N. Vietnam obtained relief from pressures that had become insupportable when President Nixon restricted the bombing of her territory. Her initial refusal to countenance changes in October's draft agreements were very probably prompted by her belief that the pressures upon President Nixon to accept that agreement would ultimately prove irresistible. The US press was growing daily more sceptical of Kissinger's claim that peace was 'at hand'. Senator McGovern was claiming with increasing directness that he had been defeated in the November presidential elections because President Nixon had lied to the American people about the peace agreement, and members of the Congress were publicly threatening to end the war by cutting off funds unless the President achieved a peace settlement very quickly. Nor was the President's position made any easier by press and television features devoted to the general theme of getting the prisoners home from N. Vietnam in time to spend Christmas with their families.

As they studied the American domestic situation—the N. Vietnamese have been conducting detailed analysis of the American political situation on a continuing basis for many years—Hanoi's communist leaders became well aware of President Nixon's very real dilemma. Having indicated that the October draft cease-fire agreements were unacceptable to him, he faced the alternatives of accepting them unaltered, and thereby losing face and credibility, or of insisting on changes and risking failure to secure any settlement at all. Le Duc Tho's conduct of negotiations during December appears to indicate that N. Vietnam had taken a further decision to exploit the President's dilemma for yet another purpose. By going back on points already agreed and proposing large numbers of fresh changes, he convinced Kissinger that N. Vietnam no longer desired a peace settlement, which was no doubt precisely what he intended. When both Kissinger and Le Duc Tho returned to their respective capitals and neither man would give an assurance that there would be further meetings between them, the N. Vietnamese leaders had achieved just the situation of uncertainty and doubt they sought to create.

By leaving the negotiations in this state of suspended animation, they doubtless expected to provide sufficient time for President Nixon's domestic critics and enemies to damage him, his credibility, and his standing in his own country and the world.

It is not possible to determine with certainty what the N. Vietnamese leaders expected, or even hoped, to accomplish by their new policy. One cannot read the N. Vietnamese press published during October without receiving the impression that the country's leadership was highly delighted by the terms of the draft cease-fire agreement. The satisfaction expressed appears genuine enough and, since the terms were subsequently rejected by both President Nixon and President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, was almost certainly well founded. Possibly, therefore, N. Vietnam was seeking nothing more than to compel President Nixon to reverse his decision and to accept the draft text as it stood. If that were the case, though, it would suggest that the communist leaders had made a very inaccurate assessment of his character. More probably they understood him better than that, a viewpoint that is corroborated by the fact that they ordered the evacuation of Hanoi, the urgent repair of damaged air raid shelters, and diverted a very high proportion of available manpower to the task of trans-
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porting as many as possible of the new Soviet SAM 2 missiles from their storage area in the Chinese frontier region to their action positions around Hanoi and Haiphong. The thoroughness with which the N. Vietnamese carried out all these things very strongly suggests that they had anticipated a resumption of American air raids north of the 20th parallel.

Why it must be asked, if the communist leadership entertained no very lively hopes of having the October draft agreement signed by the US, was it willing to create a situation likely to provoke renewed bombing attacks against the whole of its country? Part of the answer became apparent almost as soon as the bombing raids commenced, for the anti-aircraft defences were shown to be far stronger than at any previous period, and the numbers of planes lost were much higher. A second part of the answer was not revealed until several days later, when numbers of government leaders in all parts of the world, ranging from Sweden's Prime Minister Palme to Australia's Whitlam, voiced the most outspoken criticism of American actions in Vietnam ever heard from persons occupying such high office. Moreover, individual members of the US Congress were stating publicly their intention to table resolutions to end the war by cutting off funds as soon as the Congress reunited after the Christmas recess. N. Vietnam, it appears, was prepared to allow President Nixon to resume bombing in the belief that her strengthened anti-aircraft defences could minimize damage by keeping the attacking planes away from the more important targets. Thus, while sustaining relatively small damage to the country, the communist leaders hoped to provoke an immediate upsurge of domestic American and international condemnation of the resumed bombing so strong as to cause President Nixon to desist. Were the President seen to be unable to carry through the policies he had adopted and forced to abandon them, his prestige and authority would be seriously, perhaps irreparably, damaged. It is difficult to dismiss the conclusion that N. Vietnam's leadership coldly and deliberately undertook to destroy President Nixon as it had previously destroyed President Johnson.

That N. Vietnam failed to accomplish any such objective was due to two factors, one of which was determined by its own leaders and the other by President Nixon. To take the second factor first, President Nixon ordered bombing to be carried out on a far heavier scale than ever before, concentrated it upon targets previously forbidden to attacking aircraft, and persisted in the bombing despite unprecedentedly high plane losses. By so doing he surprised his enemy, destroyed targets the enemy had believed to be inviolate, and forced the enemy to expend as much ordnance that stocks were virtually exhausted. The other factor was that of timing, which N. Vietnam had influenced throughout by her conduct of negotiations. US bombing attacks commenced on December 15th, within a week of Christmas, when the public preoccupation in all Christian countries was preparation for the festival and its accompanying celebrations and holidays. Universities, one of the mainstays of the protest in the West, had gone down for the Christmas vacation, parliaments everywhere were about to recess, and people were dispersing. Press and television were concentrating on their usual Christmas subjects, and events in Vietnam had begun to appear remote and unimportant. In other words, the resumption of air attacks came at a time when it was impossible to organise full-scale orchestrated protest campaigns in the West. By December 30th N. Vietnam could take no more and transmitted a message to Washington that it was ready to resume serious peace negotiations in Paris. But people in the West were still dispersed and institutions were still not functioning normally, so that the bombing attacks were over and peace negotiations in prospect once more before the full weight of protest and condemnation could be brought into play. Political leaders were, of course, able to make personal condemnations, newspapers to publish strong editorials and readers' letters, but the timing of the bombing attacks caught the protest machine at a moment when it was incapable of operating and the effect of such protest as was voiced was small.

Because of the intensity of the bombing, the damage it caused, and the limited stocks of anti-aircraft ordnance available to N. Vietnam, time became the most important factor. The attacks could be borne for only a very limited period and, in the event, this proved too short to enable the N. Vietnamese to derive the full advantage they had expected from the protest campaign. But time was scarcely less important for President Nixon, who would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to continue bombing had the campaign of protest and condemnation reached a crescendo, as it must surely have done after the Christmas and New Year's holidays. If the Hanoi leaders had found themselves at last compelled to abandon their political objective, to agree to resume serious negotiations, and to send a somewhat chastened Le Duc Tho back to Paris, President Nixon too had been nearing the limits of endurance. When, therefore, negotiations resumed in Paris during January, both sides would seem to have had the very strongest reasons for reaching early agreement. It was not surprising, therefore, that the negotiations, which recommenced on January 4th, resulted in the initiaing of a new cease-fire agreement on January 27th. The long drawn out business was formally concluded at a signing ceremony on Saturday, January 27th, which had about it an air of anti-climax and was remarkable only for the noisy demonstrations by French communists which President Pompidou tactlessly permitted for domestic political reasons of his own.

The cease-fire agreements

The Agreements, when they were at last published, were found to contain 23 Articles and 4 Protocols, and their text plainly reveals the very hard bargaining which preceded their acceptance by both sides. Neither the US nor N. Vietnam obtained all
it had sought, and reluctant compromise is evident in almost every line. None of the participants in the lengthy war could find in the text grounds for great satisfaction, but each achieved something. The language of the document is unusual, to say the least, the signatories, for example, being referred to repeatedly as ‘the parties’, a form of words used to avoid calling the Viet Cong a government, which would have been unacceptable to South Vietnam. Moreover, a deliberate vagueness characterizes some passages, indicating that a more precise wording would not have been agreed by one or other of the signatories. Plainly the question of national frontiers was one which caused difficulty to the negotiators for, while Article 1 speaks of the “territorial integrity of Vietnam”, Article 15 lays down that the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam is “in provisional and not political or territorial boundary”, but a boundary nevertheless.5

Were the authorities in North and South Vietnam prepared voluntarily to implement the terms of the Paris Cease-Fire Agreement, both in the letter and in the spirit, peace and stability could be established on a lasting basis. But that is not the case. Indeed after so many years of bloodshed, destruction, suffering, and bitterness, no reasonable person would expect it to be so. The communist and nationalist sides in Vietnam are today perhaps more deeply divided than ever before. The terms of the Agreement, which were conditioned by the military and political realities in Vietnam and in the US, reflect this unmistakably. There is no mutual trust, only deep suspicion well founded on long and painful past experience. That N. Vietnam has insisted on her regular armed forces remaining in South Vietnam, as of right, in the positions they held when the Cease-Fire came into effect is the bluntest possible affirmation of N. Vietnamese determination actively to continue the struggle there. South Vietnam resisted their presence on her territory until she could resist no more. Confronted with the threat that future American aid, which is essential to the survival of South Vietnam in the immediate future, might no longer be forthcoming, she bowed to the inevitable and signed, but it would be quite unrealistic to expect President Thieu not to exert every effort to contain this northern military presence and to end it at the earliest possible opportunity. What, then, have the Paris Cease-Fire Agreements achieved, what have they failed to achieve, and what is the future likely to hold for Vietnam?

N. Vietnam has repeatedly described the Agreements as a ‘great victory’, which is scarcely surprising since to call them anything else would be to question the infallibility and invincibility of the Party; but what has she in fact accomplished? She has unquestionably obtained one of her principal requirements, the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, as well as some short-term tactical requirements such as the cessation of US bombing of her territory and the clearing of US mines from her waterways and ports. She has won the right to a military presence in South Vietnam, has had the territorial integrity of Vietnam recognised in a document signed by all parties, and has established the right of the Viet Cong’s Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) to control territory in South Vietnam and to participate in South Vietnam’s political processes. Together these represent very important gains, but they have not been obtained without important concessions too. Until very recently N. Vietnam had insisted on the departure of President Nguyen Van Thieu and the replacement of his government by a tripartite coalition government in which at least one of the segments, and probably two, would be communist as a pre-condition for any Vietnam settlement.5 This had now been dropped altogether. N. Vietnam has agreed to the continued existence of the Demilitarized Zone (albeit as a provisional boundary), has accepted reference in the Agreements to S. Vietnam as an entity and undertaken to respect its sovereignty. In consequence of this latter concession, Hanoi Radio and the Viet Cong’s Liberation Press have made reference for the first time to the “Government of the Republic of Vietnam”. Hanoi has also foresworn armed force as a means of achieving reunification, which is now to be brought about “step by step through peaceful means on the basis of discussions and agreements.”5 She has also made major concessions over the question of Laos and Cambodia.

This latter concession was, perhaps, a little surprising and deserves comment. Article 26 of the Agreements commits the signatories to respect the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Agreements on Cambodia and Laos respectively. Not only do the N. Vietnamese recognise the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territ-
orial integrity of these two countries, but they undertake not to use the territory of either for the purpose of encroaching on the sovereignty and security of South Vietnam and of other countries. "All foreign countries shall not only end all military activities in Cambodia and Laos, but shall withdraw troops, military advisers and personnel, arms and war materials from them." N. Vietnam is estimated to have 35,000 soldiers in Cambodia, where they constitute the main strength of the anti-government insurgents. The complete withdrawal of these men risks reducing the whole insurgency to impotence.

In Laos, N. Vietnamese have not only carried out the fighting for the Pathet Laos communists, but have created at enormous effort and expense the Ho Chi Minh trail, the lifeline upon which communist forces in South Vietnam and Cambodia have depended almost entirely. It is difficult to envisage how N. Vietnam proposes to supply her estimated 200,000 soldiers in South Vietnam unless she makes use of the trail. Kissinger has stated on January 24th that Article 20 prohibited the use of infiltration trails in Laos and that N. Vietnam clearly understood that her forces were included by the term 'foreign troops' and had to be withdrawn.

The US has extricated herself from the unpopular Vietnam war and secured agreement to release her prisoners, doing so on terms a good deal better than most Americans would have believed possible in mid-1972. When her last troops withdraw, the Viet Cong must feel pleased with what they have obtained from the Paris Agreements.

South Vietnam is left with a sizeable N. Vietnamese communist force occupying parts of her territory and is confronted by a Provisional Revolutionary Government which has won some measure of international recognition. She is obliged to participate on an equal footing with the PRG on the 4-party military commission, and the tripartite National
Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC), which involves no small loss of face. She will have to contest national elections with the PRG. Nevertheless, President Thieu remains in office, as does his government, and it disposes of military forces stronger than ever before. The national and local administrations remain intact, and the overwhelming majority of South Vietnam's people remain under government control.

The least satisfactory part of the Paris Cease-Fire Agreements is the arrangements they have made for supervision and control. Correct implementation of the terms is supervised by a 4-party military commission comprising representatives of the four signatories, and it will be replaced by a 2-party military commission after 60 days, when the US and N. Vietnam withdraw their representatives. Each of the parties enjoys the right of veto, making it difficult to see how either body can function effectively. These bodies will guide a 4-nation International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) comprising elements from Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, and Poland in the exercise of its supervisory function. Since the ICCS members, too, are accorded veto powers, that body seems unlikely to accomplish very much. In any case, its quite inadequate numbers—280 men from each country—will prevent it from exercising any but the most perfunctory supervision. None of the bodies has any power to enforce its decisions or directives other than the right to issue reports, which suggests that the whole apparatus will prove to be even less effective than the ICC established by the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Canada, understandably apprehensive, may decide to withdraw her element, which would leave the whole future of the ICCS in doubt.

Nor are the prospects for determining the future political institutions in South Vietnam encouraging. Under the terms of the Agreements, the two South Vietnamese parties must immediately commence talks on the creation of a NCNRC which will comprise three segments—it is assumed, but nowhere stated, that these will represent the Saigon government, the PRG, and a 'neutral' segment. The talks must also determine the form of future government institutions in South Vietnam and the lower level councils. The duly constituted NCNRC will then organise national elections, under international supervision, to whatever institutions have been agreed and fix the modalities for local elections. Such are the suspicions which exist between the Saigon government and the Viet Cong that it is difficult to see how their representatives will reach agreement either over the composition of the third segment of the NCNRC or over the form of South Vietnam's governmental machinery. Should deadlock be reached in these talks, no means of breaking it have been laid down in the Agreements.

Even if one leaves on one side questions such as enforcing the prohibition on the introduction of further weapons or military personnel in South Vietnam, the prevention of reprisals, the establishment of normal relations between North and South Vietnam, gradual advance towards reunification by negotiation, and so on, there remain other matters which appear certain to cause difficulties and disputes. The release of prisoners is one such question. There are in South Vietnam's prisons 41,000 persons whom President Thieu insists are common criminals but are described by N. Vietnam as political prisoners. These persons are civilians who have been found guilty by duly constituted courts of illegal acts—chiefly subversion, sabotage, the use of violence, etc.—but the communist side maintains they performed these acts for political reasons. If the men were released, President Thieu believes they would immediately engage in renewed subversion, which is why he is unlikely to let them go. N. Vietnamese leaders know that the greatest bargaining counters they possess are the American prisoners, and it is possible they will seek to exploit these so as to exert pressure on Saigon.

Another important question concerns the areas seized by the communist forces on the eve of the Cease-Fire. Some of these are so located that they could be used by the communists to disrupt important communications routes. President Thieu is not disposed to allow the communists to hinder the free passage of people or goods, or to interfere with administration, and he will certainly try to retake the areas by force. The communists are seeking to enlarge their enclaves and to infiltrate armed propaganda cadres into South Vietnam's villages, so that further engagements appear inevitable.

The future

The restoration of peace and stability still
appears only a remote possibility. If hostilities should recommence, they are unlikely to be halted by outside agencies, for no state or international body is likely to attempt to halt N. Vietnamese forces fighting in the South after the failure of half a million American soldiers to do so. Indeed, throughout all the negotiations, N. Vietnam has strongly resisted all efforts to involve other countries in the settlement. She was obliged to accept the ICES, but contrived to limit both its numbers and its powers.

During his 19 hours of talks in Hanoi with Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho, Kissinger offered US assistance to restore N. Vietnam’s shattered communications, to restore ports to working order, and to rebuild factories, equipping them with modern machines. He also offered to make available cheap and abundant hydro-electric power from the nearby Mekong Development Project. With this help and her own natural resources, N. Vietnam could dramatically raise living standards in a very short time—though Kissinger was probably too tactful to mention it—reduce her dependence on the USSR and China. Before he departed, both sides agreed to establish a joint US-North Vietnamese Economic Commission to direct US reconstruction funds.

But Kissinger warned that the aid would not be forthcoming if N. Vietnam broke the Paris Agreements, and outspoken criticism of such aid inside the US lent added credibility to his words. President Nixon would not feel concerned, he assured his hosts, if N. Vietnam should outstrip the South in peaceful competition. Here, once more, was the familiar Nixonian carrot and stick, but the decision would, in the last resort, have to be made by N. Vietnam’s leaders. On their decision would hang the future of South Vietnam for, if Hanoi chose to break the Cease-Fire Agreements, there was no power to prevent her.

It is perfectly possible that N. Vietnam abandoned her former inflexible stand and signed a Cease-Fire Agreement for the sole purpose of securing complete US withdrawal from Vietnam. If that is the case, then N. Vietnam’s intention now is to attack the South again after all US forces have departed. To do so would entail the loss of US aid and risk renewed bombing, but even that high price might be considered acceptable for the chance of finally capturing the South. Alternatively, the Hanoi oligarchy may conclude the advantages accruing from US aid outweigh other considerations. If so, N. Vietnamese soldiers will be recalled from the South, Cambodia, and Laos, and the emphasis will be shifted from military struggle to ‘socialist construction’. Either outcome remains possible, but N. Vietnam’s elderly and inflexible leaders are life-long revolutionaries. Some, at least, will be loath to abandon the struggle to impose communism on the South at this late stage, whatever the cost. Moreover, they have always deemed the achievement of their ideological objectives more important than the living standards of their subjects. The most likely outcome is that the North will seek to obtain America’s aid and, at the same time, press on with the struggle in the South. Strategy would, of course, change and military struggle would give way to political struggle, subversion, and terrorism. Since the campaign would be conducted by small groups and at village level, it would be very difficult for the ICCS to detect, so that it might not necessarily lead to the stopping of American aid. In any event, the immediate future of South Vietnam remains uncertain and the initiative presently rests with Hanoi. The next few months will reveal which of the possible options the communist leaders have chosen to adopt.

P. J. Honey

1 CNA No. 903, VNA Bulletin, Hanoi, November 16, 1972
2 The Times, London, December 14, 1972
3 The Times, London, December 21, 1972
4 All quotations are taken from the English language text of the Cease-Fire Agreements issued by the White House, Washington
5 See, for example, the 7-point proposals put forward by Nguyen Thi Binh in Paris on July 1, 1971

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