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DOES HANOI NOW WANT PEACE NEGOTIATIONS?

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THE Foreign Minister of North Vietnam said that his Government would be willing to sit down to talks with the Americans if the bombing and all acts of war against North Vietnam were unconditionally ended. Hitherto this has always been the implication that all inquirers in Hanoi read into North Vietnamese statements, but when an assurance was sought that talks would follow given the unconditional end to the bombing it was never given. Has it been given now, in the course of a speech of welcome to a visiting Mongolian delegation?

It is too soon to answer this question, or, if textual study finds that the awaited assurance has been given, to pronounce on the much more difficult question of why Hanoi has changed its mind. Can one believe, in the purpose of easing the path to negotiations at a time when all other statements coming from either Hanoi or the N.L.F. (Vietcong) in South Vietnam remain as intransigent as ever and plainly carry no expectation that talks on their terms are foreseen?

Nevertheless one can go over the ground that may influence North Vietnamese thinking, bearing always in mind that there are hawks and doves in Hanoi as in Washington, and a shift in influence from one side to the other is always a possibility in itself. It is in this context of hawks and doves that one needs first to emphasise the deep suspicion in the minds of men who have been continuously concerned with the liberation of Vietnam (as they see it) ever since the Vietminh took shape in 1941 or since it took to the hills as a guerilla force in 1944 and proclaimed itself the government of Vietnam in 1945 — 23 years ago.

Twice cheated

The suspicion began after 1946, when Ho Chi Minh negotiated with the French, made concessions, and twice found his government cheated. Ho himself had to defend his position from colleagues who said he should never have trusted the French. Then came 1954 and Geneva and once again the same men were negotiating and were unwillingly persuaded to make

concessions to reach an agreement of whose fruits, once again, they were cheated. This suspicion covers everybody: the French, who slipped out of their responsibilities after 1954, the Americans, who gradually took over these responsibilities and at a critical moment inserted their own nominee, Diem, into power, the Russians and the British, who in their different ways said "tut tut" but no more when 1956 brought no elections for the unification of Vietnam, and, of course, the Chinese who, after all, were the most effective in persuading the Hanoi representatives to sign at Geneva in 1954.

It follows from this that at all costs there can be no let-up in the war, no readiness to take any part whatsoever in negotiations unless an American withdrawal is the outcome foreseen even before the negotiations begin. "The main thing to know," as an N.L.F. representative put it in the latest interview recorded, "is if the Americans want to pull out or not. The way in which this retreat takes place would present no difficulties."

Declared aim

When the bombing of North Vietnam began it was, of course, with the declared aim of applying pressure which would force North Vietnam to negotiate. That was two years ago and has been forgotten as a motive for bombing. Nevertheless the argument of the American hawks remains; it is the same in any war — hit them hard enough and in some way they will show signs of giving in.

Of all the reasons why Hanoi should have changed its mind this seems the least probable. No western journalist visiting Hanoi has found evidence of such a weakening. However much damage the bombing is doing to the economy, however much life has been made difficult, the sufferings imposed are not bringing surrender. Nor can one believe that the doves in Hanoi would dare to use it as an argument for concessions. Much more likely is a re-examination by Hanoi of its assumption that the American election campaign is most likely to see a strengthening of pressures for peace. The visible evidence from Washington points just the other way — that President Johnson is much more likely to find that escalation will improve his chances with public opinion whereas concessions might lead to negotiations but would hold out small hope of any successful outcome within the year. In this sense Hanoi's fear of an uncertain future could be a factor.

Growing doubt

Added to this could be growing doubt about Hanoi's own supporters. The Russians would plainly like to see negotiations. They go on giving aid that is defensive, in helping Hanoi to bring down attacking American planes, rather than on a scale which is likely to increase North Vietnam's offensive power. As for China, even the most sympathetic Vietnamese can only have watched with distress the progress of the cultural revolution. When they read a speech by Mr Chou En-lai protesting at Red Guard rivals ambushing trains carrying military aid for Vietnam, or looting military stores destined for Vietnam, what priority do they think they can be getting? The idea that the cultural revolution began in China with the prospect of China's involvement in Vietnam looks quite unsupportable.

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The Chinese have lately been putting on a big show to impress the Vietnamese. Anniversaries of the foundation of the N.L.F., of the founding of the North Vietnamese army and so on have brought delegations to China, intransigent speeches, and handshakes from Chairman Mao. Evidently the Chinese have been smarting under comparisons made between them and the

Russians over the value of aid supplied. All the same, much as they want to avoid ever having a single Chinese volunteer on their soil if they can, the North Vietnamese must wonder what China could do if, like the North Koreans in 1950, they found themselves under direct assault and outflanked. The accounts of trouble on Chinese railways are enough in themselves to make Chinese action doubtful.

Another factor is the apparent shift in the American position towards the N.L.F. Hitherto Hanoi's attitude has been parallel to the American. The N.L.F. was the only true representative of the South Vietnamese people: there could be no thought of Hanoi negotiating with the Saigon government, which was a puppet of the Americans. For the Americans Saigon was the representative government — much more so since the elections — and the N.L.F. not to be considered as a separate factor in negotiations since it was a puppet of Hanoi.

The suggestion that contacts between the two forces in the south might now be indulged — though rejected both by Saigon and the N.L.F. — could set Hanoi to some more rethinking. Is it even possible that a settlement could be reached in the south by some realignment of political forces beyond North Vietnam's control? The N.L.F. speaks respectfully about the Democratic Front (whose candidate in Saigon was runner-up to President Thieu) and of the more nationalist element among the Buddhists. If the Saigon Government in turn finds fringes of the N.L.F. acceptable to them who knows what thaw might set in once contacts are established. It is, after all, South Vietnam where the war is being fought and where the less committed population is enduring most suffering.

Unchanging theme

These are some of the possibilities that could influence Hanoi's thinking. It must also be admitted that the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister's speech allows of a different interpretation. He repeated as forcefully as ever the four points for a settlement that have been Hanoi's unchanging theme ever since they were first set out by Mr Pham Van Dong and even repeated once again that the political platform of the N.L.F. must "serve as a basis for solving the Vietnam problem."

He then went on to recall earlier statements demanding a cessation of bombing, and added: "After the U.S.A. has unconditionally stopped its bombing and all other war acts against North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese government will talk with the U.S.A. about relevant questions." What are relevant questions? Could it be nothing more than the timing of the American withdrawal, which is all Hanoi ever claims to be bothered about? Or is each side now coming to be much less hidebound in the attitude to the protege of the other, so that the more the Americans concede in the status of the N.L.F. the more Hanoi may — privately and not for attribution of course — concede in the status of the Saigon government?

Confusing aftermath

These are questions that no one who has followed events in Vietnam from the beginning would wish to ignore. From the very first confrontations in September, 1945, in the confusing aftermath of the Japanese surrender, the tragedy of Vietnam has been compounded by ignorance on both sides. Are the calculations each side makes, the suspicions each side entertains, the true objectives that each side pursues, yet perfectly understood? In spite of the firm front that Communists everywhere present to their opponents, there is no reason to think that the pressures affecting North Vietnam are any less than those brought to bear on President Johnson. —