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U.S. Denies Hardening Talk Terms

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Administration officials underscored last night the need for North Vietnam to limit its side of the war if the United States stops bombing in exchange for peace talks.

The United States will not be lured into trading off a bombing halt for empty talks while Hanoi's part of the war continues unabated, they emphasized.

At the same time, U.S. officials insisted there has been no change in what they term the "master formula" of the United States for launching peace talks, even though President Johnson used different words about it in his State of

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the Union message on Wednesday night.

There was high sensitivity on this point yesterday inside the Administration. The Washington Post and many other newspapers reported that the President used "stiffer emphasis" or "firmer" language Wednesday night in stating his terms for peace talks than he did at San Antonio on Sept. 29.

Although U.S. officials would not say so outright, they evidently are concerned that the United States may be accused of undermining the chances for peace talks by hardening its terms in the midst of private diplomatic probing. Officials who declined to be identified by name said that even though the President's language may have been more explicit or stiffer to the public, there was no intention to alter the U.S. position.

The following limited comment was authorized for quotation by Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

"In answer to a question as to whether the President's statement changed the San Antonio formula, the Secretary of State replied 'no.'"

What is at issue in this seemingly fine diplomatic hair-splitting is that President Johnson's Sept. 29 statement at San Antonio was followed by a North Vietnamese diplomatic move on Dec. 29. In it, Hanoi stated for the first time publicly that it "will" hold talks with the United States if the United States "unconditionally" halts the bombing and "all other acts of war" against North Vietnam.

President Johnson at San Antonio said the United States would stop bombing if that would "lead promptly to pro-

ductive discussions." He then added the key qualification: "We would assume that while discussions proceed, North Vietnam would not take advantage of the bombing cessation or limitation."

The diplomatic significance of the word "assume" was that it made it possible for North Vietnam—which has never officially admitted that it has forces in South Vietnam—to reduce its side of the war without saying so publicly.

President Johnson said Wednesday night the United States stands by the San Antonio formula. But in stating it, instead of using the terminology "assume," he said: "And the other side must not take advantage of our restraint as they have in the past. This Nation simply cannot accept anything less without jeopardizing the lives of our men and our allies."

This phraseology amounted to a more overt call by the United States for some reciprocal military action by North Vietnam in return for a halt in the bombing. U.S. officials conceded that last night, but they maintained that the same objective was implicit in the San Antonio language.

The United States is avoiding the terms "reciprocity" or "matching military de-escalation" by Hanoi because such terms are scorned by North Vietnam, officials conceded. But this does not mean, they emphasized, that the United States is prepared to tie its hands by a bombing halt and be powerless to respond if the North Vietnamese, for example, resume firing artillery at U.S. Marines across the border that divides North and South Vietnam.

Administration policy-makers

are described as being still unsure and skeptical whether North Vietnam is engaged in a sincere peace move. The fact that North Vietnam is publicly amplifying its position in Paris and elsewhere is cited as cause for U.S. suspicion, on grounds that the talk is "too public." Administration critics, however, contend that North Vietnam may be talking aloud because it is suspicious of private U.S. diplomacy.

The U.S. diplomatic probe is both genuine and sincere, American officials counter. Nothing being said publicly by North Vietnam's envoys in Paris and elsewhere, U.S. officials said, exceeds what is passing through secret diplomatic channels. But these officials now say it may be some time before the U.S. search for "clarification" of North Vietnam's position is completed.

An American newsman, who submitted questions to Hanoi about its terms for peace talks reported yesterday that he was officially referred to public statements in Paris on Jan. 16 by North Vietnamese envoy Mai Van Bo. Robert E. Elegarit, of the Hong Kong bureau of the Los Angeles Times, reported that this brief answer was cabled to him by Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh.