

'Uneasy peace for Vietnam' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (25 January 1973)

Caption: On 25 January 1973, German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung considers the viability of a ceasefire in Vietnam and the country's future after the withdrawal of American troops.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Dürrmeier, Hans ; Herausgeber Heigert, H. 25.01.1973, Nr. 20; 28. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag GmbH. "Labiler Frieden für Vietnam", auteur:Schröder, Dieter , p. 4.

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Uneasy peace for Vietnam

by Dieter Schröder

The long-awaited news of the ceasefire in Vietnam has been received with satisfaction and relief throughout the world; there is scarcely any sense of jubilation, however, nor is there any reason to rejoice for the time being. The price to be paid for the political perpetuation of the military stalemate and for the 'honourable withdrawal' of the Americans is alarmingly high; the peace remains fragile; the ravages of war have reduced both halves of Vietnam to scorched earth; one nation has been divided, sacrificed, martyred and uprooted; another — the United States — has seen its own sense of identity shaken and its credibility abroad damaged.

Hanoi and Washington have expressed the hope that the ceasefire will lead to a 'stable and lasting peace' in Vietnam and South-East Asia; before that hope is fulfilled, the Vietnamese to the north and south of the 17th parallel will have to endure still more suffering, and the world will continue to be a witness to their fratricidal struggle. What form a peace settlement in Vietnam will eventually take — whether the country will be united under Communist rule or permanently divided — cannot easily be assessed today. The ceasefire agreement negotiated by Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger does not answer that sort of question. It solves none of Vietnam's political problems. In fact, it serves but one purpose, namely to let the United States pull out in an honourable manner.

No political solution

Whether this actually amounts to peace with honour for the United States may and will be disputed. It is not for us, however, to play up such a dispute. We must say to our American allies that leaving is the best way to preserve their honour. Since all their power was insufficient to decide the conflict, any new condition they might have made in order to salvage their pride and to save face could have brought them only dishonour. If the agreement serves to heal the divisions between Americans over this war and to preserve American society from an even greater shock, it is good and honourable enough for the United States. With or without the agreement, the United States will never be able to recapture the innocence of the pre-war era, and the painful task of coming to terms with this war will occupy the American nation for a long time to come.

The other question that must be asked today is this: how good and honourable is the agreement for the two Vietnams and, not least, for the Vietcong? President Nixon's speech and the details of the ceasefire agreement provide some indicators. In his address to the American people, the President asserted that all of the conditions for an honourable peace that he had stipulated in January and May 1972 had been fulfilled. This is certainly true of three of the conditions: international monitoring of the ceasefire, release of the American prisoners, and withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam within 60 days. On his fourth condition, however — free elections in South Vietnam within six months under international supervision — Mr Nixon has climbed down. The South Vietnamese people, he said, had been guaranteed the right to determine on their own future without external interference; in other words, Saigon and the Vietcong are to come to an agreement about the elections.

By deciding that the agreement need not include a substantive provision on free, internationally monitored elections, however, the contracting parties have also abdicated their responsibility to lay the foundations of a political solution in Vietnam. However, the decision does strengthen the position of President Thieu in Saigon. The parties have renounced the clause in the October agreement whereby a coalition committee comprising Thieu's nominees, representatives of the Vietcong and neutrals was to make preparations for the elections. Thieu had always feared that the Communists and their supposedly neutral fellow-travellers would use this process to outflank him. Nor does he have to release the Vietcong and his imprisoned political opponents, who would otherwise have reinforced the ranks of the neutrals. In the quest for a political solution, he need negotiate only with the Vietcong.

A chance of survival for Thieu

In view of this slight improvement in President Thieu's chances of survival, the question remains as to the

benefit that North Vietnam and the Vietcong will derive from the agreement, given that Hanoi has already spoken of the 'great victory of the Vietnamese people'. From the Hanoi perspective, the main value of the agreement undoubtedly lies in the fact that North Vietnam does not need to withdraw her troops from the South and that the provisions of the agreement do not demand tight control of supply movements from North to South. While Washington recognises the Thieu regime as the only legitimate Government of South Vietnam, by tolerating the presence of North Vietnamese forces in southern territory the United States is, to all intents and purposes, also according recognition to the provisional revolutionary government of the Vietcong, which was one of the co-signatories of the agreement, and upholding the right of Hanoi to have a say in South Vietnam; in short, Washington is effectively recognising a tripartite division of Vietnam.

The military situation, in which neither side was able to achieve victory, despite unprecedented exertions, will thus be frozen for the time being. But therein lies the inherent contradiction in the ceasefire agreement, which carries the germ of renewed hostilities after the withdrawal of the Americans. Right up to the day of the ceasefire, both sides will keep trying to usurp the largest possible parcels of territory on the map of South Vietnam, which is now dotted like a leopard skin with Vietcong enclaves, with a view to securing the optimum starting position. Whether Thieu can triumph without US military intervention in the final battle when it eventually occurs will depend on whether he succeeds in fostering loyalty among the people of South Vietnam to his regime, which is more like an authoritarian oligarchy than a democratic government at the present time.

Interaction of the major powers

How long the period of peaceful circumspection lasts after the withdrawal of the American forces will not depend on Hanoi and Saigon alone. Vietnam has not yet become a footnote in history, as Mr Kissinger once said in relation to Washington's rapprochement with China. President Nixon's appeal for restraint to Peking and Moscow will therefore fall on fertile soil. Until Vietnam can be deleted from the history textbooks and consigned to indifference and oblivion as a local conflict, the big two Communist powers have no interest in fuelling the conflict, which would inevitably jeopardise their economic and political cooperation with the United States. They can be expected to have a restraining influence on Hanoi, and this should have a favourable impact on the ceasefires in Cambodia and Laos, too; if Hanoi, on the other hand, chooses not to listen to them, they are likely to watch passively from the sidelines. Mr Nixon would surely not have emerged with this reasonably face-saving deal if he had not already been enjoying the tacit consent of the Soviet Union and China to his policy of bombing and mine-laying.