

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker
Henry A. Kissinger

TIME: March 8, 1970, 9:30 a.m.

Meetings with North Vietnamese of February 21

Mr. Kissinger had given Ambassador Bunker the night before a copy of the transcript of the meetings on February 21; Ambassador Bunker had gone over it and made written notes.

Mr. Kissinger asked Ambassador Bunker's impressions. The Ambassador said that he was very encouraged -- this was the most forthcoming approach in his experience, "by a good deal." He said that he thought Mr. Kissinger's comments on our not agreeing to the overthrow of Thieu were strong enough, and he found it interesting that they acquiesced when Mr. Kissinger said that we assumed they would use their influence with the PRG after an agreement just as we would use ours with the GVN. They had gotten the point that there would be a GVN at that time.

Ambassador Bunker also found significant the fact that they said that "for the time being" talks between the PRG and the Saigon administration cannot be held. He was further encouraged by the fact that Le Duc Tho proposes to stay in Paris.

He was also impressed by the atmosphere of the meeting which, he said, indicated that they want to move forward.

Ambassador Bunker said he thought that the North Vietnamese are not so sure Vietnamization won't work. And he agreed with Mr. Kissinger's point that they fear the consequences if it doesn't work, since that could mean American troops will be there for a long time.

The Ambassador said he also thought that Mr. Kissinger's statements that a political solution must reflect the existing political realities in South Vietnam and that a fair political process must register the existing relationship of political forces had sunk in.

He found further encouragement in the fact that they had agreed for the first time to discuss both the 10 and the 8 points. He agreed with Mr. Kissinger

on the significance of their saying only that we should discuss the 10 points, and not insisting that we accept them.

In addition to these points, the Ambassador agreed with the following encouraging signs listed by Mr. Kissinger:

-- They did not take exception to Mr. Kissinger's use of the word "reciprocity."

-- They did not use the word "unconditional" in referring to American withdrawal.

-- They did not insist that the GVN be changed before serious negotiations.

-- They based their argument for dropping Thieu, Ky and Khiem primarily on the grounds that the PRG would not now agree to talk with the GVN.

-- They did not lay emphasis on coalition government, or talk about the provisional government before elections.

-- They allowed Mr. Kissinger to make the appointment of a new chief of delegation conditional on progress in this channel.

-- They indicated a desire for more frequent meetings, and let us choose the time for the next meeting.

-- They have accepted a procedure for negotiations in which it would be difficult for them to pursue their usual tactics, since progress must be shown.

-- On the Monday after the meeting, Mai Van Bo thanked French Foreign Minister Schuman for helping with the arrangements for Mr. Kissinger's trip. Bo said that Mr. Kissinger unfortunately had been very tough, but nevertheless the talks would continue. This was encouraging, and if the French leak it, it won't hurt us with the GVN.

In short, Ambassador Bunker said, he found "every aspect encouraging."

Approach at the Next Meeting

Mr. Kissinger described the assets we have in this channel:

-- He speaks with the President's direct authority.

-- The North Vietnamese can't kick him around, since his personal position does not depend on progress in the negotiations.

-- There must be progress in this channel if they are to get a new U.S. Ambassador at the talks.

-- We will not follow the usual approach, but will state a position and stick with it.

Mr. Kissinger then summarized the statement he proposed to use at the meeting, subject to the President's approval. He said that the basic objective is to get their agreement to the principle of reciprocity in the withdrawal of non-South Vietnamese forces. If they accept this principle, we have passed a fundamental turning point. We should not get bogged down in details. Ambassador Bunker agreed. He noted that we should not flood Hanoi with proposals.

Ambassador Bunker specifically agreed with Mr. Kissinger's (1) stating our acceptance of the principle of total withdrawal, (2) presenting a schedule showing what a U.S. withdrawal in 16 months would look like, (3) stating our understanding of their special problem with linking their withdrawals to ours, (4) asking them for a separate schedule for their withdrawal, (5) saying there should be means of verification and an exchange of POWs, and (6) stating that if there were agreement in principle the technical issues could be discussed at the Majestic. (Mr. Kissinger noted that this approach would enable them to save face, since there would not appear to be exact mutuality, and it would give them a tougher problem since they would have to respond or be open to blame for blocking progress. In addition, we could always hold out for something different when they came back with their proposal.)

Mr. Kissinger said that this was all he intended to do at the meeting. He would say nothing about political settlement except to ask questions, if they raise the subject, and reiterate that we will not overthrow Thieu. He would then inform Ambassador Bunker, who could inform Thieu, of what was said on political settlement, in accordance with our understanding with Thieu. If the North Vietnamese accepted the principle of mutual withdrawal, the question of a political settlement should fall into place somehow. Agreement on this principle would put heat on the NLF to reach agreement with the GVN on political issues.

Ambassador Bunker said he thought the whole approach was "very good tactics."

Mr. Kissinger said that he wanted to be sure that Ambassador Bunker was not agreeing reluctantly. Ambassador Bunker said, "on the contrary," he was whole-heartedly in accord.

Informing President Thieu

Mr. Kissinger suggested that Ambassador Bunker give Thieu the essence of the transcripts of the February 21 meetings. He should inform Thieu that it was the President's wish that he receive this information. Ambassador Bunker said that he would call Thieu's attention particularly to Mr. Kissinger's strong statement to the North Vietnamese that we were not entering the discussions with an agreement or understanding that we will change the government in Saigon.

With regard to informing Thieu of our approach at the next meeting, Mr. Kissinger said that he thought we should be as candid as possible. We would leave it to Ambassador Bunker to judge the amount of detail into which he should go. He should inform Thieu that we will not let the North Vietnamese use the negotiating process to overthrow him.

Mr. Kissinger said that the Ambassador should emphasize to Thieu that Thieu and Bunker are the only two people in Saigon who know of this, and Thieu should mention it to no one, including other Americans. Ambassador Bunker said that we can trust Thieu not to talk about it. He kept his promises to be silent about secret negotiations in 1968.

Thieu's Probable Reaction

Ambassador Bunker said that he thought Thieu would be encouraged by these moves. He knows that while Vietnamization can lead to the end of the war for us, it does not mean the end of the war for him. This is why he has been publicly taking a harder line recently. He is thereby steeling his people for a longer struggle, and is trying to overcome the effect of Big Minh and Senator Don in lessening the resolve of the Vietnamese people. (Thieu had, however, handled the Chau case badly.)

Thieu knows that while Vietnamization has gone well so far, there are problems ahead for the GVN and for Thieu himself. Thieu therefore hopes that things will go well now so that the other side will come to terms.

Thieu will therefore be "reassured" by Mr. Kissinger's meetings with the North Vietnamese.

While Thieu has the "usual Vietnamese suspicious nature," he has great confidence in the President. The President's meetings with him at Midway and during the Asian trip, and the November 3 speech, helped build this confidence.

Mr. Kissinger asked if Thieu would be bothered by Mr. Kissinger's statements that a political solution must reflect the existing political realities in South Vietnam and that a fair political process must register the existing relationship of political forces. These statements mean that both Thieu and the NLF must have a role. Ambassador Bunker said that Thieu would not be bothered by these statements; he is committed to the same position.

Knowledge of Meetings within the American Government

Ambassador Bunker agreed with Mr. Kissinger's doubts about the wisdom of spreading knowledge of his meetings with the North Vietnamese. In addition to the dangers of leaks, knowledge of the meetings would lead to increased pressure for a flood of initiatives such as ceasefire. They agreed, however, that at some point we should bring in a selected and very limited number of people. Mr. Kissinger said that he thought the Secretary of State should be informed, perhaps after two more meetings.

Arrangements for Keeping Bunker Informed

Ambassador Bunker said that he had set up a special procedure for back-channel messages on this subject. Only one man in Saigon, [redacted] knows the code. Mr. Kissinger said that he would send Ambassador Bunker a brief account of the next meeting through this channel by the morning of March 18, Saigon time, and would then send him a full account by courier. He would probably use a code for names in these messages. (This code would be as follows: Kissinger = Luke, Xuan Thuy = Yul, Le Duc Tho = Michael, Mai Van Bo = Nestor, General Walters = Xerxes.)

Troop Withdrawals

Ambassador Bunker said that he thought the next troop withdrawal should be for about 50,000 men. Mr. Kissinger asked if he favored such a withdrawal. Ambassador Bunker said that he did, if it were spread over four months. Mr. Kissinger said that he had been told that it might damage the military situation. Ambassador Bunker said that the Vietnamese expect us to withdraw about 150,000 troops this year, and two more increments of 50,000 each during the year would be acceptable.

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Mr. Kissinger asked if his conversations with the North Vietnamese provide a reason for holding withdrawals down. Ambassador Bunker said that perhaps they do. Mr. Kissinger said that he himself would therefore favor holding off, but "hell would break loose" if we did. Ambassador Bunker agreed.

Mr. Kissinger said that he could tell Ambassador Bunker in great confidence that the President is thinking of making the next increment 20,000 men over a two month period. Ambassador Bunker said that he would prefer this to 50,000 over four months.

Ambassador Bunker recalled that Thieu was the one who had first mentioned the figure of 150,000 men to be withdrawn during the course of 1970. Mr. Kissinger suggested that he might have been saving face. Ambassador Bunker agreed, but said that Thieu had volunteered that the President should decide whether to announce the 150,000 at the beginning of the year or do it in stages. He noted also that the South Vietnamese want us to follow the three criteria.

Military Situation

In response to Mr. Kissinger's question, Ambassador Bunker said that General Abrams is doing what he can to keep on the pressure, and that there is no indication of contrary orders from Defense.