

Vietnam, 1967

The cease-fire in Vietnam this weekend, brief and fragile as it is, enables New Year's Day to open on a note of hope. What is more important is how the day—and the new year—will close. In neither case is great optimism justified.

Despite the peace efforts of Secretary General Thant and President Johnson's swift acceptance of a new British proposal for immediate negotiations, the odds are running strongly against either prolongation of the New Year's truce now or achievement of a negotiated settlement later in 1967. Neither side can look forward with any confidence to a military victory, and there is a growing awareness that a long war is in prospect.

Essentially, the issue now revolves about the future Government of South Vietnam. The Communists want to shoot their way into it and take it over. Washington and Saigon are determined to keep them out. Until that gap is bridged with a formula that both sides are willing to discuss, it is difficult to see how negotiations can be brought about.

Neither side can be forced to accept talks by military pressure. The massive military power of the United States can neither find the guerrillas in the South nor, by all indications, bomb the North into submission. Vietnamese military power, unable to reach the American homeland, is almost as impotent against American military forces in the field; casualties can be inflicted, but large American units can neither be destroyed nor seriously impeded in moving around the country.

The resulting stalemate could continue for many years. Hanoi has made it clear to all questioners that it will not negotiate while North Vietnam is being bombed. But the Administration evidently takes the view that two bombing pauses have proved their uselessness.

Before his current peace exploration U Thant was convinced that a halt in the bombing of North Vietnam was the first prerequisite for peace. His view was that it should be followed by a reciprocal scaling down of military activity in the South and, finally, negotiations among all the combatants, including the Vietcong.

This procedure—which Mr. Thant urged afresh in his letter to Ambassador Goldberg yesterday—still seems the one most likely to succeed. An alternative would be a substantive offer to discuss Vietcong participation in an interim government between a cease-fire and elections. No one can be sure that either offer would be taken up by Hanoi or the Vietcong. But nothing less is likely to move the conflict toward a settlement.