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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

*Memorandum of Conversation*

DATE: Feb. 21, 1968  
1:00 p.m.

SUBJECT:

PARTICIPANTS: Secretary General of the United Nations - U Thant  
Under Secretary General - Ralph Bunche

UNITED STATES

Secretary of State Dean Rusk

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Ambassador Goldberg

Secretary of Defense-designate Clark Clifford  
(only for brief period)

Under Secretary of State Katzenbach

Ambassador at Large Harriman

Assistant Secretary of State - William Bundy

Assistant Secretary of State - Joseph J. Sisco

The conversation concentrated exclusively on Vietnam. While the details of the give-and-take are given below the principal ingredient reported by the Secretary General is summarized as follows:

On Monday, February 19th, Berard (French UN Delegate) gave to the Secretary General in writing a report from the French Delegate General in Hanoi which the Secretary General believes is something new. The message from the French Delegate General as conveyed to Thant by Berard includes the following principal points:

1. If the U.S. stops bombing, Hanoi will hold talks with the United States "at the appropriate time; that is, as soon as the unconditional cessation of the bombing and all other acts of war against the DRVN becomes effective;

2. If North Vietnam is officially notified by the U. S. of the above, talks would take place "immediately"; and

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3. If no public announcement is made by the United States, there would be a certain delay between the cessation of the bombing and the beginning of the talks, perhaps three weeks.

(The Secretary General did not identify any North Vietnamese sources of the French report. It was presented as a French report of the latest North Vietnamese position. Secretary Rusk asked for the above report in writing from the Secretary General, who indicated he would consider the request.)

Thant stressed his impression that Hanoi wants to begin talks. He cited Hanoi's "defiance" of and independence from Peking as evidenced by Bo's desire to respond to Thant's questions on February 14, two days after Peking's broadcast castigating Thant as a U.S. errand boy. He emphasized too the sharp divisions in the leadership in Hanoi, as reported particularly by Dier, Canadian ICC member. The Secretary General noted that for the first time Hanoi has said it is willing to talk about de-escalation in South Vietnam rather than maintaining this was a matter only for discussion with the NLF. He pressed the U.S. to take the first step of stopping the bombing, a step of limited risk in his view, and as a way to put a halt to escalation and intensification of the war.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Secretary General opened the luncheon conversation by giving the group the gist of the report he said he had given to President Johnson that morning. He recounted, as previously reported to us by Ambassador Goldberg and by messages from Wilson and Brown, the chronology of his discussions with the North Vietnamese: the Secretary General's message to Ho in January informing him of his intention to be in New Delhi for the UNCTAD conference and requesting a talk with a North Vietnamese representative there; the meeting held with the North Vietnamese representative on the 8th of February

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in New Delhi and the questions put to him; the unexpected North Vietnamese message on February 12 which he received in London informing him that Bo would give the North Vietnamese reply to the questions put by the Secretary General; and his meeting with Bo on February 14. The Secretary General attaches importance to the reply given to him by Bo on the 14th, because in his judgment Hanoi did so in the face of Peking's opposition. He recalled the Peking radio broadcast on the 11th which called the Secretary General a U.S. errand boy. He mentioned that Peking has never broadcast the Trinh statements. He found it significant too that, despite Peking's open opposition, Bo had invited the Secretary General to Paris on the 13th to receive the North Vietnamese replies just two days after the Peking broadcast on the 11th.

Thant reported his conversations with Bo in similar terms to those given to Ambassador Goldberg. (USUN's 3794 and USUN's 3805).

He reported Bo as saying on February 14 that the question of de-escalation in South Vietnam could be discussed at a first meeting between the U.S. and North Vietnam; and that the U.S. was free to bring up any topic that it wished. The Secretary General said he tried to pin Bo down on the timing, but Bo limited himself to saying the talks would begin "as soon as the unconditional cessation of the bombing and all other acts of war against the DRV becomes effective." Thant reported the French view that talks would begin within two weeks of an unconditional cessation of the bombing. This was confirmed to him, Thant said, before he went to Delhi by an Eastern European source who said that talks would begin "within one week or ten days" after cessation.

Thant then reported on his conversation with French UN Delegate Berard on February 19, reading from a piece of paper the three points cited at the beginning of this memorandum and emphasizing the word "immediately" as new.

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Still drawing from the written report, Thant said the French Delegate General called attention in his telegram to Paris that Hanoi has not reacted either to Secretary Rusk's or President Johnson's statements of last week in which they said that Hanoi had rejected the San Antonio formula. Thant reported the French Delegate General as interpreting this as an effort by Hanoi to show that the door to negotiations with the United States had not been closed.

In pressing his point that the United States test Hanoi's attitude, the Secretary General maintained that the United States could bomb in Laos and in the South if North Vietnam tried to take advantage of a bombing cessation in the North. At this point he reported as the French Government's view, that the Demilitarized Zone was outside the terms of reference of a bombing cessation and that the French do not consider the DMZ to be North Vietnamese territory. While the Secretary General did not say so explicitly, the presumption was that we would be free to bomb the DMZ and that this was not necessarily encompassed in a bombing cessation of the North.

The Secretary General reports Bo as having said that it is difficult to know what was meant by normal supply in the Clifford formula. Moreover, he reports the North Vietnamese representative in Delhi as saying that the North Vietnamese "do not understand what is meant by military disadvantage".

The Secretary General said Prime Minister Gandhi had informed him of India's willingness to host the first meeting between the United States and North Vietnam after the bombing had ceased. The Secretary General mentioned this to Bo, who in turn was non-committal; Bo replied to the Secretary General that this matter could be discussed between Hanoi and Washington.

In discussing the kind of notification Hanoi might expect, Secretary Rusk said that if Hanoi expects the use of the word "permanent" in regard to cessation of the bombing there would

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be difficulties. The Secretary General said they used the term "unconditional" with him, and that in his judgment if the bombing ceases, Hanoi would enter into talks immediately, perhaps in two or three days.

Secretary Rusk said several times that if Hanoi has in fact indicated its willingness to enter into talks "immediately", this is important. Secretary Rusk said that we had the means to explore this in various ways.

Secretary Rusk then stressed three points: (a) First, in these matters precision is of great importance, and it would be helpful if the Secretary General could give us in writing the most current report he has just given us from French sources; (b) Secondly, the United States attaches importance to the relationship between what is said publicly and privately; how can what is being said privately be reconciled with the public statements coming out of Hanoi; (c) Thirdly, Secretary Rusk wanted to be clear whether we and the Secretary General were talking about basic points appropriate for private discussions between us, or whether we were discussing something which the Secretary General might say publicly. The Secretary General assured the Secretary that he did not intend to make any statement until Saturday at which time he would give "his assessment of the situation and possibly some first steps that might be taken" in order to get talks started. (The Secretary interjected he hoped there would be indication of steps which the other side might take.) The Secretary General said that it is not his intention to play an intermediary role, that he is primarily concerned over the loss of human life, and was worried about the disastrous alternative, that is escalation and intensification of the war.

Secretary Rusk dwelt on the importance we attached to Hanoi not taking military advantage of the situation if we should stop the bombing. He said we would not consider the act of sending in new North Vietnamese divisions as normal. He pointed out that the DMZ belongs neither to the South nor the North, and the French view regarding the DMZ is technically wrong. If during a cessation we found artillery in the DMZ

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or North of the DMZ or divisions in the North threatening our forces, we would have to bomb them. He stressed that Hanoi had raised a major condition to talks, and that there could not be talks until our minimum counter conditions are met, principally that Hanoi would not take advantage of the situation militarily.

In reporting on his conversations in Moscow, Thant said the Soviets stressed to him that they will never permit North Vietnam to be defeated. They feel the United States wants a military victory. The Secretary said that we have no designs on the North. We recognize that the Soviets have an interest in North Vietnam; they should recognize our interest in South Vietnam.

Ambassador Goldberg focussed on the point raised by the Secretary regarding reconciliation between public and private indications from Hanoi. Ambassador Goldberg cited the December 29 and February 8 Trinh statements, and asked the Secretary General whether it was his impression that these statements were essentially what Bo had said to him. Is the last formulation of the Trinh statement about the same as Bo has indicated to you, Ambassador Goldberg asked? Secretary General responded affirmatively, and he mentioned again that Bo had indicated willingness on behalf of North Vietnam to discuss de-escalation in South Vietnam and a Geneva Conference at a first meeting following cessation of the bombing.

The Secretary General dwelt for some time on the North Vietnamese attitude that the San Antonio formula is conditional, with the Secretary and others pointing out that it is Hanoi that has raised a major condition. Secretary Rusk underscored that we are ready for unconditional discussions at any time, and that we have long been ready to name the date and place.

Governor Harriman expressed puzzlement over the latest formula reported through French sources saying that in certain circumstances there might be a delay of three weeks before

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talks got started. He raised the question as to what North Vietnam would be doing during this three-week period. Would there be new attacks? Would there be new supplies? Would there be more infiltration?

At this point without answering Governor Harriman the Secretary General again expressed his own view that talks would start in two or three days. However, he seemed to indicate that this was based on the French report and assessment rather than anything explicit from the North Vietnamese.

Secretary Rusk said the San Antonio formula is the bone and gristle. The point reported by the Secretary General regarding promptness with which talks might get started following a bombing cessation is an important one; we have ways to explore whether this is Hanoi's view through other means. He wondered also whether Hanoi expects commitments other than notification. There was an ambiguity in the French report as to what would happen if there was no public announcement regarding a bombing cessation.

Another point of ambiguity raised by the Secretary was the question of "other acts of war". For example, does this refer to aerial and naval bombardments or does it include aerial reconnaissance? We would find it necessary to have overflights in order to assure that Hanoi was not taking advantage of the situation militarily.

The Secretary General responded that he had thought of this point and had mentioned it to both the Consul General in New Delhi and Mai Van Bo; however, there had been no answer. (It was not clear whether the Secretary General had raised the specific question of reconnaissance, or had simply asked for a definition of "other acts of war.")

As to "productive" in the San Antonio formula, Secretary said we are not inclined to argue this point in any detail. However, we cannot accept a "fight and negotiation" strategy on the part of North Vietnam. In short, empty talk cannot go

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on too long since it would leave<sup>2</sup> much more dangerous situation subsequently.

As to the "no advantage" point, Secretary Rusk noted that the North Vietnamese are resisting discussion on this key point, maintaining that this is a condition on our part. Secretary Rusk pointed out that we used the word "assumption" in order to give the other side opportunity to deal with the military disadvantage point on a de facto basis rather than require advance guarantees. It is important for Hanoi to understand that this is our position, the Secretary said, since negotiations that lead to nothing would lead to a much more dangerous situation.

The Secretary then went on to say that it was very important to realize that negotiations did not necessarily mean peace. For example, it was the U.S. view that peace must bring about a North Vietnamese military disengagement from Laos and South Vietnam. We are concerned that we do not see much indication that Hanoi is ready to accept this result. The point he was making, the Secretary said, was that negotiations do not mean peace and that it takes two to make peace.

The Secretary General said there is a basic difference of view between the United States and the other side. You want them to leave the South and they want you to get out. The important thing is that first steps must be taken now since the only alternative is intensification of the war. He again referred to the concern he found both in Paris and in Moscow regarding possible use of nuclear tactical weapons by the United States. The Secretary General welcomed the assurances given to him by the President this morning on this point.

The Secretary General stressed that the United States take the limited risk of the first step. In response to Ambassador Goldberg's query, the Secretary General said that the North Vietnamese went only as far as saying they are willing

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to talk about the Geneva Agreements. There was no commitment by the North Vietnamese by way of reaffirmation of the Geneva Agreements as a basis for settlement. As to the participation in any meeting or conference, the Secretary General said he mentioned to Bo his long-held view that North and South Vietnam and the NLF should participate. Bo's answer was the same as on a number of other points, to the effect that this too could be discussed between the United States and Hanoi. In all of his contacts, the Secretary General said the North Vietnamese sought to give him the impression that "final victory" is theirs. The Secretary said Hanoi is making a mistake if they continue to think that the United States is the same as France in 1954.

The Secretary General said that he told the President this morning that in all of his talks with Asian leaders he did not find one government which wants the United States defeated, and this includes Sihanouk. At this point, the Secretary General once again summarized the French report given to him by Berard on Monday, February 19, for Secretary of Defense-designate Clifford who had just arrived.

Defense Secretary-designate Clifford said that the United States insisted: (a) that talks start promptly; and (b) that no military advantage be taken during a bombing cessation. He stressed that if Hanoi wants to talk it is very simple for them to do so. His impression is that the moment the point is reached when it seems possible for the parties to start talks, North Vietnam pulls back. He has the impression that we are being teased by Hanoi and that we are being faced with a combined political-military-propaganda strategy. He asked the Secretary General: "Is this view off?" "What is your view of my impressions?"

The Secretary General repeated to Mr. Clifford what he had said earlier. It is the Secretary General's impression that Hanoi seriously wants to talk. He once again detailed Hanoi's "defiance of Peking", citing evidence noted earlier

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in this memorandum. He stressed the independence of Hanoi from Peking and the need for the United States to test Hanoi's attitude. He emphasized the divisions in Hanoi saying that the older members of the leadership are more hawkish and the younger more dovish. At the same time, he described Ho as more dovish than Pham Van Dong. He described the risk to the United States for stopping the bombing as being limited and the alternatives disastrous. He mentioned again the concern in Moscow over the possible use of nuclear weapons, Kosygin's reaffirmation that the Soviet Union would never permit Hanoi to be defeated, and Brezhnev's blistering attacks on the United States. He concluded by saying he had no desire to play the role of mediator; his only purpose is to try to prevent an intensification and escalation of the war.

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