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Mr. Nixon: Linking His Future With Detente

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MOSCOW—Permeating every aspect of the murky summit meeting here is deep Soviet uncertainty over the future of President Nixon, the central topic of conversation by everyone here—except Mr. Nixon and the Soviet leaders themselves.

The President's calculated and self-serving efforts to enshrine detente as a special Nixon creation—its future coexistent with his own—has both embarrassed and angered his Soviet hosts. A leading Western analyst called it "outrageous."

Indeed, the real reason for the extraordinary change in the official translation of Mr. Nixon's celebrated toast to Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev at the state dinner last week, which credited detente to his "close personal relationship" with Brezhnev, was that it appalled and offended Brezhnev himself. It appeared to elevate Brezhnev to heights unacceptable to the Communist Party hierarchy.

Although Brezhnev is now at the peak of his personal prestige and power, the cult of the individual went out with Nikita Khrushchev. Far more important, however, is the fact that detente became an object of highest Soviet policy not by any Brezhnev whim but by decree of the 24th Party Congress in April 1971.

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The translation changed Mr. Nixon's phrase "close personal relationship" with Brezhnev to "relations between us." As one well-informed Soviet expert told us: "We have never based any foreign policy ever on the claim of a personal relationship and we do not intend to start now."

No word of this Soviet displeasure was allowed to sift through to Mr. Nixon. Indeed, every public pronouncement uttered by Soviet leaders here is carefully screened to avoid any semblance of veiled criticism of the President. That is a measure of delicacy with which the Kremlin has approached its 1974 negotiating sessions with a President who is here today—but may be gone tomorrow.

Yet, beneath this placid surface, the party's ruling establishment is asking critical questions about Richard M. Nixon and the future of detente. For example, it is felt that since Mr. Nixon's 1972 pledge for vast U.S. trade credits to the Soviet Union, and his promise to extend tariff equality to Moscow, are still unfulfilled because of congressional resistance, he should have brought a congressional delegation with him to the summit. But in fact, the President was not about to share any summit glory with the Democratic Congress.

More important, it is now being widely but privately said that Mr. Nixon should have explained the pitfalls of congressional politics before he promised so much in the way of expanded trade two years ago. Although no word of Communist Party disenchantment has seeped into the tightly controlled party press about the abysmal failure of the U.S. to deliver on those Nixon promises, there is profound regret within the top leadership. That regret could boomarang on Brezhnev if the trade stalemate continues much longer.

Moreover, a feeling of unease is beginning to permeate high party levels about the continuing instability of the American government, including published reports in the American press about dissension between Mr. Nixon and his Secretary of State. Kissinger is regarded here as critically important to the process of detente.

The attack on Kissinger by liberal Democrats and "other powerful elements" in Washington, in the words of one theoretician here, is beyond comprehension in this country of monolithic bureaucratic solidarity. Coupled with the President's failure to speak out for Kissinger, this both disturbs and distracts Soviet leaders.

None of this means that detente has been weakened as fundamental Soviet policy. To the contrary, the mere fact that the leadership here is treating this third summit with exquisite delicacy and making so obvious a public effort to ignore Mr. Nixon's vulnerability points the other way. Detente is still perceived as vital to Soviet interests stretching far beyond the end of Richard Nixon's presidency.

But the mood is uneasy, the atmosphere murky and the accomplishments meager. As one leading Americanologist told us: "The cream is off the top of the bottle and we are trying hard to keep the milk from going sour."

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