

The Third Summit *Post 6/23/74*

TWO NIXON-BREZHNEV summit conferences have shown that Soviet-American "detente" represents more an attitude or a certain subdued way of approaching problems than a magical formula for solving the problems themselves. To be sure, some parts of the President's rhetoric and that of Secretary Kissinger promise early and lasting relief from worldly cares. But their more substantial pronouncements recognize the real and continuing stickiness of the rivalries of the great powers and their perceptions of one another. That is wise.

It is at once the success and failure of detente so far that its main achievement has been to confirm the mutual belief that differences must be resolved short of nuclear confrontation. Yet even that achievement is shaded. In the Mideast war last fall—despite earlier summit agreements to consult and show restraint in crises and to refrain from the threat or use of force—the smell of nuclear confrontation was again in the air. Both sides were subsequently reduced to saying defensively that but for detente it might have been worse.

One can agree and still wonder how detente can be strengthened. Anyone asking the question must concede right off how much events of the past few years have reinforced those elements in both the United States and the Soviet Union that have long been skeptical of the prospects for improved relations. The Kremlin's adventuresome policy in the Mideast in October and its strenuous missile-testing program have stirred and strengthened American anxieties. Washington's own nuclear projects and—only 18 months ago—its bombardment of North Vietnam cannot have failed to have a similar effect in Moscow. The special tension over the link between trade and emigration has sobered both sides.

To label the skeptics "cold warriors," however, is to neglect the substance of their views and their political force. "Each leader has his own constituency at home," Henry Kissinger said as the first summit closed. "Both of us have our Pentagons," Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev told a recent visitor. This is the principal fact of Soviet-American life and it reinforces the partial inclination already existing in the two summit participants—the two men who have staked their careers on detente—to move slowly, to stick to the old ways of going it alone and relying on power, to avoid political risks.

In fact, there is no alternative to political risk if detente is going to be made more real and firm—"irreversible," as the Russians put it. That it is not yet irreversible, on either side, is evident to both sides. Agreements have been signed on general principles, on controls on strategic arms, on political negotiations, on various aspects of bilateral cooperation. But even as these agreements and their promise—much of it not yet

fulfilled—are celebrated, there has not yet been established a basic trust or what a Soviet commentator calls "a confidence that the understanding reached is indeed firm, will be unconditionally observed, and is an expression of long-term national policy."

Part of the reason lies in the incompatibility of the two nations' traditions and values, and this fact is unlikely to diminish. Another lies in strategic and political asymmetries which in turn arise from the differences in the composition of the two sides' missile forces and from the differences in the nature of their respective alliances. A third part arises from shortfalls of political leadership. If Mr. Brezhnev speaks for detente in the Kremlin, then he does not always do so with full clarity and vigor. Mr. Nixon has committed himself many times to building a "structure of peace" but some of his policies go the other way. Moreover, it is painfully apparent that his Watergate-weakened political authority has cost detente dearly. His failure to deliver on his trade pledge to Moscow and his felt need to accommodate conservative legislators, who are even warier of detente than he, are conspicuous cases in point.

For all of these considerations it becomes necessary in contemplating the third Nixon-Brezhnev summit to take a modest view of the near prospects, but not to yield to defeatism or despair. So far as we know, the various agreements which are being readied for signing in Moscow do not amount to any great shakes in themselves. But together they can make a useful contribution to keeping together the hard-pressed domestic constituencies for detente in both countries.

Not having seen the prospective agreements, we wish to withhold pronouncing on their individual worth. In the current atmosphere, however, there is evident a certain tendency to disparage them—even in some quarters to block them—in anticipation of the event. We do not approve of "inequal" or "bad" agreements. It is possible, though, in considering any one agreement to fasten so thoroughly on a "worst-case" analysis of its possible defects as to overlook the political value of making it. By political value, we refer to the need to make progress even in small steps, in order to prevent detente from being undone politically by stalemates on particular issues, such as trade, or by the large leaps in arms building which could come all too soon if the hope or momentum of detente flags.

It could not have been Mr. Nixon's leading goal as he undertook his opening to Moscow two years ago merely to prevent backsliding. But that has become his necessary purpose now. Not entirely by his own doing, he has lost a substantial part of the great chance he had to round a historic corner in international relations. Detente now is less an immediate possibility than a continuing trust. It is Mr. Nixon's responsibility to hold that trust for the next President.