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Khrushchev And Summit Patterns

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Thanks to Nikita Khrushchev's passion to "do my share in providing history with information and impressions"—as he put it in the just-published second volume of his memoirs—the current Nixon-Brezhnev summit in Moscow is the first meeting of Soviet and American leaders for which we've had at hand a participant's unvarnished view of how summits can look from the Soviet side.

From "Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament" (Little, Brown), we know that his encounters with American counterparts were high-noon occasions demanding painstaking preparation, a care for sure stepping, and considerable psychological bracing.

To be greeted by President Eisenhower at National Airport in 1959, Khrushchev recalls, "made me immensely proud; it even shook me up a bit. . . Here was the United States of America, the greatest capitalist power in the world; bestowing honor on the representative of our socialist homeland—a country which, in the eyes of capitalist America, had always been unworthy or, worse, infected with some sort of plague."

Indeed, his sense of personal challenge and national stakes is of a piece with that of Richard Nixon when the then-Vice President himself visited Moscow in 1959—"I was keyed up and ready for battle. . ."; and with that of President Kennedy who, heading to see Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961, said he felt that "the problem" was nothing less than "whether Khrushchev really believed in the firmness of the West."

All of us are more accustomed to summits now but, since the sense of Soviet-American rivalry is still so overwhelming, the participants may not enter them any less personally or nationally keyed up.

Khrushchev had only the two one-on-one summits: with Ike in 1959 and Kennedy in 1961. His memoirs provide rich insights into his and the Soviet Union's negotiating style on those occasions.

At Camp David with Ike, he proposed mutual elimination of foreign military bases—this meant dismantling NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

"Actually, we say, we knew that the conditions for such an agreement were not yet ripe and that our proposal was premature. In fact, our proposal was intended to serve a propagandistic, rather than a realistic purpose." Quite an admission.

As for Eisenhower's arms control proposals, Khrushchev observes: "What you have to remember is. . . we lagged significantly behind the U.S. in both warheads and missiles and the U.S. was out of range for our bombers." In brief, no deal.

"By the time Kennedy came to the White House and we had our meeting in Vienna," Khrushchev goes on, "there had already been a shift in the balance of power. It was harder for the U.S. to pressure us. . . It was for this reason that Kennedy had felt obliged to seek an opportunity to reach some kind of agreement"—though none was reached. His own Berlin proposal, Khrushchev states, "might have sounded like a threat." Kennedy, as we know took it precisely so.

The Russian leader left Vienna saying that Kennedy "still doesn't quite understand the times in which we live. He doesn't yet fully understand the realignment of forces. . ." Ten years later, as we also know, the balance of power had further shifted and Nixon accepted essentially the German deal which Kennedy had rejected and hailed it as the flower of detente.

The most gnawing theme in Khrushchev's summit remembrances, however, is the paralysis he felt in the face of the pressures of the arms race. When Eisenhower confessed that such pressures swamped him on the American side, Khrushchev responded: "It's just the same. Some people from our military department come and say, 'Comrade Khrushchev, look at this! The Americans are developing such and such a system. . . and we take the steps which our military people have recommended.'"

And in Vienna, he contemplated the collapse of his talks with Kennedy: "This worried me. If we were thrown back into the Cold War, we would be the ones who would have to pay for it. The Americans would start spending more money on weapons, forcing us to do the same thing, and a new accelerated arms race would impoverish our budget, reduce our economic potential, and lower the standard of living of our people. We knew the pattern only too well from our past experience."

For all that they tried to break that fateful "pattern" at their respective summits, Khrushchev—and Eisenhower and Kennedy—failed. They knew it, moreover.

It is to break that same pattern that Nixon and Brezhnev have met three times. But skeptics would have to say that both of them are still caught up by a determination to assert or defend their nations' positions in the world rather than to ease up on each other, as only they are able to do, the pressures which drive the arms race on.