

Nixon's Tough Talk Affects

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VIENNA, March 20—President Nixon's tongue-lashing of America's European allies has triggered new speculation about how the bickering within the NATO alliance could affect efforts here to negotiate East-West troops cuts in Central Europe.

Speaking in Chicago on Friday, Mr. Nixon appeared to be threatening a link between continued U.S. military protection of the Europeans and their closer cooperation with Washington in economic and political matters.

He backed away from this in an appearance in Houston last night, saying he would fight any congressional efforts to cut U.S. forces in Europe unilaterally. But he served notice that he cannot be expected to override congressional pressures to reduce the U.S. presence in Europe if the Europeans "appear hostile" in other fields.

As is now being pointed out all over Western Europe, such a linkage would appear to add a highly unpredictable new dimension to one of the most important tests of the prospects for detente—the talks between NATO and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact on mutual and balanced force reductions.

The West's main bargaining chips in the talks are the approximately 185,000 U.S. troops stationed along the Iron Curtain. They are both the backbone of NATO's ground combat manpower of the central front and the presence that gives the U.S. nuclear deterrent credibility in West European eyes.

By attempting to win a thinning out of ground forces on both sides, the West hopes to enable the United States to withdraw some troops from Europe without creating a crisis of confidence with the other NATO countries.

Before his later disavowal

of any intention to threaten Europe, Mr. Nixon's tough Chicago remarks caused widespread fears throughout Europe that the breach within NATO could lead to reckless throwing away of the only chips that the west has to play.

"If the quarrel ever actually escalates to the point where the United States turns away from its allies and unilaterally pulls troops out of Europe, the game would be over. It would mean not just the end of the force-reduction talks but the collapse of NATO too.

Even in what the U.S. President described as the more likely eventuality that Washington and the Europeans manage to patch up their differences, there is still a danger that the scars left from the confrontation could seriously impede progress toward agreement with the Communists on mutual force cuts.

With dissension so evident on the Western side, Moscow might decide that it has

no real incentive to use its forces in Central Europe as bargaining counters for American cutbacks. Why, the question is asked, should the Soviets not simply stall

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and let what Mr. Nixon called the isolationist build up for a unilateral U.S. withdrawal?

While these points add up to a frightening possibility for the West, they do not seem to be causing undue concern to the negotiators actually conducting the force reduction talks here in Vienna.

A canvass of delegations from several of the 19 countries participating in the negotiations indicates that they do not expect any major setbacks as the result of the latest U.S.-European controversy. This is true of the American delegation, of those from the European NATO members and even of those from the Communist

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side. They show a remarkable unanimity in citing their reasons for treating the matter with relative calm.

For one thing, they point out that the NATO partners have been very careful to insulate the force reduction talks from more conventional problems, such as the stalemated allied effort to draw up a statement of principles redefining the nature of the Atlantic Alliance.

The opening of the talks here in late October came against the background of the Middle East war, when Washington and the Europeans were involved in an almost unprecedented exchange of recriminations about failures to consult and support each other. Already, such U.S. officials as Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger were issuing public warnings about the possible need to reassess the status of American forces in Europe.

Yet, all of the NATO delegations arrived in Vienna with instructions to proceed

as if the transatlantic slanging match was not happening. Since then, the interviewed delegates agree, the NATO side has managed to maintain unity both in defining its negotiating stance and in adhering to it at the bargaining table.

The general tendency of the European delegates is not to quarrel unduly with attempts to soften the impact of the President's words in Chicago.

In private, the European diplomats say they regard the Nixon assault as having been prompted partly by domestic Watergate pressures and partly by hopes of administering a shock to break the European-American impasse over a revised relationship. While they concede that Washington is apparently resorting to a choice of blunter bargaining instruments, they remain unconvinced that Mr. Nixon would carry his analysis out to its ultimate conclusion.

While there is a general feeling that some kind of

East-West agreement will eventually be achieved, it is not likely to become discernible for some time. The Soviets and their allies appear to be genuinely interested in accord, but an enormous gulf remains between the two sides.

So far, neither side has budged beyond the point from its initial maximum bargaining position. The NATO countries remain united in insisting that the Soviets, at a minimum, must agree to consider seriously the western call for limiting the first stage to outbreak in American and Soviet forces alone on the central zone, and they say there can be no further progress until this concession is made.

Until now, Western sources have spoken cautiously about possible reaching this point by May or June. They maintain that the Soviets know a satisfactory agreement is part of the price for further detente and note that the timetable cited by Soviet Communist

Party chief Leonid I. Brezhnev calls for agreement by 1975.

Moscow's flexibility could be affected by a host of outside developments ranging from progress toward peace in the Middle East to what the U.S. Congress does about the Soviet bid for most-favored-nation trade status.

Diplomats here reject as simplistic the idea that Moscow might be tempted by the NATO donnybrook into bargaining in bad faith. Moscow, they note, has had ample opportunity in the past to scuttle the force-education talks, especially during periods when Mr. Nixon was under severe congressional pressure to make unilateral cuts. On at least one such occasion, Brezhnev, in effect, came to Mr. Nixon's rescue by making sufficient concessions to move the talks along and stave off the troop-cutters in the Congress.