

... And the Meaning for Detente

The culmination of the Mideast crisis yesterday etched in unforgettable if not historic terms the true contours of Soviet-American detente. As a result of the failure of the United Nations' earlier cease-fire calls to halt the momentum of battle, the Soviet Union apparently found itself faced with the imminent collapse of its Egyptian ally's army. As a great power, the Kremlin simply could not countenance being seen again, as in 1967, as an unreliable patron—a "pitiful helpless giant," if you will. So Moscow took steps aimed—we may not soon know which—either to introduce its own forces at the side of Egypt or to precipitate a political crisis whose intended result was to offer Egypt another form of relief.

President Nixon was then confronted with a situation in which his own ally's fortunes, and the United States' own principle of great-power conduct, were coming under challenge. He responded, in our view, with admirable firmness and restraint. On the unanimous advice of his National Security Council, he took certain "precautionary" moves to alert American forces, in order to convey to the Russians, who had made moves of their own, that he understood the great-power stakes. Through Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, he made known unmistakably the American judgment that either power's introduction of military forces into the Mideast, and especially a unilateral Soviet entry, could threaten "all that has been achieved" in improvement of relations so far. Again through Dr. Kissinger, he kept open an avenue for Soviet moderation, by not laying down an open challenge to Moscow and not spelling out the details of the situation in a way that would have tightened the demands on Soviet pride. Finally, he produced in the United Nations a satisfactory alternative—an enlarged emergency force, without participation by either Russians or Americans—to deal specifically with the possibility of Egyptian collapse. We presume Mr. Nixon also let the Israelis know just how important he regarded their own restraint to be.

The result was, in our view, perhaps the single most significant vindication of "detente," that much abused word, which the world has seen to date. It was a vindication all the more valuable for preventing an extremely serious potential disruption of great-power relations. It is entirely wrong, we believe, to say that the very flowering of the crisis demonstrated how illusory or unworkable detente is. This is a view which may flow easily from the rosy and unreal image elaborated earlier by Mr. Nixon and others who spoke feelingly of building a "structure of peace." But it is a view inconsistent with the continuing reality of great-power rivalry.

Detente should never have been received, or purveyed, as the sure and easy solvent of great-power tensions. It never could be more than what it turned out to be this week: an attitude, an understanding, a frame of mind in which the two great powers could pursue their various political interests, and conduct their rivalry, with some sense of the need for pulling back on this side of the brink. Whether in this crisis we were in fact that close is something we may know more about



when the administration produces, as Dr. Kissinger said it would, the appropriate texts and facts. A judgment on that can wait. What is important now is to note, with sober thankfulness, that the relationship created by Mr. Nixon and Mr. Brezhnev in recent years served both of them well in their contest this week.

"The United States and the Soviet Union are, of course, ideological and to some extent political adversaries," Dr. Kissinger said yesterday. But, he went on, "we possess, each of us, nuclear arsenals capable of annihilating humanity. We, both of us, have a special duty to see to it that confrontations are kept within bounds that do not threaten civilized life . . . We will oppose the attempt by any country to achieve a position of predominance, either globally or regionally. We will resist any attempt to exploit a policy of detente to weaken our alliance. We will react if a relaxation of tensions is used as a cover to exacerbate conflicts in international trouble spots. We have followed this principle in the current situation."

Dr. Kissinger added a final observation about the contours of detente: "If the Soviet Union and we can work cooperatively, first toward establishing the cease-fire and then toward promoting a durable settlement, in the Middle East, then the detente will have proved itself," he said. It must now be the American and Soviet purpose to make the second part of the statement—promoting a durable settlement—real.