

Kissinger's Miscalculations

Secretary of State Kissinger has dangerously misjudged Soviet intentions in the Mideast, despite secret personal warnings to him by Chairman Leonid Brezhnev last March in Moscow that there would be no peace in the Mideast if the United States persisted in "going it alone" diplomatically with the Arabs and Israelis. At that time, Brezhnev accused Kissinger of "ruses" and "trickery."

The cumulative result of Kissingerian miscalculations—some diplomats call it Kissinger's "greed" in freezing out the Russians—is the latest crisis raising the threat of a new Arab-Israeli war.

Kissinger, in effect, helped to create a situation in which the Arabs, frustrated by the lack of diplomatic "movement" with Israel he had promised them after the 1973 war, have turned again toward Moscow for political and military help. For similar reasons, a new sense of unity against Israel emerged from the recent Rabat summit with the all-out support of the financially powerful oil-producing states.

The Soviets, feeling vindicated, are obviously delighted to oblige. They have been heavily rearming the Syrians for some time. And all indications are that Soviet military supplies will start flowing anew to Egypt even before Brezhnev visits Cairo in January.

Only six months after Nixon's and Kissinger's triumphal tour, it is Brezhnev's turn to be hailed once more as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's favorite ally. President Ford's get-acquainted meeting with Brezhnev in Vladivostok late this month might well be overshadowed by the gathering Mideast crisis.

In the light of this developing situation, it is instructive to look at the secret record of Soviet-American differences, including Brezhnev's 1973 warnings that an Arab-Israeli war was in the offing. A part of this record, never before made public, was presented by Brezhnev himself to a Western statesman at the Kremlin earlier this year. Even allowing for Brezhnev's self-serving bent, his account is worth pondering.

Speaking of his conferences with Nixon three months before the eruption of the Yom Kippur war, Brezhnev

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recalled that "at San Clemente, I kept Nixon up almost all night on the Middle East, trying to convince him of the need to act together. Otherwise, there would be an explosion . . . Nixon didn't heed my words. And there was an explosion in the Middle East."

We don't know Nixon's and Kissinger's response to Brezhnev's alleged entreaties, but American diplomacy was then singularly inactive in the Mideast, even though the administration already had intelligence that Egypt and Syria were preparing for war. But Brezhnev told his visitor that afterward "Nixon wrote a letter to me saying he had underestimated the gravity of the problem."

The United States and the Soviet Union did cooperate in a fashion in bringing about a cease-fire. Subsequently, a two-day Arab-Israeli peace conference was convened in Geneva under Soviet-American co-chairmanship, with only the Syrians staying away.

Kissinger quickly concluded, however, that Geneva was the wrong forum because the negotiations would bog down in propaganda. The Soviets would also acquire a permanent presence in Mideast affairs. Instead, he concentrated on military disengagement between Israel and Egypt and Syria, and then on the "second step" of seeking Israeli pullbacks in the Sinai and the occupied West Bank through separate negotiations with Egypt and Jordan.

The Russians inevitably saw it as an end-run to exclude them from Mideast diplomacy. As Brezhnev told his Western visitor, "I berated Kissinger here in Moscow," during the Secretary's visit late last March, "for the U.S. behavior in the Middle East."

Brezhnev said that "we had agreed at the United Nations and elsewhere that the United States and the Soviet Union would work together to secure peace." But, Brezhnev added, "then Kissinger began a series of ruses, and attempted to go it alone. . . . We must

act together, or there will be no tranquility in the Middle East. . . . Israel, too, knows our strength, and would want us to guarantee. It was even agreed to better relations with Israel. Then, there was Kissinger's trickery, which is not the way to deal with this. . . ."

Kissinger kept betting that his lonely diplomacy would succeed, but none of the contenders was willing to budge toward an "interim agreement." As Arab tensions and frustrations mounted, Kissinger's strategy began to disintegrate.

His hopes to minimize Russian involvement faded as Egypt sent its foreign minister and its army chief of staff to Moscow in late October. And at Rabat, the Arabs ended the chances for Kissinger's piecemeal negotiations when they recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization—with which Israel refuses to deal—as the *de facto* power, rather than Jordan, to govern the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the future.

This ruled out Israeli-Jordanian talks. Parallel negotiations between Israel and Egypt were similarly undercut, for Sadat lost in Rabat his freedom to bargain separately with Israel, despite the Egyptian President's public endorsement of Kissinger's diplomacy this week.

Could Kissinger have defused the Egyptian switch back toward the Soviet fold and forestalled Rabat's backing of the PLO if he had initially gone the Geneva way, despite Israel's objections and Sadat's lukewarmness?

Perhaps. Moscow, after all, is a fact of life in the Mideast. Even to Israel, a conference deadlock would be preferable to the prospects of war. The Soviets might have been locked in a diplomatic situation in which it would have been harder to rearm the Arabs and champion the PLO.

This may be why Kissinger is now rethinking the relative merits of Geneva which, as the Shah of Iran told him the other day, is better than nothing.

But with the ascendancy of the PLO, Israel's archenemy, it may no longer be possible to construct even a diplomatic charade in Geneva. Thus, Kissinger may have missed a great opportunity.