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Dissolving the Kissinger-Schlesinger 'Partnership': A Mistake

What is most troubling about President Ford's changes in his national security team is that he has shown not the slightest awareness that momentous policy issues are at stake and that his rejuggling of personnel may have a crippling impact on them.

He has the right, of course, to exercise his presidential prerogatives and to pick people whom he is comfortable with and who he thinks may help his reelection but these seem to me to be considerations of insufficient weight to justify the apparently unwitting, trifling with the national interest which he has now done.

For Ford does not seem to realize what a delicate international moment this is and what the foreign policy consequences of his personnel changes may be.

The moment is delicate, not to say pivotal, because the United States and the Soviet Union are probably at the point of no return on detente. Unless the moderates on both sides get greater payoffs on

strategic arms control and economic cooperation, then detente—defined with proper modesty as the restraint of super-power rivalry over time—risks losing its joint political base. It's that simple.

So often presented as adversaries on the detente issue, Henry Kissinger and James Schlesinger in fact—under the mumbles—have essentially agreed on it. Where they have differed is on tactics. Schlesinger, with a defense minister's preparedness bias, has thought that the stick of a strong defense posture would more likely induce Soviet reasonableness. Kissinger, with the foreign secretary's problem-solving bias, tends to believe that the carrot of perceived political and economic self-interest would help do the trick.

I would argue that this two-tracked approach served the American interest well. Only liberals who have not reviewed the strategic facts in 12 or 15 years, since the Kremlin began its great strategic

buildup, still contend that Kissinger's initiatives alone could reap good results. Others understand that the toughness represented by Schlesinger is what makes these initiatives attractive to Moscow.

Similarly, only conservatives who have not reviewed the political facts in the period since American primacy and invulnerability disappeared, still argue that toughness alone will suffice. Others understand that Kissinger's diplomacy is what redeemed Schlesinger's defense posture.

In brief, the two have been not so much adversaries as role players, partners in a process no less valid for being better known in used-car lots than in the corridors of power. Moreover, since both are serious men, they knew it, I think. Ford has now destroyed their "partnership."

By dumping Schlesinger, he has removed the most sober and respective conservative element in his administration and abandoned the con-

servative high ground to the military brass, whose strategic apprehensions can be challenged as crude special pleading, and to other politicians, whose alarms are invariably suspect on political grounds.

The bureaucratic and political advantage thus seemingly accorded Kissinger, however, will be eroded by public restiveness over the fact that Schlesinger is no longer around to keep him honest, and by Ford's presumably continuing determination to avoid the kind of SALT agreement that would expose him to political attack from the right.

At one stroke Ford has diminished the responsible conservative position and the responsible liberal position. He has broken up the team that ensured (1) that strategic policy would be shaped carefully within the administration and (2) that strategic policy would be accepted by the public, whose ambivalence about detente has found comforting expression in the Schlesinger-Kissinger dialogue.

Ford has also forced a large new question mark to be placed over Soviet policy. Kremlin hardliners unsympathetic to a good American-style detente of equals may be tempted now to push all the harder to exploit the advantage perceived in Schlesinger's disgrace and Ford's lightheadedness.

Nor is there any evident reason why either Moscow or Washington might choose at this moment to slow the pace of the new weapons—the American cruise missile and the Russian Backfire bomber—which are causing terrible new complications in the SALT talks. The “mad momentum” of the arms race is no respecter of either White House or Kremlin politics.

In sum, it looks to me as though, for pitifully insubstantial reasons, Gerald Ford has jammed the arms control balance wheel and thereby committed the largest national-security mistake of his presidency. If we're lucky, I'm wrong.