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# Detente: Victim of Watergate?

High-level officials here are beginning to fear that the political convulsion growing out of impeachment proceedings against President Nixon may soon switch Moscow out of its uncharacteristic soft-line policy of detente into a tougher, more aggressive foreign policy.

The single major factor behind this ominous switch away from detente—a policy considered the personal preserve of Communist Party chief Leonid Brezhnev—is the decline and possible fall of Richard Nixon.

“Will they go on making agreements with a President who may not be around next year, who has lost his clout with Congress?” a top U.S. official dealing with Soviet affairs asks rhetorically.

A negative answer to that question could destroy Mr. Nixon's plans for large-scale diplomatic accomplishment in the coming months to overshadow and perhaps suffocate impeachment proceedings in Congress. A byproduct of detente's decline could be the cancellation of the President's Western European trip—a strong possibility today. Even the proposed Moscow summit meeting with Brezhnev might be postponed.

Evidence that a major reappraisal of Soviet policy toward the United States is now going on behind Kremlin walls is far from positive, but U.S. policymakers see plenty of ominous signs. One is the five-week absence from Washington of the Kremlin's longtime American expert, Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, who is not expected back in the capital at least until after Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's trip to Moscow in late March.

The ambassador ostensibly left here for a vacation, and vacation was the official explanation given to the State Department. But this extended absence persuades many U.S. diplomats that in fact he is reporting something new to the Kremlin: for the first time he is convinced the impeachment of Mr. Nixon is a live possibility, not just exaggerated American political rhetoric.

The Soviet urge to reappraise detente stems primarily from President Nixon's inability to deliver on promises he made in Moscow almost two years ago: trade equality for the Russians and ample financial credits. At the height of power two years ago, Mr. Nixon could assure the Kremlin that he could persuade or compel Congress to deliver on those two pledges. His influence today while fighting impeachment has disappeared.

In addition, the Russians are show-

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By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

*Mr. Brezhnev with Mr. Nixon during their summit conference last June*

ing understandable fascination with the American-European break, a new factor not foreseeable when they began drawing the original blueprint for detente. The fact that many European diplomats are totally convinced that a Nixon European trip any time in the near future would be an unmitigated disaster is just one more shocking indication of the low state of the American presidency.

The first visible casualty in a post-detente era would probably be the next installment of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, called SALT II. With Mr. Nixon under attack for detente even from the once soft-line Democratic liberals, Soviet military leaders are understood to be warning the

Kremlin that any hard agreement on SALT II reached with Mr. Nixon in Moscow this spring might not last six months; a new President might take a far harder line.

Hence, some pessimists in official circles here now raise the question of whether a deadlock on SALT II, plus continued Nixon failure with Congress on the trade-and-credits question, might actually postpone the Moscow summit.

The worst immediate prospect if Moscow decided to mute its five-year detente would be in the Mideast, where Kissinger's spectacular success in negotiating political settlement is boxing in the Soviet Union. A decision to switch out of detente would vastly

increase present Soviet pressure on Syria to play much tougher on separation of its forces from Israeli troops on the Golan Heights.

That would be followed by a demand to reconvene the Geneva Mideast conference, now in recess, where Moscow would dramatically underwrite the most extreme Arab demands and insist on immediate Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab lands.

If the reappraisal now ominously under way in Moscow does produce a major policy switch, it would mean that Watergate had devoured yet another victim—the boldest, most successful U.S. foreign policy since the cold war began.

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