

# Specter of Watergate at U.S.-Soviet Talks

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MOSCOW, March 28 — For the first time in two years, the Watergate affair has had some discernible impact on important Soviet-American negotiations.

During Secretary of State Kissinger's talks here with Leonid I. Brezhnev, each side went out of its way to assure the other that despite Mr. Nixon's Watergate troubles, it was still committed to improving relations, regardless of personalities.

The very need to make such commitments in public, through the ritualistic language of toasts and communiqués suggested how much Watergate and Mr. Nixon's personal future are now on Moscow's mind as well as Washington's.

Officially the final com-

muniqué announced that both sides would push ahead with preparations for the visit of President Nixon to Moscow. But at a Soviet reception for American correspondents, one Soviet official kiddingly asked an American journalist, "Are you looking forward to the visit of President Ford? Such jocular irreverence would have been unthinkable for Moscow a few months ago.

Other Soviet officials were particularly keen to probe and question the Washington corre-

spondents traveling with Mr. Kissinger about the likelihood of impeachment proceedings against the President. In their private comments, they showed new respect for the power and autonomy of Congress.

The Watergate factor was undoubtedly one reason for the disappointing results of the Brezhnev-Kissinger talks. For Mr. Kissinger came here with a weak negotiating hand and the Soviet leadership obviously felt no compulsion to rush toward compromise with a weakened Administration.

The tables have turned dramatically since the spring of 1972 when Mr. Nixon's first Presidential visit was being prepared. Then, the Russians knew privately that they were headed for a disastrous harvest and that they needed both

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American wheat and an arms agreement to signal formally to the world that the United States accepted the Soviet Union as a nuclear equal.

This spring, Mr. Kissinger arrived not only with his President trying to hold Congress at bay but also with the Atlantic alliance rent with fundamental divisions. This situation undercut any chance for him to act as interlocutor with Moscow for the divided West on such major East-West issues as reductions of military forces in the center of Europe or terms for a European security conference.

On arms limitations, Moscow knows that the Nixon Administration is divided and may well wonder whether Mr. Nixon would be able to persuade Congress to accept any deal to which Moscow might ulti-

mately agree. Again, reason to pause to see how the power struggle over the Presidency is resolved.

With Marshal Andrei A. Grechko, the Soviet Defense Minister, now in the Politburo, Mr. Brezhnev must apparently move more carefully on the arms issue. Marshal Grechko's rapid return home from a visit to Iraq pointed up his importance in the exchanges with Mr. Kissinger.

Rather consistently in the last three months, the 70-year-old marshal has taken a more wary public stance on improving relations than other top leaders and has stressed the need to push ahead with "strengthening" of the Soviet arsenal. He was invited to Mr. Kissinger's luncheon yesterday but, along with a few other Soviet officials, did not attend. Tonight, however, American officials said they attached "no

special significance" to his absence.

Despite the Kremlin's unwillingness to make concessions on the hard, practical issues, the Soviet leadership quite deliberately chose Mr. Kissinger's visit to take the recent chill off Soviet-American relations and to warm up the atmosphere.

Soviet officials from Mr. Brezhnev on down fairly exuded good fellowship and optimism during Mr. Kissinger's brief stay, though they let him go home without the crucial negotiating breakthrough on arms control or the other concrete results he had sought.

One implication is that the Kremlin hopes a more cordial mood with Washington, after obvious recent strains, may encourage Congress to liberalize the terms of trade with the Soviet Union.

As if recognizing Mr. Nixon's impotence to move Congress on the trade issue, the Soviet leadership reportedly offered some slight flexibility on the Jewish emigration question, presumably to see whether Congress could be swayed.

### A Waiting Game

But the Kremlin seems inclined to wait to see what happens on the bread-and-butter issue of lower tariffs and bigger credits before striking any major new deals with President Nixon, perhaps with the thought that the pressures of the next weeks may make his own terms softer.

Once again, the Watergate affair and Mr. Nixon's low popularity ratings at home may have an impact on a kind of deadline diplomacy by Moscow. One theory here is that the Kremlin believes Mr. Nixon will be ready to pay a high price for a successful visit, indicate a willingness to compromise, and send Mr. Kissinger back to Moscow for more negotiating.

The deliberately downbeat assessment of the talks in Mr. Kissinger's party as he flew home could be intended to belie such a Soviet view, by signaling that the Administration was prepared to forgo success when Mr. Nixon came to Moscow rather than make unacceptable compromises.