



Russia Dodging Nixon's Challenges

— Joseph Kraft

PRESIDENT NIXON is courting confrontation with the Soviet Union on Vietnam. But Moscow keeps slipping the challenge, thus forcing the President to renew it in ever stronger terms.

That means Mr. Nixon is going to have to do truly terrible things to get the Soviet response he seeks. But the chance of getting that response is so small that he would be better off scrapping the whole show — including the Moscow summit meeting — than proceeding further down the course he has blocked out for himself.

Public evidence of the President's deliberate search to engage the Russians on Vietnam is ample. The latest and strongest evidence is the raid on Haiphong, the chief port of entry for Soviet shipping to North Vietnam.

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THE RUSSIANS ducked the challenge. Though Soviet ships were hit, a Tass statement about the raid was so soft that the State Department called it "moderate."

So Mr. Nixon has to take further steps if he is going to engage the Russians. Once more he has Melvin Laird and military chiefs at his shoulder pushing him on — that is the meaning of the Pentagon stories that the United States now feels free to bomb targets anywhere in North Vietnam. Their argument seems to go something like this:

At present the Russians think they have Mr. Nixon over a barrel. They see that his Vietnamization policy is taking knocks on the ground. They know support for the war in the United States is doubtful.

So, this hard-line argument continues,

when the President comes to the Moscow summit meeting, Brezhnev will be able to demand an Arms Control Agreement that restricts American defensive strength without affecting Soviet offensive strength. Mr. Nixon would be in poor position to refuse because collapse of the summit would compromise his whole diplomacy and his chances for reelection.

As an advance defense against that danger, the President has been putting the Russians under pressure now.

Moreover, he may be able to force Moscow to take responsibility for what has been happening in Indochina. If the Russians truly want an Arms Control Agreement, they will, the theory concludes, take steps to force North Vietnam to ease up on the offensive and return to serious negotiations.

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THE TROUBLE with all that is that the game isn't worth the candle. To draw the Russians into a definite commitment on Vietnam, the President will have to push them very far. He will have to flatten North Vietnam, and maybe even blockade the port of Haiphong. Even then it is very doubtful, given the competition with China for world Communist leadership, that Moscow would come down hard on Hanoi to abandon the war and make peace.

As to the impact on Arms Control Talks, Mr. Nixon is in a weak position because he has tied himself up with the Saigon regime in a war it cannot win and which has only the most limited support in this country. By plunging deeper into the war, he does not improve his bargaining position for the summit.