

Vietnam Blockade

Viewed by Moscow

IT SURPRISES NOBODY that Moscow and Peking should damn the Haiphong blockade as "illegal . . . dangerous and slippery" (Moscow) and "a highly adventurous and crazy act" (Peking) and that North Korea and other Communist governments have rung in on the condemnatory chorus.

What does evoke surprise, however, and contribute a smidgen of warmth to a less than comfortable situation, is the relative restraint with which the Soviet government denounced "this new escalation of aggressive actions." To be sure, its pronouncement spoke of "the piratic nature" of the U.S. presence in Vietnam and of "the barbarous acts and crimes" entailed in that presence. But these are comments offered frequently and even more eloquently in the past. What is new in the current declaration is (a) a demand that the United States cancel the blockade at once and return to the negotiation table, and (b) a possibly defensible allegation that the blockade violates the Geneva conventions on marine law that the United States signed in 1958.

IN RETALIATION against this alleged infringement on freedom of navigation, the document suggests nothing more than a hope that "other nations and the peoples of all peace-loving states" will share this view, and a flat but unspecified assertion that the Soviet union will, as it has in the past, "give the Vietnamese people necessary support." But, it is noted by those wise in the ways of diplomatic language, the Moscow paper does not declare or even hint that the new development will cancel or even delay the U.S.-Soviet talks.

Here is an intimation that Moscow is, for readily discernible reasons bearing on world peace, no less eager for those talks to proceed than is Washington. Such an inference may also be drawn from yesterday's meeting of President Nixon and Henry Kissinger with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and Nikolai Patolichev Soviet Minister of Foreign Trade. The President left the meeting wearing the kind of smile known as "satisfied."

SUCH SIGNS AND PORTENTS do not, of course, guarantee that the current measure of serenity will continue if by evil chance a Soviet ship is damaged and Soviet crewmen are killed or wounded while entering or leaving the mined port of Haiphong. The situation is of so delicate a nature as to prompt this more or less detached view from the British "Guardian":

"The South Vietnamese forces are not fit to fight alone and never will be. Bombing is both inefficient and inhuman . . . Yet for the United States to withdraw wholly . . . will leave moral and physical scars. The most sensible course is to recognize privately that the regime in South Vietnam cannot now survive. How to come to terms with the North and how to extricate the remaining forces quickly are the real question."

They are indeed, and if the blockade does not force the answers as Washington apparently hopes, the upcoming Moscow Summit looms as the best hope now on the horizon.