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Nixon's Moscow visit depends on the outcome of two events

WASHINGTON — President Nixon's trip to Moscow is not yet a certainty. Whether he goes will depend upon two events:

First, the success or failure of North Vietnam's offensive.

Second, Moscow's reply to the points put forward by Dr. Henry Kissinger during his recent secret conversations with Russia's Leonid Brezhnev and Andrei Gromyko.

The first event, as George Washington said, "is in the hand of God." The White House is still saying that it believes the northern front will hold. If it doesn't hold, Kissinger's talks in Moscow become even more important. So what Kissinger asked for, in effect, was that Moscow urge Hanoi to stay its hand.

His argument went somewhat as follows: If the Russians want a liberal U.S. trade policy, a slow-down in the arms race and a relationship with the United States which recognizes the Soviet Union—not China—as spokesman for the Communist world, Russia cannot permit a U.S. rout in South Vietnam.

A major defeat, Kissinger pointed out to Brezhnev, would shock public opinion in this country. In turn, a shocked public opinion would force the President to take "tough stands" and win points. A nation which has suffered a Dunkirk is in no mood to make compromises.

Therefore, so the Kissinger argument went, the Soviet Union should make it clear that Hanoi has had all the help it is going to get and should stop now before it involves major powers in disputes which may get out of control.

If this word is passed, the White House hopes that North Vietnam will move toward a settlement. If the word is not passed, or if North Vietnam ignores the word, Mr. Nixon will not go to Moscow.

What happens during the next few days at the Paris bargaining table or on the battlefield will tell the story.

Mr. Brezhnev was cordial to Dr. Kissinger and said he understood his point of view. But it is not so much a question of whether Mr. Brezhnev will deliver the message to North Vietnam as whether North Vietnam will pay any attention to it.

With supplies already on hand, the North Vietnamese are doing very well. As this is written, the northern front appears to be cracking. Russia may well have created a monster, lacking that little call button which will permit the inventor to call the monster to a halt when it appears to be getting out of hand.

Meanwhile, the White House is readying itself for a renewed bombing offensive. A collapse of the northern front would be a signal that the Russians have not delivered the message or that North Vietnam has ignored it. Such a signal will trigger an onslaught by air.

Mr. Nixon expects student protest. But as at the time of the Cambodian "incur-sion," he thinks that student protest drives the silent majority to his standard.

It is a risky judgment. For surely the results of recent primary elections do not send forth the same message as the White House poll does. Sen. George McGovern's astonishing showing can hardly be regarded as a vote for more bombing and more war.

And what of Dr. Kissinger's oft-recited theory that big powers will hang together to prevent small powers from upsetting the peace? This theory, too, hangs in the balance. There is just the faintest suspicion here that the Kissinger visit to Moscow, ostensibly a warning, may have been seen in Moscow as a desperate plea.