

The Split Level at the Summit

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MOSCOW, May 25—So far President Nixon's meeting with the Soviet leadership has been a split-level affair.

On the public level, the summit meeting is humming along with daily signing of pre-arranged agreements on health, science, environment, space and maritime exchanges. But these were negotiated well in advance and saved for release here to create a sense of success even though in the case of the agreements on health and environment, officials are hard put to explain precisely how they go beyond previous agreements.

More significant agreements lie ahead on curbing the strategic arms race and opening the way to increased Soviet-American trade. The arms agreement was essentially completed before Mr. Nixon stepped on Soviet soil last Monday though the White House has continued to say that it is still not ready for signature. Soviet officials express no such doubts or hesitations.

The contents of the trade agreement are intimately bound up with the second level—the private level—of the Moscow meeting, for American officials have been hinting the last 24 hours that its contents depend in some measure on how helpful the Kremlin leaders want to be regarding Vietnam.

Publicly Unmentionable

As an issue, Vietnam symbolizes the split-level nature of the summit meeting—privately debated but publicly unmentionable, as if it had been forgotten that the crisis over the mining of North Vietnamese harbors formed the prelude to the meeting and may have nearly become the death of it.

The Soviet and American spokesmen were both reduced

to virtual silence the other day at a joint news conference when one reporter asked for their comments on reports that Soviet ships had passed through the American minefields in Haiphong.

The President had several reasons for the mining—to hit back in reprisal for the Communist offensive in the South, to force Moscow to be more responsible for the use of the arms supplied to its allies and to put pressure on Moscow to become a broker for a Vietnam settlement.

From the few scraps of information that have leaked out about Mr. Nixon's talks with the Communist party leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, Premier Aleksei Kosygin and President Nikolai V. Podgorny, he has begun to present his brief and has met resistance.

Looks to Moscow

Mr. Nixon came into office feeling that the Soviet Union was a major factor in settling the Korean war and believing that the road to peace in Vietnam lay through Moscow. It is a theme raised in each of his three annual State of the World messages.

"The Soviet leadership has failed to exert a helpful influence on the North Vietnamese in Paris," he declared on Feb. 18, 1970. "The overwhelming majority of the war matériel that reaches North Vietnam comes from the U.S.S.R., which thereby bears a heavy responsibility for the continuation of the war. This cannot help but cloud the rest of our relationship with the Soviet Union."

It was essentially the same logic and nearly the same language that the President was using less than three weeks ago as he explained the mining of North Vietnamese harbors.

The response in Moscow is that the Soviet Union is not a party to the war despite the President's efforts to involve it, that it cannot and will not

try to influence Hanoi to change its over-all strategy or peace terms, and that it does not want to become a peace broker. But a new element has crept in since Mr. Nixon's trip to Peking.

U.S. Intentions Questioned

If the private comments of highly placed Soviet journalists reflect the views of the leadership, Mr. Brezhnev and his colleagues regard the mining of Haiphong as an affront and a nuisance that can be endured and circumvented without seriously affecting the course of the war. If Mr. Nixon truly wants help in getting out of the Vietnam war, it is said,

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he must be more explicit about his intentions in Asia.

In the first place, Moscow wants some convincing assurance that his latest offer of American troop withdrawals within four months of cease-fire truly signals a desire to end all American involvement for good.

Perhaps more important, Mr. Brezhnev and his colleagues are said to want persuasive assurances that the new American relations with China are not secretly aimed against Moscow over the long run. Unless the Kremlin can be reassured on this point with some full and frank talk, it is said, Mr. Nixon can hardly expect any Soviet help on Vietnam.