



Long Odds for Kissinger Talks

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IN A QUARTER century and more, the United States has never sent a negotiator into the fray carrying the kind of heavy handicaps that Henry A. Kissinger is carrying to Moscow. The handicaps begin at home, of course.

Even if some Americans are too silly to realize the fact, all of America's adversaries in the world are well aware that this is a presidential government. If the President is crippled, the government is crippled. This is the state of affairs today, and it will continue to be the state of affairs until the business of the President's impeachment is finished, one way or another.

So far, the Secretary of State has coped with this particular handicap by the characteristically shrewd device of pretending he has hardly heard the dread name, "Watergate." The device has worked, though only barely worked, for two main reasons. The President has backed his secretary to the hilt. The Congress has not dissented.

Maybe another reason should be mentioned, too. America is still much stronger than any other western nation. Without exception — although for several different reasons — the major western nations across the Atlantic now have weak governments, beset by many difficulties, and pursuing uncertain courses.

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BUT THIS SITUATION, viewed in another way, also constitutes another heavy negotiating handicap. Only consider how the western alliance must now appear, as viewed from Moscow.

To begin with, because of the new

crude oil price, there is the startling prospect that all the major nations of the west will run balance of payments deficits during the period ahead. No one can quite foretell the consequences of universal deficits.

Finally, there has never been a period of such western disunity since the end of the second world war. It is a problem little understood in Washington, but the causes are simple enough at bottom. About a year ago, the French took an important though unannounced decision, probably on the basis of that period's close new relationship between President Pompidou and the former British Prime Minister, Edward Heath.

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THE FRENCH DECISION was to veer away from narrow nationalism, towards a new policy of trying to build a politically united Europe under French domination. Unity generally needs an "against" element. As the Europeans were too fearful to be united against the Soviets, the French also wanted a Europe united against the Americans.

Various steps were taken to this end, such as the new Common Market rule that all European political positions must be worked out in advance, without consultation with the United States.

Add up the score, then. Kissinger goes to Moscow first with a crippled government behind him; second, with an oil-caused economic crisis ahead of him; and third, with an alliance all around him weaker and more fractured than at any time in the past. This is not an ideal negotiator's assignment.