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Combined Crises

Flashes of brilliant improvisation have marked the performance of the President and Secretary of State Kissinger in dealing with the latest war in the Mideast. Still their activities abroad do not cancel Watergate and the domestic crisis it set in motion. On the contrary, the foreign and domestic crises combine to show how difficult it is for Mr. Nixon to govern.

Three particular actions by the administration in the present Mideast crisis deserve special praise. First, there was the President's decision on Oct. 13 to order, over the head of the oil lobby in the Pentagon, a fullscale supply effort to Israel. The American airlift permitted Israel to take the offensive and redressed the balance in the Eastern Mediterranean which was tipping dangerously toward Russia and its Arab clients.

Second, there was the cease-fire agreement worked out by Dr. Kissinger with Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow over last weekend. That agreement, by stipulating the need for early negotiations between Israel and the Arabs on a durable peace, was at least a step forward in the diplomatic rhetoric.

Then there was the defense alert ordered by the President when the Russians, in response to an Israel breach of the cease-fire, suddenly switched their tone from conciliatory to very tough and threatened to establish a unilateral military presence. If the United States had let that threat go by, there could have been serious trouble.

But why were there three moves by the administration necessary at all? The answer lies in the administration's domestic difficulties.

When trouble first started in the Mideast, the administration, despite evident signs of Soviet involvement, took no steps to block the Russians. In large part because the President's only claim to domestic support was an ability to get on with Russia, Dr. Kissinger kept sounding the themes of "detente" and the "structure of peace." As a result, the Russians gained an enormous initial advantage in the war. The President was obliged to set in motion fullscale aid to Israel as a desperation measure.

Dr. Kissinger's diplomatic arrangement in Moscow was achieved largely thanks to Israeli arms which began to move forward when the supplies started rolling. Even so, the cease-fire Dr. Kissinger brought back was a piece of paper without any provision for enforcement. Had he been willing to dally in Moscow, the ongoing success of the Israelis' arms could probably have given him the bargaining power for a much more detailed agreement. But he could not afford to linger because he needed a quick cease-fire to shore up Mr. Nixon at the time the affair of the tapes was unraveling the President's authority at home.

As to the alert, it seems probable that the Russians were tempted to toughen their stand because of President Nixon's domestic weakness. And moreover, the President was in such difficult straits at home there was



widespread suspicion he might be staging the alert to rally the country.

Even the most effective measures taken by the administration, in sum, would not have been necessary except for the staggering decline in Mr. Nixon's internal support. So the President cannot conduct steady foreign policy unless he dramatically improves his standing at home.

Maybe he can pull himself up. The appointment of a special prosecutor might help. But I still have my doubts. In at least four separate cases—the

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case of the milk producers, the case of the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the case of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. (ITT) and the case of his friend Charles Rebozo—Mr. Nixon faces cases that point to criminal activity in the Oval Office.

In the past the President has repeatedly acted to cover up these cases. It was in order to cover up that he took the supreme risk of firing the special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox last weekend. And it seems unlikely that he will suddenly begin practicing

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an open policy on cases that come so close to the bone.

In the absence of an open policy, however, nothing is going to end the doubts and suspicion. Both in foreign policy and in domestic affairs Mr. Nixon will at best be able only to limp along as President. So to me, anyway, it still makes sense, especially in the absence of a Vice President, to think about ways the President might be induced to step down in favor of another leader able to command more confidence in the country.