

Russia and the U. S.: Detente Reigns

MOSCOW—Although the tea leaves are not yet entirely settled, the Kremlin's inner reaction to the Mideast crisis of 1973 is another piece of evidence that detente with Washington has now been enshrined at a pinnacle of Soviet policy from which mere wars between allies of the United States and the Soviet Union shall not be permitted to dislodge it.

Even the genuine fright in Washington that Soviet troops might be on the way to the Suez Canal from airfields in Hungary, which apparently led to the worldwide U.S. military alert, failed to have more than momentary impact on the policymakers here.

Before that sensible precaution was taken on Thursday, Soviet officials were quietly praising the way Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was trying to deal with the volatile question of Israel's new positions to the west of the Suez Canal not far from Cairo.

As one of these officials told us: "Your man McCloskey [chief State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey] has used just the right language

to describe the effect of all this on detente."

Moreover, there have been many signs that—contrary to charges by high officials in Israel that the Mideast war was plotted, timed and ordered by Moscow—the Russians saw a new outburst of war between Israel and the Arabs as not an unmixed blessing, remembering the 1956 and 1967 debacles. Their explanation of massive Soviet assistance to the Arabs as soon as the war started is self-serving, but it raises important questions about premature conclusions in Washington.

"No agreement we have ever signed with you," one influential official told us, "forces us to drop our backing of the Arabs or affects our long-standing relations with third countries." His claim: Moscow would never sit quietly by without responding to Arab requests for military hardware.

However, Western experts here give testimony that when Algerian President Boumedienne turned up at his own request in Moscow on Oct. 14 in the middle of the fighting in the Mid-

east, he left disappointed following an all-night session with top Kremlin leaders. Nor was there bona fide "exhortation," said one long-time Western expert, by party chief Leonid Brezhnev for Algeria to send troops to the Mideast.

Non-U.S. Western sources say two other pieces of evidence are beyond dispute: that Moscow did not want Jordan to enter the war against Israel and that Moscow has not pressured oil-rich Arab states to punish the United States. Why? It might boomarang into a Soviet backlash.

If true, this is all the more remarkable because the Russians have been taking a political pasting in the so-called third or uncommitted world for trying to become a bedmate of the United States. One of the chief villains in the non-aligned conference in Algiers last month was the Soviet Union. Russians in position to know high-level opinions in the Politburo, moreover, went out of their way to defend the United States against charges that Washington encouraged the first viola-

tions of the Suez Canal cease-fire which were charged to Israel. President Nixon's problem of persuading Israel to make "substantial concessions" on territory, as promised by Kissinger, is fully understood and even sympathized with here.

Finally, the Soviet-controlled press, nearly every word of which—or omission thereof—carries some political significance, has been thunderously silent on both the war and the American-Soviet differences on how to police the cease-fire. As we write this, not a word has appeared in the major party or government newspapers about the worldwide U.S. military alert.

What this adds up to is that Soviet courtship of the United States in the form of detente may run deeper and warmer than anyone thought. It means not that the Russians have suddenly become nice little boys who want to play with Uncle Sam, but that at this point detente is perceived here as in the highest interest of the Soviet Union, a subject needing elaboration in a subsequent column.