

Watergate's Impact on Detente

The government's analysts are currently conducting exhaustive post-mortems on the signs and symptoms observed during the recent Moscow visit of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. For the first time, Watergate's impact on the Kremlin bulks large.

President Nixon's grim troubles were treated as nonexistent by the Soviets until only a little while ago, when they began to be mentioned in the Russian press. One odd theme of the press discussions, officially dictated of course, was that Watergate was an anti-Nixon plot organized by the enemies of "detente."

When Dr. Kissinger was in Moscow, however, a further step was taken that has much meaning. In the course of the opening talks, there were a good many heavy-handed Soviet hints that the President's hands were tied—that he was now unable to do all sorts of desirable things—because he was having such severe political difficulties at home.

The hints reached the point, reportedly, of forcing Dr. Kissinger to reply to them directly, with chilly indignation, that as Secretary of State he could testify domestic politics had had no effect whatever on the President's foreign policymaking. This seems to have produced a beneficial effect.

At any rate, the hints ceased. The press pointedly reproduced a passage from a dinner-time toast by the Secretary of State, naming President Nixon and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev as the personal architects of improved Soviet-American relations. Hopes were expressed, both in the press and in the closed talks, for a visit by the President to Moscow in the late spring or early summer.

These specific Soviet responses to Watergate, with their somewhat mixed pattern, must also be interpreted against the background of what mainly happened in the Moscow talks concerning matters of substance. The two main developments were a show of extreme Soviet testiness about the Mideast, plus a virtual deadlock on the second round of SALT.

Significantly, there would have been a total deadlock on SALT if the Soviet-American discussions had continued as they started. Because of the threat-

ened deadlock, as General Secretary Brezhnev himself declared, the Soviet defense minister, Marshal Andrei Grechko, was hastily called back to Moscow from Baghdad.

An immensely long meeting of the top Soviet group then probably ensued. At any rate, the Americans were kept waiting for hours after the proposed conference time the next day. At this Soviet policy-makers' meeting, as already more briefly reported in this space, Marshal Grechko's approval was evidently secured for a little bit of give in the Soviet position. So the second round of SALT was not broken off.

Adding the whole thing up, the official analysts shrewdly see a Soviet "reconnaissance," aimed to discover how much President Nixon's position had been weakened by his troubles at home. The SALT episode was particularly significant. Here, one must remember that a good many of the local Nixon-haters have openly suggested the President would sell out the United States' best interests, in order to secure the temporary political benefits of a fake-peaceful second SALT agreement.

That suggestion must have seemed persuasive to the Soviet leaders, when they took their first extreme position effectively condemning the U.S. to severe strategic inferiority. There was not even any fall back position. The absence of a SALT fall back position can be easily deduced from the need to make a hurry-up call for Marshal Grechko's presence in Moscow.

All these facts point straight to a hard, tough Soviet probe, aimed to see whether Watergate-induced desperation would indeed drive the President to pay a shockingly improper price for his "peace-maker" image. Because the President has never had the slightest intention of doing anything of the sort, and because Dr. Kissinger was both tough and shrewd, the Soviet probe in Moscow ended in failure. In truth, the Moscow visit of the Secretary of State must have proved a considerable disappointment for the Soviet leaders.

Meanwhile, however, what happened

in Moscow should also be a pretty stern warning to responsible Americans. Anyone ought to be able to see the magnitude of the future risks, if the Soviets are already hankering to exploit Watergate-induced weakness.

The main side is that the Kremlin will later be tempted to really brutal adventures by the total paralysis of the U.S. government that must result from a presidential trial by the Senate lasting for many months. If the full facts prove that the President is guilty of real crimes, such as obstructing justice, impeachment is unavoidable. Yet no one should forget that the risks will be appalling.

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