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A New Weakness

MOSCOW—The Moscow summit meetings last week provided a foretaste of the rough going the United States is apt to encounter in the international arena as long as President Nixon clings to office. The talks here showed plainly that Mr. Nixon has lost his clout in the most important of foreign affairs.

Moreover, the President's weakness is now beginning to rub off on his Secretary of State. Dr. Kissinger can no longer wield the club of a strong presidency to line up the American bureaucracy in the style required by his special kind of diplomacy.

Unmistakable evidence of the President's weakness abroad arose from his efforts to make the summit talks a personal victory. He repeatedly and publicly declared that the talks and their success depended upon "personal diplomacy" between himself and Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev.

But the Russians did not rise to that bait. On one occasion, which referred to the future, Pravda struck the term "personal" from the text of a presidential toast.

At the final banquet, Mr. Brezhnev made rejoinder to the President's stress on personal diplomacy by pointedly alluding to the American people and the American Congress. The Russians have come to understand that their future with the United States requires a thick diet of relations with all elements in American life. It says something of Moscow's changing view that a documentary film of Sen. Edward Kennedy's recent visit to Russia opened here last week.

Neither were the Russians prepared to oblige the President on the main matter of substance in the summit talks here. The big item on the agenda turned around proposals for a limitation on multi-headed missiles, or MIRVs.

The Russians clearly sensed that they had Mr. Nixon on the defensive. Secretary General Brezhnev presented proposals which would have allowed the Russians to catch up with the United States and perhaps achieve a decisive edge in 1980. The Politburo

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The American Flag flies over Moscow during Mr. Nixon's recent summit trip.

spurned more restrictive numbers put forward by Mr. Nixon.

Not only did the Russians feel able to hang tough, but it seems clear that the President could not have bought a slightly softer Russian position. Mr. Nixon depends on conservative votes in the Senate to overcome impeachment. The last thing he can afford is a nuclear agreement that would alienate such hawks as Barry Goldwater.

Congressional opposition was the more certain because the administration position on MIRV limitation has not been unanimous. Defense Secretary James Schlesinger actually wanted more restrictive limits on Soviet deployment than those set forth in the U.S. proposal which the Russians rejected. Had a deal been struck there would have been some murderous infighting within the administration.

For relations among the chief fig-

ures inside Mr. Nixon's government have been recently altered. Dr. Kissinger, used — by invoking the President's authority and by playing a close, inside game — to force his own positions on the rest of Washington.

But the presidency which he once brandished as a club has turned into a banana. Independent-minded men, such as Dr. Schlesinger, can and do take positions which differ from those of the Secretary of State. Dr. Kissinger now has to make treaties with the Washington opposition instead of overcoming it by main force.

It says a good deal that during the Moscow visit various Russians expressed a keen interest in a visit from the Defense Secretary. It also says something that Dr. Kissinger hung back in the negotiations, and once, not entirely in jest, said, "Nobody tells me anything. I just follow ten paces behind."

What was achieved at the Moscow summit, in these conditions, is not to be disparaged. The condition called detente was maintained. Some accords which provide for further cooperation were signed. A truly bad deal was avoided.

No doubt it is unfortunate that more was not achieved. But no one should be in any doubt as to why the accomplishment was so meager.

The central fact is that the United States has a President crushed by the problems which have brought an impeachment process down upon his head. Even if he were a man of pure motive and unblemished conscience, he could not possibly separate out his own interest from the national interest. So long as he remains in office, the country will limp along in its most important international business.