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THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN . . .

Ford

SALT prospects dimmer

Political wear and tear weaken detente

By HENRY L. TREWHITT
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Washington—On a wide range of issues, the fabric of detente between the United States and the Soviet Union is wearing thin.

Whether it survives, many analysts in Washington agree, depends on how the two governments now balance the imagery and reality of both foreign and domestic issues. If it becomes an issue in the U.S. presidential campaign next year, as current trends indicate it might, it could be destroyed.

There is no sign yet of renewed tensions of the kind that created the cold war. Yet there has been decided deterioration of the climate that developed from the historic meeting of former President Nixon and Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, in 1972.

Now three situations—the new agreement in the Middle East, the turmoil in Portugal and the controversy over U.S. grain for Russia—underline the point dramatically. But the erosion began earlier, and other issues are waiting to be dealt with.

One obvious point of change followed President Ford's arrival in the White House. Mr. Nixon had been destroyed politically at home and abroad. To reverse that perception of his office, Mr. Ford set out to reassert the U.S. role in the world even as its role in Vietnam collapsed.

The tone of U.S. treatment of Moscow became sterner—answering those who complained that Moscow was getting all the advantage of detente—even though Mr. Ford retained Henry A. Kissinger, who, as Secretary of State, engineered the reconciliation.

By last spring Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger were strongly proclaiming fresh leadership of the North Atlantic alliance. The strategic arms limitation talks (SALT), the negotiations to limit nuclear weapons, were in trouble again after what had been proclaimed as a breakthrough at Helsinki a few months before.

As the summer approached, the administration's critics, notably Senator Henry M. Jackson (D., Wash.), were winning at least some

public support for a harder line toward the Russians. Mr. Ford reacted accordingly, emphasizing watchfulness more than detente when he met at the summit conference with other NATO leaders in June.

At the European security conference six weeks ago, the U.S. policy line was even a bit sharper. Mr. Ford reaffirmed detente, but he strongly challenged the Soviet Union to give substance to its pledges of political liberalization. Here he had the support of European neutrals as well as formal U.S. allies, for the Soviet Union, in the presummit maneuvering, had antagonized all of Western Europe.

At the same time the U.S. was proclaiming a political stake, after long delay, in the result of Portugal's political turmoil. Initially Mr. Kissinger appeared to have conceded the loss of Portugal, a NATO member, to communism. But at Helsinki and later, the U.S. began to warn off the Soviet Union—just as Moscow was beginning to state publicly its support for Portuguese Communists.

Whatever the underlying reality, the current trends in Portugal away from Communist domination will be read generally as an advance for American policy. Moscow can be expected to react accordingly.

Soviet leaders already have made bitterly clear their reaction to the U.S. role in the Middle East. By Western assessment, they already had wasted once their opportunity there when overzealousness got them expelled from Egypt. They sought to re-establish their position in other Arab countries.

But Mr. Kissinger's success in negotiating a new Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement has left the U.S. as the dominant outside power. In effect, both Israel and Egypt have committed their strategic futures to Washington.

When it came time to sign the accords in Geneva last week the Soviet Union, though a member of the forum nominally supervising the ceremony, boycotted the event. In that decision it was true to the other militant Arabs who feel

sold out by Egypt. But the boycott also underscored the American role.

In propaganda terms it was a severe defeat for Moscow, as long as Americans are willing to support the commitment implied by the accords.

At home the U.S. is embroiled deeply in controversy over the latest Soviet-American grain deal. Longshoremen, charging the sales will drive up the price of food at home, are refusing to load shipments to the Soviet Union. It is a controversy the administration would like to see to Russian satisfaction, of course, but the effect on relations between Moscow and Washington is hardly salutary.

Apart from immediate issues, the SALT controversy ahead could have even more serious consequences. The two governments are committed politically to reach a new treaty this year, one that would limit the total number of strategic warheads in their arsenals.

According to Mr. Kissinger, they "no longer have a

problem" on simple numbers of warheads on big missiles. It is a safe prediction, however, that when those numbers are made public they will stir the critics of previous agreements, such as Mr. Jackson.

Moreover, two fresh issues have complicated the negotiations. They center on the strategic value to be given to a new Soviet bomber and to jet-powered missiles, in which the U.S. excels.

Senior U.S. officials now rate the prospects for a new SALT agreement this year at no better than 50-50, far worse than those of six months ago. The strategic stakes of both governments in the outcome are considerable, and Mr. Kissinger will try to get the discussions moving again next week when he meets Andrei A. Gromyko, his Soviet counterpart, at the United Nations.

If they fail, another aspect of Soviet-U.S. relations automatically comes into question. Ever since Mr. Nixon's visit to Moscow in 1972, the leader of one country has visited the other each year. This year it is Mr. Brezhnev's turn to travel. The trip has been postponed pending the outcome of the SALT talks. Their failure would force him to decide whether he could afford the visit politically.

In fact the circumstances of detente are becoming a growing political problem for both leaders. Whatever course now develops, Mr. Ford will be criticized from some politi-

cal quarter, right or left.

As Soviet-American relations become generally or specifically a campaign issue, he will have to weigh important policy issues in terms of pure politics. Some high officials think the survival of Mr. Kissinger as secretary of state for the remainder of the current term yet could come into question.

For Mr. Brezhnev the personal consequences are equally great. He staked his career on detente, whether he saw it as a means to undermine the U.S., as American critics charge, or as a design for equitable coexistence.

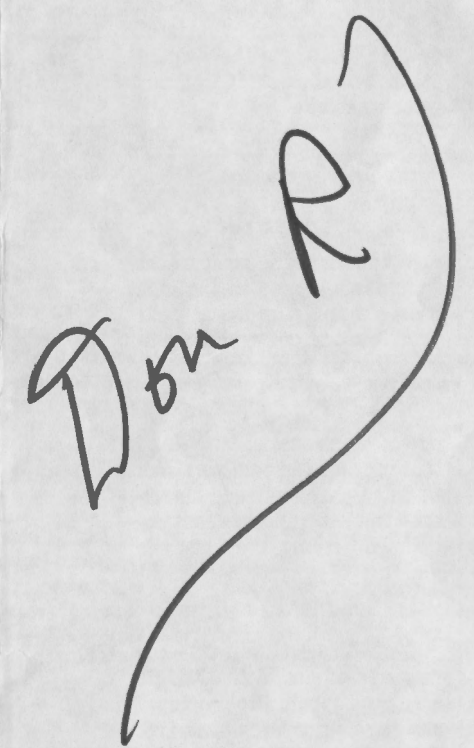
His performance will be evaluated at the 25th Soviet Communist party conference in February. It is accepted generally in the West that Mr. Brezhnev will step down sometime next year. How his pursuit of detente is judged doubtless will have much to do with the identity and policies of his successor—as well as on his own reputation.

"A debate of some kind on detente is inevitable," a high State Department official said. "What we have to hope is that it deals with something like objective merits."

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