

Russia's Stand on Mideast Seen a Key to Summit Talk

By GEORGE SHERMAN

Star Staff Writer

President Johnson and the Soviet leadership are in the final stages of a delicate double guessing game over a summit conference before the new administration takes office Jan. 20.

The latest Soviet move, some officials here believe, was a high-powered commentary yesterday in the Communist party organ Pravda, explicitly pledging Soviet support for a "political solution" for the Middle East crisis.

The Soviet government, Pravda said, will not permit a "new dangerous flareup" between the Arabs and Israelis.

The first American reaction was cautious. Officials noted that the article continued to throw all blame for the tension on Israel, and once again lined the Russians up "on the side of the Arab people."

The article did not endorse a "just and binding peace"—which the Israelis demand with American support—nor did it indicate what, if anything, Moscow will do to bring United Arab Republic President Gamal Abdul Nasser to a compromise settlement.

"Are the Russians willing to apply the pressure in Cairo where it really counts?" asked one official. "That's what we want to see."

He and others noted that the Soviet pledge "to prevent a new explosion" coincided with the arrival in Cairo of United Nations special envoy for the Middle

East, Gunnar Jarring. Jarring has just ended a conference on Cyprus with Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban.

In Pravda, the Russians once again supported the Jarring mission, which for the past year has sought, without much success, to bring Israel and the Arabs together on implementation of the Security Council resolution of Nov. 22, 1967, setting out general principles for a Middle East settlement.

That resolution coupled Israeli withdrawal from conquered Arab territories with Arab recognition of the independence and territorial integrity of Israel.

The Pravda article took on added meaning as fighting continued for the third straight day today between Israeli and Arab forces along the Israeli border with Jordan. American analysts have long felt that Russian interests in infiltrating the Middle East are best served by keeping the Israeli-Arab dispute simmering, but not by allowing it to boil over into all-out war.

These analysts also believe that the timing of the new Soviet endorsement of an unspecified "political solution" for the Middle East may be aimed at the Johnson administration. Ever since the five-day war in June 1967 threatened a Soviet-American confrontation, Johnson has sought some kind of understanding with the Russians on a compromise which would limit big power arms shipments to the Middle East.

This crisis area would be one obvious area for discussion at a final summit conference between Johnson and Soviet Premier Alexei N. Kosygin.

The Pravda article, officials said, shows at least that the Russians are willing to talk seriously. But they doubt that either the United States or the Soviet Union has enough influence over the feuding Israelis and Arabs to make any dramatic breakthrough on a concrete peace settlement at a summit meeting.

But the breakthrough might come in a new atmosphere of negotiation from the two super-powers. And on this score a thrust toward compromise in the Middle East might well coincide with progress on what promises to be the main topic for any final summit conference—mutual limitation of offensive and defensive nuclear weapons.

The general expectation here is that if and when a summit conference is agreed, its main outcome will be agreement to open the long-delayed talks at a specific date, place and level of negotiation.

Before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Aug. 20, 1968, President Johnson was ready to announce a summit conference for just such a purpose.

The double guessing game on the part of the Americans and Russians is whether the meeting is any longer worthwhile in the remaining days of the lame-duck Johnson administration. Officials here maintain that the delicate final calculations are now in the hands of Johnson and his two top foreign policy advisers, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Walt Rostow, national security adviser in the White House.

Johnson first must decide whether the most serious consequences of the Czechoslovak invasion have been "liquidated" sufficiently to justify a go-ahead on the missile talks. The Johnson administration has never said publicly what level of Soviet activity in Czechoslovakia would be "tolerable," but officials say one key is withdrawal of occupying forces.

In a television interview Sunday, Rusk surprised Pentagon officials by confirming that these Soviet forces are down to "three or four divisions"—35,000 to 45,000 men, compared to an estimated 250,000 troops in August.

Rusk did not indicate that this level was acceptable, or that the Czechoslovak situation had been liquidated satisfactorily. But he did lay the basis for removing the Czechoslovak obstacle to the Soviet-American talks, if Johnson decides to go ahead.

Johnson also must win agreement from President-elect Richard M. Nixon. Although Johnson himself insists that he is the "only President of the United States" until Jan. 20, no one thinks he would go ahead on a summit conference on missiles without the agreement of Nixon.

The question still unanswered publicly is whether Nixon is willing to let Johnson bow out with a spectacular summit—and a major commitment for the new administration.

Soviet calculations are equally delicate, officials believe. Over the past two months the Russians have pushed hard to get the missile talks opened. They are believed to have two main reasons. First, they want to refurbish their tarnished image after Czechoslovakia. Second, and more important in the long-run, they are deeply suspicious of Nixon's repeated "reverence for nuclear superiority" in the arms race.

Some analysts reason they would like to get the United States locked into as many "peace" positions as possible before Nixon takes over.

The unanswered question on the Russians' part is whether they are prepared to have a summit conference with a lame-duck administration, in order to obtain the missile talks. The answer to these questions must come within the next few weeks.