

13 June 1979

Who'll follow Brezhnev and will he buy SALT?

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Moscow

"You can't go past Andrei Kirilenko," said one earnest Kremlinologist here, discussing who President Carter might have to deal with if ailing Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev should suddenly have to step down.

On the eve of the Vienna summit, there's renewed urgency in worldwide speculation about Mr. Brezhnev's ability to continue in office, and what would happen to détente if he should retire or pass on.

Mr. Brezhnev is still very much chief of the Communist Party and head of state, approving all major decisions. But he is described by Westerners who have met him as "nothing like the man he was even two or three years ago." And it was the issue of his health that shifted the summit from Washington to Vienna — a shorter trip for the Soviet leader.

"Kirilenko runs the party day by day right now, and is effectively Mr. Brezhnev's deputy already," the Kremlinologist went on.

"No, no," said another diplomat across town, waving his hands. "The real power struggle will be between Mikhail Suslov [the kingmaker and chief theoretician] and [Prime Minister] Alexei Kosygin."

"What you must never do," chimed in a third expert, "is forget Yuri Andropov [head of the KGB]. One of the brightest people in the Politburo, a logical successor. . . ."

"The name to keep in mind is [Defense Minister] Dmitri Ustinov," insists yet another diplomat here, "tough, well-connected in the armed forces, a veteran. . . ."

If you think all this sounds as though the experts don't really know who will step into Mr. Brezhnev's shoes, you're right. They don't. But the four comments do sum up what most Kremlinologists are saying here now — and there's serious purpose behind their figuring.

President Carter and Congress would like to know whether Soviet SALT strategy would change if Mr. Brezhnev, so closely identified with it, should depart.

One cogent argument in Moscow goes like this:

Mr. Brezhnev learned the lessons to be drawn from the way his predecessor, Nikita Khrushchev, lost power in 1964. He has stayed away from Mr. Khrushchev's penchant for tumultuous party reforms.

By and large, Mr. Brezhnev has ruled by consensus. SALT (the argument goes) is a consensus policy of the 13-man Politburo. It adds to Soviet prestige to be seen head-to-head with Washington. It gives breathing room for worry about China. It might even save some defense troubles in the long run.

Any immediate successor, it is argued, would be likely to keep SALT going. Decision-making, however, could slow down for up to a year while a new pecking order emerged.

A minority view argues that a "night of the long knives" has already begun, and that all policymaking will stop for an indefinite period while a new strongman emerges.

One veteran analyst here says, "Look at the Politburo. Four of the 12 [besides Mr. Brezhnev] are Brezhnev men — Kirilenko, [Konstantin] Chernenko, [Vladimir] Shcherbitsky [party chief of the Ukraine], [Dinmukhamed] Kunayev [party chief of Kazakhstan]."

"Then there are Ustinov, Andropov, and [Foreign Minister Anatoly] Gromyko, all elevated to full politburo membership by Brezhnev. Mr. Suslov has been a steady Brezhnev supporter. So that makes 8 of the 12 behind Brezhnev."

The only question marks are Moscow party chief Viktor Grishin, Mr. Kosygin, Leningrad party chief Grigori Romanov, the youngest man in the Politburo at 56, and Latvian Arvid Pelshe, at 80 the oldest.

CIA analysts Robert E. Blackwell Jr. also argues for stability in the March-April edition of Problems of Communism, published by the US Government agency ICA (formerly USIA).

Noting the unprecedented lack of shakeups inside the party under Mr. Brezhnev, Mr. Blackwell says most current regional leaders have a stake in supporting the status quo. They are likely to support a leader like Mr. Brezhnev, he writes, "not a man who has strong policy views, is outspoken, and displays great ambition."

The trouble with all Kremlinology is the lack of precedents, and no inside knowledge of how the Politburo operates.

Both Stalin (after Lenin) and Khrushchev (after Stalin) used leadership of the party to oust their rivals. Mr. Khrushchev was pushed out after overreaching himself with party reforms.

As for the Politburo, "we've waited for a leak ever since 1917," a very senior US diplomat told this correspondent in Washington once, "and we're still waiting."

Hence the eagerness with which diplomats here fell on a statement attributed to semi-dissident Marxist historian Roy Medvedev. Mr. Medvedev said he had heard of a contingency plan some months ago when Mr. Brezhnev was seriously ill. Should he pass on, Mr. Kosygin was to become president (the ceremonial post of chief of state, now held by Mr. Brezhnev along with party leadership). Mr. Ustinov was to become premier, and Mr. Andropov party chief.

If true, this could indicate the strength of Mr. Andropov, since party leadership is the real key to power. But no one really knows if it is true, or mere speculation.

Many in Washington and elsewhere see Mr. Kirilenko, a former electrician and aircraft design engineer who has never visited the United States, as the logical successor.

He stands in for Mr. Brezhnev when the leader is out of town. He sits in the fourth-ranking chair in public meetings, junior only to Mr. Brezhnev, Mr. Kosygin, and Mr. Suslov.

Most sources here dismiss as nonsense the flap in the US about the deletion of Mr. Kirilenko from a photo in a Moscow evening news-

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