

No Vision in Venice

The seven leaders left the economic summit conference proclaiming how pleased they were with themselves, and in a way it was true. They had come with thunderous warnings of tough talk, especially from the United States. But no one's arm was twisted, no one's toes were trodden on. They came up with banalities and ambiguities to address the issues before them with the least possible friction, and with the least possible content.

"Reagan was a pussycat," said one senior delegate. "He never gets mad." So all the noise about bashing the Iranians if they don't behave in the Persian Gulf, bashing the allies if they don't help, bashing the West Germans and Japanese if they don't pep up their economies faded away in amiability and agreement not to mention the real disagreements there are among them.

President Reagan produced a classic quote about the meaning of the harsh noises on what the U.S. would do if Iran fires on American ships, saying "I've never bluffed since I've been here." But the other leaders said they hadn't even been asked for support of what they clearly considered an undefined U.S. policy in the gulf. "No blank check was asked, none was given," said Canada's Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney.

Secretary of State George Shultz defined U.S. interests in the gulf as though it were a private American lake from which the Russians have to be excluded. But he rested American hopes to end the war on the United Nations Security Council (the same United Nations to which one of his ambassadors wanted to wave bye-bye from New York), where any attempt to impose sanctions on Iran would be impossible without Soviet and Chinese approval. After announcing that a main purpose of American intervention is to keep the Russians out, Mr. Reagan now says that he would welcome Soviet cooperation in the area. On again, off again. Which is it?

There is a strange idea that relations with Moscow can be divided up in categories that do not affect each other. In one area, the U.S. is looking for an arms reduction agreement that could surely change the East-West atmosphere and create many new possibilities for easing tensions. In another, it is deliberately moving the Iran-Iraq war from a very nasty but local conflict that both superpowers would like to see ended to a possible new East-West confrontation.

All this hot and cold, whether among allies or between adversaries, makes for an air of rudderless indecision. There is a sorry contrast with the atmosphere in Moscow, which has much worse problems but a leader-

ship that knows where it wants to go and can stimulate some exhilaration in trying to get there.

When the Russians say they are apprehensive about the buildup of an American fleet in the Persian Gulf, it doesn't seem so much to be about the expression of America's determination to defend the West's interests there but about the danger of spreading hostilities and developing a new hot-point of superpower tension.

They realize that could make it harder to complete the promising new arms agreements. They are eager for a Western response on their new proposals to discuss "military doctrine" and "restructuring of forces" in Europe so as to reduce the risk of war, and nothing has been forthcoming. Now they are showing foreign policy initiative, and the West is dithering.

with the exception of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain, who stayed overnight and rushed home to try to get herself re-elected, all the leaders present were in some way lamed, and it showed in their determination to put good appearances ahead of everything else.

Canada's brilliant economic adviser Sylvia Ostry analyzes the difficulties that the Western nations are having in taking the moves they know

An agreement to ignore the real discords.

are essential to bring health to the world economy as a "period of transition." The U.S. can no longer manage it all, but a system for cooperative management hasn't yet been achieved.

Something similar is going on in international political affairs. They know they have to get together, but nobody is really in charge, nobody is setting a clear course.

No doubt it is better in the circumstances that the Western leaders choose to spare each other, at least face to face, than if they were openly quarreling. Perhaps that in itself justifies filling the summit meeting with protocol and emptying it of substance.

But it isn't enough to move the world on to a coherent approach to real and urgent problems, or to deal wisely with the opportunities and snares presented by new Soviet policies.

Nothing bad happened in Venice, except that nothing much happened.

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