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Détente in the Nixon–Ford years, 1969–1976

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President Richard M. Nixon declared in his inaugural address on January 20, 1969, that "after a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiations" with the Soviet Union.[1] Privately, he told the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, that in the United States "whenever elections approached, political leaders were tempted to take a belligerent anti-Communist line," but that Nixon himself "did not consider such an approach to be in the interests of world peace or of Soviet–American relations."[2]

These conciliatory words toward America's Cold War rival seemed surprising at the time, since Nixon had played important parts in Congress from 1947 to 1952 and as vice president from 1953 to 1961 in shaping confrontational American policies toward the Soviet Union and Communism. As president, Nixon put aside his earlier criticism of the Communist system, choosing to focus instead on expanding areas of common interest between the Cold War rivals in order to promote what he characterized as a "structure of peace." He developed personal relationships with Soviet leaders, and the United States and the Soviet Union reached a series of agreements on arms control, commercial relations, and political cooperation that fostered a fragile détente between them.

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, a former Harvard University professor of government who became his national security adviser, later secretary of state, and his principal foreign-policy lieutenant, believed that the international situation had changed dramatically in the previous decade. The United States and the Soviet Union were no longer the only powers that

1 Richard Nixon, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1969, *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1970), 3.

2 Memorandum of conversation, Nixon, Gromyko, *et al.*, October 22, 1970. US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976 (FRUS)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2003), vol. I, 270 (hereafter, *FRUS*, with year and volume number).

mattered, as Europe and Japan recovered their strength, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerged as a growing challenge in the world Communist movement.

Nixon and Kissinger started détente as a recognition of the relative, not absolute, decline of US power and the growth of multipolarity. They responded to European desires for improved economic relations and reduced political tensions with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. They valued state sovereignty, and they believed that international stability required that great powers like the United States and the Soviet Union avoid interfering in the internal affairs of each other. This advocacy of the rights and responsibilities of great powers collided with a growing popular movement for human rights.

Détente succeeded at first, because it reduced popular anxieties about the dangers of war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet even as it enjoyed widespread popularity in the years 1971–73, its foundations were weakened by Nixon's and Kissinger's personalities. The two men manipulated others and worked in secrecy. Détente encountered opposition from both those who wanted a more forthright stand against abuses of human rights and those who continued to fear Soviet military power. When Gerald R. Ford became president in 1974, détente was already losing popularity domestically. In the aftermath of the Communist victory in Vietnam, détente suffered even more. In fact, Nixon's, Kissinger's, and Ford's realistic assessment of growing multipolarity did not rest on a belief in US decline. The Helsinki Final Act, so reviled when it was signed in 1975, actually helped set in motion forces that led to the demise of Soviet-style Communism.

Intellectual foundations of détente

In 1967, Nixon observed the "winds of détente have blown so strongly from the East to the West that … most Europeans no longer fear" a Soviet threat. As a result, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a long-time cornerstone of American Cold War policy, had weakened.[3] Kissinger also believed that the United States no longer had the dominant world position it had enjoyed in the early days of the Cold War. The growing nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union had altered traditional ideas about the relationship between the use of or the threat of military force to achieve political ends. In the past, the greater a nation's military power, the greater its ability to influence others. Now, with both the United States and the Soviet

3 "Address by Richard Nixon to the Bohemian Club," July 29, 1967, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. I, 2.

Union capable of destroying each other, the threat to use nuclear weapons to achieve ordinary political aims had become less credible.

For Nixon and Kissinger, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 presented a dilemma. On the one hand, the suppression of "socialism with a human face" indicated that the Soviet Union still posed a threat to Europe and that the Cold War competition between East and West continued. On the other hand, both sides possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other, making nuclear war a grave danger. The two nuclear superpowers were mortal rivals, to be sure, but they also had common interests in managing their relationship to prevent war.

The promotion of "peace" became a central theme of the Nixon administration. Nixon campaigned for president on a platform of achieving "peace with honor" in Vietnam. He recognized a popular yearning for an end to the war in Vietnam and to avoid nuclear war with the Soviet Union. While president, he regularly asserted that he sought to create a "structure of peace," which would apply to the whole world and which would reduce the terror of the Cold War. Peace with the Soviet Union principally meant the reduction of the danger of nuclear war.

Nixon was also responding to changes in European attitudes toward the Soviet Union. When he spoke of the winds of détente blowing across Europe, he referred to recent efforts by traditional NATO partners – France, West Germany, Italy, and Britain – to improve relations with the Soviet Union. These overtures combined political, military, and economic openings. The West German government led by the Social Democratic chancellor, Willy Brandt, launched its policy of *Ostpolitik* (policy toward the East) in 1970. The West German government stopped insisting that the East German government was illegitimate and should be isolated. It recognized the frontiers between East Germany and Poland. Kissinger alerted Nixon to the "worrisome … long range" dangers of an *Ostpolitik* that might detach West Germany from its NATO allies.[4] Across Europe, governments and citizens responded to French president Charles de Gaulle's call for an end to threats or the use of force to resolve political differences in Europe. West German, Italian, French, and British firms invested in and exported goods to Communist countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. American businesses feared being left behind by competitors in the increasingly prosperous Western European countries, and they demanded that the United States government do more to improve the climate between East and West.

4 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 530.

In this new atmosphere, Nixon and Kissinger resolved to treat the Soviet Union as an ordinary state with reasonable national goals and interests. This meant that the United States would no longer highlight its objections to Communism as a social or political system inside the Soviet Union. It would avoid condemnations of the Soviet government's abuse of its citizens' human rights. It would expect the Soviet Union to show similar restraint in avoiding bombastic criticism of the American political and social system. All the while, the United States would continue to try to contain Communism and oppose the spread of Soviet global influence.

The Nixon–Kissinger relationship

Nixon and Kissinger developed a close personal relationship that profoundly affected the way in which they conducted their foreign policy. On many days they met together alone or with only a handful of aides present for hours, and they spoke at length to one another on the phone. They criticized officials, members of Congress, journalists, and the public. Each man came to office deeply suspicious of elected officeholders, foreign affairs officials, or members of the public who commented on foreign affairs. Nixon was uncomfortable with most people, hating direct disagreement or confrontation with subordinates. He believed that most permanent officials in the government opposed him and his policies. He told his cabinet in 1971, "we've checked and found that 96 percent of the bureaucracy are against us; they're bastards who are here to screw us."[5]

Kissinger was a surprising member of Nixon's inner circle because he had supported Nelson Rockefeller, Nixon's rival for the presidency. In addition, he had taught at Harvard and written extensively for the Council on Foreign Relations, two of the principal institutions of the Eastern establishment that Nixon distrusted. Unlike Nixon, Kissinger could be highly personable, and during his tenure as national security adviser and secretary of state, he often had excellent relations with news reporters. He had, however, other reasons to want to work behind the scenes. He quickly realized that the more he and Nixon spoke to one another, the more indispensable he seemed to become, especially when Kissinger joined the president in complaining about the inadequacies of others.

Kissinger's academic writings belonged to the Realist school of foreign-policy analysis. His research added to his sense that most Americans could not

5 "President's Talk to Cabinet, " June 29, 1971. H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 309.

be trusted to understand foreign affairs or to support what he believed to be a foreign policy that promoted American interests. Among the major tenets of Realism are the ideas that power matters most in international relations; ideology has little importance. Regrettably, from Kissinger's point of view, Americans paid too little attention to power relations in international affairs, and they stressed too often unworkable moral maxims or legalistic formulations. In 1968, he disparaged the idealism of American youth who "considered the management of power irrelevant, perhaps even immoral." A generation gap had opened between students opposed to American participation in the war in Vietnam and their elders whose remembered lesson of World War II was the danger of unchecked aggression. "Partly as a result of the generation gap," Kissinger wrote, "the American mood oscillates dangerously between being ashamed of power and expecting too much of it."[6]

During the 1960s, public discussion of Soviet–American relations often focused on efforts to cap the nuclear-arms race. Kissinger, however, expressed skepticism that arms-control agreements by themselves would reduce tension between the two nuclear superpowers. Concentration on arms control, he believed, got the story backward. Improved political relations, he argued, would lead to arms control. But since there was such widespread public support for arms control, Kissinger pursued it.

Nixon and Kissinger sought to embed US–Soviet agreements on arms control in a larger web of mutual interest. At his first press conference on February 6, 1969, Nixon explained that the United States wanted to go forward with the Soviets on political agreements and arms control. This policy became known as "linkage," in which the US government would connect progress in different areas. Kissinger explained that Nixon meant linkage to convey the idea that "there be enough movement in the political field to indicate that arms control negotiations do not unwittingly, instead of reducing the danger of war, offer a means by which conflict can be intensified."[7]

At its most ambitious, the Nixon administration expected that progress toward better bilateral relations with the Soviet Union would encourage the leaders of the Kremlin to apply pressure on the government of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam to agree to end the Vietnam War on terms the Americans would accept. These hopes proved to be illusory. The Soviet Union did not push North Vietnam very hard, and the North Vietnamese could resist Soviet pressure since they also enjoyed the backing of the PRC, Moscow's rival for leadership in the Communist world. Nixon and Kissinger

6 "Essay by Henry Kissinger," *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. I, 47. 7 Editorial note, *ibid*., 58–59.

hoped to exploit this intra-Communist rivalry through "triangular diplomacy" among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

Triangular diplomacy failed in its original goal of gaining Soviet and Chinese pressure on Hanoi to settle the war in Vietnam on terms agreeable to the United States. Triangular diplomacy did, however, expand US–Soviet détente. American steps toward détente with the Soviet Union proceeded side by side with secret efforts to open relations with China. This behind-the-scenes diplomacy culminated in Kissinger's trip to Beijing in July 1971, which paved the way for a celebrated visit by Nixon to China in February 1972. Soviet officials observed the burgeoning US–PRC rapprochement with alarm. They often warned Nixon and Kissinger against making friends with the Chinese at the Soviets' expense. Nixon and Kissinger offered only tepid reassurances to the Soviet leadership that closer ties between Washington and Beijing would not harm Soviet interests. As the United States and China ended their decades'-long estrangement in 1971 and 1972, Soviet leaders became more inclined than they had been before to reach agreements with the United States.

Nixon and Kissinger built upon their views of politics and international affairs to develop détente. They responded to public anxieties about the costs and the dangers of the continuing confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Their methods became as important as their goals. They built their structure of peace in a way that shut out professional diplomats and cabinet secretaries ostensibly in charge of foreign affairs. Their tight control of foreign policy led to dramatic and unexpected breakthroughs. But their antagonism toward professional advisers also left them without vital support when opponents criticized détente.

Arms control and US–Soviet summit meetings, 1969–1972

In early 1969, at the beginning of the Nixon administration, National Security Adviser Kissinger informed the Soviet ambassador, Anatolii Dobrynin, that the president wanted to conduct business with the Soviet Union personally and directly through a "back channel" line of communication. Kissinger explained that he had the authority to speak for the US government regardless of what other officials said. The back channel became the principal means through which the United States and the Soviet Union communicated over the next five and one-half years. The back channel's advantages were that it gave Kissinger and Nixon control over the setting of foreign policy, and its secrecy enabled them to make dramatic announcements which captured public

attention. The disadvantage of conducting foreign affairs through the back channel was that it was far too personal. By ignoring and undermining the professionals within the State Department, Nixon and Kissinger lost out on important technical advice. Their penchant for secrecy and their distrust of professional advice also made it harder than necessary for them to build support for their policies. When domestic opposition to elements of détente intensified, Nixon became vulnerable to complaints that the agreements he had signed were deeply flawed.

In the mid- and late 1960s, the race between the United States and the Soviet Union to deploy more intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and to develop anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs) provoked worldwide public anxiety. As soon as he became president, Nixon tried to dampen these fears when he announced within days of taking office that US policy was to have "sufficiency" not "superiority" in nuclear weapons. He downsized the Johnson administration's plan for a large ABM system directed against the Soviet Union, called Sentinel, to a smaller Safeguard system intended to be deployed against a possible threat from China.

In 1970 and 1971, Kissinger negotiated with Ambassador Dobyrnin and Foreign Minister Gromyko through the back channel. In a series of discussions with Dobrynin, Kissinger argued that the Soviet Union and the United States should try to reach an agreement, first, on limiting the potential deployment of ABMs and call a freeze on further deployment of ICBMs. In May 1971, Kissinger and Dobrynin reached what Kissinger called a "conceptual breakthrough" by separating ABM and Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) negotiations. They promised to reach an agreement on an ABM treaty within the next year and make "progress" on SALT.[8]

Nixon announced in May 1971 that he would attend a Moscow summit meeting in May 1972. He and the Soviet Communist Party general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, would sign arms-control agreements worked out between the two sides over the previous year. During the fall and winter of 1971 and 1972, Kissinger used the back channel without the knowledge of the official US arms-negotiating team meeting with their Soviet counterparts in Helsinki. Kissinger told Dobrynin, "the main problem is to get concrete about something."[9] He believed that the fact of an agreement would do more than

8 Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American–Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1992), 146–47.

9 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 525.

anything to persuade the public that the United States had not been paralyzed by Vietnam; the actual details of an agreement were less important.

As Nixon and Kissinger prepared for the late-May summit in Moscow, they agreed to steer clear of discussions of human rights. Kissinger told Nixon, "I don't think it is proper for you to start lecturing them about freedom of speech." Nixon concurred: "oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no."[10] Nixon's insistence that he personally negotiate the final terms of agreements to provide dramatic impact lent a frenzied and improvised tone to the Moscow summit meetings from May 23 to 29, 1972. Kissinger, Nixon, Gromyko, and Brezhnev hammered out the final details of several treaties, agreements, and statements in late-night bargaining sessions in the Kremlin and Brezhnev's country house. Nixon told Kissinger that Congress "will watch every line of the agreement to see if we were placed at a disadvantage," but like the national security adviser, he believed the fact of having reached an agreement was more important than the details of it.[11]

Nixon and Brezhnev signed the Interim Agreement on the Limitation of Strategic Arms (SALT I) at an elaborate late-night ceremony on May 26. This agreement was a framework document in which each side froze the number of missiles it had as of the date of its signing. The United States would be allowed 1,054 ICBMs and 656 SLBMs, and the Soviets would be permitted 1,618 ICBMs and 950 SLBMs. Despite what appeared to be a Soviet advantage in SALT, the United States had no plans to increase the number of missiles in its current arsenal. While the Soviets were permitted to increase the number of their ICBMs to about 50 percent more than Americans had in 1972, the United States had an advantage in multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). This emerging MIRV technology allowed missiles to carry multiple warheads that would be easier to evade an enemy's defenses. SALT I had a term of five years, during which time the two sides agreed to work to develop a full-fledged treaty limiting, and possibly reducing, offensive nuclear arms.

Nixon and Brezhnev also signed an Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. They agreed that each party would construct no more than two ABM sites. One of them would protect the capital and the other would protect a missile base. These provisions allowed for each side to maintain a credible deterrent against a first strike that would permit national governments to continue to function in the event of war.

10 Transcript of telephone conversation between President Nixon and Kissinger, May 17, 1972, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XIV, 922.

11 Memorandum of conversation, May 23, 1972, Kissinger Transcripts (KT) 100494, Digital National Security Archive (hereafter, DNSA), For additional discussion of the arms race and arms control, see William Burr and David Alan Rosenberg's chapter in this volume.

27. US president Richard Nixon (left) and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Nixon's home in San Clemente, California, in June 1973. Nixon saw détente as a key breakthrough in relations with the Soviet Union.

The United States and the Soviet Union reached several other understandings that expanded détente. They signed agreements on reducing pollution and enhancing environmental quality, on cooperation in medicine, science, and technology, and on space exploration. They set up a joint commercial commission that would negotiate a comprehensive trade agreement. They agreed to convene a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), a meeting the Soviets had long advocated as a way of finally acknowledging the international borders established in Europe after World War II. CSCE gained little attention when it was announced, but as it developed it became a major element in eroding public support for US–Soviet détente.

The two leaders issued a twelve-point statement of Basic Principles of Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, a document which broadly defined the ways in which they would treat each other in an era of détente. The Basic Principles committed each power to conduct "normal relations" on the basis of "peaceful coexistence" and the principles of "sovereignty, equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and mutual advantage."[12]

12 Basic Principles of Relations between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, May 29, 1972, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. I, 389.

Kissinger and Nixon thought the Basic Principles had at most a symbolic value. In a press briefing immediately after Nixon and Brezhnev signed the Basic Principles, Kissinger said the document represented "an aspiration and an attitude, and if either the aspiration or the attitude changes, then … either side can change its course."[13] Unfortunately for the future of détente, Kissinger's attitude toward the Basic Principles proved to be far too nonchalant. Domestic opponents of détente soon used the principle of equality to undermine support for several of the agreements Nixon had signed.

Public reaction to détente, 1972–1973

The meetings in Moscow solidified Nixon's public position as a masterful statesman who had grown far beyond his early anti-Communism to usher in a new era of stability and peace and to dampen the tensions of the Cold War. Kissinger told senators that the SALT agreement was "not merely a technical accomplishment … but it must be seen as a political event of some magnitude." He encouraged lawmakers to drop what he considered to be sterile old habits of measuring who was ahead and who was behind in the arms race. "Catastrophe has resulted," he warned "far less often from conscious decisions than from the fear of breaking loose from established patterns." He feared that the "paralysis of policy which destroyed Europe in 1914 would surely destroy the world if we let it happen in the nuclear age."[14]

Despite Kissinger's warnings that the world stood on the brink of annihilation if Congress did not support the Nixon administration's approach to arms control, détente faced serious challenges from domestic critics in the months and years following the summit. Opponents considered sufficiency in nuclear weapons to be a dangerous delusion. Representative John M. Ashbrook (R–Ohio), a conservative who was running against Nixon for the Republican presidential nomination, complained that SALT would "lock the Soviet Union into unchallengeable superiority, and plunge the United States and its allies into a decade of danger."[15]

13 *Ibid*.

14 "Congressional Briefing by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger," June 15, 1972, Frank Church Papers, box 166, folder 14, Boise State University Library, Boise, Idaho.

15 Quoted in Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220.

Senator Henry M. Jackson (D–Washington) led the opposition to arms-control agreements and détente in general for the remainder of Nixon's presidency. He insisted that the United States had accepted an unfavorable deal with SALT, one in which the United States had made commitments to limit its missiles but the Soviets had not made reciprocal ironclad guarantees. He told Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird that "the total number of ICBM missiles [listed in SALT] represents a unilateral position on our part and does not represent a bilateral agreement with the Russians … This kind of ambiguity can breed suspicion and lead to an unstable situation rather than to a more stable one."[16]

Jackson used the equality provisions of the Basic Principles of US–Soviet relations to develop an amendment to the congressional joint resolution endorsing SALT. The amendment stipulated that the United States would sign a future treaty only if it guaranteed that the missile forces of each side be equal. It required that US SALT negotiators maintain "the principle of United States–Soviet equality reflected in the anti-ballistic missile treaty." The amendment stated that the United States would consider any new deployment by the Soviet Union of weapons that could destroy American missiles to be contrary to American interests. In September, the Senate passed the amendment by a vote of fifty-six to thirty-five.[17]

Economic relations, emigration, and the Middle East, 1971–1974

While Jackson's amendment to the congressional resolution in support of SALT indicated that not everyone favored Nixon's approach to the Soviet Union, détente was popular in the United States in 1972. Improved relations between the two superpowers promised a more peaceful and more prosperous world. From 1971 to 1974, the two countries completed more than ten pacts dealing with World War II debts, shipping, taxes, and grain purchases. The most significant of these was the October 1972 bilateral trade agreement under which they opened commercial and trade offices in the other nation's capital and the Soviet Union promised to pay its $772 million World War II Lend Lease debt over the next thirty years. The United States promised to extend most-favored-nation (MFN) status to the Soviet Union. (MFN status, a

16 US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearings on Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missiles and the Interim Agreement on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, June 20–July 8, 1972, 92nd Congress, 2nd session.

17 Public Law 92–448 as amended by Senator Jackson.

position enjoyed by most US trading partners, meant that the United States would grant a most-favored nation the lowest tariffs it extended to any other country.) But the Soviet Union would become a most-favored nation only with congressional approval.

Congress grew increasingly unhappy with Nixon's conduct of commercial relations with the Soviet Union in 1972 and 1973. Word spread that the Soviet Union had purchased one quarter of the American wheat supply, in part by using commercial credits supplied by the United States under its trade agreement. Wheat prices shot up in the United States and critics charged that the Soviets had engineered a "Great Grain Robbery" with the Nixon administration's connivance or negligence.

Unhappiness with the grain deal contributed to anti-détente sentiment. This hostility grew when the issue of Soviet mistreatment of its own citizens roused attention. In October 1972, Senator Jackson gained the support of seventy-two of his colleagues to pass an amendment to the Trade Reform Act that would deny the Soviet Union MFN status unless it permitted free emigration of its citizens. The issue of emigration from the Soviet Union had become embroiled in the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies gave political and military support to the Arab nations after Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Coinciding with this Communist support of the Arab side had been a rise in anti-Semitism throughout the Eastern bloc, which had prompted many Jews within the Soviet Union to seek to emigrate to the United States or Israel. Between 1968 and 1972, the number of Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union had exploded from 400 to 35,000 per year. Then, in August 1972, the Kremlin imposed a steep tax amounting to thousands of dollars on anyone wishing to leave.

In April 1973, Congressman Charles Vanik (D–Ohio) introduced in the Houses of Representatives an amendment to the trade bill similar to the one Jackson had sponsored in the Senate. It passed in December by a wide margin. This Jackson–Vanik amendment went through several revisions until both houses of Congress finally adopted it as part of an omnibus Trade Reform Act in 1974. The Soviet Union reacted angrily. It cut the number of Jewish emigrants from 35,000 in 1973 to 20,000 in 1974. It also canceled the 1972 trade agreement with the United States. The Jackson–Vanik amendment directly challenged the Nixon administration's policy of disregarding the Soviet Union's internal affairs or its restrictions on human rights. The amendment and the large issue of the Middle East played major roles in undermining détente throughout the rest of Nixon's term.

Watergate, the Middle East War, and the end of the Nixon administration, 1973–1974

In May 1973, the Senate began televised hearings on the June 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex. As public interest in Watergate intensified, General Secretary Brezhnev came to the United States for another summit meeting with Nixon from June 16 to June 24, 1973. They met at the White House, Camp David, and at the president's summer house in San Clemente, California. Nixon extended lavish hospitality for his Soviet guest, but the two men's conversations lacked the drama of the Moscow summit of May 1972, and they were overshadowed by the growing Watergate scandal.

At their meetings the leaders discussed nuclear arms, the status of the SALT negotiations, and the Middle East. They made little progress on nuclear arms or SALT. Much to Nixon's and Kissinger's discomfort, Brezhnev raised the issue of the Middle East. The Soviet leader said that his allies in Egypt and Syria found the continued Israeli occupation of the Sinai Peninsula (Egyptian territory) and the Golan Heights (Syrian territory) increasingly galling. He urged the United States to apply pressure on Israel to withdraw. "If we agree on Israeli withdrawals, everything will fall in place," Brezhnev said. He added that he was "categorically opposed to a resumption of the war. But without agreed principles" of what a settlement should look like, Brezhnev said, he could not guarantee that a new war would not erupt.[18]

The two leaders signed an agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War (PNW). The PNW agreement was of indefinite duration and it committed the two countries to conduct themselves in ways "to prevent the development of situations capable of causing a dangerous exacerbation of their relations." They promised to avoid threats against each other and each other's allies. They also agreed that if it appeared as if relations between them or other countries risked a nuclear conflict, they would "immediately enter into urgent consultations with each other and make every effort to avert this risk."[19]

Like the Basic Principles of US–Soviet relations signed at the Moscow summit of 1972, the PNW agreement set forward the aspirations of both sides to work together in an era of détente. Each document held hidden dangers, not fully appreciated by their authors at the time of the signing. As

18 Memorandum of conversation, Nixon, Brezhnev, *et al.*, June 23, 1973, KT00765, DNSA.
19 Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 334.

Raymond L. Garthoff, one of the American arms-control negotiators, noted in *Détente and Confrontation*, "the Basic Principles in 1972 and the PNW agreement of 1973 contributed to the launching and development of détente, but before long they also contributed to its failure."[20]

The United States and the Soviet Union collaborated, but they also approached a confrontation as they backed opposing belligerents during the war between Israel and Egypt and Syria that began on October 6, 1973. The two nuclear superpowers worked together at the United Nations to call for a ceasefire, but it was slow in coming. The Egyptian and Syrian forces made great gains in the first five days of the war, capturing Israeli soldiers and driving scores of kilometers into Israeli-occupied positions. The Soviet Union sent arms to Egypt and Syria as a way of assuring its Arab allies of its support, and also to gain leverage with them to accept a ceasefire.

Israel's government, shocked by the success of the Arab armies, ran low on war *matériel*, and desperately applied to the United States to resupply its losses in planes, tanks, and ammunition. The United States airlifted military equipment on October 12. Once Israel was assured of American arms, it launched a counterattack.

Brezhnev then proposed to Nixon that the two sides jointly sponsor a ceasefire. Nixon sent Kissinger, who in September had become secretary of state in addition to continuing as national security adviser, to Moscow to work out the details. By the time Kissinger began meetings in the Kremlin on October 20, Israel's armed forces were threatening to advance on the Egyptian and Syrian capital cities. Kissinger's visit coincided with a climactic moment in the Watergate scandal. Nixon refused to turn over tapes of conversations he had had with aides discussing the break-in and the cover-up. He fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. This "Saturday Night massacre" provoked an outraged public to demand Nixon's impeachment.

Kissinger, Gromyko, and Brezhnev developed a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire and negotiations for a peaceful solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Israel delayed implementing the ceasefire until its forces had pressed their advantage against the Egyptian army. Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, asked the Soviet Union and the United States jointly to send troops to enforce the ceasefire. The Soviets stepped up their airlift of supplies, and the United States responded by putting its Mediterranean forces on the highest level of alert. Kissinger eventually persuaded Israel to agree to a ceasefire on October 27.

20 *Ibid*., 338.

Over the next several months, Kissinger traveled between the capitals of Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria to arrange an Israeli withdrawal from the territory it had captured at the end of the war. He convinced Israel to withdraw from the east bank of the Suez Canal, enabling Egypt to reopen that waterway, and from some Syrian territory on the Golan Heights.

Soviet–American cooperation during the October War demonstrated the ways détente operated. Both sides recognized that their need to avoid a confrontation that could lead to a catastrophic nuclear war took precedence over their commitments to their allies. Insofar as the two nuclear superpowers had followed through on their commitments to consult in the Basic Principles and PNW agreements, détente had worked. On the other hand, each side had threatened the other and had armed its allies. Supporters of Israel were especially distressed by the way in which the United States had cooperated with the Soviet Union to deny Israel the opportunity to rout the Egyptian and Syrian armed forces. As Garthoff observes, "many politically significant supporters of Israeli interests thus became disenchanted with the policy of détente."[21]

Congressional opponents of détente stepped up their campaign against Nixon's and Kissinger's efforts to cooperate with the Soviet Union in the winter and spring of 1973 and 1974. Kissinger told his staff on March 18, 1974, that "the Soviets are getting nothing out of détente and what can I deliver in Moscow?" The Jackson–Vanik amendment to the trade bill had proven to be a far greater irritant to the development of détente than Kissinger had expected. Kissinger lamented that "Jackson has obviously been convinced that I am a hostile country." Kissinger derided Jackson as one of "these bastards on [Capitol] Hill who ignore the fact that 400 Jews were leaving the Soviet Union in 1969 and now say that 30,000 a year is inconsequential." Since the trade relationship with the Soviet Union now "is no good, SALT can't go down the drain," because if that happened détente would end.[22]

Kissinger traveled to Moscow in March 1974 to try to make progress on SALT before Nixon's June visit to the Soviet Union. The Soviets rejected his proposal that they allow equality in warheads by granting the Americans superiority in MIRVs. He also did not get Soviet agreement to a proposal for "offsetting symmetries," in which the Soviet Union would have the advantage in ICBMs and the United States would have more MIRVs.

21 *Ibid*., 406. For further discussion of US and Soviet policies in the Middle East, see Douglas Littles's chapter in this volume.

22 Secretary Kissinger's staff meeting, March 18, 1974, KT01072. DNSA.

When Nixon visited the Soviet Union in late June, the days of his presidency were numbered as the Watergate scandal reached a crescendo. Nixon told Brezhnev not to worry about the Jackson–Vanik amendment. "On MFN," Nixon said, "we will get it." Brezhnev called his statement "a good sign."[23] But SALT II was garnering serious criticism in the United States. Before Nixon left for Moscow, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger endorsed Senator Jackson's position on equality of weapons systems in SALT, thereby publicly undercutting Nixon's and Kissinger's policy of sufficiency. Paul Nitze, a veteran foreign-policy adviser who deeply distrusted the Soviet Union's military intentions, resigned from the US SALT negotiating team. He said that "the traumatic events now unfolding" in the Watergate scandal might encourage Nixon to agree to a disadvantageous SALT treaty with the Soviets just to obtain favorable publicity.[24]

Nixon and Brezhnev made no progress on the details of offensive weapons systems. They amended the ABM Treaty, reducing the number of sites each side could have from two to one. They also signed agreements on commercial, technological, energy, housing, and medical research cooperation, but these accords generated little of the earlier excitement over improving US–Soviet relations. The public was not impressed with their work. Commentators considered the trip to be part of a clumsy effort by Nixon to revive his fading fortunes as a foreign-policy leader. On August 9, 1974, five weeks after Nixon returned from the Soviet Union, he was forced to resign the presidency rather than be convicted in the Senate on three articles of impeachment likely to be approved by the House of Representatives.

The Ford administration and the decline of détente, 1974–1976

Détente did not die with the end of Nixon's presidency, but it was encountering stiffer opposition. Vice President Gerald Ford succeeded Nixon and vowed to continue the foreign policies lain down by Nixon and Kissinger. Kissinger remained secretary of state and national security adviser.

In the first few months of Ford's presidency, he pressed forward with US–Soviet negotiations on strategic arms. The new president met Brezhnev at the Siberian city of Vladivostok in late November and early December 1974, and the two men promised to sign a SALT II agreement within a year. This treaty

23 Memorandum of conversation, Nixon, Brezhnev, Kissinger, Gromyko, *et al.*, June 28, 1974, KT01232, DNSA.

24 Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 411.

would limit each side's nuclear delivery vehicles (ICBM's, SLBMs, and long-range bombers) to 2,200. Ford told Brezhnev that a signed SALT II agreement before the 1976 election would strengthen détente and prevent "people such as Senator Jackson" from undercutting favorable trends in US–Soviet relations.[25]

But support for détente, diminishing in 1974, declined even more over the remainder of Ford's term. A series of events at home and abroad undermined Ford's public standing and seriously shook the confidence of administration officials. Opposition Democrats, already in the majority in both houses of Congress, made large gains in the congressional elections of November 1974. In 1975, the Ford administration was preoccupied with the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. In March, the armed forces of North Vietnam intensified an offensive against the South, and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam retreated in disarray from positions it held in the northern part of the country. In late April, North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front troops surrounded Saigon, forcing the last Americans to leave. On April 30, the Communist forces captured the presidential palace in Saigon and declared victory in the war. The mood in Washington was grim in the wake of the revolutionaries' triumph in Vietnam. Philip Habib, one of Kissinger's top deputies, said in May 1975 that long-time allies who had prospered under US military alliances and support "are all concerned that the U.S. shield does not provide them the protection they think is necessary for their own development."[26]

For the remainder of 1975, the Ford administration became more confrontational toward the Soviet Union and its allies. In July, Kissinger insisted that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provide additional financial and military aid to the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), one of three armed factions trying to supplant the Portuguese authorities in that West African country. Kissinger advocated intervention in the Angolan civil war as a counter to the Soviet Union which supported the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a rival faction. Kissinger believed that the Soviets supported the MPLA because they felt emboldened by the American defeat in Vietnam. US intervention in Angola generated public fear of involvement in another distant war, similar to Vietnam, and in December, Congress blocked additional CIA funding for the FNLA.

In the summer of 1975, Ford was criticized when he continued Nixon's policy and did not ridicule the Soviets' record on human rights. Ford declined to meet with expelled Soviet dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The

25 Quoted in Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, 371.
26 Secretary Kissinger's staff meeting, May 7, 1975, KT101611, DNSA.

novelist was widely admired in the United States for his vigorous condemnations of the Kremlin's history of repression. Domestic foes of détente accused Ford of hurting the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn then further eroded American support for détente when he denounced the upcoming CSCE meeting in Helsinki as a "betrayal of Eastern Europe."[27]

The Helsinki ceremony of August 2, 1975, at which representatives from thirty-five states in Europe and North America signed the Final Act of the CSCE, reflected the culmination of years of negotiations. The Soviets had originally proposed a meeting to resolve all disputes in Europe in the mid-1950s, and they agreed to US participation in the talks in the early 1970s. At the insistence of several Western European and neutral countries, the scope of the discussions expanded from traditional security concerns over borders and the use of force (what came to be known as Basket I of the Helsinki Final Act) to include trade and scientific cooperation (Basket II), and humanitarian and other fields (Basket III).

American foes of the Helsinki agreements did not like the Final Act's recognition of prevailing territorial borders in Europe. Many Americans of Eastern European ancestry were fiercely anti-Communist and opposed to Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. They complained that the acknowledgment of current borders validated the 1940 Soviet occupation and annexation of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. These criticisms of the Helsinki Final Act made Ford's trip to the conference unpopular, and he sought to recover by adopting a more confrontational stance toward the Soviet Union. When he spoke to the delegates there, he reversed Nixon's practice of refraining from criticizing Soviet domestic policies. He looked directly at Brezhnev during his speech and insisted that the Soviets "realize the deep devotion of the American people and their government to human rights and fundamental freedoms."[28]

Still, Ford's statements at Helsinki did not calm critics of CSCE. To Helsinki's opponents, it seemed that the Final Act condemned the Eastern European and Baltic states to permanent domination by the Soviet Union. Senator Jackson predicted that the human rights provisions of Helsinki were "so imprecise and so hedged" that they would never be implemented. Former California governor Ronald Reagan, who was preparing to challenge Ford

27 Quoted in Anne Hessing Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 32.

28 Quoted in Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 153.

for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, asserted that "all Americans should be against" the Helsinki Final Act.[29]

The attacks on détente and on Kissinger as the architect of US foreign policy continued after Helsinki. Some of them came from within the administration. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger sided with members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who argued that the arms-control agreements of recent years had left the United States in a militarily inferior position to that of the Soviet Union. In early November, Ford replaced Schlesinger as secretary of defense with White House chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld. To assuage the concerns of Kissinger's opponents, Ford replaced him as national security adviser. Kissinger remained secretary of state, but his authority was clearly diminished. Reagan continued to assail détente as a "one way street" and complained that "Henry Kissinger's recent stewardship has coincided with the loss of U.S. military supremacy."[30] In February 1976, Ford explained that officials in his administration would no longer use the word "détente" to characterize US–Soviet relations.

Brezhnev did not visit the United States after the Vladivostok meeting of November 1974. Nor did the United States and the Soviet Union sign the SALT II Treaty by 1976, as they had promised at Vladivostok. Presidential politics interfered with further progress toward détente. The way in which Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger conducted détente became a contentious issue during the presidential election campaign of 1976. Jimmy Carter, the Democratic Party's candidate, assailed the three leaders for acquiescing to the Soviet Union's mistreatment of its own citizens. Carter condemned Ford for declining to meet with Solzhenitsyn in the summer of 1975. Carter said that the Soviets had known what they wanted to achieve from détente, but "we have not known what we've wanted and we've been out-traded in almost every instance."[31] Ford blundered in a televised debate with Carter when the president, attempting to defend the Helsinki Final Act, denied that the Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe. The Democratic challenger retorted that he would like to see the president convince Hungarian-, Czech-, or Polish-Americans that their former homelands did not live under Soviet control. Carter defeated Ford in November 1976, and he owed his election in part to the public's sense that détente gave unfair military advantages to

29 Quoted in Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, 436, 437.

30 Statement by Ronald Reagan at Orlando, Florida, March 4, 1976. box 26, Ronald Reagan folder, Robert Hartman Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

31 Second Carter–Ford Presidential Debate, October 6, 1976, The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.uscb.edu.

the Soviet Union while betraying traditional American commitments to expand human rights abroad.

Assessments of détente

When Richard Nixon left office in August 1974, newspaper commentators were scathing in their denunciations of his domestic abuses of power. They also, however, gave him high marks for reducing the danger of nuclear war and making the world safer. An August 12, 1974, editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor*, a paper highly critical of Nixon's abuse of power, noted that "Nixon risked alienating many of his long-time Cold War supporters by opening America's door to the Communist world."[32] But détente had lost much of its domestic popularity by the time Gerald Ford traveled to Helsinki to sign the Final Act of the CSCE. By then, the public mood in the United States had turned sour and a significant number of Americans believed that the Soviet Union was in the stronger position in the Cold War.

Paradoxically, the Helsinki process undermined Soviet power. Helsinki transformed the discussion of behavior throughout Western and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union over the next decade. After Helsinki, the protection and advancement of human rights within countries became generally accepted international standards. The political scientist Daniel C. Thomas expressed a widely accepted point of view when he observed in 2001 that this emphasis on human rights "contributed significantly to the demise of Communist rule in 1989–1990."[33]

Yet the end of Soviet-style Communism was not visible on the horizon in the decade after Nixon left office. Nixon's and Kissinger's foreign policy gradually lost popularity in the late 1970s and 1980s. Some of the criticism involved complaints about their deceptive and manipulative style. Garthoff's *Détente and Confrontation* praised Nixon and Kissinger for initiating détente, but Garthoff argued that they undermined support for it by their secretive style and by their belittling the advice of foreign affairs experts.

Later observers, who benefited from the abundance of original documentation on the Nixon and Ford presidencies that became available in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, noted that these men conducted foreign affairs in order to maintain what the historian Jeremi Suri

32 *Christian Science Monitor*, August 12, 1974, editorial page.

33 Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 272.

characterized as "a conservative world order." This arrangement "addressed the fears and served the interests of the largest states."[34] While Nixon and Kissinger spoke often about the changing circumstances of the Cold War in which the United States no longer had unrivaled military superiority over the Soviet Union, they expected to manage a prolonged, even indefinite rivalry with the Kremlin. Jussi Hanhimäki, one of Kissinger's biographers, concluded that the policy of détente with the Soviet Union was essentially backward looking and lacked "understanding of the underlying forces that were shaping the direction of international relations in the 1970s."[35] Popular movements for political freedom and economic prosperity were surfacing in the Communist world and they would culminate in the unexpected collapse of Soviet rule and the end of the Cold War a decade later. Other subsequent observers have been even more critical. The historian Jeffrey Kimball concluded that "the Nixinger grand design was not well conceived in the beginning, was not fully realized in the end, and was as much, if not more, a product of reaction, improvisation, bureaucratic infighting, and political and economic realities, as it was proactive, farsighted planning and wise coolheaded statesmanship."[36]

Negative assessments such as these raise serious questions about the quality of Nixon's and Kissinger's statesmanship. They also are retrospective judgments made in the post-Cold War era through the prism of the end of Soviet-style Communism. The end of the Cold War has led other historians to more favorable judgments of détente. John Lewis Gaddis argued in 2005 that "détente did not free the world from crises, but the new spirit of cooperation, did seem to limit their frequency and severity."[37] The leaders of both the United States and the Soviet Union committed themselves to manage their nations' relations responsibly. They recognized that each was a legitimate state. Henceforth, they would compete for influence throughout the world, but they would limit their rivalry and reduce the danger of nuclear war between them. They would expand trade, cultural, and scientific relations in order to modulate the acrimony in their day-to-day relations. Robert Dallek in his 2007 joint biography of Kissinger and Nixon harshly criticized the two for their secretiveness and

34 Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 258.
35 Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, 490.
36 Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 370.
37 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 198.

manipulations of others. He also characterized détente as one of the central elements of US policy toward the Soviet Union. Dallek observed that "détente did not end the Cold War, but in conjunction with containment and deterrence … it set a process in motion that came to fruition under Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of the 1980s."[38]

38 Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 618.