

Was Détente a Success?

Introduction

During the 1970s the Cold War apparently gave way to a new era in international relations. Détente, or relaxation of tensions, began to characterise both east–west relations in general and Soviet–US relations in particular. As east–west trade increased, Communist China was finally recognised by the USA, and the Soviets and the USA signed their first nuclear arms control treaties. It seemed hot war was increasingly unlikely. The character of international relations appeared to have undergone a fundamental change; some even argued that the Cold War had come to an end. Yet by the late 1970s it was evident that a new period of confrontation was under way, which signified more of an adaption of the Cold War system. You should assess why such a zigzag movement took place within one decade, and what were the prime motivators – economic, political and ideological – behind the move to and from détente.

This chapter is essentially divided into three sections. The first deals with the launching of détente during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The second outlines the height of détente to approximately 1975. The last part discusses the reasons why détente failed to take root and was, by the late 1970s, giving way to a new Cold War.

The European origins of détente, 1969–71

Ostpolitik, the term used to describe the attempts by West German chancellor Willy Brandt to improve relations with East Germany and forge closer links between the eastern and western blocs, was a significant factor in the subsequent promotion of détente by the superpowers. European leaders were all aware that conflict between the west and the Soviet Union could result in the destruction of European civilisation. At the same time replacing conflict with greater contacts through cooperation in trade and diplomacy, for example, could be an effective way of reducing the closed totalitarian system operating from Moscow. Suspicion and ignorance could be reduced and the repressive communist system undermined peacefully.

The French leader Charles de Gaulle hoped that the influence of the two superpowers would decline as Europe, led by France, emerged as a more influential force. Brandt looked more to resolve a number of unsettled issues concerning Germany that had not been agreed after the war. The Harmel report, in late 1967, on NATO's future role sought to produce 'peace and stability' in Europe by using NATO in the interest of détente. When Brandt became West German chancellor in 1969 he immediately signed the non-proliferation treaty and followed it up with the Moscow treaty with the Soviets the following year. This contributed, in effect, to the recognition of Germany's division and the post-war status of Berlin between 1970 and 1972.

Détente and Cold War in the changing international system

The era of détente was in large part a reflection of the structural changes that had taken place in international relations since the 1950s. Among the major issues were the Sino–Soviet split, the USA's failure in Vietnam, the decline in US relative economic strength and the costly arms race between the Soviets and the USA which had, by the late 1960s, resulted in a situation of virtual parity between the USA and the USSR. In the climate of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and

evident multipolarisation, pressures to reduce tensions between the east and the west in general, and the USA and the USSR in particular, increased. The new US president Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger thus launched a policy of détente. The aim was to improve Soviet–US relations and reduce the risk of hot war while preserving America’s advantages in power and influence within the international system. An important step in reducing tensions was taken in 1969 when the two countries commenced the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). While Nixon and Kissinger did not expect to end the Cold War, they hoped that by minimising Soviet–US tension they could curb the USSR’s interest in aiding radical revolutions in the less developed world. As a bonus, they hoped that the Soviets would help bring about an end to the Vietnam War.

Important Dates

1967	December	Harmel Report presented to NATO
1969	January	Nixon begins his presidency
	March	Sino-Soviet border clashes, continue until August
	July	Nixon Doctrine
	November	SALT talks begin
1970	March	Four Power talks on Berlin begin
	April	US troops invade Cambodia
	August	Soviet-West German Treaty
	December	West German-Polish Treaty
1971	April	‘Ping-pong Diplomacy’
	May	Honecker replaces Ulbricht in East Germany
	June	End of US trade embargo against China (since 1950)
	July	Kissinger’s secret visit to China
	September	Four Power agreement on Berlin signed

Détente 1972–75: US and Soviet aims and expectations

For the Americans, faced with the expense of the Vietnam War, détente was in part an attempt to deal with the rising economic challenge of the Europeans and the Japanese in the context of the Cold War. It was an essentially conservative policy designed to preserve the status quo, based on US dominance, by dealing with the new multipolar world in Europe and Asia which was symbolised by the opening to China. The main aim of the USA was to ensure that the Soviet Union did not challenge the status quo in ideological terms or make further gains in influence through its growing military and hard power. That meant that Soviet influence in important regions like the Middle East should not be allowed to increase.

In 1972 the Nixon–Kissinger détente appeared a huge success. First, Kissinger had visited China in 1971 and opened up a relationship that had been closed since 1949. Second, Nixon had met Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders in 1972 in Moscow and signed the SALT I treaty – the first agreement that put limits on nuclear arms. By early 1973 the Vietnam War had ended, albeit without significant Soviet involvement. Thus, when Nixon began his second term, relaxation of tensions appeared to be the central theme in international relations. However, Nixon himself was soon undone by the Watergate scandal and the SALT process stalled. Despite the Conference on

Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975, détente lost its support in the USA and was undermined by continued Soviet–US confrontation in places like Angola and the Horn of Africa.

The Soviets hoped to secure access to the technological knowledge gained by the west, but above all to gain recognition as an equal power to the USA in the international system. This gain in status would be enhanced by the reduction of the risk of hot war, while continued ideological gains through left-wing revolutions in the developing world continued to be supported.

Important Dates

1972	February	Sino-US meeting in Beijing
	May	Soviet-US summit in Moscow. SALT1
	June	Four Power agreement on Berlin
	July	3-year US-Soviet grain deal reached
	September	US-Soviet-British-French agreement on future of Berlin
	November	Nixon re-elected
	December	West and East Germany sign Basic Treaty on relations between East and West Germany
1973	January	Paris Peace Accords end Vietnam War
	April	Watergate crisis intensifies
	May	Brezhnev visits West Germany
	June	Brezhnev-Nixon summit in the USA
	October	MBFR talks begin in Vienna. Arab-Israeli War begins. Arab oil embargo.
1974	May	Willy Brandt resigns as West German chancellor. India joins nuclear powers.
	June-July	Nixon-Brezhnev summit in Moscow
	August	Nixon resigns. Gerald Ford becomes president
	November	Vladivostok summit (Brezhnev-Ford)
1975	January	Ford signs the Trade Reform Act. US-Soviet 1972 trade agreement cancelled
	April	South Vietnam surrenders to the communist North
	July	Joint US-Soviet space mission
	July-August	Helsinki Accords signed

The collapse of détente, 1976–79

During the late 1970s Soviet–US détente quickly evaporated. In part this was the result of domestic opposition in the USA, where the Nixon– Kissinger–Ford foreign policy was attacked from the left and the right during the 1976 presidential election. During the Carter administration relations with the Soviets worsened. Although the SALT II negotiations were brought to a conclusion in 1979 they were never ratified. As the USA began to try and restore its lost credibility in the less developed world after the humiliation of Vietnam, it eventually ran into greater confrontation with the Soviets. Much of this seemed to take place, however, in the propaganda field and US–Soviet trade reached new heights in the late 1970s. Unfortunately, ideological rivalry, in the Horn of Africa and Angola in particular, continued as socialist revolutions were becoming internationally more significant. By the end of the decade the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan, a move which, along with the unfolding of the Iranian revolution, was challenging the stability of the

oil-rich Middle East. Explaining whether détente thus collapsed due to differing general expectations of the outcomes of détente or specific regional requirements and differences in Soviet–US approaches to particular problems is key to understanding why tensions grew anew in the late 1970s. The changing international system was also crucial in its production of more revolutionary movements presenting ideological challenges to US interests.

Important Dates

1976	January	SALT II talks in Moscow fail
	March	President Ford stops the public use of the term ‘détente’
	September	Mao dies
	November	Jimmy Carter wins US presidential race
1977	May	NATO agrees defense spending increases
	July	Fighting breaks out between Ethiopia and Somalia
	September	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) follow-up meeting in Belgrade begins
	November	Somalia ends 1974 friendship with USSR
	December	Cambodia breaks diplomatic relations with Vietnam
1978	April	SALT II talks re-launched; Marxist regime takes over in Afghanistan
	May	Sino-Soviet border clashes
	September	Camp David Summit
	December	Vietnamese forces invade Cambodia
1979	January-February	Deng Xiaoping visits the USA
	February	China invades Vietnam
	June	SALT II signed in Vienna (not ratified)
	November	Hostage crisis begins in Iran
	December	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan