

SUPERPOWER DÉTENTE: US-SOVIET RELATIONS, 1969–1972

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In the years 1969–72, the United States and the Soviet Union sought stability rather than détente. Détente was a by-product of the temporary stabilization that resulted. It rested, however, on precarious foundations. Rather than evolving from an effort to sort out the political issues that underlay the Cold War, the superpower détente stemmed from an ill-defined perception of parity in strategic nuclear armaments, the possession of which was increasingly difficult to relate to political purposes.

The conduct of policy by the superpowers was highly centralized and personalized—more effectively on the American side than on the Soviet side. Masterminding U.S. foreign policy with a lack of constraints unprecedented in the American political system, Henry Kissinger began in 1969 to implement a well-defined vision of the world that, inspired by conservative European notions of power politics, aimed at accommodating the Soviet Union in an international order that derived its legitimacy from the superpowers' stake in its stability. He was skeptical about the Soviet system's susceptibility to change.

In contrast to Kissinger, Leonid Brezhnev started out largely by improvising. He never achieved the extent of autocratic power that had been the hallmark of the Soviet system under his predecessors, nor did he possess the ability to conceptualize policy in anything other than crude Marxist terms. Despite these differences between the protagonists, both the United States and the Soviet Union shared a position of relative weakness—the former on account of its debilitating involvement in the Vietnam War, the latter on account of its failure to “normalize” the Czechoslovak situation while Soviet-Chinese relations deteriorated to the brink of war.

Whereas the course of U.S. policy that culminated in the landmark Nixon-Brezhnev summit of 1972 has been extensively elucidated using newly declassified documents, contemporaneous Soviet policy remains the least researched aspect of Cold War foreign policy-making. The paucity of top-level documents from Russian archives can in part be compensated for by newly accessible records from the archives of Moscow's former Eastern European allies. These records are all the more illuminating because the Soviet Union by that time felt more compelled than it had previously to treat its allies as junior partners rather than mere subordinates, and consequently Moscow coordinated its policies with them in

ways it had not been accustomed to before. This change in Soviet practice followed the long-delayed reorganization of the Warsaw Pact at the Budapest meeting of the alliance's Political Consultative Committee in March 1969—a response to NATO's recent success in overcoming its own internal crisis by accommodating the dual goals of defense and détente. The importance of the meeting was enhanced by its coincidence with the military turn of the Sino-Soviet conflict during clashes along the disputed border on the Ussuri River.

Having followed its traditional impulse of trying to drive wedges between Washington and its NATO allies without achieving the desired result, Moscow signaled its interest in improved U.S.-Soviet relations to the incoming Nixon administration. The renewed appeal by the Budapest meeting for a conference on security and cooperation in Europe (CSCE)—for the first time without preconditions—was similarly indicative of a Soviet desire to shore up relations with the West while conditions in the East remained unsettled. The change did not yet amount to a coherent policy, and above all it left open the crucial question of U.S. participation in the proposed conference and therefore elicited an understandably cool Western reaction.

It was not the superpowers but their respective allies, together with some of Europe's neutrals, who spearheaded the move toward détente. The smaller states had more interest in détente than the superpowers, who viewed it with suspicion. The offer by the Finnish government in April 1969 to host the security conference may have been commissioned by Moscow; Finnish President Urho Kekkonen, after all, maintained intimate contacts with the Soviet secret services. But it was more likely an independent initiative calculated to appeal to both the East and the West while enhancing the status of Finland and other neutrals as intermediaries. The initiative found the Soviet Union ill-prepared. It scrambled to rally its allies behind a coherent proposal for the conference, especially after several Western European countries, including France, indicated their support for the idea.

Cautioning the Warsaw Pact allies that “we do not want to call the conference to review the postwar order in Europe,” the Soviet Union had to contend with a proposal already prepared by Poland.¹ The proposal, the details of which have only recently emerged from Polish archives, aimed at a conference that would lead to the creation of a system of collective security superseding the existing military blocs. It entailed compulsory consultation in case of crises, thus limiting the capacity of the superpowers to act arbitrarily, and envisaged regional disarmament, which would call into question the presence in Europe of not only American but also Soviet troops and missiles.²

Disputes erupted behind the closed doors of Warsaw Pact meetings. The East Germans tried to steer the CSCE in trying to attain their cherished goal of having their country recognized internationally as a legitimate entity. The Romanians welcomed the project for the safeguards it might provide against Moscow's interference in their own affairs. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Semenov found himself in the unusual position of having to resist what he called "extreme Polish, Romanian, and East German demands."³ He prevailed upon the Poles to hold up the publication of their proposal, but they still continued to promote it within the councils of the alliance.

The Nixon White House had no more sympathy for the potentially destabilizing agenda of the Western European advocates of détente than it did for the national aspirations of East Europeans. With its priorities skewed by its quixotic quest for Soviet help to end the Vietnam War, the administration sought to reassure the Kremlin that it would respect the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe while seeking a deal on nuclear armaments. Such a deal was not, however, a matter of great urgency for Moscow, which only agreed to start the SALT (strategic arms limitations talks) negotiations after its own hints about a pre-emptive strike against Chinese nuclear installations had prompted a U.S. alert in October 1969 that was calculated to intimidate the Soviet Union and subsequently led to the resumption of Sino-American diplomatic contacts.⁴

By the time the SALT talks started in November, however, the Sino-Soviet military confrontation had subsided and the disruptive effects of the Czechoslovak crisis on Eastern Europe had been largely contained. Moscow had little incentive to proceed quickly with the negotiations. Nor did the United States, which made progress in the negotiations dependent on a favorable "prevailing political context" that included such extraneous issues as the Middle East situation and the Paris negotiations on Vietnam.⁵ By the year's end, the results of the fledgling détente were decidedly meager.

Both Kissinger and the Soviet ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, would later assess 1970 as a wasted year—the former blaming the lack of a coherent Soviet policy, the latter the defensiveness of the Nixon administration.⁶ They were both right. For the United States, the Vietnam War was going from bad to worse, without an end in sight. In Moscow, the leadership remained divided in its assessment of the risks involved in any prospective accommodation with Washington. The most important East-West developments during that year took place outside of the superpower framework: West Germany's new Ostpolitik and the cooptation of the CSCE project by the West Europeans with support from the State Department rather than from Kissinger or Nixon.

The Soviet Union devoted more attention to West Germany than to SALT. In December 1969, Brezhnev convened the Eastern European party chiefs for consultation.⁷ He wanted to know how they assessed the change of government in Bonn before he would proceed towards signing with it the August 1970 treaty that recognized West Germany as an international partner rather than an outlaw state. The Soviet Union discouraged East Germany's quest for full international recognition lest this create difficulties for the West German government of Chancellor Willy Brandt. Presumably well-informed about Brandt's thinking through Günter Guillaume, the East German spy planted in his office, Moscow was likely reassured about Brandt's intentions and regarded him as an asset. In the Kremlin's judgment, Soviet-West German rapprochement tilted the international "correlation of forces" decisively in Soviet favor.

As much as Moscow wanted to have the CSCE, it vacillated in pursuing the project. It first advanced but then abandoned its proposal for the creation of a permanent international body that could become the arbiter of security in Europe. It finally settled for seeking no more than recognition of the status quo that had emerged from World War II, the renunciation of force or the threat of force, and the removal of barriers to East-West trade. In the meantime, the Western nations had by late 1970 united in insisting upon a large and specific conference agenda, including the protection of human rights, freedom of movement, and other items that could potentially subvert Soviet totalitarianism and that would later to be known as "Basket Three."

It is still difficult to determine on the basis of reliable evidence the precise nature of the Kremlin disagreements that inhibited movement toward détente. Resistance to arms control can be plausibly attributed to the Soviet military—traditionally the most conservative part of the Soviet establishment. The Warsaw Pact records are replete with warnings by Soviet generals that the appearance of détente did not reduce the reality of the Western military threat—a threat to be countered by increased combat readiness, shortened alert times, and the formation of new assault troops capable of striking deep behind the enemy lines. "In 1971," in the opinion of Soviet defense minister Marshal Grechko, "the international situation deteriorated . . . and has hardly been more serious, tense, and turbulent than it is now."⁸

By the time of the 24th Party Congress (March 1971), Brezhnev concluded that the correlation of forces had become sufficiently favorable to justify troop and armaments reduction. As Gromyko famously put it, "Today, there is no question of any importance which can be decided without the Soviet Union or in opposition to it."⁹ Brezhnev began to call for "military détente"—a vague notion conveying a desire to reduce the dependence of policy on changes in military postures. At a meeting with

Brandt in September, Brezhnev followed up with a call for a reduction of conventional forces, but he did not act to put it into effect. Nor was the United States ready: Kissinger merely feigned interest in their reduction to fend off Senator Mike Mansfield's proposal for unilateral cuts.

It was the Sino-American rapprochement in July 1971 that served as the catalyst for accommodation between Washington and Moscow. Neither side, however, took full advantage of the opportunity. As early as May, with preparations for his secret Beijing trip sufficiently advanced, Kissinger had agreed with Dobrynin to substitute the more attainable ABM treaty for a more difficult agreement on strategic arms limitations. The shift had the effect of postponing substantive reductions of the nuclear stockpiles in favor of enhancing hypothetical deterrence against nuclear attack that neither superpower wished to contemplate in the first place. In arriving at the dubious agreement through their "back channel," the two "generalists" systematically bypassed the experts in their respective SALT delegations.¹⁰

When Dobrynin proposed to Nixon in June to discuss comprehensive arms reductions with the other nuclear powers—Great Britain, France, and China—the president expressed his preference for "a little talk" between the back-channel operators. In the president's view, what really mattered was "what the two major nuclear powers will do" to put "our whole postwar relations . . . on a new basis."¹¹ Accordingly, both superpowers welcomed the conclusion in September of the Quadripartite Treaty on Berlin as a stabilizing measure. Kissinger later commented with satisfaction that the treaty had harnessed "the beast of détente, making both a European Security Conference and ratification of Brandt's Eastern treaties dependent upon a Berlin agreement that met our objectives."¹²

In preparation for the May 1972 U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow, Brezhnev tried to justify accommodation with the archenemy. In an important speech to the closed session of the Warsaw Pact's Political Consultative Committee in January, he enumerated all the favorable developments that had supposedly tilted the correlation of forces in Soviet favor; however, he conspicuously omitted mentioning the possibility that the new situation might allow the Soviet military machine to be scaled back. He explained that "military détente" meant preventing both Western military superiority and a continuation of the nuclear arms race, but he announced that a reduction of conventional forces would be premature. Lamenting that "unfortunately the situation is such that we cannot yet do it," he hinted cryptically that the Central Committee was nevertheless studying the subject.¹³ In the end, all that is known to have happened as a result was merely the cancellation in 1973 of military exercises enacting an offensive thrust into Western Europe. Military expenditures continued to increase.¹⁴

The flaws of the excessively personalized détente diplomacy became evident in April 1972 during Kissinger's preparatory talks in Moscow for the summit. He arrived with the assignment to elicit, through a "tough opening position," Soviet support for ending the Vietnam War before agreeing to discuss anything else. At a moment's notice, however, he changed his script by letting Brezhnev know that the United States merely wanted a "decent interval" in leaving Vietnam to its fate, not excluding its takeover by the communists.¹⁵ Having been given the signal that Washington was interested in pretense rather than substance, the Soviet leader responded in kind.

The next day, Brezhnev asked Kissinger to prepare for signing at the summit a document misleadingly described as a "Statement of Principles of Cooperation." He supplied a text vague enough to be interpreted to Soviet advantage whenever necessary. Without consulting anyone, Kissinger then took upon himself the task of editing the draft so that it could be interpreted to American advantage as well.¹⁶ The final version neither explicitly ruled out Soviet support for Third World "liberation movements" nor questioned the "Brezhnev Doctrine" that asserted Soviet right to intervene at will in Eastern Europe. The ability of both sides to read into the purported "principles" what they wanted made it possible later for each to accuse the other—correctly, if hypocritically—of having acted in bad faith.

The arms control agreements concluded at the summit substituted appearance for substance. The "interim" SALT agreement, valid for five years, did not reverse the arms race, and the ABM treaty perpetuated the illusion of security by deterring the nuclear attacks that neither side intended to launch. Brezhnev nevertheless acted as if he genuinely believed that America's acquiescence to Soviet global ascendancy was both historically inevitable and irreversible. And Kissinger, too, convinced of the strength of his "intuition on where the main historical currents were," judged the summit as a success in his quest for accommodation to what he regarded as the Soviet Union's inevitable rise as a superpower.¹⁷

Both readings of history were wrong. It was not the attempted stabilization of the untenable superpower dominance but, on the contrary, destabilization of the status quo that pointed the way to the eventual dénouement of the Cold War. The true harbingers of the future were not the self-styled realists of the back channels but the open Helsinki process, which had the potential to compel internal changes that would eventually undermine the Soviet system. In addition, the advances in Western conventional, rather than nuclear, weaponry would in time impress upon the Kremlin the system's inability to keep up in technological competition with the West. In a longer perspective, the superpower détente appears as an awkward episode, singularly lacking in grandeur.

Notes

¹ Statement by Leonid Ilichev, minutes of Berlin meeting of deputy ministers of foreign affairs, May 20–21, 1969. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PolAA), Ministerium für auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR (MfAA), G-A 555, 9–140, at 34.

² Summary of project, October 16, 1969, KC PZPR, XIA/106, 24–27, Modern Records Archives, Warsaw.

³ Memorandum by Erdélyi on conversation with Semenov, October 18, 1969, MOL-M-KS-288, 501.ö.e., Hungarian National Archives, Budapest.

⁴ William Burr, Sino-American Relations, 1969: The Sino-Soviet Border War and Steps Towards *Rapprochement*,” *Cold War History* 1, no. 3 (2001): 73–112, at 86–99.

⁵ Nixon to Secretaries of State and Defense, February 4, 1969, cited in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 527; Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York, 1995), 206.

⁷ Report by Ceausescu on the December 2–4, 1969 summit meeting, minutes of Romanian politburo meeting, 5 December 1969, CC PCR, Chancellery, 145/1969, Romanian National Archives, Bucharest.

⁸ Statement by Grechko at the Budapest meeting of the Committee of the Ministers of Defense, March 2–3, 1971. Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg/Br. (BA-MA), AZN 23857, 113.

⁹ Cited in Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, 1994), 66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–82.

¹¹ Memorandum of Nixon-Dobrynin conversation, June 15, 1971, National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.

¹² Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 534.

¹³ Speech by Brezhnev at the Prague meeting of the Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee, January 25, 1972, ZK SED, DY/30/526, p. 34, SAPMO, Federal Archives, Berlin.

¹⁴ Rusov to Dzúr on the Minsk meeting of the Warsaw Pact military council on October 17–20 and October 23, 1972, Gè-OS 1972, 0036034/11–13, Central Military Archives, Prague.

¹⁵ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, “Some More ‘Smoking Guns’? The Vietnam War and Kissinger’s Summitry with Moscow and Beijing, 1971–73,” *SHAFR Newsletter*, December 2001: 40–45.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Kissinger-Brezhnev conversation, April 22, 1972, National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Cited in Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976* (Cambridge, 1984), 48.