**Viewpoints: Was Détente a Success? -** *History in Dispute*

President Richard M. Nixon took office during the height of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Public opposition to the war was growing, as was public discomfort with expensive and demanding foreign entanglements. Nixon chose Henry Kissinger as his national security adviser. As a Harvard professor in the 1950s and 1960s, Kissinger had criticized U.S. reliance on massive nuclear retaliation and pointed out the dangers attending to the pursuit of ideological “crusades” and total war in the nuclear age. The term détente is used by historians to describe periods of relaxation of tensions between states. The détente Nixon and Kissinger launched was a response to the perceived decline in U.S. power, the rise in Soviet power, and the dangers of uncontrolled competition between the two nations. For the United States, détente had two purposes: first, to turn the Soviet Union from a revolutionary power bent on subverting the international order into a status quo power with a stake in that order; and second, to find a way to regulate the nuclear-arms race.

With roots going back to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s belief in a cooperative relationship with the Soviet Union and an always-present strain of thought in the American (and Western) political spectrum, détente was initially welcomed by the American public when it was launched in earnest in the early 1970s. The Soviet Union, however, appeared not to have moderated its foreign policy conduct to the extent that many were led to believe it would. Also, détente entailed trade-offs that many Americans found distasteful, such as the administration’s reluctance to criticize human-rights violations by the Soviet authorities. The anti-détente forces gathered strength within the Republican party, coalescing around the stiff challenge of California governor Ronald W. Reagan to President Gerald R. Ford in the 1976 Republican primaries. Opposition to détente also had strong resonance in the Democratic Party, finding a champion in Washington senator Henry M. Jackson, who lost the 1976 presidential nomination race to Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. As president, Carter continued to pursue détente policies for a while, but with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 the détente decade came to a close.

President Reagan continued to resist détente as a policy through much of his administration and even adopted policies designed to harm the Soviet Union economically and militarily, but by late 1986 changing Soviet attitudes under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev allowed détente to be renewed. In the last two years of the Reagan administration, and during the détente-oriented administration of George W. Bush, several agreements on arms control, human rights, and greater commercial and diplomatic ties gave the policy of cooperation a new chance.

**Viewpoint #1: Yes, détente was a success because it reduced tensions and helped to end the Cold War**

In assessing whether détente in the cold war was a success, one must bear in mind that it is a multifaceted concept. Détente, a relaxation of tensions, has been a recurring historical fact, but it is also a perceived phenomenon, and public perception of it has not always corresponded to the objective reality. Détente is also a process as well as a state of international relations, and it affects internal as well as foreign relations. Finally, at times détente has been a policy objective. To be sure, a state may pursue détente; even adversaries may both pursue a relaxation of tensions, but they may not succeed. Objective foundations for détente may not exist, or subjective evaluations of the prospects for détente may be in error. Hence, in either case a policy of détente may not succeed. Furthermore, even when a relaxation of tensions can be or is achieved, détente as a policy objective may be overridden and discarded because of perceived security requirements with a higher priority. On the other hand, a détente in relations between adversaries may occur without having been pursued as a deliberate policy, although obviously, it cannot occur if either adversary’s policy is against détente.

During the cold war, there were alternating intensifications and relaxations of East-West tensions. In one sense, neither détente nor confrontation “succeeded”—or failed—as each was reborn. Indeed, there were four periods of détente in the cold war. After the death of Joseph Stalin, the end of the Korean War in 1953, and the 1955 peace treaty that led to the withdrawal of foreign troops from Austria, the four-power East-West summit meeting in Geneva in 1955 gave rise to the Spirit of Geneva, the first cold-war détente. After Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who had denounced Stalin, visited President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1959, this first détente became known as the Spirit of Camp David (named for the presidential retreat in Maryland where they had conferred). This period of relative calm was ended by renewed tensions over Berlin, the shooting down of a U.S. U-2 reconnaissance aircraft over the Soviet Union in May 1960, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. Soon after the missile crisis, however, a second détente gave rise to the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (LTBT), the U.S.-Soviet “hot line,” and other steps in a relaxation of tensions.

After the intensification of the war in Vietnam, Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and other sources of renewed tension in the late 1960s, a third détente followed in the early 1970s. When most analysts refer to cold-war détente, they are talking about this period. The earliest steps toward détente were taken by the West Europeans, first the French and then the Germans. The United States joined the effort in part to preserve a Western consensus. During the 1970s East-West bilateral meetings of leaders, five Soviet-American summits, and an all-European summit conference on security and cooperation accomplished many political agreements, including the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreement in 1972. There also was a growing normalization of trade, travel, and other relations between East and West, especially in Europe.

This “classic” cold-war détente declined in the late 1970s after renewed confrontations in the Third World and an intensification of the strategic-arms race. It finally collapsed after Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan at the end of 1979. The “decade of détente” had ended, and détente had failed (above all, in American eyes).

One important reason for the decline and fall of détente in the late 1970s, especially the U.S. policy of détente, was the discrepancy between the reality of continuing competition and the Nixon administration’s overblown image of détente as “building a structure of peace.” President Richard M. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, were fully aware of the reality and “waged” détente vigorously to gain advantage in the global competition with the Soviet Union. They did not acknowledge this fact, however, and could not control adverse public reaction when the Soviet leaders sought to do the same, both by intervening in the Third World and by keeping up the arms race. Blame was attributed not only to the Soviet leaders but also to the policy of détente, especially in the Ford and Carter administrations.

Heightened tensions in the early 1980s led some to refer to a new or “second cold war,” although it was really a continuation of the cold war that had waxed and waned since the late 1940s. The fourth and final period of détente came in the mid and late 1980s, with renewed summitry (five meetings of the U.S. and Soviet leaders during the last four years of the Reagan administration) and the achievement of new arms-reduction agreements. Although more progress toward reducing tensions was made during these years than during any of the preceding détentes, the United States studiously avoided calling this period a détente, owing to the bad name the word had acquired in influential circles. At that point the pattern of the cold war was broken, and the undeclared détente of 1985–1988 was succeeded in 1989–1990 not by renewed tension, but by a phenomenon that transcended détente: the end of the cold war.

Why did the détente of the 1980s succeed (apparently), while those of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s had failed? Could an earlier détente have succeeded if it had been pursued more vigorously, as Deborah Larson contended in 1997? Or was the cold war brought to an end not as a development of the détente of the mid 1980s but as a result of President Reagan’s hard-line policies in the early 1980s? Could the cold war have ended earlier not with greater efforts at détente, but with more vigorous competition and confrontation, as John Lewis Gaddis argued in 1997?

Although scholars differ, there is a growing consensus that the cold war rested on a foundation of ideological beliefs in ineluctable conflict, held by successive Soviet leaders from Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev, and a reactive Western belief in an inescapable need to contain the Soviet expansive impulses fueled by those ideological beliefs. The cold war, to be sure, had dynamic geopolitical and geostrategic dimensions, and it was waged by both sides with a wide variety of means and specific objectives. It was marked by shifts in perceptions and policies within constraints of a common nuclear danger, leading to alternating periods of détente and confrontation, but always within an adversarial framework.

By the early 1980s Americans generally viewed détente as a failure because it had not succeeded in bringing a lasting relaxation of tensions. Yet, détente was never an alternative to the cold war; détente was a less belligerent way to wage that conflict. In effect, détente was a palliative, reducing the dangers of confrontation and building on those elements of the adversaries’ common interest (above all, survival) that were never completely absent. Détente was also a continuing competition between rivals. There probably were missed opportunities for relaxation of some tensions, but those adherents and opponents of détente who saw it as a way to end the cold war were operating under a misconceived notion of the policy. Of course, détente failed to do what it never could have done and should never have been expected to do. Yet, it did ameliorate the dangers and costs, both societal and political, of the cold war while maintaining containment and deterrence.

A principal reason for the recurrent failures of détente during the cold-war decades was that the underlying suspicions and fears of the adversary could not be dispelled and were used by opponents of détente to discredit it for failing to do what it should never have been expected to do. Détente was vulnerable not because it caused real weakness, but because it could not (on either side) dispel the fears of the enemy.

In recognizing that the fundamental underpinning of the cold war was a reciprocated ideological belief in unavoidable conflict between two armed camps with different ideologies and political systems, historians can now see that the only way the mold could have been broken was by a Soviet leader’s decisive recognition that the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideological worldview was fundamentally flawed and must be discarded. Only then could Soviet and Western policymakers undertake through deeds, as well as declarations, to bring the cold war to an end.

Gorbachev brought such recognition to Soviet policy and deeds. After a cautious initial reception, his overtures were reciprocated by Presidents Reagan and George Bush and other Western leaders in the late 1980s. It was that process—not the hard-line policies of the first Reagan administration or the undeclared transitional détente of the second—that led to the dismantling of the arms race, to the end of the division of Germany and Europe, and to the demise of the cold war by 1990 (even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union). As a relaxation of tensions within an adversarial framework of ideologically grounded worldviews, détente could not bring the cold war to an end, but that was not the true measure of its value.

Détente was a success in three important respects. First, it helped to keep the cold war from getting too “cold” or becoming a “hot” war. The second success of détente was its role in keeping alive the aspirations of people in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union who sought greater freedom. They valued the greater East-West contact fostered under détente. Although American political declarations of “bridge building” to the East in the 1960s and 1970s touched on this theme, the greatest achievements were contacts between eastern and western Europe and institutions in the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which survives today as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The most important success of détente, however, was its contribution to the gradual transformation of thinking in the Soviet Union that led to abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist ideological worldview, which posited an inevitable conflict between two contending worlds. This vitally important contribution of détente is still too-little recognized, but historians of the cold war are becoming increasingly aware of it by benefit of hindsight and greater information from declassified archives.

The lowered barriers to access to printed materials and the greater opportunity for travel and personal contacts under conditions of détente during the cold war, particularly in the 1970s, broadened the understanding of many Soviet officials, intellectuals, and other members of the Moscow establishment. Aleksandr N. Yakovlev, one of Gorbachev’s key advisers, had been influenced by his experience as a graduate exchange student at Columbia University in the 1960s. So was Oleg Kalugin, a KGB intelligence officer and a notable early liberal “internal defector.” Gorbachev himself was influenced by private travel in the early 1970s in France and Italy. Moscow institutes not only purveyed the official Soviet “line” to the West, but conveyed a much more nuanced and sophisticated picture of the West to Soviet leaders (and future Soviet leaders) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Official U.S. and other Western thinking on deterrence and strategic stability, as well as unofficial Western thinking on “non-offensive” defense concepts and force structures, for example, had a significant influence on the “new thinking” of the Gorbachev era. The access and exchanges afforded by détente significantly contributed to such developments.

Détente succeeded in playing a useful if limited role during the cold war, even though it failed to meet misconceived higher hopes. The most lasting success of détente, however, was its significant indirect role in helping to pave the way for the end of the cold war. –RAYMOND L. GARTHOFF, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

**Viewpoint #2: No, détente was a failure because the United States and the Soviet Union never agreed on its fundamental meaning**

Détente was a failure because the two superpowers never came to any agreement on the fundamental meaning of détente. On the American side, it was viewed as a means of reconciling the Soviet Union to the existing international order. President Richard M. Nixon and his national security adviser (later secretary of state) Henry Kissinger sought to “manage” Soviet behavior through the selective use of rewards and punishments, giving Moscow a stake in the existing international system and discouraging it from further expansion. Nixon and Kissinger hoped that habits of mutual restraint would evolve from this process of “linkage.” Kissinger also hoped that Moscow would eventually come to see itself as an established, or status quo, power with an interest in international stability.

Curiously, Kissinger had written his doctoral dissertation years earlier on the subject of diplomacy between revolutionary and status quo powers in nineteenth-century Europe. In that work he argued that Anglo-Austrian efforts to reconcile France were crucial to the success of the European Concert (an informal association of European monarchs)—but only after Napoleon’s revolutionary regime had been defeated militarily. Kissinger may have come to believe that the Soviet Union of the 1970s was more akin to Restoration France than to Napoleonic France, but the Soviet Union remained a self-consciously revisionist power under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and would not be reconciled to Kissinger’s design.

KISSINGER ON DÉTENTE

On 19 June 1972, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger went before the U.S. Senate to explain the Nixon administration foreign policy regarding the Soviet Union and progress in the arms-limitation talks. During this briefing Kissinger made the following remarks:

“The President... decided that the United States should work to create a set of circumstances which would offer the Soviet leaders an opportunity to move away from confrontation through carefully prepared negotiations. From the first, we rejected the notion that what was lacking was a cordial climate for conducting negotiations. Past experience has amply shown that much heralded changes in atmospherics, but not buttressed by concrete progress, will revert to previous patterns, at the first subsequent clash of interests. We have, instead, sought to move forward across a broad range of issues so that progress in one area would add momentum to the progress of other areas. We hoped that the Soviet Union would acquire a stake in a wide spectrum of negotiations and that it would become convinced that its interests would be best served if the entire process unfolded.

We have sought, in short, to create a vested interest in mutual restraint. At the same time, we were acutely conscious of the contradictory tendencies at work in Soviet policy. Some factors—such as the fear of nuclear war; the emerging consumer economy, and the increased pressures of a technological, administrative society—have encouraged the Soviet leaders to seek a more stable relationship with the United States. Other factors—such as ideology, bureaucratic inertia, and the catalytic effect of turmoil in peripheral areas—have prompted pressures for tactical gains. The President has met each of these manifestations on its own terms, demonstrating receptivity to constructive Soviet initiatives and firmness in the face of provocations or adventurism. He has kept open a private channel through which the two sides could communicate candidly and settle matters rapidly. The President was convinced that agreements dealing with questions of armaments in isolation do not, in fact, produce lasting prohibitions on military competition because they contribute little to the kind of stability that makes crises less likely. In recent months, major progress was achieved in moving toward a broad-based accommodation of interests with the USSR, in which an arms limitation agreement could be a central element.”

Source: “Congressional Briefing by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger,” Congressional Record, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, 118 (1972), part 17:21307.

Like their American counterparts, Soviet policymakers had an interest in minimizing the risks of nuclear war. They also had a keen interest in countering Chinese influence, entrenching strategic parity with the United States, and gaining Western trade and technology. They had little interest, however, in joining the United States in defense of the international status quo. The Soviets were quite candid about their conception of détente: the arena of superpower cooperation would be expanded within an overarching framework of political and ideological struggle. Outside explicit oases of agreement, the conflict between capitalism and socialism would inevitably continue. In particular, it would continue in the developing world, through national liberation struggles aided by the Soviet Union and its allies. Leonid I. Brezhnev and his advisers believed that the international balance of power—or the “correlation of forces,” as they called it—was shifting in their favor. Moscow’s nuclear deterrent made direct military aggression by the West unthinkable; socialist revolution could be promoted in the developing world without fear of nuclear war. Through détente Soviet policymakers sought recognition from the United States of their equal status in the international system. They also sought and expected further expansion of Soviet influence abroad. Their acceptance of détente did not indicate any recognition of an international status quo. If anything, it indicated a hope that the seeming decline of American power could be managed smoothly and peacefully.

Over the course of the 1970s, a series of crises revealed the lack of any agreement over the core meaning of détente. For the most part they were triggered by the extension of Soviet influence, arms, and aid to regions hitherto dominated by the United States and its allies. First in Angola and Mozambique, then in South Yemen, and finally in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and Cuba acted to establish and support friendly communist regimes. Again, such active support of revolutionary activity in the developing world was entirely compatible with the Soviet conception of détente; Moscow had never made any secret of that. American policymakers, however, felt betrayed by these acts of Soviet expansion and responded with anger and resistance while questioning Soviet motives. In fact, the United States had no intention of letting the Soviets play an equal role in affairs outside eastern Europe. Kissinger, for example, did everything possible to shut the Soviets out of the Middle East, with considerable success. While the United States claimed the right to exclude Soviet influence from Latin America, it had no qualms about aiding armed rebels in Afghanistan, a nation bordering the Soviet Union.

Changes in the governments of Angola or Afghanistan might not alter dramatically the global balance of power, but such conflicts were symbolic of the larger struggle between the superpowers. By the 1970s the Soviet Union had built a blue-water navy capable of giving American naval authorities serious cause for concern. Moscow had begun projecting its influence into traditional Western preserves. Soviet expansionism seemed to be on the rise. Whatever their interest in détente, American policymakers had no intention of surrendering their hegemonic position in the international system to this self-described challenger. Nixon and Kissinger might admit Soviet nuclear parity, but in practice they would not permit the Soviet Union to play a political role in regional affairs on par with that of the United States. Many leading Americans were unreconciled even to admitting nuclear parity. Impressive summitry could not conceal the fact that the two superpowers had agreed on no common code of conduct, or rules of the game, by which to regulate and moderate superpower rivalry in the developing world. At its heart the underlying political, military, and ideological rivalry between the two nations was simply too intractable to allow for any grand reconciliation through détente. Both sides would have preferred such reconciliation, but disagreed on its terms.

Managing détente successfully would have been an almost impossible challenge under any circumstances, but it should be added that the American political system in the 1970s was especially unlikely to sustain such a policy. The traditional American distaste for realpolitik is often mentioned as one cause of the failure of détente. Beyond that, the Vietnam War had shattered the cold-war foreign-policy consensus of the 1950s, and presidents from Nixon to Jimmy Carter had to deal with stinging attacks from both left and right. To liberals, détente seemed immoral, an excuse used to justify supporting right-wing dictators and a thin disguise for the old mentalities of the cold war; to conservatives, it seemed a sellout, offering too much to the Soviet Union without much benefit in return. Congressional critics complicated the process of “linkage” by censuring the Soviets on trade, emigration, arms control, and human rights, while simultaneously cutting domestic defense spending. By 1976 détente had become sufficiently unpopular that Ford refused to use the word in his campaign appearances. The policy suffered a lingering death over the next three or four years. Carter was ambivalent about its merits, preferring to emphasize human rights, a theme that could only alienate Soviet leaders. By the end of 1979, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter returned to a more traditional cold-war view of Soviet intentions and committed his administration to the reassertion of American military strength. Ronald W. Reagan’s election in 1980 only confirmed and amplified this trend.

As frustrating as these domestic political complications were from Moscow’s perspective, the critics of détente were on to something. Only a radical change in the nature of the Soviet regime would lead to a corresponding change in Soviet foreign policy. Only with the collapse of communism was there even a chance that Russia might become reconciled to the legitimacy of the existing international order. Beyond that, however, the critics of détente turned out to be right about something else: that America’s relative decline in the international system was not inevitable. In fact, the United States was never as weak, and the Soviet Union never as strong, as policymakers of the 1970s believed. The experience of Vietnam had encouraged a period of withdrawal and consolidation, but in the long run the United States was unlikely to accept the continued expansion of Soviet influence. In this sense, détente rested on a flawed perception of the relative strength of the two superpowers; a misperception that was sharply corrected over the course of the 1980s. –COLIN DUECK, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY