

In what ways was Nixon and Kissinger's strategy of detente a significant policy initiative?

The hallmark of American foreign policy in the post World War II era was the idealistic and ideological determination to prevent the spread of communism. The high water mark of containment was the American success in the Cuban Missile Crises of 1963. The American desire to counter Soviet expansion provided the stimulus to stop the domino of Vietnam from falling to the communists.

However, by the 1960's the bipolar nature of the post-war world was increasingly under threat. The emergence of Japan, West Germany, China and the Third World as credible actors on the world stage all contributed to the challenge to the status quo. These threats to the international balance of power, previously dominated by the two superpowers, were made all the more focussed by the relative decline of American prestige and power during the same period.

Domestic disillusionment with the perceived lack of progress in Vietnam forced a succession of Presidents to reassess the American position within the international structure. The realisation that American strategic supremacy had also eroded further contributed to this reassessment. Part of this erosion is attributable to Khrushchev's determination to avoid the international humiliation of any more 'Cubas'. The search for parity with the Americans produced a spectacular growth in the Soviets strategic arsenal.

Yet the Soviets remained faced with their own military and economic challenges. The rise of China as a contender for the mantle of international communist leadership coupled with a deteriorating domestic situation forced the Soviets to reconsider their political options. So, by the end of the 1960's it appeared the time was right for the Cold War to thaw, at least, a little.

Nixon and Kissinger recognised the advantages of a relaxation of tensions between the two superpowers. Nixon highlighted that the 'era of confrontation' had ended and the 'era of negotiation' had started.¹ The policy they devised to pilot America through the darkening clouds of international relations was called detente.

Critics have argued that detente represented containment but at less expense.² Whether a new initiative or a reinterpretation of a previous policy, detente's impact was its recognition that the international structure had conceivably altered. Consequently, opportunities to redefine the superpower relationship, negotiate arms control measures and recapture economic health existed for both the United States and the Soviet Union. Detente also attempted to prescribe the rules for this new era of international competition and co-operation.

The American failure in Vietnam symbolised the loss of American power and influence during the 1960's. The military's inability to deal with President Johnson termed "a raggedy ass little fourth-rate country" was reflected in the loss of strategic supremacy over the Soviets.³ Increased Soviet defence spending had overwhelmed the quantitative superiority the Americans had previously held.⁴ In 1965 the United States had 2056 bombers and missiles to the 417 for the Soviet Union. By 1973, the Soviet arsenal had multiplied fivefold to surpass the American total for the first time; 2251 to 2210.⁵

Similarly, Vietnam represented a seemingly bottomless pit through which American resources were drained. It is estimated that the financial cost for the war was between US\$108,480

million and \$170,000 million.⁶ The American economic position had likewise substantially deteriorated. In eight years a US\$7 billion trade surplus was a US\$7 billion trade deficit. The balance of payments deficit had increased twentyfold in twenty years from US\$1.5 billion in the late 1950's to US\$30 billion in 1971. The economic downturn was further contributed to by the rising cost of oil imports and increasing pressure on the American dollar.⁷

It is not surprising then that the early years of the Nixon Administration were marked by intense efforts to extricate the United States from Vietnam without suffering the ignominy of defeat. Kissinger believed the Soviets held the key to a 'peace with honour' solution. He viewed the world in bipolar terms. Consequently, the Soviets, as leaders of the communist world, were responsible for the actions of their client states, in this case Hanoi. The demise of American economic and military superiority had removed the tools of force and power which previous Administration's had wielded to influence Soviet decision-making. In an increasingly nuclear equipped multipolar world force was increasingly imprecise if not irrelevant as Hanoi's ability to fight indicated.⁸ A new or alternative tool was required. The theory of linkage appeared the ideal replacement.

Linkage was the politics or art of the trade-off.⁹ American concessions in arms control, European security and assistance in trade and technology would produce outcomes favourable to the American national interest. In this case an honourable disengagement from the Vietnam War. Consequently, "Vietnam was the crucial test of the linkage theory."¹⁰

Although a negotiated settlement was eventually achieved, the input and influence of the Soviets is debateable. Kissinger claimed Le Duc Tho, his Korean co-negotiator, had softened his stance since the Soviets had agreed to act as intermediaries between the two nations. Whilst Nixon was quick to credit the Soviets for shifting Hanoi's previously intransigent negotiating posture.¹¹ However, the limitations of linkage and detente had been exposed.

Firstly, linkage revolved around the belief that the two superpowers continued to dominate their respective blocs. Kissinger, for example, remained unconvinced that Hanoi was capable of independent action. Yet the American recognition of China in 1972 and the OPEC orchestrated world oil crises in the early 1970's clearly demonstrated that other serious players had entered the international game of politics. The contradiction of this of the American position was highlighted by the Middle East crises of 1973.

The Yom Kippur War was an Arab-Israeli conflict that contained the potential to involve both superpowers as patrons of their respective clients. Both superpowers endeavoured to negotiate a ceasefire whilst simultaneously starting massive airlifts of arms supplies. Neither superpower could accept defeat. A superpower conflict was narrowly avoided after the Soviets acquiesced to American pressure. Throughout the conflict the Americans had linked client state action to superpower responsibility. Kissinger had told the Soviets that their "client had started it, you have to end it."¹² He also added that, "detente cannot survive irresponsibility in the Middle East."¹³ Meanwhile, Kissinger's post conflict shuttle diplomacy to broker a peace was designed to remove the Soviet influence from the Middle East.

Thus, the Americans requested that the Soviets control their Arab clients and yet undertook action to prevent the Soviets from accessing those clients. The irony of this policy is found in the Administration's aspirations to:

limit Soviet influence in areas such as the Middle East, while at the same time urging the Russians to join the United States in a kind of duopolistic management of global order.¹⁴

Detente and linkage presented practitioners with other dilemmas. Kissinger's attempts to trade off prosperity for power represented fundamental misconception of the ideological differences between the two systems. Such a view closely corresponded to the materialist driven nature of Western liberal society and its "conception of the state as an inherently valueless, supportive machinery."¹⁵

This view did not concord with the Soviet concept of the state as immaterialist, omnipresent and organic. In other words neither side either appreciated or ignored the underlying fundamental differences between the systems. Consequently, any external action deemed an internal intrusion or threat to the operation of either system could be neither warranted nor condoned. Brezhnev confirmed that "detente meant a lessening of military and political tensions with the West, but ideological coexistence could not be allowed."¹⁶ This theoretical discord translated into practical problems.

One of these problems was manifested in the proposed linkage between economics and politics. Brezhnev's policy of detente was not supported by a robust or efficient economy. Soviet farmers were one sixth as productive as their American counterparts. The five year plan for 1966-70 had failed to meet its objectives.¹⁷ The "active collaboration of the West" was preferred as a quick fix to the economic difficulties encountered by the Soviets.¹⁸ The only alternative was internal reform and modernisation of the economy and therefore the communist system. The prospect of threatening the status quo was anathema to both the system and the conservative elements within it.

The Soviet willingness to open its markets to Western trade and technology contributed to an unprecedented level of American involvement within the Soviet economy. American investment in projects such as the Kama River truck plant contributed the rise of American exports to the Soviet Union amounting to a record US\$1.2 billion in 1973. The flood of trade saw the United States become Moscow's second largest trading partner behind West Germany.¹⁹ The goodwill established by this exchange produced a general Trade Agreement which was concluded in 1972.²⁰ In response the Soviets received the what has been described as the 'Great Grain Robbery'.²¹ In 1972 the Americans subsidised the export of US\$750 million worth of grain to their political adversary. The Soviets also hoped to reap the benefits by receiving the conferral of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status from the United States.

The Soviets expected the approval of MFN to provide them the long-term benefit of being competitive in the provision of finished goods for the American market.²² More importantly, the approval of MFN would symbolise American goodwill to the developing policy of detente. However, the political shylocks of the Senate were determined to extract their pound of flesh from the Soviets. The anti-MFN forces ensured the passage through the Senate of the Jackson Amendment. This Amendment denied MFN privileges to the Soviet Union as long as internal restrictions on the right of emigration remained.²³ The Stevenson Amendment imposed a US\$300 million ceiling on Export-Import bank loans to the Soviets. The Soviet response was to repudiate the entire trade agreement.

These amendments "struck at the heart of Kissinger's detente policy."²⁴ The Soviet repudiation confirmed their ideology that interference in the internal affairs of their nation, at least in the

glare of the international spotlight, was both intolerable and not negotiable. The American preoccupation with Soviet domestic policy probably cost them the opportunity to moderate or influence Soviet foreign policy. Kissinger, the architect of linkage, certainly lost little time in castigating Congress for its linkage of human rights to trade.

This difference in values remained a constant thorn in the side of detente. President Carter's inaugural address revealed that human rights would be a significant element of foreign policy during his Administration. He proclaimed "because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere."²⁵ Not surprisingly, the Soviet leadership rejected Carter's policies as attempts at interference within the internal affairs of the Soviet Union and other socialist nations under the pretext of human rights.

Carter's attack highlighted the essential dilemma confronting the superpower relationship over the issue of human rights. To the Soviets Carter's championing of human rights represented not only interference in internal affairs but also threatened the very basis of the socialist order. Human rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, political emancipation and the right to a fair trial are the fundamental rights identified within a democratic system and absent within authoritarian regimes such as the Soviet Union. A system is therefore defined by its approach to human rights. The socialist character of the Soviet regime would be inevitably and irrevocably altered if it were to allow its citizens to exercise their 'human rights'.

The question of human rights also demonstrates the almost irreconcilable difference between the systems represented by the two superpowers. Article 50 of the 1977 Soviet constitution guarantees Soviet citizens the very rights outlined above.²⁶ Yet this did not prevent the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to quell internal dissension. The problem is that there is no common measure by which both systems can evaluate the term 'human rights' and its application within the Soviet state. Essentially "truth...is determined by the purpose it serves."²⁷ A similar perceptual problem is evident in the Soviet definition of security.

The Soviet search for security had led in part to the bipolar nature of post-war Europe. The Iron curtain that so effectively descended divided Germany into the two opposing camps. The German question became one of the core issues of the Cold War. At its centre lay Soviet security as defined by the redrawn boundaries of Europe. Symbolised by the divided Germany, Brezhnev confirmed as much in outlining that "the final recognition of the territorial changes that took place in Europe as a result of World War II" remained a Soviet priority.²⁸

The West objected to Soviet territorial claims on two grounds. Firstly, any acknowledgment of the redrawn boundaries would condemn the Eastern European peoples to an undemocratic way of life. Such an admission would be tantamount to a renunciation both of the Truman Doctrine and American policy since the end of World War II.²⁹ Secondly, the West viewed communism as an aggressive expansionist ideology that had to be contained. Such a view would interpret Soviet pleas for security as a cover for attempts to spread communism.

In lessening these fears detente provided the Soviets the opportunity to resolve their security on a more stable and permanent basis. Willy Brandts' Ostpolitik paved the way for this resolution.

Ostpolitik sought to engage both superpowers within Germany to overcome the threat posed by flexible response strategy to West German security.³⁰ Agreements between both sides settled the status of Berlin, confirmed the post-war European boundaries and provided the framework for

the future integration of Germany. Essentially, these agreements are the closest Europe got to recognising of the outcomes of World War II. Importantly, these steps paved the way towards detente in Europe.³¹

The Helsinki Conference in 1975 confirmed the present condition of Europe; the division of Germany and Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. The Conference also established that Western standards of humane discourse became a recognised subject for East-West discourse. The key, however, to the Conference was American acceptance of their inability to challenge Soviet hegemony and therefore security within Eastern Europe.³² American acceptance of Soviet security concerns in Europe did not extend to either the Middle East (the Yom Kippur War 1973), Asia (Vietnam), or Africa (Angola). Moreover, security could not be separated from the nuclear issue.

In the age of nuclear weaponry, the traditional reliance of territorial security on military might was anachronistic. Consequently, arms control of the superpower's nuclear and strategic capability was of paramount concern. Arms control would represent "the best yardstick for measuring the commitment of the two superpowers" to the process of detente.³³

In the nuclear age the theory of mutually assured destruction provided a limited form of security. An endless and expensive arms race developed in the search for a first strike capability that would tip the balance of terror. Hence, the only certainty and security was that the use of nuclear weapons would result in retaliation, escalation and mutual destruction. For example, for each of the 240 Russian cities of 100 000+, the US could target 36 separate nuclear devices, while the Soviets could destroy each American city of similar size 11 times over.³⁴ Kissinger noted that "in the age of thermonuclear weapons and strategic equality, the relaxation of tensions is the only responsible course."³⁵

Mutual recognition of these facts produced a series of agreements setting quantitative limits on weapons and establishing a code for nuclear behaviour. These included the modernisation of the 'hot line' (1971), measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war (1971), the Basic Principles (1972), Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War (1973).³⁶

These agreements formed part of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) series. SALT "was from the beginning the centrepiece of detente."³⁷ Yet SALT was never designed to reduce the amount of arms or accomplish disarmament. SALT was aimed at combating threats to the stability of deterrence. Arms control thus becomes any measure that stabilises the military environment so as to make a military attack less likely.³⁸

Technological developments threatened to undermine SALT and overwhelm detente. Computerised improved accuracy, Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) defence systems and Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV) all enhanced the likelihood of a successful first strike without fear of retaliation.³⁹

SALT I was limited in its accomplishments. At best, both superpowers realised the full implications of a nuclear confrontation. At worst, nothing changed arms spending escalated and the balance of terror remained. The goodwill established by the summitry of SALT I had dissipated by the arrival of SALT II. Arguments over the quantitative and qualitative limits of the treaty saw the demise of the process.⁴⁰ Essentially, "SALT II was one of the casualties of the decline of detente."⁴¹

In conclusion, detente proved a significant American policy initiative. The policy recognised the changing nature of American power and influence within the international structure and responded accordingly. Consequently, successes were recorded via the withdrawal of forces from Vietnam, the brokering of a peace in the Arab-Israeli crises in 1973 and the multitude of agreements including nuclear, economic and territorial that the superpowers concluded for mutual benefit.

In many respects detente was realpolitik at its peak. Practitioners identified areas of negotiation and commenced bargaining. Unfortunately, detente was not the precise tool required for the complexities of the multipolar world or even Kissinger's world of "political multipolarity with military bipolarity."⁴² Thus, for the Soviets the "Americans tried to sell detente like detergent and claimed it would do everything a detergent would do."⁴³ For their part, the United States recognised that "American power can influence Soviet behaviour only at the margins."⁴⁴

Endnotes

1. Papp, D.S. *Contemporary International Relations; Frameworks for Understanding*, Macmillan, Canada, 1984, p.119.
2. LaFeber, W. *America Russia and the Cold War 1945-1992*, 7th Edn. McGraw-Hill New York, 1993, p.255. Nathan, J.A. & Oliver, J.K. *United States Foreign Policy and World Order*, Little Brown & Company, Boston, 1975, p.397.
3. *ibid.*, p.266.
4. Gati, C. & Gati, T.T. *The Debate Over Detente*, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 1977, p.23 outlines that CIA estimates indicate that between 1962-77 Soviet defense spending had increased from 25 to 28.5% as a percentage of global military outlays. During the same period American military spending had declined from 45.5 to 30%.
5. *loc.cit.* Gati, *ibid.*, p.27 provides a comparative table for U.S. and Soviet Strategic Forces, 1965-1976.
6. Brown, C. & Mooney, P.J. *Cold War to Detente 1945-80*, 2nd Edn. Heinemann, London, 1981, p.98.
7. Ashton, S.R. *In Search of Detente: The Politics of East-West Relations Since 1945*, MacMillan, London, 1989, pp.114-5.
8. Nathan & Oliver, *op.cit.*, pp.410-11.
9. Simes, D.K. "Detente, Russian-Style" in *Foreign Policy*, Fall, 1978, p.51.
10. Noguee, J.L. & Donaldson, R.H., *Soviet Foreign Policy Since World War One*, Pergamon Press, Sydney, 1984, p.259.
11. *ibid.*, pp.260-1.

12. Nathan & Oliver, op.cit., p.400.
13. ibid., p.402.
14. loc.cit.
15. Liska, G. *Rethinking US-Soviet Relations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1987, p.196.
16. La Feber, op.cit., p.259.
17. ibid., p.271.
18. Noguee & Donaldson, op.cit., p.251.
19. Gati, op.cit., pp.30-2. A brief analysis of the economic relationship between the two superpowers is offered at Gati, op.cit., pp.29-40.
20. Gati, op.cit., p.33 highlights that this agreement settled the outstanding Lend Lease debt owed to the United States since the end of World War II and established an Export-Import Bank for the financing of credits.
21. La Feber, op.cit., p.271.
22. MFN nations are charged lower duties on the import of finished goods to the American market. In the short term there would be little benefit to the Soviets as they produced either raw materials or semimanufactured goods. Neither of which accessed the lower import duties of MFN.
23. Gati, op.cit., p.35.
24. La Feber, op.cit., p.276.
25. Noguee & Donaldson, op.cit., p.293.
26. ibid., p.293 notably the previous constitution provided the same rights in Article 125.
27. loc.cit.
28. Noguee & Donaldson, op.cit., p.252.
29. ibid., p.85.
30. Flexible response was an American strategic initiative which envisaged any attack being met with the commensurate level response. If conventional war was to be the response then West Germany would be the battleground. If a nuclear response was deemed more appropriate then West Germany ran the risk of nuclear devastation. Flexible response represented a nil win scenario for West Germany.

31. Ashton, op.cit., p.113 Treaties include the Basic Treaty 1972 and a West German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty 1970.
32. Gati, op.cit., pp.48-52.
33. ibid., p.14.
34. ibid., p.15.
35. loc.cit.
36. ibid., p.17.
37. Nogee & Donaldson, op.cit., p.270.
38. loc.cit
39. Increased accuracy would reduce the land-based retaliatory ICBM threat, the ABM system was capable of defending against a retaliatory strike and the MIRVs were capable of overwhelming ABM systems.
40. Nogee & Donaldson, op.cit., p.290. These arguments included whether the Soviet Backfire bomber was a strategic or theatre weapon and whether the cruise missile represented a nuclear or conventional weapon.
41. ibid., p.275.
42. Brown & Mooney, op.cit., p.165.
43. Donaldson, Dr. R.H. "Soviet Strategy in the 1970's and Beyond" in *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College*, Mar 1978, pp.66.
44. Simes, op.cit., p.62.

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