

Détente in the 1970s

TIMELINE

1955: Nixon becomes US President:
Nixon Doctrine.
1971: China joins the United Nations.
1972: Nixon goes on a visit to Moscow.
: Nixon goes on a visit to China
: West and East Germany accept existing frontiers.
: SALT1
1974: Brezhnev visits America.
1975: Helsinki Agreement.
: space docking.

Source A

A comment by Leonid Brezhnev, Soviet leader (1975).

The Cold War has outlived itself and there is a need for a new, more sensible and realistic policy. Our calls for peaceful coexistence have begun to bring serious responses in many capitalist countries.

In the 1970s, the word ‘détente’ was used to mean a relaxing of tension between the USA and the Soviet Union. People talked of a thaw in the Cold War.

Historians disagree about when détente started. Soviet writers, such as Brezhnev himself in Source A, traced it back to 1953, and claimed that the Soviet Union had followed a consistent policy ever since.

Many Western historians suggest that détente began with the scare Khrushchev and Kennedy gave themselves during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

However, it is difficult to argue that there was any policy of *rapprochement* through the years of Vietnam and the invasion of Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1960s, when international relations seem to have been as bad as ever. Many historians, therefore, present détente as a new idea of the 1970s, which began with President Richard Nixon and the Nixon Doctrine of 1969.

Historiography

As well as disagreeing about when détente started, historians disagree as to whether detente was a success or a failure.

At first, writers saw even SALT1 and the Helsinki Agreement as very flawed ‘successes’, and it is difficult to portray the invasion of Afghanistan and the confrontations of the Reagan years as anything but a ‘new Cold War’ – i.e., détente failed.

However, recently, historians have begun to give the achievements of the early 1970s more credit, and have suggested that they planted in the Soviet system ‘seeds of destruction’, which were eventually to lead to the end of the Cold War in 1989.

Reasons for Détente

Both the USA and the Soviet Union had come to accept each other's areas of influence in the world, and both wanted to improve international relations.

Pressure for détente in the USSR

President Brezhnev was keen to extend Khrushchev's policy of peaceful co-existence, and wanted to persuade the West to accept Soviet control in Eastern Europe.

Soviet expenditure on arms amounted to 20 per cent of total spending by the government. By the mid-1970s, Russia had caught America in the nuclear arms race; so wouldn't it make sense to cut back on this expenditure – particularly when people were fed up with the Communist bloc's low living standards.

The Iron Curtain countries all had very low industrial efficiency, and needed to trade more with the West. Also, Russia had quarrelled with China, and needed better relations with the USA.

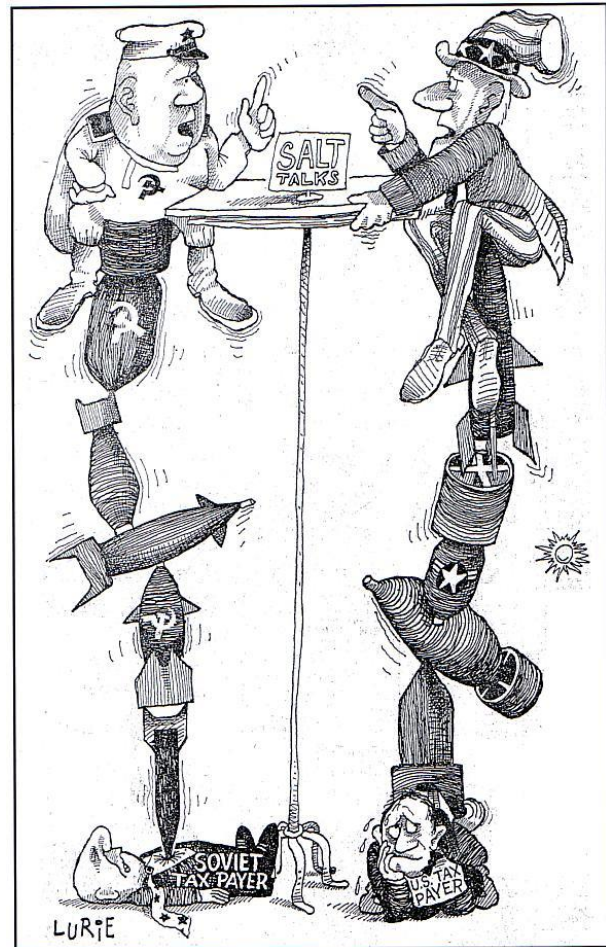
Pressure for détente in the USA

By the early 1970s, America had enough to worry about at home, without trying to fight an international Cold War all over the globe.

There was 'stagflation' in America – rising inflation, couple with economic stagnation. This, together with huge expenditure on the arms race and the war in Vietnam, was crippling the US economy.

Above all, America's failure in the Vietnam War had dented its confidence, and sparked a huge peace movement, particularly amongst America's black population, who were demanding instead their 'Civil Rights'

When Richard Nixon became US President in 1969, thereof, he and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, were keen to establish better working relations with both the USSR and China.



Source B

An American cartoon, published in 1970.

The cartoonist criticises US and Soviet leaders, who possess a HUGE stockpile of weapons already, refusing to agree at the SALT (arms reduction) talks – even though the financial burden is killing the tax payers on both sides.

How far was Détente successful in the 1970s?

When Richard Nixon became US President in 1969, he announced what was to be called the Nixon Doctrine: the United States would keep its Treaty obligations and maintain a nuclear umbrella for the free world, but he expected America's allies to take care of their own defence.

The Beginnings of Détente

The leaders of the USA and the Soviet Union began to meet each other. For example, in 1972 President Nixon visited Moscow, the first US President to go to the Soviet Union since 1945. In return, Brezhnev visited Washington in 1974.

In 1972 agreements were signed between East and West Germany recognising each other's frontiers. This removed one of the areas of tension between the superpowers; it also helped the USA and the Soviet Union to develop trade links. For example, the USA sold its surplus wheat cheaply to the Soviet Union.

At the same time, relations between the USA and communist China improved. In 1971 the USA agreed that communist China should be allowed to join the United Nations. The US table tennis team visited China; this 'ping pong diplomacy' went on side by side with meetings between government officials. In 1972 President Nixon visited China.

There was also co-operation in space. In July 1975 three US astronauts and two Soviet cosmonauts docked their Apollo and Soyuz spacecraft together in orbit round the world. It was a very visible sign of détente.

The two most important outcomes of détente were:

SALT 1 (1972)

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) started in 1969 and led to the SALT 1 agreement in 1972. This agreement, which ran for five years, limited the number of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs) on both sides. Each side was allowed to use spy satellites to check that the other was not breaking the agreed limits. Although it did not reduce existing stocks of weapons, the signing of the agreement in Moscow was seen as a huge achievement at the time.

Helsinki Agreement (1975)

In August 1975, at Helsinki in Finland, 35 countries, including the USA and the Soviet Union, signed the Helsinki Agreement:

- The West recognised the frontiers of Eastern Europe and Soviet influence in that area; West Germany officially recognised East Germany.
- The Soviets agreed to buy US grain and to export oil to the West.
- All countries agreed to improve human rights – freedom of speech, of religion and of movement.

As a result of the Helsinki Agreement, groups were formed in eastern Europe to agitate for greater freedoms – groups such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, or the Helsinki Watch Group in Moscow and East Germany. Another result of the Helsinki Agreement was that – since Communist governments could now borrow money from the West – by the 1980s, most were hugely in debt.

Source C *A comment by the journalist and broadcaster Martin Walker (1993).*

Voice Your Opinion!

Make a judgement - how successful do *you* think détente was in the 1970s?

The Helsinki Treaties of 1975 were the West's time-bomb planted in the heart of the Soviet Empire.