

# The Decade *of* Détente



By John T. Correll

To the dismay of Henry Kissinger, his masterpiece.

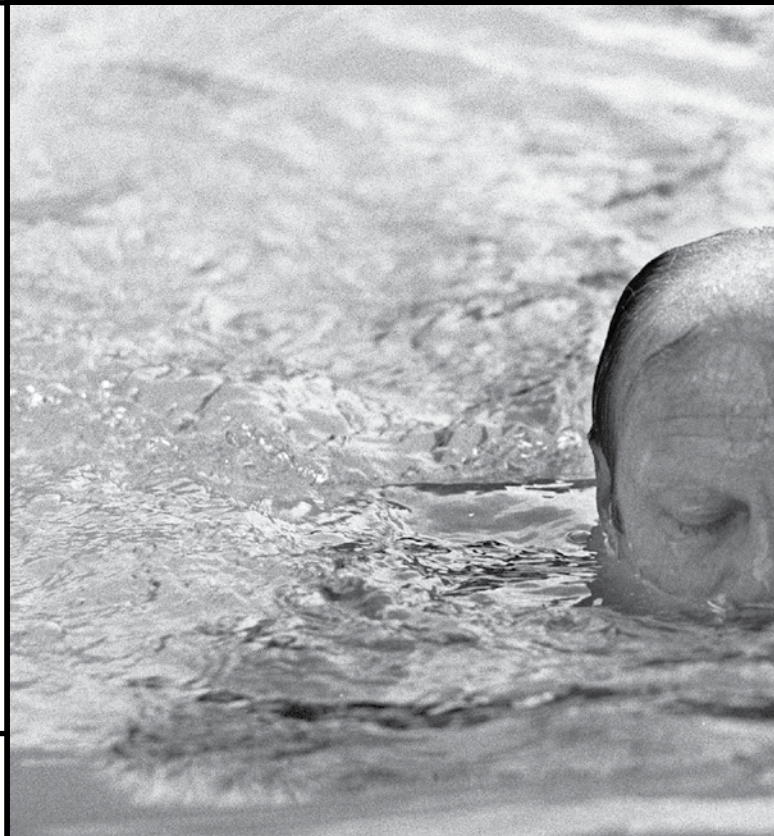
**T**he crowning moment for US nuclear superiority came during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev withdrew the ballistic missiles he had intended to target on American cities.

Khrushchev's power play failed when his missiles in Cuba were discovered before they were operational and ready to use. That left him with the existing disadvantage in deliverable weapons—5,100 for the US, only 300 for the USSR. Although the Soviet Union might inflict massive casualties, it could be wiped off the map in a nuclear exchange.

The superpowers came away from the experience heading in opposite strategic directions. The Soviets, determined not to be humiliated again, pushed their nuclear buildup with unrelenting vigor. The United States stopped building its forces and cut back on nuclear programs.

US policymakers had developed doubts about strategic superiority. President John F. Kennedy understood the need for military strength, but he also saw it as provocative.

“Truman and Eisenhower believed that Hitler had started World War II because he had thought his enemies were



*President Gerald Ford swims at his home in Alexandria, Va., in 1974. Ford did not have Nixon's depth in foreign affairs, and it showed.*



Bettman/CORBIS photo

*President Nixon (c) and Henry Kissinger (l) meet with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow in 1974. Brezhnev was the Soviet leader for the entire decade of détente.*

not everyone saw the benefits of



AP photo by Chick Harrity

weak and not ready to act,” said Cold War historian W. R. Smyser. “They strengthened and united the West to avoid having Moscow repeat Hitler’s mistake. But Kennedy and his advisors looked more closely at the events that had led to World War I. They believed that a sequence of mutually threatening mobilization plans and actions had gotten out of hand and escalated into war in 1914. They thought that US policy should strive to avoid such misunderstandings.”

The CIA’s National Intelligence Estimate for 1964, one of several later proved to be faulty, reported no evidence of a Soviet force buildup. In 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara said, “There is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a nuclear force as large as ours.”

The emergence of ICBM technology had simplified the fielding of long range nuclear strike capability, so the loss of US nuclear superiority was probably inevitable, but the United States abandoned the effort and decided unilaterally to accept parity in strategic weapons. The Minuteman missile program was cut by half, the B-70 bomber was canceled, and a unilateral limit was imposed on the ICBM fleet. In 1965, McNamara promulgated Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD, as the planning base, setting the strategic force requirement at no more than what was necessary to inflict reciprocal destruction on the enemy.

In the next four years the Soviets would draw even with the United States on numbers of strategic missiles and then pull significantly ahead. Defense cutters in Congress opposed any attempt to regain superiority as destabilizing. Besides, the ongoing Vietnam War was making money in the defense budget scarce for anything else.

In October 1968, during the presidential election campaign, Republican challenger Richard M. Nixon promised to restore “clear-cut American military superiority” over the Soviet Union, but that was wishful thinking. It fell to Nixon, the consummate Cold Warrior, to confirm the new balance of power in the doctrine of détente.

### Sufficiency

In his inaugural address in January 1969, Nixon said, “After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation.” He was more specific in a press conference a week later. In reply to a question, he said, “Our objective is to be sure the United States has sufficient military power to defend our interests and to maintain the commitments which this Administration determines are in the interest of the United States around the world. ... I think sufficiency is a better term, actually, than either superiority or parity.”

Once he had stated sufficiency as a principle, Nixon never again raised the goal of strategic superiority. At first, however, Nixon avoided the newly popular term “détente,” a French word meaning “a relaxation of tensions.” He used it for the first time in a speech to the UN in 1970.

Nixon had depth in foreign affairs in his own right, but the high priest of détente was Henry A. Kissinger, the national security advisor and later secretary of state, who overshadowed both Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers.

Congress was not willing to keep pace with the Soviet nuclear buildup, much less seek to recover dominance. By

### The Odd Couple



**In this 1973 political cartoon, the US and Russia are proud parents to détente, holding an olive branch.**

1970, the Soviet Union surpassed the United States in the number of ICBMs possessed, although the US was still ahead in other aspects of the strategic balance, such as the number of warheads.

The question, Kissinger said, was “how to respond to Soviet expansionism when we no longer possessed a credible counterforce capacity and were inferior in conventional forces.” The point of détente, he said, was not friendship with the USSR but an effort “to manage the emergence of Soviet power.”

Kissinger did not regard the loss of superiority as all that important. “What in the name of God is strategic superiority?” he asked. “What is the significance of it? ... What do you do with it?”

The Soviet leader through the entire period of détente was Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev had his own reasons for wanting to tone down the confrontation. Among them was a rift with China, which triggered a redeployment of forces to the Soviet-Chinese border. Détente made this reallocation easier by reducing the pressure elsewhere.

Brezhnev gained further flexibility from the “Ostpolitik” initiative by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, which included a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union and acceptance of the Soviet presence in central Europe.

Kissinger introduced “linkage” as an adjunct to détente. He insisted that all aspects of the US-Soviet relationship be treated as if they were connected. Linkage was useful as a bargaining tool in matters on which the United States would otherwise have had little or no leverage to negotiate.

For example, Kissinger said, “We made progress in settling the Vietnam War something of a condition for advance

in areas of interest to the Soviets, such as the Middle East, trade, or arms limitation.”

### Against All Challengers

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks became “the flagship of détente,” said Raymond L. Garthoff, senior arms control specialist at the Brookings Institution. Preliminary discussions had begun in the Johnson Administration but the SALT I treaty in 1972 was concluded on Nixon’s watch.

SALT froze strategic nuclear forces at existing numbers—deployed or under construction—for five years. It did not address bombers. Since the Russians were ahead in ICBMs, they got a three-to-two advantage in launchers.

Kissinger defended the agreement in a briefing to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “First, the present situation is on balance advantageous to the United States,” he said. “Second, the interim agreement perpetuates nothing which did not already exist and which could only have gotten worse without the agreement.” The United States was not going to increase its ICBM force with or without SALT I, and the treaty might have some restraining effect on the Russians, who continued to add to their missile force.

“SALT imposed a sacrifice on the Soviets if it did on anyone,” Kissinger said in his memoirs. “They had been building 200 new launchers a year. They had to dismantle some 210 ICBMs of older types to come down to the agreed ceiling. We had stopped building during the Johnson Administration; we had no new missile program in production and the Vietnam-era Congress would not have approved one. For us the sacrifice was theoretical.”

The hawkish Sen. Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson (D-Wash.), who had been Nixon’s first choice for secretary of defense, took exception. His amendment to SALT I, adopted by Congress in approving the agreement, urged the President to seek a future treaty that “would not limit the United States to levels of intercontinental strategic forces inferior to the limits provided for the Soviet Union.”

Jackson, Kissinger said, was “the most implacable foe of the Administration’s Soviet policy.” To the fury of Nixon and Kissinger, Jackson found an ally in Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, who Kissinger described as the “leader of the revolt within the Administration.” Like Jackson, Schlesinger thought that Kissinger was giving away too much. Schlesinger had powerful supporters in and out of government so Nixon hesitated to fire him.

Schlesinger refined strategic sufficiency as “Essential Equivalence,” one test of which was whether the equivalence would be “perceived not only by ourselves but by the Soviet Union and Third World audiences as well.”

Détente had begun as the best available adjustment to a deteriorating situation, but had evolved into the centerpiece of foreign policy and Kissinger would defend it aggressively against all challengers.

### The Foibles of Ford

Nixon’s presidency was cut short by Watergate, and Gerald R. Ford, who succeeded him in August 1974, did not have Nixon’s depth in foreign policy. He was dependent on Kissinger and deferred to him in affairs of state. He did not like Schlesinger, who, according to Kissinger, made Ford feel “extremely uncomfortable.” Ford told Kissinger, “He thinks I’m stupid and believes that you are running me.”

In 1975, Kissinger steered Ford into the Helsinki Accords, a 35-nation agreement that recognized the “inviolability

of frontiers” in Europe and proclaimed an assortment of human rights assurances. The *New York Times* called it a mistake, “symbolically ratifying” the Soviet annexation of Eastern Europe. Kissinger argued that this “posed a much greater restraint on the power possessing the largest land army” than it did on the democracies. The Warsaw Pact nations hailed it as a great triumph.

A month before the signing of the Helsinki Accords, Ford refused to meet with Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, author of *The Gulag Archipalego*, who had been deported from the Soviet Union because of his criticism of the system. A White House spokesman said that Ford had done so on advice from the National Security Council and had been persuaded that a meeting with Solzhenitsyn would be inconsistent with the policy of détente.

“All hell broke loose,” Kissinger said. “Jackson issued a statement that it was a sad day for the country when the chief spokesman of American foreign policy sided with the Soviets instead of with freedom of speech.” Kissinger tried to blame it on a scheduling problem but said the meeting would have been “disadvantageous” at that particular point. The *New York Times* asked, “Does President Ford know the difference between détente and appeasement?”

Schlesinger’s clash with Kissinger, and by extension with Ford, worsened and in November 1975, Ford fired Schlesinger. “Henry is always tough with everybody except the Russians,” Schlesinger told the *Washington Post*. Donald H. Rumsfeld, who followed Schlesinger as secretary of defense, recast “Essential Equivalence” as “Rough Equivalence,” which made no difference except to put Rumsfeld’s name on the terminology.

Ford, still bobbing and weaving, declared several months later, “I don’t use the word détente anymore.” However, the White House said that did not mark any change in policy. Ford was soon back in the soup again. In an election campaign debate on national television in October 1976, Ford defended the Helsinki Accords, declaring, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford Administration.”

The moderator, Max Frankel of the *New York Times*, gave Ford a chance to clarify and recover, but he was having none of it. “I don’t believe, Mr. Frankel, that the Yugoslavians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. I don’t believe that the Romanians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. I don’t believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. Each of these countries is independent, autonomous, it has its own territorial integrity, and the United States does not concede that those countries are under the domination of the Soviet Union.”

### Tackled by Team B

Once SALT had imposed a limit on launchers, the Soviets concentrated on increasing the accuracy and throw weight of their missiles. In 1973 alone, they tested four new ICBMs, three of them with MIRVs, or multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles.

The CIA’s National Intelligence Estimates, perceived as reflecting the bias of the liberal and academic communities, downplayed the challenge. The 1975 NIE was especially egregious. It said that the best of the Soviet missiles were not accurate enough to threaten US Minuteman silos.

In 1976, Director of Central Intelligence George H. W. Bush appointed “Team B,” headed by Professor Richard

E. Pipes, to take an independent look at whether Soviet objectives were more ambitious and more threatening than depicted by the NIE. The Team B report confirmed an inclination by drafters of the NIEs to “minimize the Soviet strategic buildup because of its implications for détente” and that Soviets leaders were, beyond a reasonable doubt, reaching for strategic superiority.

Force reduction advocates hoped the Team B report would have no effect on the Jimmy Carter Administration, which took office in January 1977, but the Democrats’ best strategic thinker was Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and some of his positions sounded a lot like Team B. “Soviet spending has shown no response to US restraint,” Brown said. “When we build, they build. When we cut, they build.”

National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski took a harder line than Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who was a firm believer in détente. President Carter himself was also inclined toward détente. He abandoned the B-1 bomber, stretched out the MX ICBM, and slowed down the Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile.

What spoiled détente for Carter was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He reacted by withdrawing the SALT II treaty, which he had sent to the Senate for consideration, and expressed hope that the principles of détente might be resumed at some later date.



**President Jimmy Carter, followed by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, waves as he leaves a speaker’s podium at the Pentagon. Carter was inclined toward détente, but fell out with the Soviets over Afghanistan. Brown said that no matter what the US did, the Soviet buildup continued.**

AP photo



AP Photo by Dennis Cook

**President Ronald Reagan addresses the nation in a televised event in support of his proposed defense budget. Reagan revoked détente, saying the Soviets had treated it as a one-way street.**

“Irritated by the vacillations of the Carter presidency, they [the Kremlin] had finally come to treat him with contempt,” said Martin Walker, US bureau chief for *The Guardian*.

Brandt, the architect of Ostpolitik, had moved on to the presidency of Socialist International and was more enthusiastic than ever. In November 1980, he called for nations to put aside their “deep-seated ideological differences” and carry détente into the 1980s.

In Brown’s estimation, the Soviets in the early 1980s could have “reasonable confidence in destroying nearly all US Minuteman silos.” There was a “dangerous asymmetry,” he said. “The Soviet ICBM force is not at similar risk because the US ICBM force does not have enough re-entry vehicles of high accuracy to pose a like threat to the larger number of Soviet ICBM silos.”

### Reagan Pulls the Plug

Ronald Reagan, running against Carter in the 1980 election, said that if the United States made a serious effort at rearmament, the Soviets could not afford to keep up. “I think there is every indication and every reason to believe that the Soviet Union cannot increase its production of arms,” he said. “They’ve diverted so much to military [spending] that they can’t provide for the consumer needs. So far as an arms race is concerned, there’s one going on right now, but there’s only one side racing.”

At his first press conference as President in January 1981, Reagan revoked détente. “So far, détente’s been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims,” he said. For the first time in more than 20 years, it was again US policy to roll back the Soviet advance.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher agreed, saying there was no “evidence of a real Soviet interest in genuine détente.” So did NATO Secretary General Joseph Luns, who said détente had weakened NATO’s resolve to maintain an effective military defense, and that this may have been “one of Moscow’s goals when it helped to initiate détente more than 10 years ago.”

Reagan’s critics were outraged, declaring that Reagan had revived the Cold War. Typical of their objections was a

*New York Times* op-ed piece by Stephen F. Cohen of Princeton, who complained that “the only sane alternative in the nuclear age” had given way “to the militarization of foreign policy” and the “pursuit of strategic superiority.”

Reagan could hardly be accused of categorically opposing arms reductions. At the Reykjavik summit in 1986, he proposed mutual elimination of all ICBMs and SLBMs. The deal fell through only because Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev insisted that the “Star Wars” Strategic Defense Initiative be included and Reagan refused.

Ten years after Reagan pronounced the end of détente, the Soviet Union was gone, disestablished in the dramatic close of the Cold War. Reagan critics would say his actions had nothing to do with it, that the USSR was already in deep decline.

Such claims were undercut, however, by earlier assessments. In 1982, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., court historian to the Kennedy Administration, returned from a trip to the Soviet Union with the conclusion that “those who think the Soviet Union is on the verge of economic and social collapse are kidding themselves.”

The critics said Reagan had been more lucky than prescient, but whatever it was, it seemed to work.

### Détente’s Fatal Flaw

“Détente of the kind that existed in the mid-’70s was really undermined by the Soviets, who thought they could have détente and a fundamental shift in the balance of power at the same time,” Brzezinski said. “Instead of accepting détente as a relationship designed to stabilize the relationship between the two major countries, they viewed détente as essentially an umbrella under which a fundamental shift in the cor-relationship of power could be effected.”

Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union before its collapse, confirmed Reagan’s perspective to a considerable extent. In his memoirs, he acknowledged that the Soviet objective had been “military supremacy relative to any possible opponent” and that as a consequence, “the arms race continued, gaining momentum even after achieving military and strategic parity with the United States of America.”

In some years, Gorbachev said, Soviet military expenditures “reached 25 to 30 percent of our gross national product—that is, five or six times greater than analogous military spending in the United States and the European NATO countries.”

“We were living much worse than people in the industrialized countries were living and we were increasingly lagging behind them,” Gorbachev said. “Doomed to cater to ideology and suffer and carry the onerous burden of the arms race, [the Soviet Union] found itself at the breaking point.”

In *Diplomacy*, published in 1994, Kissinger said that Reagan “had only a few basic ideas” and that his conception of the Soviet threat “reflected an oversimplification of the nature of military superiority in the nuclear age.” Reagan, he said, was “in the fortunate position of dealing with a Soviet Union in precipitate decline.”

Nevertheless, “Reagan put forward a foreign policy doctrine of great coherence and considerable intellectual power,” Kissinger conceded somewhat grudgingly, and this hastened the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. ■

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