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Focus On: American-Soviet Detente: What Went Wrong?*

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1. *The demise of detente*

A long period of increasingly constructive relations between the United States and the Soviet Union was initiated following the Cuban/Caribbean missile crisis of October 1962. In 1963 several agreements, resting on the mutual interest of the two leading nuclear states, were concluded, covering nuclear testing as well as grain trade and crisis communications.

Through the 1960s negotiations were carried out on nuclear proliferation, resulting in the non-proliferation treaty of 1968. During the first half of the 1970s several important and substantial accords were concluded, notably the SALT and ABM agreements. Parallel to this, the Brandt Ostpolitik brought more stable relations between the two Germanies, between the Federal Republic and Poland and for Berlin. The culmination of detente, it appears in retrospect, was the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, signed in Helsinki in 1975. On this occasion the parallel developments in Europe and between the two nuclear superpowers appeared as *one* policy of detente. It was soon to become clear, however, that there were, in fact, two separate dynamics operating, one for the nuclear superpowers and another for intra-European relations.

Undoubtedly, detente as a whole brought considerable achievements. However, some-

where in the middle of the 1970s the momentum seems to have been lost. Increasing scepticism of detente was spreading in the United States. The end of Soviet-American detente came with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979. The detente-positive Carter administration shifted policy. Clearly, the perceptions differed in Europe and in America. Decision-makers and opinion-leaders in Europe were less indignant than were their American counterparts over the Soviet actions. Thus, detente took different routes; more of the fruits of detente remained in the intra-European relations than in the American-Soviet ones. Detente ceased to be a positive concept for the latter, but continued to be useful for the former.

The crises over Poland and over the deployment of new missiles in Europe further intensified the conflicts between the USA and the USSR. By the end of 1984 the relations between the two major powers had thus arrived at a stage of neither detente nor a Second Cold War. Some aspects of *the* Cold War were still lacking; inter-German and intra-European relations were not as confrontational as they had been in the 1950s (Ostpolitik remained and there were no new Berlin crises), and no war was going on with direct or heavy indirect involvement of both major powers on opposite sides (as had been the case in Korea and in Indochina). Typically, the only negotiations that continued constructively were those directly relating to the European scene (the Vienna talks on force reductions, the Stockholm conference on confidence-building measures). However, also here progress was slow, suggesting that European issues could not be entirely divorced from American-Soviet relations.

* This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Conference on Peace and Security Processes in Europe, Siuntio, Finland, September 7-9, 1984. Stimulating comments have been extended to this article and in other contexts by Johan Galtung, Sverre Lodgaard, Malvern Lumsden, Kjell Skjelsbæk and Raimo Väyrynen. Needless to say, I remain solely responsible for the ideas expressed in this article.

Thus, there is a need to evaluate what went wrong with American-Soviet detente. One simple explanation would be to say that the wrong President was elected in the United States. However, it is somewhat superficial only to point to a particular American President; after all, a President is not that omnipotent. To a considerable extent a President is a victim or a result of pressures building up internally, rather than a master or a conductor of opinions and special interests. Thus, it is more fruitful to analyse what took place in the United States as a whole during the 1970s.

Another simple explanation would give the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which indicated Soviet adventurism and expansionism, exploiting opportunities to its own advantage. Certainly, this was the way the Soviet Union was perceived in large sectors of the American population, not the least by the incumbent President. Again there is a longer story. For several years, the Soviet Union had embarked on policies, particularly in Africa, but also in Afghanistan, which seemed to culminate in the 1979 invasion. Thus, as much as Reagan might have been the result of a more fundamental shift in American sentiments, the invasion of Afghanistan might in fact also have been an expression of more general Soviet ambitions. Still, Afghanistan marked the end of detente, as well as the end of a gradual demise of detente. Frustrated expectations were abundant on both sides.

In hindsight, it appears that the years 1978 and 1979 saw a continuous worsening of relations, one action feeding into the other, and with no particular starting point. A list might include the Camp David agreement of September 1978 (perceived to exclude the Soviet Union from the peace process in the Middle East), as well as the Soviet treaty with Vietnam in November 1978 (escalating the conflict between China and Vietnam, resulting in two wars in early 1979), the American diplomatic recognition of China in December 1978 (leading to the postponement of SALT the 'discovery' of a Soviet brigade on

Cuba, the cold reception in October 1979 of the Brezhnev proposals for European detente, or the NATO dual track decision on medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe in December 1979. There are many events of different magnitude to point to. In total, they increasingly strained the relations between the USA and the USSR. They fuelled the delusion that both sides had about detente.

Rather than finding the 'true' answer to the demise of detente, it might prove more fruitful to examine the lessons that can be drawn from the detente experience, with an eye to future attempts to build constructive relations between the superpowers.

2. *The purpose of detente*

For the USA and the USSR the purpose of detente seems to have been the same: to *avoid nuclear war between the two*. Thus, efforts were made to improve direct communication between them (the hot line agreement of 1963), followed by agreements on reducing confrontations by mistake (the naval agreement of 1972, the basic principles agreement of 1972, the agreement on avoidance of nuclear war of 1973) or some confidence building measures in Europe (the Helsinki Final Act 1975). Both wanted to manage crisis without risking an unintended nuclear war, i.e. both sought a predictable relationship.

Relating to this, but to some extent subsidiary, was the second purpose of detente: to *limit the nuclear arms race*. Thus, the partial test ban treaty was concluded in 1963, but with little hope of a continuation, because both still wanted to keep the option of having additional nuclear weapons and to keep their existing arsenals intact. Rather than to achieve nuclear disarmament, the purpose was to slow down and direct the arms race (arms control). Additionally, the two agreed on the need to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation (NPT 1968). Together, these measures would enhance predictability and make constructive relations possible. Also, a worried public would be appeased.

A further purpose, perhaps not of equal

significance to both, was the *hope of economic benefits*, not only from slowing down the arms race, but from direct exchanges between the two; grain and technology were the two most important commodities sought by the Soviet Union, while new markets appealed to the United States. The economic gains were — in a sense — the tangible result of the relationship, the fruits of stability. Thus, already in 1963 an unprecedented grain deal was concluded. In 1972 huge Soviet purchases of American grain were allowed and in 1975 a long-term agreement was agreed on. Parallel to this, there were relaxations of the American-led embargo on strategic commodities. In 1980 a complete reversal took place in both these sets of exchanges, which indicates their close association with detente, but also their unequal significance. For one party the trade provided a means, for the other it was a goal in its own right.

This set of purposes meant, first of all, that the basic contradiction between the two blocs and the two bloc leaders in particular, remained unaffected. The essence of peaceful coexistence, the Soviet side made clear, was not to transcend the dichotomy between capitalism and socialism. The conflict would simply be pursued with other means or in other places. Thus, it was peaceful coexistence, not peace. This interpretation certainly was not contrary to the American one. Detente was the relaxation of tension, not the elimination of conflict, hence the choice of the term 'detente'.

Furthermore, this is to suggest that the common interest was, in fact, highly limited, and of almost a technical nature: to manage conflict escalation, to develop not-so-dangerous force structures and to make a good profit on top of it all. The profound joint interest that, for instance, is to be found between allied powers fighting a war together, was not there. Almost to the contrary: Soviet references to such a joint interest always seemed to evoke unpleasant reminiscences on the American side, such as 'we gave away too much in Yalta'.

Detente, as the parties themselves saw it,

was a policy to regulate a fundamentally irreconcilable relationship. Thus, it is not surprising that the parties mostly used different names for the relations they were constructing together; their analyses of why they were doing what they were doing were highly divergent.

The common interest was nuclear war avoidance, and most other aspects appeared subordinated to this or became means to achieve this. This joint interest was to be achieved together with the preservation of the existing social orders. Thus, if the period prior to detente emphasized such social order values (American-type Capitalism vs. Soviet-type Socialism), detente made nuclear war avoidance a goal of equal magnitude, but not a superior one. Both interests were to be met at the same time. The demise of detente consequently meant a return to the previous preference order, again making the social order values the more important ones.

3. Assumptions of detente

To achieve nuclear war avoidance and system maintenance at the same time, the detente policy was constructed on seven assumptions. The fate of detente lies not so much in its purpose, as in these in-built assumptions. One by one, they turned out to be unrealistic, and, consequently, the overall purpose of a constructive and predictable relationship could not be achieved.

3.1 'Success' was to be found in the Third World rather than in Europe

As the competition between the two superpowers and their social system was 'inevitable', as both perceived it, it required a less dangerous area to be played out in. The crises of 1957-1961 showed the dangers of a confrontation in Berlin and Germany; nuclear weapons were in abundance, the warning time was minimal, the devastation would be enormous.

At about the same time, decolonization processes resulted in new possibilities for competition. The superpowers could simply estimate their influence on the newly independent nations as their measure of success.

These countries would, freely or not, select social systems, and this would show which one would be the most attractive one. Senator Kennedy spoke of competition between China and India, Premier Khrushchev pointed to liberation struggles as part of his concept of peaceful coexistence. For both, anti-Communism and anti-imperialism found new arenas and new actors, but the struggle was the same. The new element was competition through deflection. The struggle would continue, but without direct confrontation between the majors.

Cuba was a case in point. This Third World country had 'chosen' Communism, according to a typical Liberal American view, because of a lack of a viable democratic and capitalist alternative. A response was the Alliance for Progress for South America. On the Soviet side, Cuba typified the alignment between Soviet Socialism and anti-imperialism. Castro had not been a Marxist-Leninist from the beginning, but the forces of imperialism 'objectively' formed him and the Cuban revolution in that direction.

Working within this perspective, Kennedy aggressively stepped up the American involvement in Vietnam. But the American expectation of meeting an imported, superficial type of Communism, in fact, encountered something much more profound. Vietnam illustrated the shortcomings of this analysis; there were more forces operating in the world than the two that were anticipated.

This reading of the world also made superpower acceptance of detente dependent on their 'success' in the Third World. As long as a given superpower had, according to its own criteria, 'success', it would be satisfied and detente would survive. However, in case of 'failure' and particularly 'failures' that were attributable to the other superpower, the game might again have to be changed.

It is remarkable that the period of detente to a very large extent overlaps with the American war in Vietnam. It was in 1963 that the USA became irreversibly involved through the overthrow of the Diem regime. It was in 1975 with the collapse of the Thieu regime

that rethinking about detente began to have appeal in the United States. In the spring of 1976, Governor Reagan actually forced President Ford to abandon the term 'detente'.

Thus, this assumption made detente a victim of 'failures' in the Third World. Such 'failures' were experienced by both parties. What Vietnam did for the United States, China seems to have done for the Soviet Union. Also in this case, an indigenously based challenge, built on historical independence, cultural self-reliance and societal ingenuity proved its capacity to withstand outside pressures. For the Soviet Union, the conflict with China provided an impetus to reduce confrontation with the West. Thus, the increasing alignment between the West and China decreased in turn Soviet hopes for detente. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1978 directly affected relations between the two superpowers.

Still, both superpowers could record some 'successes'. For a while Egypt was such a case to the Soviet Union, later it acquired similar significance for the United States.

However, both powers were to learn that Third World countries were not necessarily playing the superpowers' game, as already China and Vietnam had indicated. The Moslem revival seems to have taken both by surprise. The fall of the Shah of Iran, as well as the rebellion against the Marxist-Leninist regime in Afghanistan, were parallel developments. Their meaning was approximately the same: 'don't try to impose your system on us, we have our own values'. From both the American and the Soviet perspectives, these challenges reflected conservative or reactionary tendencies and they certainly were way outside the usual left-right continuum both were accustomed to apply.

The United States tried to find a compromise solution (Bakhtiar), which could not stem the tide, but rather illustrated American manipulation. The revolutionary fervour resulted in the occupation of the American embassy and the taking of hostages in November, 1979. In spite of sanctions and

rescue attempts, the USA found itself obliged to negotiate with a regime it found abhorrent. An ordeal, witnessed by the American public, that lasted for 444 days.

The Soviet Union, rather than supporting a regime willing to accommodate some Moslem criticism (Amin), intervened, killed the Prime Minister, installed its own man (brought from Czechoslovakia where he might have learnt appropriate skills), and faced a widespread rebellion. Thus, the USSR faced an ordeal, largely withheld from the public, still with no end in sight five years later.

In sum, from the Third World a clear message was conveyed; it was not going to play the roles allotted it by the policy of detente/peaceful coexistence.

3.2 An 'organic' relationship between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe was the area where the escalation between the West and the East emerged after the Second World War. It was over Poland that the allied powers discovered their conflict and it was over Czechoslovakia that the conflict crystallized into two opposing blocs. Consequently, detente/coexistence would have to come to terms with Eastern Europe.

The original inclination on the Western side seems to have been, in line with Gaullist thinking, that increasing independence would be possible in Eastern Europe with the development of detente. However, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia made it abundantly clear that such hopes had strict limits. Thus, a period followed where Eastern Europe was treated as 'organically' linked to the Soviet Union. However, the provisions on human rights in the Helsinki Final Act brought back the issue, although this time not in the form of expecting independence for the countries, but rather independence for individuals and groups in the countries. The Carter administration embarked on a detente with a human face, but without challenging the strategic interests of the Soviet Union. In essence, this seems to have been a return to the hope for an 'open' Soviet sphere of influence in

Eastern Europe. Legitimate Soviet security interests were to be met, but forms of democracy were also to be developed.

It is, however, clear that such a detente policy ran into considerable difficulty exactly at this juncture. The Soviet leadership preferred 'organic relations' to 'open' spheres of influence. As the human rights issue was not only of concern in Eastern Europe, but also in the Soviet Union itself, Soviet uneasiness increased. Rather than witnessing a return to 'organic' thinking under Reagan, the entire issue became even more explosive, through the emergence of Solidarity in Poland.

The questions of Eastern Europe are central to both superpowers, and it is hard to imagine that a return to 'organic' thinking is at all possible. From the American side, liberalization in Eastern Europe will always be encouraged (if not, what has the American-Soviet conflict with all its costs been all about?) in the same way as the Soviet Union will prefer as closed a sphere of influence as possible (if not, would not much of the sacrifices of the Second World War be rendered meaningless if again a route of attack from the West was opened?). Coexistence and detente, in other words, will have to include a mutual understanding. Indeed, this might have been part of what Carter was saying: in order to maintain detente, American leaders have to show that they have not 'given up' on Eastern Europe.

3.3 'Confidence' between the United States and Western Europe

The Americans felt from the start that detente should be pursued by the West under the guidance of the United States. This required the Western European countries to line up solidly behind the bloc leader, so that the Soviet Union would not be able to play one off against the other. The hot line was built directly between the United States and the Soviet Union, any use of nuclear weapons was ultimately to be decided on by the United States, and the allies were not to move ahead of the United States in detente promotion. These were, in fact, hegemonic ambitions,

and during most of the period of detente the United States was not able to play such a dominant role. On the contrary, for a period in the 1960s, France was way ahead in developing links with the Soviet Union, and in the early 1970s West Germany took the lead, accompanied by great American anxiety.

In fact, the confidence between West European governments and the American administration was gradually eroding. The Vietnam war reduced American attention to European issues, the 'Year of Europe' became another year of the Middle East, the SALT negotiations separated Western Europe nuclear questions from American ones. All this conveyed an impression that to the USA Europe was one theatre among many, not *the* theatre for grand performance.

Also, confidence was eroded in the business community, which ran into American restrictions on potentially lucrative exports to the East, and among the population at large with issues such as the neutron bomb. The NATO dual-track decision of December 1979 was made dual to gain West European support, but instead divided opinions even further. It signified either an American plan to withdraw and make a new war a local European one, or an American ambition to involve itself too much in European affairs. Certainly, the US embargo policy and revelations about NATO nuclear strategy in the early 1980s further undermined confidence. Without basic confidence, it would of course be almost impossible for the United States to conclude agreements on behalf of Western Europe.

3.4 *'Continued but controlled' arms race*

During the entire period of detente the military stationary confrontation in Central Europe was left unaffected. The military build-up was pursued with modernization of the military machinery, including the nuclear arsenals. In the European Security Conference some limited measures of confidence building were agreed on, but troops remained right on the borders. Thus, the military threat was unceasing, the fear of attack was not reduced, and incidents kept tension high. Detente,

however, seems to have implied from the start that this eye-to-eye confrontation in Central Europe was not so important. The focus was on nuclear weapons rather than on conventional forces.

The lack of effort in this area certainly reinforced the impression that American-Soviet detente policy was less one of building a new system of relations in Europe than one of cementing what was already there. Thus, it should be noted that German-German detente, less conspicuous but in the long run very important, seems to have continued unabated by the failure in American-Soviet relations, and in spite of regime changes in Germany itself.

The dangers of nuclear war were, according to detente thinking, to be decreased through reductions of dangerous nuclear weapons. However, during the 1960s the two superpowers enlarged their arsenals without any restrictions. The strategic arms negotiations were not initiated until the United States had finished its ambitious programme of a strategic triad. The first SALT agreement allowed for further arming by not curtailing modernization (i.e. mirving). Only when both saw the end of their modernization programmes could a second agreement be concluded, still allowing for further new weaponry, and having an effective ceiling operative only by 1985.

Thus the arms race continued in a not very controlled manner, increasing fear rather than injecting a persuasive feeling of control. As the arms themselves constitute such strong elements in generating fear, giving rise to worst case scenarios on the part of strategists and nightmares on the part of ordinary people, the absence of control over nuclear weapons served to undermine the credibility of detente. In fact, detente policy faced an unresolvable dilemma; to gain support from those with strategic and military interests the arms race could not be restricted too much, but to gain popular support it would have to be restricted a great deal. The different types of weapons, the different compositions of the force structure, the different programmes for development, all made any agreement difficult to

interpret, and left apparent contradictions that provided arguments for the sceptics. Certainly, a policy aiming at reducing the danger of war and limiting the arms race would have to show a record of achievement at least in the latter field, to indicate that some headway had been made also with respect to the former. Detente did not achieve this.

3.5 *'An economic race is better than a military one, and we are the ones to race'*

Early on in the detente period, the idea was prevalent of making economic achievements an indicator of success for the two competing systems. Both systems expected increased international support to be gained by such successes, and military adventures would not be required. This competition, in some versions, would also apply to the main contenders themselves; the Soviet citizen was to eat as much meat as the American consumer by the 1980s, it was proclaimed.

The record on this score seems to have been a surprise to both, and gradually, this form of competition receded into the background. The most interesting economic developments during the period came from neither of the two. Rather, Japan turned out to be an engine, formally operating within a capitalist framework but with strongly centralized means (hardly a model either one of the superpowers could embrace). Certainly, this challenge created more problems for the United States than for the Soviet Union, resulting, inter alia, in a soy bean embargo and car import restrictions.

Furthermore, the developing countries took measures which were consonant with market mechanisms, but again hurt the leading proponents of free markets the most; the OPEC cartel increased prices, created shortages in the United States, and gave unexpected profits to the Soviet Union as it could increase its oil prices too (a move of solidarity?).

Finally, attention was drawn to a set of new models of development, contradicting the principles of socialism but not compatible with the principle of democracy. The NIC

economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong-kong and other countries in Southeast Asia worked under capitalist rules, but not under democratic ones. Thus, again, the world did not fall into the neat boxes drawn by American and Soviet observers.

3.6 *'What is good for us, is good for the World'*

An important aspect of detente was the preference for bilateralism, for a joint leadership of the leading nuclear powers against all the rest. In a spirit of enlightened duopoly the two superpowers (sometimes with Britain involved as well) sought to preserve their own hegemony and prevent an erosion of the existing hierarchy. The first substantial agreement concerned the partial test ban treaty, which allowed only such tests that the three signatories could carry out. Thus, they, for a while, drew a technological line between themselves and the rest. Similarly, the non-proliferation treaty tried to reserve weapon technology for those that already possessed it in exchange for arms reductions which never materialized.

This was even more marked in other instances, where immediate, not only potential, interests of others could be affected. In 1967-1968, some saw the emergence of a division of the world into two closed spheres; Czechoslovakia had its troubles in one, Greece in the other, which would be a way of reducing the dangers of confrontation between the two spheres, but would hardly further the development of the countries inside these spheres. Certainly, this was reminiscent of the developments in these two countries twenty years earlier!¹

Others became suspicious about whether the superpowers were willing to pursue their allies' interests with sufficient energy. This was President Sadat's reaction to the Soviet attitude in the Moscow summit meeting in 1972 (leading, by his own account, to the expulsion of Soviet military personnel in July 1972), and might well have been the Vietnamese reaction as well (the main port of entry to the country was mined by the USA the week before the 1972 summit meeting). Again,

the Somalis might have suspected a Soviet/American deal in the lack of American support for Somalia in the war with Ethiopia in 1977. The fear that the Americans would involve the Soviets in the Middle East negotiations might have prompted Sadat's decision to go to Jerusalem.

Thus, as has been noted before, the Third World might not necessarily share the aspirations of the superpowers, although all might agree on the necessity of avoiding nuclear war.

3.7 *'Parity is OK, but I'm still better than you'*

Fundamental to the design of the detente policy was the assumption that the conflict between the two would continue. The formula that made it possible to pursue agreements in spite of this, was the acceptance by both of 'parity'. On the Soviet side it was very important to gain recognition as an equal power. This was largely granted during the early 1970s. To Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, the Soviet Union appeared as a responsible power capable of entering and abiding by agreements, as any other power. Thus, an unprecedented number of important accords were concluded in the brief span of 1971-1974.

Still, the United States and the Soviet Union both indicated that such equality related to limited fields of their interaction. Thus, the Soviet side, although in favour of equality, resented the term 'superpower', as this implied something about systems, which in its view were completely incomparable. The same held true for the American side. Few Presidents have been willing to describe the Soviet Union as a responsible power apart from Nixon. This was certainly not the view of Carter following the invasion into Afghanistan, nor hardly the views held by Kennedy and Johnson, all being American democrats.

The insistence that the parties are not comparable brought a particularly destabilizing element into the relationship. Primarily it meant that agreements became more difficult to conclude, as they had to be more precisely worded (the length of the SALT II agreement

compared to the size of SALT I is indicative of this, although this is not the whole explanation). Verification became a more difficult problem. In general, agreements become less acceptable, if there is something fundamentally unreliable about the other signatory. Also, conflicts become more difficult to handle; each party will have a strong sense of self-righteousness, and will be inclined to make black/white pictures of each issue. As the parties are two, the analysis easily points to the existence of two polarized forces, distorting a mostly more complex reality, or rather, distorting the party's interpretation of its information about the reality.

4. *Conclusion*

Taken together, these assumptions about detente certainly do not provide much support for a given policy at a given point in time. Detente requires considerable effort, a good portion of luck, and there have to be some favourable developments on which to build. In particular, several of the assumptions result in internal inconsistencies (such as combining tension reduction with arms increases) as well as contradictions between the superpowers and the rest of the world (such as attempting to deflect the conflict or act on behalf of others). Such inconsistencies, in turn, mean that an unclear message is communicated between the two, resulting in difficulties for them to interpret what the other is doing. Thus, a necessary and renewed attempt to create constructive and predictable relations between the two superpowers, preferably under some other heading than detente or peaceful coexistence, would have to come to grips with these inconsistencies. It cannot be done, however, without taking into account the interest of others. In fact, the choice seems to be between a narrow route, discussing issues that only relate to the two superpowers themselves (such as space weapons or strategic nuclear weapons), or a broader route, where also others are invited to the negotiations.

NOTE

1. For this comment I am indebted to Kjell Skjelsbæk.