

## Détente

### **Introduction**

Détente is the easing of strained relations, especially in a political situation. The term is often used in reference to the general easing of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1970s, a thawing at a period roughly in the middle of the Cold War.

The period was characterized by the signing of treaties such as the SALT I, SALT II, and the Helsinki Agreement. There is some debate amongst historians as to how successful the détente period was in achieving peace. It did, however, mark the first time in the Cold War period that the US and the USSR worked together to lessen international tensions, caused primarily by Mutual Assured Destruction. The first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaty, agreed for both countries to halt the production of nuclear weapons and missiles. It was the first step towards solving one of the most important issues that was disabling any kind of relationship between the USSR and the US. The two superpowers also agreed to install a direct hotline between Washington DC and Moscow, the so called red telephone, enabling both countries to quickly interact with each other in a time of urgency. The SALT II pact of the late 70s continued the work of the SALT I talks, ensuring further reduction in arms by the Soviets and by the US. The Helsinki Accords, in which the Soviets promised to grant free elections in Europe, has been seen as a major concession to ensure peace by the Soviets.

Détente ended after the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan, which led to America's boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980, based on an anti-détente campaign, marked the close of Détente and a return to Cold War hostilities.

### **Causes**

The NATO powers and the Warsaw Pact both had strong reasons to seek relaxation in tensions. Leonid Brezhnev and the rest of the Soviet leadership felt that the economic burden of the nuclear arms race was unsustainable. The American economy was also in financial trouble as the Vietnam War drained government finances at the same time as Lyndon Johnson (and to a lesser extent, Richard Nixon) sought to expand the welfare state.

Worsening relations with the People's Republic of China, leading to the Sino-Soviet Split, had caused great concern in the Soviet Union. The leadership feared the potential of a Sino-American alliance against them and believed it was necessary to improve relations with the United States. Improved relations with China had already thawed the general American view of communism.

Several anti-nuclear movements supported détente. The Cuban Missile Crisis showed how dangerous the relations between the USSR and the USA were becoming. John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev wished to reduce the risk of a nuclear war, as they were aware that the nuclear arsenals on each side granted mutually assured destruction.

### **Summit and Treaties**

The most obvious manifestation of détente was the series of summits held between the leaders of the two superpowers and the treaties that resulted from these meetings. Earlier in the 1960s, before détente, the Partial Test Ban Treaty had been signed in 1963. Later in the decade, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Outer Space Treaty were two of the first building blocks of détente. However, these early treaties did little to curb the superpowers' abilities, and served primarily to limit the nuclear ambitions of third parties that could endanger both superpowers.

The most important treaties were not developed until the advent of the Nixon Administration, which came into office in 1969. The Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact sent an offer to the West, urging to hold a summit on "security and cooperation in Europe". The West agreed and talks began towards actual limits in the nuclear capabilities of the two superpowers. This ultimately led to the signing of the SALT I treaty in 1972. This



treaty limited each power's nuclear arsenals, though it was quickly rendered out-of-date as a result of the development of MIRVs. In the same year that SALT I was signed, the Biological Weapons Convention and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty were also concluded. Talks on SALT II also began in 1972.

In 1975, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe met and produced the Helsinki Accords, a wide ranging series of agreements on economic, political, and human rights issues. The CSCE was initiated by the USSR, involving 35 states throughout Europe. Among other issues, one of the most prevalent and discussed after the conference was that of human rights violations in the Soviet Union.

In July of the same year, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project became the first international space mission, wherein three American astronauts and two Russian cosmonauts docked their spacecraft and conducted joint experiments. This mission had been preceded by five years of political negotiation and technical co-operation, including exchanges of US and Russian engineers between the two countries' space centers.

Trade relations between the two blocs increased substantially during the era of détente. Most significant were the vast shipments of grain that were sent from the West to the Soviet Union each year, which helped make up for the failure of kolkhoz, Soviet collectivized agriculture.

### **End of Detente**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that was to shore up a struggling allied regime led to harsh criticisms in the west and a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics, which were to be held in Moscow. Jimmy Carter boosted the U.S. defense budget and began financially aiding the President of Pakistan, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who would in turn subsidize the anti-Soviet Mujahideen fighters in the region.

The 1980 American presidential election saw Ronald Reagan elected on a platform opposed to the concessions of détente. Negotiations on SALT II were abandoned.

### **USSR and USA:**

1963 - hot-line established after Cuban Missile Crisis

1963 - both agreed to only use underground tests for nuclear explosions

1969 - Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) start

1972 - Richard Nixon, USA president, visited Moscow

1973 - Leonid Brezhnev, USSR leader, visited Washington

1974 - Nixon visited Moscow

1975 - Helsinki Agreement — USA, USSR, Canada + major European powers accept European frontiers set up after World War Two. This recognized that Germany was divided and East European countries agreed to allow their people human rights such as freedom of speech.