

The Cold War Foreign Policy of Nixon and Carter

On July 20, 1969, astronauts Neil A. Armstrong and Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr. landed a spacecraft on the moon. The United States had fulfilled President Kennedy's dream of putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

Around the world people clustered in front of television sets to witness this astonishing event. President Nixon told the astronauts, "For one priceless moment in the whole history of man all the people on this earth are truly one."

Three days later, on the deck of a ship in the Pacific, Nixon welcomed the astronauts back to earth. From there he set out on a tour of Guam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Romania, and Britain. Nixon thrived

on foreign policy. As President, he hoped to earn what he believed was "the greatest honor history can bestow: . . . the title of peacemaker."

Nixon's Foreign Policy

Nixon was a staunch anti-Communist. Yet he and his foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger agreed that it was time for the United States to move away from Cold War confrontation toward "a new era of negotiation." They recognized that the world had changed since the 1950s. The two blocs—Communist and non-Communist—had begun to splinter. Looking ahead, Nixon saw a world dominated by "five great economic superpowers: the United States, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, mainland China, and, of course, Japan."

Nixon also recognized the growing importance of the developing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the third world. While third-world nations were happy to receive aid from the superpowers, they had remained **nonaligned**, or not allied, with either side in the cold war.

In this changed world, Nixon and Kissinger based their foreign policy on *détente*, a French

word meaning "relaxation of tension." Kissinger explained that under this policy "[we] have no permanent enemies." Instead, "we will judge other countries, including Communist countries, . . . on the basis of their actions and not . . . their ideology."

Opening doors to China. In line with this new approach, Nixon and Kissinger worked to improve relations with the People's Republic of China. For more than twenty years, the United States had refused to recognize the Communist government of China. Such a policy, Nixon believed, was no longer wise. He declared:

"We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation."

The Chinese had their own reason for seeking better relations. By 1970 fierce disagreements with the Soviet Union had led to armed clashes along the border separating the two nations. In dealing with this threat, the Chinese hoped, in their words, "to fight the near barbarian [the Soviet Union] with the far barbarian [the United States]."

In 1971 the United States dropped its opposition to UN membership for Communist China. Then Nixon stunned the world by announcing that he would visit the People's Republic of China. During this historic visit in 1972, Nixon and Chinese Premier Chou En-lai (JO en-LI) agreed to improve relations. "What we have done is simply opened the door," the President said, "opened the door for travel, opened the door for trade."

Détente with the Soviet Union. President Nixon expanded his policy of *détente* in 1972 when he became the first American President to visit Moscow. There, Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev (BREZH-nev) agreed to cooperative ventures in science, health, and space exploration.

The superpower leaders also signed two agreements designed to control the arms race. Over the last decade both nations had spent immense sums of money to build powerful weapons. American and Soviet representatives had been holding Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in hopes of slowing this rush to destruction.

The 1972 SALT agreement limited each nation's offensive weapons to those already made or under construction. Critics pointed out that it failed to freeze or reduce nuclear arsenals. But it did establish the idea that the powers could set limits on their destructive weaponry.

The second agreement, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, limited each nation to only two defense systems designed to shoot attacking missiles out of the sky. Nixon explained the reasoning behind the treaty.

“By giving up missile defenses, each side was leaving its population and territory hostage to a strategic missile attack. Each side therefore had an ultimate interest in preventing a war that could only be mutually destructive.”

Carter's Foreign Policy

In his inaugural address, President Carter had spoken of a new approach to foreign policy:

“The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor ambitious task for Americans to undertake . . . than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane.”

Carter planned to base his foreign policy on an “absolute commitment to human rights.” In the past, the United States had overlooked human rights abuses as long as a ruler stood firm against Communism. Carter changed this policy. He cut foreign aid to many dictators who had abused human rights. When Communist rebels, known as Sandinistas, ousted Anastasio Somoza, the corrupt dictator of Nicaragua, Carter refused to intervene.

Recognition of China. In 1978, Carter told the nation that the United States would establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China on January 1, 1979. He also announced an end to diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Carter's announcement set off a storm of controversy. For three decades the United States had recognized the Nationalist Chinese on Taiwan as the rightful government of China. Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona charged that the change in policy “stabs in the back the nation of Taiwan.”

Carter defended his China policy, saying it would “contribute to the well-being of our own nation” and “enhance the stability of Asia.” In March 1979 the United States and the People's Republic formally exchanged ambassadors. The United States gave the People's Republic special trade privileges.

Relations with the Soviet Union.

President Carter continued Nixon's policy of détente with the Soviet Union. In June 1979 he and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed a new strategic arms limitation treaty at a summit meeting—SALT II—in Vienna, Austria. This agreement limited the number of missiles and long-range bombers each superpower could build, while allowing nuclear warheads to be doubled in number. “SALT II will not end the arms race,” Carter said, “but it does make the arms race safer and more predictable.”

The SALT II agreement faced stiff opposition in the Senate. Liberals charged that it was not “real arms control.” Conservatives worried that it might weaken American military strength.

Late in 1979 the Soviet Union invaded its southern neighbor Afghanistan, claiming that Afghan leaders had asked for help in putting down a rebellion. Calling the invasion the “most serious threat to world peace since World War II,” the President placed an embargo on the sale of grain, machinery, and technology to the Soviet Union. He also announced an American boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic games in Moscow. Détente was dead. And with it died all hopes for Senate ratification of the SALT II agreement.

King, David C., McRae, Norman and Jay Zola.
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Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.