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Nixon and Brezhnev

Although besieged by public anger over a volatile economy and failed foreign wars, a rise in terrorism, and impeachment proceedings in Congress, President Richard Nixon visited the U.S. Naval Academy in June 1974 and extolled détente with the Soviet Union. He defended his policies of cooperation with an aggressive Russian adversary.

The president wanted listeners to see détente as sophisticated, enlightened, and dependent on the man in charge. He emphasized his personal leadership: "A blend of the ideal and the pragmatic in our foreign policy has been especially critical in our approach to the Soviet Union. The differences between our two systems of life and government are sharp and fundamental. But even as we oppose totalitarianism, we must also keep sight of the hard, cold facts of life in the nuclear age. Ever since the Soviet Union achieved equality in strategic weapons systems, each confrontation has meant a brush with potential nuclear devastation to all civilized nations. Reduction of tensions, therefore, between us has become the foremost requirement of American foreign policy."¹

The tool that Nixon employed in reducing tensions was personal diplomacy. His two immediate predecessors each met with their Soviet counterpart only once. Those meetings—in Vienna in 1961 and Glassboro, New Jersey in 1967—were stiff and inconclusive. Superpower negotiations received less priority than Cold War competition, characterized by arms races, foreign interventions, and belligerent propaganda.

Nixon turned that around, placing negotiations with the Soviet Union at the center of American foreign policy. No president had done this since Franklin Roosevelt during the Second World War. Unlike Roosevelt, Nixon approached the Soviet Union without a common fascist enemy or firm support for his policies at home.

He met with Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev three times (twice in the Soviet Union, once in the United States). These were extended multi-day summits, with long stretches of time for the two leaders to share perspectives. And these meetings built on close coordination between top advisers. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's chief foreign policy aide, communicated on a daily

1. Richard Nixon, Remarks at Commencement Ceremonies at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, June 5, 1974, accessed February 2, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsba.edu/ws/?pid=4236>.

(sometimes hourly) basis with Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, maintaining an unprecedented "back channel" for uninterrupted confidential dialogue. The White House and Kremlin shared information as never before, and they avoided many of the misunderstandings that had contributed to prior crises.

Nixon believed he was negotiating from strength, but times were changing. America's nuclear superiority in the Cold War had receded, and the Vietnam War had shaken confidence in the nation's conventional preparations for conflict. The American economy had also entered a period of low growth and high inflation, triggered in part by the Middle East oil embargo of 1973. The domestic consensus for American Cold War policies had shattered amidst rising tensions over civil rights and Vietnam. Similar dynamics separated the United States from many of its traditional Cold War allies.

The president assigned priority to personal diplomacy with his Soviet counterparts because he believed that Washington needed to reinforce global order, and Moscow was a crucial stakeholder. Despite ideological differences, the two superpowers had an interest in avoiding war, managing their allies, and controlling emerging threats to their power. Nixon also distrusted the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA, and other established parts of the U.S. government. He believed they pursued stale policies that reinforced Cold War divisions. Personal diplomacy allowed Nixon to increase his control and flexibility in a time when he felt the nation's executive needed more of both. Détente offered Nixon an opportunity to enforce order at home, as he also pursued it abroad.

He worked with the Soviet Union to reduce areas of inherited conflict. Nixon used his conversations with Soviet leaders to create understandings—written, and more often, unwritten—on the division of Europe (Germany in particular), the containment of Soviet influence in Cuba, and the end to war in Vietnam. In each of these areas, Nixon abandoned American aims for victory; he accepted compromises that affirmed stability, with reduced risks for both superpowers.

Arms control followed a similar pattern. Negotiations to limit the breakneck growth of American and Soviet nuclear arsenals began in the 1960s, but Nixon gave these efforts a strong personal push. He was less concerned with the technical details of measuring throw-weights and blast power, and more focused on creating ceilings on weapons developments to reduce the risks of war. He was the first president to accept mutual dependence with Moscow, rather than the pursuit of absolute security.

The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), signed in 1972, institutionalized strategic parity, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, also signed in 1972, eliminated defensive weapons that could upset stability by giving one side a chance of surviving a nuclear strike. Annihilation for both the United States and the Soviet Union had to be inevitable if nuclear war were to be made unthinkable.

Nixon's insight was to recognize how important it was for each side to know that the other side accepted mutual vulnerability. That common knowledge seeded cooperation around other shared problems—including the proliferation of nuclear weapons, internal unrest, terrorism, and eventually space exploration and environmental protection. Although the two superpowers continued to support allies fighting in distant regions, they worked together to contain and prevent conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa from expanding into wider wars.

The Helsinki Accords, concluded in 1975 with thirty-five signatories (including the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada, and the European states) marked a culmination of détente. This multilateral agreement aimed to create a system of mutual security and cooperation on the European continent in place of Cold War conflict. The Helsinki Accords affirmed existing political borders, they encouraged more extensive East-West trade and cultural exchange, and they pledged the signatories to protect basic human rights for all citizens. This latter provision, pushed primarily by the Europeans, undermined Soviet repression, but that was not the intention of American or Soviet leaders at the time. The Helsinki Accords, like SALT and ABM, were efforts at institutionalizing cooperation between long-time adversaries.

Nixon's personal diplomacy succeeded in reducing tensions with the Soviet Union. He helped open opportunities for East-West cooperation between scientists, scholars, artists, businesspeople, and others with powerful long-term effects. A new generation of Soviet leaders, including Mikhail Gorbachev, gained a more humane understanding of the West because of foreign travel during this period. And the repeated nuclear crises of the 1950s and 1960s did not recur again.

The primary shortcoming of détente came from the source of its success—personal diplomacy. Nixon, Kissinger, and their close associates overrated the endurance of personal relations and negotiated agreements. They underinvested in addressing the ideological roots of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, which remained, and sometimes deepened. Nixon also failed to convince American citizens of the wisdom of his actions.

Personal diplomacy is essential for improving American relations with Russia. Presidents must reach out and they must respect the security needs of Russian leaders. Nixon did that with great skill.

Personal diplomacy, however, is only a first step. Presidents must cultivate support for their actions at home and among allies with a consistent articulation of strategy, an avoidance of harmful distractions, and the modeling of statesman-like behavior. American citizens will not trust a president who reaches out to adversaries but attacks democratic values. And domestic opposition corrodes presidential leverage abroad. Congress, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the intelligence agencies, activist groups, and the media are integral to the day-to-day management of foreign policy. As Nixon and Kissinger learned, these institutions are necessary to connect the potential

advances of personal diplomacy with the economic and military practices that define relations between the United States and other societies.

Détente did not endure because the president never persuaded the government and the people to embrace cooperation with the Soviet Union. The opposition from Congress and the civil service, often founded on sound judgments of Soviet aggression, motivated a snapback to militaristic policies under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. In some ways, the emptiness of détente justified more vigorous challenges to Soviet power and Nixon's leadership. Excessive reliance on personal diplomacy contributed to public condemnations of abusive presidential power in the shadow of Watergate.

Like Nixon, President Donald Trump has high hopes for his personal diplomacy with foreign adversaries, particularly Russian President Vladimir Putin. Trump has reached out to his counterpart repeatedly and he has condemned informed critics within the U.S. government, Congress, and the public. He has also undertaken to purge government agencies, particularly the State Department, of experts who might challenge him. As a consequence, his personal diplomacy has triggered deeper domestic resistance while debilitating the day-to-day work of American diplomats abroad. In East Asia and other critical regions, Trump's personal diplomacy has diminished Washington's influence, opening opportunities for China and other rivals.

Personal diplomacy is important, but it only works when it builds on a strong American foreign policy consensus. Nixon learned that you cannot lead our democracy abroad with rising opposition at home. Trump's diplomatic narcissism provokes unprecedented domestic resistance, which weakens American influence. Presidential power still depends on public opinion.