

Critical Analysis of the Detente Period in the Cold War

Nikita Bansal

Kirit P. Mehta School of Law, NMIMS, Mumbai, India

Email address:

nikitabansal073@gmail.com

To cite this article:

Nikita Bansal. Critical Analysis of the Detente Period in the Cold War. *International and Public Affairs*. Vol. 7, No. 1, 2023, pp. 9-13.
doi: 10.11648/j.ipa.20230701.12

Received: November 14, 2022; **Accepted:** November 29, 2022; **Published:** May 31, 2023

Abstract: The 1970s détente was a significant era in world history after the cold war since it marked the beginning of the fall of the Soviet bloc and the end of the rise of Soviet communism. Detente is a French term that means "relaxation of tension". The actions of the Soviet Union during the era of détente were not part of any coherent policy but rather represented an expansion of the conservative ideological system instituted by Leonid Brezhnev. However, the Soviet Union was unable to fully benefit from détente. The overextension of the Soviet Union in the Third World and the increasing dependency on global trends laid the groundwork for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union a decade later. This is termed the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. This paper aims to discuss the reasons for adopting the detente period which was the failure of the USA in the Vietnam war, the Cuban missile crisis and many more and the forms of cooperation between the two super blocs which are SALT I and SALT II treaties which talks about the nuclear arms control between the two superpowers. This paper also highlights the Helsinki Final Act and the ten principles adopted in the act.

Keywords: Communism, Disintegration, Cold War, Detente, Super Blocs, Helsinki Final Act

1. Introduction

Detente is a French term that means "relaxation of tension". The period from 1967- 1979 I termed as detente period. As the superpower rivalry and hostility diminished, a relaxed mood in international relations began to take hold. The term "detente" was used to describe this quiet environment. [1] Detente, in some form, was necessary for survival throughout the nuclear era. It was decided that the two power blocs would not engage in open hostilities. The Cold War was a conflict that lasted from 1945 until 1962. [2] The Cold War had not ended throughout the time of detente. Brezhnev, the head of the Soviet party, used the Russian word "Razryadka," which during the Cold War meant "slackened attention." The human issue persuaded a world leader that a Third World War would be possible. By then, both superpowers had concluded that a nuclear conflict would be fatal. Two Superpowers understood that by working together, their mistrust could be lessened and the severity of the war might be lowered. Both parties felt it beneficial to broaden the realms of collaboration because doing so served their shared interests. The detente is an intentional and purposeful effort to drastically lower this stress in contrast to the cold war,

which attempted to maintain the tension in the central balance at a high pitch. Detente refers to an endeavour made by both superpowers to increase mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation, which may eventually lessen the severity of the cold war conflict. Detente, however, continues to be a complex notion that can signify different things to different individuals. It is in no way comparable to rapprochement. Detente is more of a political initiative that has so far demonstrated its effectiveness. In actuality, it was in 1969 that the detente process became apparent in both Sino-American and Soviet-American relations. The detente process had a profound impact on international relations throughout the 1970s. In the following periods, it undoubtedly also went through several ups and downs, which will be covered in detail below. In this paper, we will discuss and understand the causes or the reasons for the Detente which were the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam war, money problems in the USA and the Soviet Union, fear of war and differences between the USSR and China and many more. Also, we will come across the treaties or agreements signed by the USA and Soviet Union such as Partial Test Ban Treaty (1963), NPT- The Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treat (1968) [14], SALT I (1972), SALT II (1979) etc. Here in this paper, we will read about Helsinki Accords also known as

Helsinki Final Act or Helsinki Declaration along with the principles and agreements laid down in it.

2. What Were the Reasons or Causes of Detente

In the 1960s, there was a distinct increase in tension between the United States of America, the Soviet Union, and some of the Soviet Union's allies. The thawing of relations between nations has been referred to by a variety of names during the course of the past decade. The Western world referred to it as 'detente', while the Soviet Union and West Germany referred to it as 'razryadka' [7] and 'Ostpolitik', respectively.

Others had the perspective that Détente was nothing more than the normalisation of ties between the superpowers. By the late 1960s, the animosity and hostility that had been maintained between the US and Soviet leaders over a period of 25 years had become impossible to sustain. Two of the world's superpowers realised that if they worked together, their mutual mistrust might be reduced, and the intensity of the conflict could be mitigated. Because expanding the realms of collaboration supported both sides' shared goals, they viewed this move as mutually beneficial and saw it as having positive implications. The term "detente" refers to an effort that was made by both of the world's superpowers to improve their level of respect, understanding, and collaboration with one another in the hopes that this may, in the long run, result in the cold war becoming less intensely contentious.

After maintaining relations during the Cold War from 1945 until 1970, the United States of America and the Soviet Union entered a period of detente during the 1970s [4]. The two were pushed in favour of detente by the following factors:

- 1) Failure of the USA in the Vietnam war: Between 1 November 1955 and 30 April 1975, when Saigon fell, there was a conflict in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia known as the Vietnam War. An extended war that fought the government of South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States, against the communist government of North Vietnam and its supporters, the Viet Cong, in South Vietnam. The primary motivation for America's involvement in Vietnam was to stop a communist takeover of the country. For that purpose, it was a failure, as in July 1976, the two Vietnams merged under a communist banner. Attacks on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong safe houses in Cambodia and Laos were carried out by American and South Vietnamese forces. All parties involved in the conflict in Vietnam, including the United States, the Viet Cong, and North and South Vietnam, signed a peace accord in January 1973. Soon after, the United States withdrew virtually all of its troops from Vietnam. Unfortunately, the war continued. The growing opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the American realisation about the futility of the Vietnam War also influenced it

to accept the need for a detente in international relations. All these factors influenced the two superpowers to adopt detente and suspend the cold war in international relations.

- 2) Differences between the USSR and China: During China's first Five Year Plan (from 1953–1957), the Soviet Union significantly increased its economic, cultural, and technical assistance to the country. The Soviet Union's aid programme to China at the time was the most extensive ever offered by a developed nation to a developing one. In 1956 and 1957, there were already noticeable disagreements between the Soviet and Chinese Communist Parties. They started narrow and shallow, focusing only on ideological issues, but have since expanded to include more substantive topics such as the economy, politics, and even foreign policy. Even as Khrushchev attempted detente between the Soviet Union and the United States, tensions between China and the United States deepened in response to the Great Leap Forward's early failure. In 1960, Khrushchev called for the return of Soviet Union specialists. The USSR was also persuaded in favour of detente by the rise of divisions between China and the USSR. Additionally, it influenced the United States to establish ties with communist countries.
- 3) Cuban Missile Crisis: During the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which took place from October 15-28, 1962, the United States of America and the Soviet Union took opposing sides against one another to further their respective national security interests. This was the high point of the [3] Cold War. The Soviet Union made an effort during this period to address the issue of its deficit of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles in comparison to those of the United States by stationing shorter-range nuclear missiles within Cuba, a communist nation that is allied with the Soviet Union and is located directly off the coast of the United States. The United States and the Soviet Union were placed on a more equal footing in terms of security and status as a result of this step, which permitted the Soviet Union to reach several of the United States' main population centres with nuclear bombs [5]. The United States was able to bring an end to the crisis by imposing an embargo on the country in question, but the ever-present risk of nuclear annihilation did not go away. The two superpowers became aware of the necessity to curtail the extent of the cold war by establishing cooperative and amicable relations after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which had taken them to the verge of war.
- 4) Fear of War: Both the United States of America and the Soviet Union, two adversarial superpowers, had amassed several nuclear warheads that were possibly hazardous, which led them to realise the pointlessness of continuing such a ludicrous race. The ever-increasing costs of a continued arms race ultimately led to the establishment of a period of detente. The desire to

prevent conflicts between two superpowers that could escalate to thermonuclear war as well as the fear of nuclear war, which could annihilate both parties involved in the battle. The first factor in the tension's reduction was the realisation that the threat posed by the superpowers would, in the long run, hinder the ability of the target countries to flourish economically without increasing their level of safety.

5) USSR and its bloc are playing a larger role in world politics: Even though both the USSR and China adhered to the communist ideology, the two countries had significant political differences. The Soviet Union viewed China as a potential adversary and prioritised improving relations with the United States. The onset of détente presented a chance for propaganda on both sides. They might individually present themselves to the public as pacifists who were concerned with the well-being of the global community. The Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc's growing influence in world affairs also affected the United States of America in favour of détente.

6) Peaceful Co-Existence: [10] The Soviet theory of peaceful coexistence proposed that the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective political ideologies, could coexist rather than fight one another. Khrushchev made an effort to demonstrate his commitment to peaceful coexistence by participating in international peace conferences such as the Geneva Conference. Initiated by Russia under Malenkov's presidency was the peaceful coexistence strategy. During the time of the cold war, China and the Soviet Union came up with the idea of peaceful coexistence as a way for communist states to coexist with capitalist states and, in the case of China, with regional powers. This concept was developed as a mechanism for communist states to coexist with capitalist states. One factor that contributed to the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s and 1960s was disagreements over the various interpretations of peaceful coexistence and how they should be applied. This disagreement was caused by the fact that the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China applied it in different ways. During the Khrushchev and later Brezhnev Kosygin eras at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956 Stalin, it became more obvious. His actions drew criticism, and the Leninist idea that war with capitalist nations was unavoidable was changed. The Soviet Union accepted the principle of peaceful coexistence as the basis of its foreign policy. The Soviet Union started to restructure its foreign policy, Hartmann said. The new strategy highlighted the Soviet willingness to diplomatically address unresolved East-West issues. The détente process continued to gain momentum as a result of the US's slow response to the policy of peaceful coexistence.

7) Role of Non-Aligned Movement: Cooperation, neutrality, and self-determination were the three pillars

around which the Non-Aligned Movement was founded. During the time of the Cold War, the NAM campaigned for the abolition of colonialism and aimed to prevent countries from becoming embroiled in the conflict on either side. A significant goal of nonalignment was to achieve a state of détente. Achieving a state of détente was one of the goals that the non-aligned movement diligently strived for during its existence. Nonalignment was all about détente, relaxing tensions, returning relationships to normal, maintaining peace, and coexisting with one another. Jawaharlal had suggested as early as 1958 that the Soviet Union and the United States should directly speak to each other rather than at each other, as they had gotten into the habit of doing. Jawaharlal was a member of the Indian National Congress. the development of the non-aligned movement and the success with which non-aligned countries, like India, were able to establish friendly ties with both communist and non-communist states also forced the USSR and USA to acknowledge the likelihood of friendship and cooperation between communist and democratic nations. It inspired them to work to advance amicable cooperation.

3. What Were the Forms of Cooperation Between the USA and the USSR

During the 1970s, there were efforts made by both the United States and the Soviet Union to forge closer ties with one another. After the Cuban missile crisis, which came dangerously close to igniting a nuclear war, both the United States of America and the Soviet Union were keen to relieve the tension. The rising costs of competing in the arms race were a contributing factor to falling living standards. Both sides reached an agreement that a new strategy was necessary because increasing military strength had not been successful in reducing tensions in the conflict.

Even though détente did not result at the end of the Cold War, it was still responsible for several significant advancements. The willingness of both superpowers to communicate has resulted in several positive outcomes, including the decrease of nuclear weapons stockpiles, the adoption of anti-nuclear proliferation agreements, and arms reduction summits. Richard Nixon's visit to communist China in 1972 is often regarded as the most significant example of political recognition of communist countries extended by the West.

In 1972, then-President Nixon [8] made a trip to Moscow, where he met with then-Soviet Leader Brezhnev. This event signalled the beginning of a new, friendlier relationship between the world's superpowers.

After that, the United States and the Soviet Union signed a series of deals that were as follows:

1) Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) [9]

The United States of America and the Soviet Union, which were the two superpowers at the time of the Cold

War, participated in two rounds of bilateral discussions and related international accords on the subject of weapons control. SALT I is the abbreviation for the agreement reached on May 26, 1972, regarding the negotiations for the limiting of strategic weapons. They sought to put a halt to a developing rivalry in defensive systems that threatened to drive offensive competition to even higher levels through a Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems. The two countries took the first steps to tamp down competition over their most potent land- and submarine-based offensive nuclear weapons in an Interim Agreement on Certain Measures Concerning the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. After two and a half years of negotiation, the first round of SALT was brought to a conclusion when President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev signed the ABM Treaty and the Interim Agreement on strategic offensive arms during a summit meeting in Moscow. This marked the end of the first round of SALT. In addition to these imbalances in their strategic capabilities, the countries' respective defence requirements and pledges diverged significantly from one another. The United States of America had commitments for the protection of friends located overseas, such as Western Europe and Japan, but the allies of the Soviet Union were located near it. Because of all of these factors, it was impossible to determine if specific weapons or types of weaponry were equivalent. The number of strategic ballistic missile launchers was frozen at current levels, and new submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers could only be added when an equivalent number of older intercontinental ballistic missile and submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers were decommissioned.

2) Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) [6]

The term "SALT" refers to two rounds of talks on nuclear arms control that were held between the United States and the Soviet Union. The duration of SALT II was from 1972 until 1979. Carter and Brezhnev signed the SALT-II agreement at a meeting that took place in Vienna in June of 1979. The deal, in essence, brought the two countries up to the same level in terms of the number of nuclear weapons delivery systems that they each possessed. Additionally, it restricted the total quantity of MIRV missiles -missiles with multiple, independent nuclear warheads. The discussions for SALT II, which took place between 1972 and 1979, had as their primary objective the slowing or stopping of the manufacturing of strategic nuclear weapons. It was a continuation of the conversations that had taken place during SALT I, which were presided over by representatives from both countries. The initial nuclear arms reduction treaty, known as SALT II, expected that both parties would cut their strategic forces. As a result of the proliferation of new missile programmes, both camps felt they had no choice but to place restrictions on the development of new types of strategic missiles. Even though they were too sluggish to be effective on the first try, President Jimmy Carter planned to use Trident and cruise missiles as his primary defensive weapon, and the United

States still maintains its most critical programmes, including those. However, on the first try, they were ineffective.

4. What Was the Helsinki Final Act About

It was thought that the iconic summit that took place in Helsinki in 1975 with representatives from 35 countries and the signing of its final act had put an end to the Cold War for the time being. When it came to matters of national security in the 1970s, the primary preoccupation of West European nations was to strengthen their ties with the United States while also strengthening their ties with the Soviet Union. Improved ties were reflected in several ways, including a less tense climate; more cultural, business, and personal exchanges; and a reduction in the number of forces utilised by both sides. [12] These were goals that were also held by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union proposed holding a conference to discuss the state of security in Europe. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss various matters concerning safety. Despite the West's and non-aligned countries' insistence that the borders could not be considered final, the gathering concluded that they should not be altered using force and made this decision. The key last act of the Helsinki Declaration, which was signed by all 35 nations in 1975, is formal and normative, even though it does not have any legal force. The concluding act had ten guiding principles, which were as follows:

- 1) Sovereign equality of all nations
- 2) Respect for the right of all
- 3) Neither to use nor threaten the use of force
- 4) Inviolability of frontiers and territorial integrity of states
- 5) Peaceful settlement of international disputes
- 6) Non- interference in the internal affairs of each other
- 7) Freedom of expression and faith and worship and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- 8) Equality and people's right to self-determination
- 9) Cooperation among states
- 10) Observance of responsibilities implied in international law

The final act outlines several principles for cultural and economic collaboration going forward. Participants made a solemn commitment to work toward the promotion of fundamental human rights in all of their contacts that take place across international borders. The detractors emphasized how challenging it was for the USSR and the states of East Europe to keep their promises. The leaders of both countries reaffirm their dedication to respecting and honouring the terms of the final act reached in Helsinki. They hope that the Cold War will soon come to an end and that good relations will be restored between the East and the West [13]. The heads of state of the world's most powerful nations have promised to respect and honour the terms of the Helsinki Final Act. They believe that the Cold War will be forgotten

as a result of the East's and West's growing relationship. The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Harold Wilson, addressed the concept of the Helsinki spirit. When Churchill gave his speech at Fulton, it marked the beginning of the Cold War; when they met in Helsinki, it was heralded as the end of the conflict. The participants at the conference reached a consensus to agree that the undertakings will be subject to periodic reviews. The first review was held in Belgrade in 1977, but by that time, a great deal of change had already taken place. The only thing that was accomplished was an agreement to get together once more. After a great number of Soviet efforts to resolve the issue, the following review was convened in Madrid in 1980–1981. This time, however, the spirit of Helsinki had been replaced by the new Cold War, and Soviet armies were occupying Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

According to the book *The rise and fall of superpower detente, 1968-1979*, the French term "detente" served as an effective term for the more stable and cooperative relationship that was being created by the main actors of the Cold War throughout the 1970s. This relationship was created by the main actors of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union attempted to lessen the likelihood of a nuclear conflict by working out verifiable agreements on the control of their respective arsenals and adopting a core set of "rules" to govern their relationship with one another. Such problems had reached such a point of severity by the end of the 1970s that they brought an abrupt end to the era of detente. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the period of detente had effectively come to an end. Infuriating the Soviet Union was President Jimmy Carter's decision to increase spending on the United States military [11] and provide support to anti-Soviet Mujahideen fighters operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a direct consequence of their invasion of Afghanistan, the United States did not participate in the 1980 Summer Olympics held in Moscow. Later on, in that same year, anti-detente candidate Ronald Reagan was victorious in his bid for the presidency of the United States of America. During his first news conference as president, Reagan referred to detente as a "one-way roadway that the Soviet Union has used to promote its aims." He said this during the press conference. Given the increasing costs, Gorbachev decided to enter into new negotiations with President Reagan regarding the control of weapons. The discussions that they participated in resulted in the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties in 1991 and 1993. As part of the START I and START II treaties, both nations committed to halting the production of new nuclear weapons as well as reducing their overall stockpiles of nuclear weapons during the course of the treaties' duration. The START treaties have led to a significant reduction in the total number of nuclear weapons that are owned by the two superpowers that existed during the Cold War.

References

- [1] Detente || The Cold War. (2021, July 10). Political Science. Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://www.politicalscienceview.com/detente/>
- [2] Poonkham, J. (2016, March 1). Détente Studies in Cold War International History: Questions (Un) Marked? *Inquiries Journal*. Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1439/detente-studies-in-the-cold-war-international-history-questions-unmarked>
- [3] The Ups and Downs of Détente During the Cold War. (2022, May 16). ThoughtCo. Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/detente-cold-war-4151136>
- [4] Detente: Meaning, Factors, Progress and New Detente. (2015, April 7). Your Article Library. Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/international-politics/detente-meaning-factors-progress-and-new-detente/48506>
- [5] Détente. (2020, October 3). The Cold War. Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://alphahistory.com/coldwar/detente/>
- [6] Milestones: 1969â1976 - Office of the Historian. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/salt>
- [7] Détente | A Visual Guide to the Cold War. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://coldwar.unc.edu/theme/detente/>
- [8] Study.com | Take Online Courses. Earn College Credit. Research Schools, Degrees & Careers. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://study.com/learn/lesson/detente-cold-war-policy-purpose.html>
- [9] Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty I (1972) | Nuclear Arms Control Treaties. (n.d.). Retrieved September 27, 2022, from <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/treaties/salt-I.html>
- [10] White, Brian. "The Concept of Detente - JSTOR." *JSTOR*, Cambridge University Press, July 1981, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20096917>.
- [11] Chourchoulis, Dionysios. *Understanding the Long Détente and Its Crisis in Cold...* - *Sage Journals*. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25 May 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022009420921293?icid=int.sj-abstract.similar-articles.2>
- [12] Poonkham, Jittipat. "Détente Studies in Cold War International History: Questions (Un)Marked?" *Inquiries Journal*, Interstate - Journal of International Affairs, 1 Mar. 2016, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1439/detente-studies-in-the-cold-war-international-history-questions-unmarked>.
- [13] Tronnier, Nemo. "The Emergence of Detente in the Cold War." *GRIN*, 6 May 2010, <https://www.grin.com/document/150609>.
- [14] "Détente." *A Visual Guide to the Cold War*, <https://coldwar.unc.edu/theme/detente/>.