

East-West policy

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The 1970s saw major shifts in East-West relations. At first, the effects of the Vietnam War were keenly felt and impacted heavily on international relations. Subsequently, however, Chinese-American rapprochement and the US withdrawal from Vietnam led to an easing of tension in Asia.

In Europe, East-West relations improved as a result of the Federal Republic of Germany's policy of openness towards the East (Ostpolitik) and the Helsinki Conference on 1 August 1975, which was attended by members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, together with the non-aligned States. The most striking results of the new easing of East-West relations were seen in Soviet-American disarmament agreements.

Indeed, the early 1970s were marked by the two superpowers' wish for détente. In the SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) Treaty of 26 May 1972 on limiting strategic weapons, they agreed not to manufacture strategic weapons for a period of five years, not to construct land-based launchers and to limit the number of ABM anti-missile missiles. However, the agreement did nothing to limit the power of the United States and the USSR, since each retained a nuclear arsenal with multiple overkill capability.

Another sign of détente was the partial lifting by the US of the trade embargo imposed on the USSR in 1949 and the signing with Moscow of a trade agreement in October 1972. Leonid Brezhnev's visit to the United States in June 1973 was the occasion for the signing of a treaty on the prevention of nuclear war. A third Brezhnev-Nixon summit in Moscow and the Crimea in June and July 1974 was less successful, since superpower relations were adversely affected by the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East.

Paradoxically, the SALT I agreements fuelled the arms race: development of missiles with multiple nuclear warheads, tactical weapons, bombers and the 'neutron bomb' was stepped up because these weapons were not covered by the 1972 agreement. This meant that negotiations for a second SALT agreement dragged on and Soviet and US military expenditure increased. The agreement, which limited the number of missile-launchers and bombers, was finally signed on 18 June 1979. It did not enter into force because of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, it did not prevent the deployment of new Soviet medium-range missiles, the SS-20s, in Europe: the late 1970s saw the start of the Euromissile crisis.