

“Transformation versus Status Quo – Competing American Concepts for Détente from Kennedy to Nixon”

Currently, historiography on the East-West-Conflict is in the midst of debate. Did détente perpetuate the division of Europe? Or was détente rather a major force contributing to the demise of Communism behind the Iron Curtain? In approaching these questions, I examine competing American concepts for détente and their bold ramifications for European security in the long 1970s.

In the aftermath of the double crisis in Berlin and Cuba in the early 1960s, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson conceived the “strategy of peace” and “bridge building” as rationales to perforate the Iron Curtain and to open up the societies of Eastern Europe for Western ideas. Particularly Johnson encouraged his NATO partners to start their own détente initiatives. Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik and the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 were the most visible results of the transatlantic efforts to establish a sustainable framework for evolutionary change.

The conditions for the conduct of the transformation policy changed when Richard Nixon assumed the Presidency in 1969. Nixon and Henry Kissinger conceived the relaxation of East-West tension as a tool to stabilize the status quo against Moscow’s alleged plans to conquer West Europe peacefully via détente. I argue that the American strategy for peaceful change survived nonetheless. Against the opposition of Nixon and Kissinger, the bridge builders in the Department of State still sought to wage the East-West-Conflict on the “battlefield” of ideas and values.

In contrast, fearing Communist subversion in Western Europe, the Nixon White House tried to rely on advantages in strategic arms to keep the Soviet Union at bay. I make the case that this approach for the SALT I negotiations institutionalized the arms race and eventually jeopardized Nixon’s own efforts to work for a lasting structure of peace with the Soviets. Indeed, NATO’s dual-track decision of December 1979 has deep roots in the flaws of Nixon’s military détente.

Moreover, I depict that the détente dualism in Washington during the Nixon-Kissinger years particularly manifested itself in the CSCE negotiations. Whereas the bridge builders in the Department of State and their West European counterparts were instrumental in putting together NATO’s ambitious agenda for the CSCE, Nixon and Kissinger were trying to trade NATO’s demands for freer movement for Soviet concessions in SALT or MBFR. When the Nixon-Kissinger détente collapsed in late 1974, Kissinger reluctantly began to put his bar-

gaining weight behind the transformation policy that he had only grudgingly tolerated and at times even torpedoed during the previous years. Finally, in contrast to Kissinger's Realpolitik, the Western transformation policies built sufficient confidence within the societies behind the Iron Curtain to make détente irreversible and to allow for America's strategy of peaceful change to become effective.

Stephan Kieninger / stephankieninger@gmx.de

Publications

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