

The end of Détente: Soviet Adventurism in the Third World

Adam Robinson
MA in Air Power, King's College London

The Cold War between the USA and USSR is regarded to have ended with the Malta summit in December 1989. This followed the end of the 10-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan earlier that year and during, arguably, the most turbulent period of the Cold War. This paper will argue that Soviet adventurism into the Third World did not, in itself, destroy *détente* but that Soviet opportunism in the face of a weakened USA was viewed by the West as deliberate adventurism in order to gain an advantage over developing regions of the world. It was the US's perception of Soviet actions that led to the end of *détente*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines *détente* as 'the easing of hostility or strained relations between countries'.¹ Contradictorily, it defines adventurism as the 'willingness to take risks in business or politics'.²

'The common American and Soviet recognition of the need to avert war' was the genesis of *détente* in the late 1960s.³ In the early 1970s, the US Nixon administration's focus was on its extraction from Vietnam. That war had proven unexpectedly economically expensive to the US, who expected the next war to be a major European war against the Warsaw Pact. For the Soviets, their strategic aim under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev was to realise nuclear parity with the US and, therefore, reach a point of equality in all aspects of foreign policy, making a truly bipolar world. Consequently, the US saw *détente* as a method of ensuring an orderly and unhindered withdrawal from Vietnam and, 'in Kissinger's words, as a way of "managing the emergence of Soviet power"'.⁴ For the USSR, *détente* was a means of countering US hegemony as well as realising opportunities to exploit the easing of tensions, leading to greater trade and, crucially, the obtaining of superior western technology. The road to *détente* was largely personality-led; the conservative and personal approach of Brezhnev had replaced the brinkmanship approach of Khrushchev.⁵ In the US, much the same change had occurred when Nixon succeeded Johnson, but this was not the only reason for the rise of *détente*. Growing Sino-Soviet antagonism in the late 60s, along with the rise of West

¹ Soanes & Stevenson (2006), p. 390

² *ibid.*, p. 19

³ Garthoff (1994), p. 1127

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1126

⁵ Zubok, (2008), p. 430

Germany's *Ostpolitik* all pointed to the requisite move towards Superpower accommodation. *Ostpolitik* had a particular influence as it recognised many of the Warsaw Pact's territorial demands, such as the post-Second World War German-Polish border, and demonstrated that there could be peaceful co-existence between the differing ideologies. The US's *rapprochement* with China, in 1972, demonstrated its willingness to seek agreement with a communist power. The Soviets had no desire to be left out in the cold; the resultant Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) agreement of May 1972 limited the number of nuclear launchers on both sides and led, inexorably, to an improvement in Superpower relations. The Helsinki Accords of 1975, which guaranteed territorial integrity and human rights, marked the high water for *détente*; criticised by many as being a *de facto* victory for Soviet control over Eastern Europe, the route, thereafter, was downhill.

What changed? Following his impeachment for the Watergate affair, Nixon fell in 1974. Communist victory in Vietnam followed very closely, which, in addition to the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent economic recession, led to a retrenchment in US foreign policy, especially in fiscal expenditure. Jimmy Carter, who struggled to persuade the US public of its country's role in the world, followed the 'caretaking' Ford administration after 3 years.⁶ In the USSR, Brezhnev's increasing 'dependence on drugs led to his prolonged absences from the Politburo and to the disruption of the decision-making process in the Kremlin'.⁷ Additionally, the People's Republic of China was deep in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and the upheaval caused by Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Within this confusing and changing period, the USSR undertook to expand its sphere of influence in the Third World.

Soviet foreign policy was greatly hindered by Brezhnev's incapacitation. Its direction and implementation was left in the hands of a troika consisting of the KGB's Andropov, Foreign Minister Gromyko and Defence Minister Ustinov. In order to preserve the *status quo* within the Politburo and, therefore, their own power-base, they were keen not to be seen to collude against Brezhnev.⁸ The net result of this was a fragmented and incoherent policy. 'Gromyko, the chief...implementer of Soviet foreign policy, was interested only in great power politics. He left sub-Saharan Africa and Latin American affairs...to the foreign divisions of the KGB'.⁹ Amidst this policy-void, the compartmentalised view meant that the Kremlin saw no difficulty in cultivating European *détente* whilst simultaneously expanding its influence in the Third World. From the mid-60s Soviet military power had expanded to meet the Western

⁶ Mitchell, (2010), p. 68

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 433

⁸ Zubok, (2010), p. 90

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 93

threat. This growth, unlike the missile-centric policy of Khrushchev's, was aimed to provide balanced forces, delivering Soviet security and worthy of parity with the US. The added effect was that Brezhnev gained the allegiance of the military; 'he evidently...believed...that the achievement of superpower status and equality with the United States must be founded on a capacity to project Soviet power globally'.¹⁰ Within this expansion, the military had obtained the forces of power-projection, beyond that required to fight a European war. The blue-water Navy and strategic air forces were able to deploy Soviet fighting-forces around the world. With this background it is hardly surprising that the USSR elected to spread its influence into the Third World. Throughout these countries a growing number of Marxist movements, determined to fight for the freedom and liberation of countries or regions of Africa and the Americas, were developing. Driven by its Marxist-Leninism ideology, the Kremlin almost had an obligation to provide support. Never afraid to supply arms to the Third World, the USSR's expenditure quadrupled over the period 1966-82.¹¹ By 1975, through its recently procured strategic lift capability, the USSR had the means not only to supply arms but also to provide more tangible support.

Following 1974's left-wing military coup in Portugal, one of the new government's first actions was to announce the independence of its colonies, notably Mozambique and Angola. Whilst seeing the 'Carnation Revolution' as a fillip to the Marxist cause in Europe and mindful of Chinese advances in the region, Moscow was keen to help these newly emerging colonies and to spread its influence in southern Africa. Following South African support to factions in Angola, in 1975, the Soviet air forces airlifted 11000 Cuban troops in order to counter the 5000 South African forces in the country.¹² However, this support was with Cuban, not Soviet troops, apart from a small cadre of advisers. The Soviets, willing to help in principle, and to the extent of providing logistics, were not prepared to escalate to the use of combat troops; Fidel Castro, however, had no such qualms. This differentiation can, perhaps, illustrate the Kremlin's ability to separate the principles of *détente* from its ideological support to the revolutionary factions of the world. 'The Soviet Union, however, saw no incompatibility between intervention in Angola and commitment to *détente*. The Soviet Union had never, Brezhnev asserted, undertaken to abandon support for liberation struggles'.¹³ However, it is, probably, a stronger indication of the compartmentalisation of Soviet foreign policy by 1975, with the KGB acting with little apparent regard to the Foreign Ministry.

¹⁰ Crockatt (1995), p.258

¹¹ Zubok, (2010), p. 101

¹² Crockatt (1995), p. 280

¹³ *ibid*, p. 282

The logistical support was repeated in 1977 when a similar number of Cubans were transported to Ethiopia in order to fight in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Whilst this support could be viewed as more clear-cut, as it was at the behest of the Ethiopian government facing an aggressive neighbour, the episode sums up the complexity of the Cold war during this period. The overthrow of Haile Selassie's Western-looking government with a Marxist-Leninist military leadership in 1974 was welcomed by Moscow and condemned by the US who, in view of the new regime's record on human rights, withdrew aid. When overtures were made for Soviet support against Somalia action in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, Moscow had to choose between the two African nations. Initially attempting to balance, they came down on the side of Ethiopia and provided arms and logistical support for 15000 Cuban troops. With this, Moscow lost the support of Somalia who, in a reversal of regional allegiances, turned to the US for aid. The US, initially reluctant to be involved, acted to reassure its regional, strategic allies, thus elevating this somewhat insignificant spat to the status of East-West confrontation. The link between Soviet adventurism and the prospect for progress on other issues was made by National Security Adviser, Brzezinski.¹⁴ Ultimately, Moscow gained the charge of a poor, needy nation of limited value to the USSR, whilst surrendering the strategic seaport of Berbera on the Horn of Africa and the entrance to the Red Sea; tactical gain for strategic loss for incoherent Soviet foreign opportunism.

Détente, in the US, was Nixon's baby. He had overseen its gestation and birth with *rapprochement* with China and the signing of the SALT I agreement in 1972. By 1974 he was impeached and discredited. Whilst his chosen successor, Gerald Ford, continued the administration's Republican policies, *détente* was beginning to wane, largely due to its close links with Nixon. It was seen, in some circles, as somewhat secretive and underhand, indicative of the man who championed it. The 1973 oil crisis, and subsequent recession, followed by communist victory in Vietnam in 1975 led to an introspective US foreign policy. The perception of defeat and of the spread of Marxist-Leninist ideology by the communist nations was compounded by Congress's desire to rein in the hitherto Presidential preserve of foreign policy-making and to limit the President's war-making ability. As such, in 1975 it withheld appropriations for support to Saigon and to US-supported factions in Angola. Additionally, in 1972, it passed the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which linked the possibility of the USSR attaining Most Favoured Nation status with the human rights of Russian Jews.¹⁵

¹⁴ Njølstad (2010), p. 147

¹⁵ Crockatt (1995), p. 255

This amendment was viewed by Moscow as a direct interference in its internal affairs and signalled an apparent US disregard for *détente*.

When Jimmy Carter was elected in 1977, it was on a pro-human rights ticket. His presidency and foreign policy handling has been viewed as weak and indecisive but it is symptomatic of the confused period up to 1980. Moscow's adventurism was seen by some as a deliberate act to create a communist world in the strategic Middle East and Africa. 'Arc of crisis' was a term coined at the time of Iranian unrest in late 1978 referring to the region spreading from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa.¹⁶ The term was subsequently used to suggest Soviet adventurism within this region, and supposes that the events of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were linked by a coordinated anti-American agenda, along with a Soviet drive for Middle Eastern oil. Coupled with the Sandinista success in Nicaragua in 1979 and its turning to the USSR for support, the confused and paranoid attitudes within the US State Department are apparent; a siege mentality was, perhaps, inevitable, but this ignores the quiet successes of the Carter Administration. The signing of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace deal had defused a significant source of Cold War tension, which had lasted 30 years. Significantly, it had brought Egypt, a major Arab nation, into the US fold and away from Soviet influence. The Hawks of Congress would, perhaps, have wished for a Nixon-style interventionist approach by Carter but that was not his Administration's style. He desired 'to downplay the Soviet problem and East-West conflict in general' and to pursue the advancement of human rights.¹⁷ Paradoxically, it was this policy, which along with the Jackson-Vanik amendment, the Soviets viewed as internal meddling, thus raising the tension and engendering further distrust.

1979 was a pivotal year for international relations. Washington saw the Iranian Revolution and toppling of the Shah, a stabling influence in the regional, as another blow against the West. The subsequent humiliation of the US by the taking of the Embassy hostages and the failed rescue attempt (1980) served to highlight the failure of the Carter Presidency. The discovery of a Soviet brigade of combat-ready troops in Cuba pointed toward the wilful adventurism of the USSR in an exceptionally sensitive country. 'Opponents of *détente*... could be expected to, and did, make a meal out of the crisis.'¹⁸ The fact that Soviet troops had been in Cuba since 1962 was lost on those who wished to make trouble for *détente* and Carter.

¹⁶ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1979-03-01/arc-crisis-its-central-sector> 05/06/2020

¹⁷ Crockatt (1995), p. 256

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 296

When Soviet troops rolled into Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979, ‘the only intervention of Soviet troops outside Eastern Europe during the Cold War’, *détente* was finished.¹⁹

Afghanistan, the southerly neighbour of the USSR, had, in 1979, a recently installed, pro-Moscow government. Insecure, it had suffered from the Iranian Revolution on its borders and was for this reason that the USSR acted to shore up its ally. Following the death of hundreds of Soviet advisors in the Afghan city of Herat, in March 1979, the Politburo had met in emergency session to decide what to do.²⁰ The decision to send in troops was not made lightly. ‘In fact, the Kremlin sent troops to Afghanistan with a sense of deep foreboding to shore up a most shaky ally on its increasingly treacherous border with Iran. The Soviets were propelled by weakness, not adventurism. That is not how the Americans saw it.’²¹ This act of betrayal by Brezhnev was the final straw for President Carter. Seen as deliberate expansionism into the south and, possibly the Indian Ocean, the US withdrew support for the SALT II talks, halted grain exports and, along with many Western Nations, boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics. ‘By the end of 1980, US-Soviet relations were freezing’.²² The New Cold War had begun.

The Soviet leadership had seen no problem with the parallel continuance of *détente* and its support to the Marxist revolutionary movements around the world. Whilst *détente* was between the superpowers, the USSR believed that it had nothing to do with its support for the advancement of the wider Marxist world. The US saw the two as intrinsically linked and the USSR’s intervention in the Third World as blatant adventurism in the face of cordial international relations. It was this fundamental difference in the interpretation of the word, which was the root cause of its downfall. Perhaps it was, therefore, wise that ‘President Ford, in 1976, actually banished the very word itself from the [US] administration’s vocabulary’, although too late to have prevented it from becoming a dirty word.²³

The influence of Vietnam on the psyche cannot be underestimated in the 1970s. The first loss of a war in the US’s history, coupled with the coincident recession created, in part by Vietnam, but mainly from the quadrupling of oil prices following the Middle East crises of 1973, created a sense of foreign policy failure which was to last until the Reagan years. In turn, this forged a belief that the USSR was out to exploit the situation and that every

¹⁹ Mitchell, (2010), p. 84

²⁰ Mitchell (2010), p. 83

²¹ *ibid*, p. 85

²² Njølstad (2010), p. 135

²³ McMahon (2003), p. 133

excursion into the Third World was an attempt to take over the world, at the expense, or even under the cover, of *détente*. Congress's unprecedented intrusion into the previously presidential domain of US foreign affairs stemmed from a belief that the Executive had exceeded its brief during Vietnam and that it needed the restraint of the Capitol, especially in light of the increasing Soviet threat from adventurism. Whilst it is true that Congress's linking of trade relations to Jewish human rights did nothing to help *détente*, this ignores the truth that the Soviet economy had peaked and was in decline by the late-70s. The sense of losing was misplaced. The US had notable successes during this period, such as the Egypt-Israel peace deal, which elbowed the Soviets out of Egypt and into US patronage, whilst the USSR's pyrrhic victory in Ethiopia had lost them the support of Somali and the strategic seaports that it could offer. Soviet expansion into the Third World had lacked strategic vision and created tension for very little gain, but it wasn't a deliberate, distinct foreign policy. 'It seems safe to conclude that the Soviet Union did show an increased propensity to project its power because both the means and the opportunity were there. Opportunism rather than the existence of a coordinated plan, however, explains the timing and character of its interventions.'²⁴ The US view also neatly ignores its own involvement in the Third World, such as the covert ousting of Allende in Chile in 1973 and its increased support to the Iranian Shah.

'The Soviet Union could hardly resist exploiting situations as they came up. Soviet policy was thus...essentially reactive.'²⁵ The Kremlin leadership, in the latter half of the 70s was dysfunctional and incoherent; its foreign policy followed suit. Opportunistic, it saw gains to be made in the light of the US's retrenchment. Whilst these opportunities were deliberate, they were not deliberately designed to alienate the West as Moscow saw *détente* as separate to its 'obligations' to help the emerging nations of Africa. *Détente* was a process that was intended to be a means to an end, that is, the ending of mutual distrust and, ultimately, the Cold War. The two protagonists never mutually understood its definition; the term widened over the years and developed into an insurmountable obstacle. 'In creating new mutual obligations and commitments, *détente* itself had generated new sources of tension. The paradoxical effect of *détente* was to tighten rather than loosen the knot binding the superpowers together.'²⁶

²⁴ Crockatt (1995), p.260

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Crockatt (1995), p.260

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