

## American Foreign Policy 1973-1989 | Sample Answer

### **‘What were the main developments that took place in American foreign policy during the years 1973-1989?’ (2013 mock)**

The Vietnam war was a turning point in post WW2 US foreign policy. The failure of the TET offensive and the realisation that America wasn't winning the war, allied with the huge cost and general unpopularity of the war, resulted in Lyndon Johnson not running for re-election. Nixon, on becoming president, promised a policy of Vietnamization a withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, while continuing to assist the South Vietnamese financially and politically. This also signified an overall policy shift in foreign relations. Nixon sought to set up diplomatic relations with China and to further maintain improved political ties with the Soviet Union.

By 1972, only 63,000 US troops remained in Vietnam. Then the US and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. Nixon called it 'peace with honour' but 40% of South Vietnam was lost to the North. In 1975, North Vietnam attacked again and united North and South Vietnam under a communist leadership. The US may have lost the Vietnam war and it may have been a failure for the policy of containment as they also took Laos and Cambodia but this was a significant development for US foreign policy.

As the USA was withdrawing from Vietnam, President Nixon attempted to ease tensions between USA and USSR. This became known as the policy of Detente. Talks began between the superpower leaders Nixon and Brezhnev in Moscow. This led to the signing of the first strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in 1972, also known as SALT I. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the policy of Détente was very popular in the USA and a significant development in US foreign policy and also led Nixon to secure a second term as president in 1972.

The period of Détente had moments of tension, however. The Yom Kippur War erupted between Israel and the surrounding Arab states in 1973. The USSR had provided a large amount of military equipment to Egypt and Syria which resulted in both countries launching a military attack on Israel. Israel was the USA's closest ally in the Middle East and the Nixon administration backed Israel in the conflict. The conflict led to a rapid increase in tensions between the two

superpowers. blaming the USA for the military victory of Israel, the Arab countries in the Middle East imposed an oil embargo on the USA which led to a subsequent economic crisis. Tensions eventually eased when Nixon re-established diplomatic relations with Egypt.

President Gerald Ford continued Nixon's policy of Détente after Nixon was forced to resign due to the Watergate scandal in 1974. He relied on Henry Kissinger as his Secretary of State and this provided continuity of policy. Détente took a major step when Ford and Brezhnev, along with 33 other government leaders signed the Helsinki Final Agreement in 1975. They agreed to respect each other's borders, which applied particularly to Europe, to allow freedom of travel and encourage trade and cultural links and most importantly to respect human rights.

President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy differed from that of Nixon and Ford. He wanted a foreign policy based on moral principles of right and wrong. This put pressure on Détente as Carter wanted to reduce arms and was critical of the USSR over its treatment of dissidents. He did not involve the Soviet Union in the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. Then talks of the SALT agreement returned slowly. The US once again played the China card when the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping visited the US. The Soviet Union feared isolation again and soon an agreement on a second strategic arms limitation treaty was reached with the US in 1979. This was known as SALT II.

SALT II put a limit on missiles and bombers of 2,400 per country. This did not stop the USSR, however, installing SS-20 missiles. SALT II was also criticised in the US where liberals said it did not go far enough while the conservative right wing said it went too far. Where Carter made an attempt at pleasing everybody, it turned out he pleased nobody.

However, even the limited agreement was halted when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and Congress refused to ratify the treaty. In his State of the Union speech, Carter said the Soviet invasion was "the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War". He caused relations with the Soviet Union to deteriorate by suspending grain sales to that country and by boycotting the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980. This was the end of détente and an extremely significant development in US foreign policy.

Tensions and developments continued with President Reagan. He called the Soviet Union "the evil empire" and began a huge build-up of arms. Mistrust between the two sides led to the failure of the Strategic Arms Reduction talks, also known as START. Reagan wanted to use the arms

race to force the Soviet Union to agree to arms reduction because they could not afford to compete. Reagan announced that the US was developing the Strategic Defence Initiative, popularly called Star Wars, in 1983. This was a plan to develop a defence shield in space which would destroy any missiles fired at the US. Some scientists doubted if the US could develop such a shield. Others said they could and that it would make all Soviet missiles obsolete.

Star Wars was a barrier to US-Soviet agreement when Reagan and Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader met in Geneva and Reykjavik. Gorbachev objected to extending the arms race into space, while Reagan said the US would share the Star Wars technology. But Gorbachev did not believe him. However, agreement was eventually reached in 1987 when they signed the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty in Washington. This led to the dismantling of the Soviet SS-20 missiles and the US Pershing missiles in Europe. But Reagan still refused to abandon the Star Wars project.

The significance of Gorbachev coming to power as Russian premier cannot be overstated. Soviet leadership became less willing to suppress domestic pressures for increased political freedom. Eastern bloc-countries were now allowed to choose their own path in free elections and in 1989 the Berlin wall, a major symbol of the cold war had crumbled. Within the next two years the Soviet Union disintegrated economically and politically and collapsed at the end of 1991. This significantly left the US as the dominant global power and cold war victor. However, I believe that the plethora of significant developments of US foreign policy which led to this victory throughout the years of 1973 to 1989 was primarily due to the instability of the president and shifting point of views and political opinions from presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan.