

What were the main developments in US foreign policy between 1973 and 1989?

The period 1973-89 saw many changes to US foreign policy. The cold war certainties which had dictated the policies of successive presidents from Truman to Johnson began to be eroded. This was primarily prompted by the end of the Second World War. For many in America and across the globe, the Vietnam War illustrated that the clash between the superpowers was more complex than a mere battle of good versus evil. People also began to re-evaluate whether it was securing 'political freedom for distant countries was worth American lives. Voter disenchantment and increasing congressional oversight also had an impact on foreign policy, while issues such as poverty, education and civil rights occupied the electorate more than the long-running feud with the USSR. All this meant that, while the USA and USSR remained ideologically opposed, in general (and with some exceptions) tensions thawed between 1973 and 1989.

When Nixon came to power in '73 he was determined to learn from the mistakes of his predecessors. Johnson had lost the favour of the electorate because of the Vietnam War. Therefore, Nixon committed himself to a policy of Vietnamization i.e. transforming the ARVN (the army of South Vietnam) into a well-supported, effective fighting force and withdrawing American soldiers from the conflict. This strategy was part of the wider Nixon Doctrine- a plan to supply military aid, but not troops, to countries fighting communist expansion. This was a significant shift from the Truman Doctrine of the 1950s. By 1971 Nixon had withdrawn almost

half of the 550,000 soldiers in Vietnam and on the 29th March 1973 the last American troops pulled out. He hoped to achieve 'peace with honour' at the Paris Peace talks, but this uneasy peace between North and South Vietnam only lasted until 1975 when soviet backed north Vietnamese troops overran the country. This exposed the inherent weaknesses of the Nixon Doctrine.

Another significant Nixon-era foreign policy development was the improvement in US-Sino relations. The US had largely ignored the People's Republic since the fall of China in 1949. Nixon opened up diplomatic relations by first sending his foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger and later visiting China himself. He did this for three reasons; to boost his election prospects, improve foreign trade and play the USSR and PRC against each other (though they were both communist, there was an intense rivalry between Russia and China). This policy of détente with China worked extremely well. It forced Russian to the negotiating table, since they were afraid of becoming politically isolated. This culminated in the visit of Leonid Brezhnev to Washington in 1973, and the first major arms reduction agreement between the US and the USSR; SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty).

However two major foreign policy incidents in Nixon's time seemed to threaten détente. In 1973 the USSR objected with moral righteousness when Nixon used the CIA to undermine the democratically elected socialist leader of Chile, Salvador Allende. Another more serious threat came when the two superpowers supported different sides in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. When a soviet merchant vessel was targeted by Israeli weapons (supplied by the US), the USSR threatened to intervene directly. However a series of effective shuttle talks by Kissinger served to deescalate the brewing conflict.

When Gerald Ford assumed office after Nixon's resignation, he was committed to the established policies of détente. This was illustrated by the 1975 Helsinki agreement, whereby the US, the USSR and 33 other countries pledged to respect others borders, uphold human rights and encourage travel and trade. Ford also continued Nixon's pioneering work on the SALT project by meeting with the soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev in Vladivostok in 1974. The warmer relations between the two countries were highlighted by the 1975 joint Apollo-Soyuz test project, where the two countries conducted shared experiments in space.

Jimmy Carter was a Democrat whose policies differed greatly from conservatives like Nixon and Ford. He pursued a foreign policy based on moral principle rather than the realpolitik principles employed by the previous administrations. In 1979 he signed the SALT II agreement which put a limit of 2400 nuclear missile and bombers per country, thus eliminating the concept of overkill. However, Carter was not so successful in other areas of foreign policy. He failed to resolve the Iranian hostage situation where American embassy officials were kept hostage for over 100 days. In 1979 détente finally snapped when the USSR launched an invasion of Afghanistan. The USA supplied arms to the local 'mujahedeen' to fight the Russians. This undid much of the good work of the previous decade.

When Ronald Reagan came to power he deliberately moved away from détente and pursued a policy of massive military spending. This led to the largest ever peacetime defence budget. At the same time he sought to ensure American security by developing the strategic defence initiative (star wars), a series of orbiting satellites, lasers and rocket which would, in theory shoot down any oncoming ICBMs. This never came to fruition. Reagan pursued a policy of 'peace through strength' since he was confident that the by now ailing soviet economy could not keep up with a vital capitalist society.

However from 1985, Reagan toned down his aggressive rhetoric (having once called the USSR an "evil empire" which would be consigned to the "ash heap of history"). Relations between the two countries again began to improve as the new premier Mikhail Gorbachov introduced his Glasnost and Perestroika reforms. This was underscored by the signing of the Intermediate Nuclear Force treaty (INF) which led to the dismantling of SS-20 and Pershing missile sites in Europe. In 1989, after years of building pressure, the Berlin Wall fell and the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics soon followed.

There were very many significant foreign policy developments between '73 and '89. For the most part these pointed the superpowers away from the mutually assured destruction of the 1960s and towards a more peaceful coexistence. Reagan's policy helped accelerate the destruction of the USSR by running its armament industry to the ground. These developments culminated in a diplomatic victory for the US.