

National Security Strategy: The Rise and Fall of Détente, 1971-1980

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Overview We study the long decline of American foreign policy under Nixon, Ford, and Carter. This was the period that witnessed the worst defeats for the United States, and the rise of the Soviet Union as a global power.

Any nation that decides the only way to achieve peace is through peaceful means is a nation that will soon be a piece of another nation.

Richard Nixon

The Vietnam War did have bad consequences for the United States, both internally and internationally. Domestically, the government managed to squander the enormous reservoir of goodwill that had been built up after the Great Depression and the Second World War. Cynicism and apathy combined with suspicion and distrust for the “feds,” especially after the Watergate scandal that resulted in Nixon’s resignation. The war was costly, wreaked havoc with the economy, and Nixon’s controversial price ceilings did not help much. The pent up forces for racial equality erupted, and the country was reeling from the violence that accompanied the changes.

On the world scene, the U.S. had demonstrated a weakness that some considered fatal. It had waged an overt, brutal war, in which millions died, both soldiers and civilians. It had military, technological, and economic superiority. The U.S. had fought a backward nation. And it lost. It was perhaps no big secret that the Soviets and the Chinese both assisted North Vietnam, so in some ways this was a Cold War conflict by proxy.

The loss emboldened the Soviets and their sympathizers. The Russians had been rapidly developing their own military capabilities in the aftermath of the Cuban Crisis of 1962. Their soldiers could receive training by covert direct participation in the Vietnam War (e.g. operating SAM sites shooting at American warplanes). They could test new technology in actual combat, and they had succeeded in propping a friendly regime against the power of the U.S. By any account, they had done good for themselves, especially because the Americans, distracted by the war, found it necessary to lessen tensions with the Russians for the time being.

1 The Nixon Presidency

Nixon inherited the fragmented détente but he and Kissinger were determined to “manage” the Soviets as they emerged as a superpower. Because the new strength of the Soviet Union meant that the old US policies conducted from a position of military superiority were no longer tenable, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger decided to make a deal with the Russians: the Soviets could get economic help if they cooperated. However, Nixon was reluctant to deal with the Soviets in the immediate aftermath of the Czech invasion. Instead, Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger sought containment on the cheap—the US would retain its global obligations but with new policies.

The **Nixon Doctrine** stated that the US would pull back some of its military commitments while at the same time helping certain friends take up the burden

of containment. Among the predictable results: it (i) caused a tremendous surge in overseas sales of American military equipment, producing a dangerous buildup in the Middle East (the shah of Iran was ordering equipment “as if he was going through the Sears catalog”); (ii) encouraged nations like Iran to raise oil prices to pay for expensive US goods; (iii) strained relations with countries, like Japan, that did not want to take up the burdens of containment; and (iv) put Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in cahoots with some rather unsavory characters like the shah of Iran or white supremacist regimes in Africa (Angola, South Africa).

All this did not exactly prevent the regime from doing some rather shady things around the world. For example, when the Chileans elected the socialist Salvador Allende president, Nixon resolved to remove him by nearly any means possible. Kissinger had the CIA approach the head of the Chilean Army for a coup, but when he refused, he was quickly assassinated (with weapons and money supplied by the CIA), and Augusto Pinochet then proceeded with the coup in 1973. The CIA-engineered overthrow of a democratically-elected president turned Chile into one of the most repressive and brutal dictatorships at the time, with the Pinochet regime persecuting and “disappearing” thousands.

The one thing Richard Nixon did right was to befriend China. Given his anti-communist credentials, Richard Nixon could not be labeled an appeaser and so he easily overcame opposition from the China Lobby at home. The Chinese were also ready to talk (they had been for years) as the Sino-Soviet split was now a gaping hole: over 1 million Soviet troops camped along their common border, and armed clashes were common.

Richard Nixon’s trip to China in 1972 was a huge success. The friendship treaty opened up trade, the People’s Republic of China entered the United Nations and assumed Chiang’s seat. All of this obviously made the Russians very nervous. The Soviets were now quite eager to talk.

1.1 Rise of Dètente

From the Soviet perspective, of four crucial areas, the Soviet Union was doing relatively fine in just one. The four essential areas were (i) the military, (ii) Eastern Europe, (iii) Sino-Soviet relations, and (iv) the economy.

The military was doing great. Brezhnev, who believed in huge defense budgets, reversed Khrushchev’s economic policies and sped up investment in things military. The 1970s were a period of unprecedented Soviet military buildup, both nuclear and conventional. Although the Soviet economy was half the size of the American, Soviet expenditures on defense exceeded American expenditures! The Russians reached parity with the US and in some ways even surpassed it.

The USSR introduced four new ICBMs, one of which, the SS-18 was scary: with throw weight seven times larger than that of Minuteman III (the largest US missile) it could carry 8 MIRVs, all of them with a larger yield than the 3 MIRVs of the

Minuteman III. The MIRVs—multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles—were a revolutionary innovation. Each missile normally carried one warhead, which was expensive and vulnerable. The MIRVs were just several warheads delivered by the same missile—they would separate from the carrier at various times during flight and get launched in different directions, with targets hundred of miles apart. Since the delivery system was the expensive component, the new technology meant that both superpowers could dramatically increase their nuclear stockpiles without great economic distress, which they promptly proceeded to do; US first (it had the MIRVs first) but closely followed by the Soviet Union once it acquired the technology.

In addition to the new ICBMs, the Soviet Navy went from being a glorified coast guard to a formidable world-class force—new SLBMs, colossal subs, aircraft carriers, and assorted specialty ships—all entered service during this time. The Soviets even narrowed the traditional US lead in bombers by producing bombers that were almost as advanced. The Russians hardened the ICBM silos even further and developed fairly advanced plans for evacuating cities in case of nuclear war.

The conventional forces were not neglected either. The army swelled to over 5 million troops. New aircraft, armor, ships, and short-range missiles were introduced, all of them of extremely high quality, many exceeding in technological innovation the best American counterparts. One notorious event was the deployment of the new SS-20 missile (1976), which was highly mobile, easily and quickly launchable, with 3 MIRVed warheads per missile, each of them highly accurate, with range sufficient to hit any target in Western Europe if launched from within the USSR.

The Europeans went ballistic. The SS-20 was a new and serious threat which NATO had nothing to counter with. In fact NATO had no missiles in the long-range theater nuclear forces (LRTNF) category. The LRTNF were Eurostrategic forces (that is, based in Europe and targeted at European cities and military installations). The Europeans, who have traditionally favored a doctrine of early use of nuclear weapons in war—the idea was to “couple” any kind of nuclear warfare in Europe to an all-out strategic war between US and the Soviet Union, thereby deterring the Soviets from attempting any adventures in Europe—now wanted more weaponry from the US that would reinforce the coupling. The US now had to deal with the Soviet Union as with an equal superpower.

In the other three areas the Soviets were not doing well. The Czech invasion was just a symptom. In 1971 Brezhnev made a deal with West Germany: West Germany recognized the boundaries imposed by the Red Army in Eastern Europe and in turn the USSR guaranteed Western access to Berlin.

The other problem area was relations with China. The new rapprochement between the US and Mao revived the ancient fear of encirclement because an anti-Russian US-Chinese cooperation was a distinct possibility. The USSR began looking for ways to engage the US so that Richard Nixon would deal with Brezhnev

rather than Mao. There was a lot to worry about: after China acquired nuclear capability in 1964, it rapidly deployed its small, but not insubstantial, nuclear force. All of it was targeted at Soviet cities.

The third problem area was the Soviet economy. The mammoth military program was taking its toll. Because of coercion and inefficiency inherent in the system, the Russian farm workers were 1/6 as productive as American farmers. The country that had the best arable land in Europe was desperately short on grain. Richard Nixon/Henry Kissinger arranged for a huge grain sale at bargain basement prices (this became known in the US as the “Great Grain Robbery”). There was a lot of diplomatic benefits to be reaped from such assistance.

1.2 SALT I

Given the problems both Nixon and Brezhnev faced, it is not surprising that they moved toward détente. It was mostly to deal with the economic strains caused by the sprawling military commitments that the two superpowers engaged in a productive way. On May 26, 1972, the two leaders signed a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I), which froze the number of missiles to 1,054 ICBMs for US and 1,618 for the Soviet Union (710 SLBMs for US vs. 950 SLBMs for Soviet Union). In addition, SALT I indefinitely prohibited both sides from deploying ABM systems.

The first limitation was bogus. Since SALT I limited the number of missiles and not warheads, the development of MIRVs meant that both sides could produce monstrous nuclear stockpiles, limited only by their ability to MIRV the ICBMs and SLBMs. Since SALT I permitted unlimited substitution of newer weapons for older, this meant that once this technology became available, it would be utilized. This is exactly what happened. The arms race did not stop.

The ABM restriction is more interesting. Although the Soviets had deployed two such systems around Leningrad and Moscow, neither side had nationwide ABM systems (Nixon was building Safeguard to protect US missile fields). Although not absolute (it permitted the small systems to stay), the ABM prohibition restricted the small existing systems from growing larger, and banned altogether nationwide systems.

This was the logic of deterrence. If the Soviet Union did not have an ABM system, it was more vulnerable to US attack. Knowing this, the Soviets would be more restrained in their foreign policy and so would be easier to deter. Similarly, making the US vulnerable makes it easier to deter the US as well.

The Moscow summit (Richard Nixon was the first US President to go there) was a huge success. Brezhnev carried the policy of détente through the Party Congress. Neither the USSR nor China did much to retaliate for American bombing and mining in Vietnam when Nixon intensified it. Richard Nixon’s policy had worked. At home, with the help of a carefully-timed announcement by Henry Kissinger that “peace was at hand,” Richard Nixon easily won reelection. He was at the peak of

his power (what this really meant we'll find out in the years to come; even now the declassified documents on Richard Nixon/Henry Kissinger's involvements in Chile, Indonesia, and elsewhere are quite troubling).

And then, like in a second-rate Greek tragedy, the Presidency collapsed. In mid-1973 Congress began hearings on the Watergate break-in of 1972. Nixon tried to cover up his involvement but Congress had turned belligerent. It passed a series of legislations designed to curb the imperial presidency.

1.3 The Collapse of the Imperial Presidency

In 1971 Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that both Richard Nixon and LBJ abused. It also outlawed military involvement in Africa without its express consent. And then, The War Powers Act of 1973 required that "in every possible instance" the President must consult Congress before sending troops into hostilities; when the President commits the forces, he must send a full explanation to Congress within 60 days unless Congress gives him permission to keep them in battle. Despite its apparent assertiveness, the act was a paper tiger—it was not difficult to circumvent (as several presidents have done) and it in fact gave the President the power to wage war for 60 days without Congressional approval, a power that the Constitution does not give him.

Nixon's troubles were far from over. The House, fed up with the constant stream of lies emanating from the White House, prepared articles of impeachment. Richard Nixon became increasingly unstable emotionally but on August 9, 1974, he was finally persuaded to resign, which he did and Ford became president, issuing a preemptive pardon to end the investigations.

Not before long, the Nixon/Kissinger policies began falling apart. The US had concentrated its attention on the USSR and China but it was the Third World that was causing trouble, particularly the Middle East.

2 The Yom Kippur War

After the 1967 Six Days War, Egypt embarked on a policy of continuous shelling of Israeli positions along the Suez Canal (now occupied by the Israelis). Because direct engagement of the formidable IDF had proven fruitless once and again, the Egyptian president Gamal Nasser decided to chip away at Israeli morale, and their economy which he thought could not endure a lengthy **War of Attrition**.

This undeclared war lasted for three years until the death of Nasser (9/28/70). The new Egyptian president Anwar Sadat proposed negotiations to Israel but only after the latter withdrew from lands taken in 1967. These territories were significant for Israel had made gains not only on the West Bank (an area perhaps 1/3 of its pre-1967 size) but also in the Sinai Peninsula, where the size of the occupied territory exceeded Israel's own size. Having paid dearly for evacuating the area after the

1956 war (the Egyptians had threatened the vital Gulf of Aqaba, the entryway to the important Israeli port of Elat), Israel refused. There was no sense in relinquishing strategic advantage for a temporary truce with Egypt when there was no chance of a permanent peace with the other Arab states.

The Egyptians, supplied by the Soviets, began planning a new war. However when Sadat declared that Egypt would go to war unless Israel withdrew unilaterally from the territories occupied in 1967, the Soviets back-pedalled. At this point, détente was too precious to be squandered like that, and so the Russians rejected Egyptians' demands for more weapons and public support for their cause. Sadat responded by expelling 20,000 Soviet advisers. Despite Sadat's repeated threats, the Israelis did not take him seriously.

On October 6, 1973, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the Egyptians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Saudi Arabians and the Syrians fell upon Israel. This time, Israeli intelligence had failed to give sufficient warning and before mobilization plans kicked into action, the Arabs drove back IDF in a surprising show of strength. The Egyptians burst across the canal and took a strip of land about 15 km deep on the east side. The Syrians attacked across the Golan Heights, whittling the Israeli defenses down to a single tank. The situation became desperate, the myth of Israeli military invincibility was shattered.

However, it was more than a myth. Israel's reservists were called up and within days, the IDF managed to regroup, and then began pursuing the Arabs back. By the 11th, the Syrians were pushed back across the border, and IDF crossed into Syria themselves, reaching within 40 kms of Damascus before the fighting stopped. In the Sinai, a division led by **Ariel Sharon** bridged the canal into Africa, cutting the Egyptian supply lines, and encircling their army. The surrounded Egyptian army was threatened with complete annihilation, opening all Egypt to invasion. The Soviets panicked—their protégé was being pulverized. Brezhnev declared that if the US would not help broker an immediate cease-fire, the USSR would act alone and impose one.

Nixon (through Kissinger) warned the Russians to stay out—US nuclear forces went on alert and it appeared that the Middle East would drag the world into the conflagration of a war between the superpowers. Simultaneously, however, the US pressured Israel into accepting a cease-fire. The reluctant Israelis, who depended heavily on US support, agreed, and fighting ended on October 24. On March 5, 1974 Israeli forces withdrew from the west bank. It took two years to work out the details but the parties failed to find the key to a full settlement. Israel kept most of the Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

Although the Arabs were just as determined to wipe out Israel, they had seen that even a well-planned attack on a relatively unprepared IDF could not succeed. The Egyptians resolved to try a different route to get the Sinai back: negotiations. The **Camp David Accords**, signed by Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin on September 17, 1978 (following secret negotiations at Camp David un-

der the auspices of Jimmy Carter) established several important precedents. First, in the Israel-Egypt peace treaty (3/26/79), Egypt recognized Israel's right to exist and promised not to attack it again. In return, Israel returned the entire Sinai Peninsula, dismantled (some forcibly) all its settlements there, and recognized autonomy for the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This was the first **land-for-peace** exchange in the region. Sadat and Begin shared the Nobel peace prize. Unfortunately, when in 1981 Sadat cracked down on Muslim organizations, he was assassinated by members of the Islamic Jihad, which was opposed to both the crackdown and negotiations with the Israelis. However, persecution of anti-regime Islamic groups continued under Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak.

1973 also taught the US the bitter lesson Europe had to learn in 1956: support for Israel could cost them the much-needed Arab oil. When the US supplied weapons to Israel in 1973, OPEC (13 nations, dominated by Arab countries but also including Iran and Venezuela) imposed an oil embargo that threatened to strangle the Western economies. Formed in 1960 to counter the dominance of US/British/Dutch oil companies, OPEC managed to quadruple the price of oil by 1974. On January 2, 1974, Nixon lowered the maximum speed limit to 55 mph to conserve gasoline.

The Europeans, who imported 80% of their oil from the Middle East and the Japanese, who imported 90%, began switching from pro-Israeli to pro-Arab policies. Only the US remained committed to Israel (it imported 12% from the Middle East). But the oil threat remained and even the shah of Iran, Washington's most trusted friend, remarked that it was "only fair that [the US] should pay more for oil. Let's say... 10 times more."

3 The Carter Presidency

US policy under Gerald Ford remained in Henry Kissinger's hands and was unremarkable. The Ford administration saw the collapse of South Vietnam, the domino piece that the US had tried so expensively to prop. Détente, soured by Soviet adventures in Angola, Cuba, and own internal repressions, finally fell apart completely, and along with it went the Richard Nixon/Henry Kissinger dream of "managing" the Soviets.

Nothing could save Ford's campaign in 1976 and Jimmy Carter, a complete outsider thoroughly inexperienced in foreign policy, took office. The US had gone from the dizzying heights of unchallengeable superpower to defeat in Vietnam; inflation weakened the economy; reliance on cheap gasoline was replaced by deference to Arab countries; the imperial presidency was tamed; and détente was replaced by new confrontation with the USSR. At the time the US was stumbling, the Soviets had acquired strength and prestige. There was one thing to do: run the arms race gauntlet again.

When Carter replaced Ford in 1977, détente had become a dirty word. The Sovi-

ets had used the brief respite offered by the lessening of tensions to evolve from a great regional power into a formidable truly global superpower. Where the US had attempted to use détente to “manage” this evolution, the Soviets had only seen it as an opportunity to enlist emerging third world nations in the class struggle against capitalism without, of course, risking direct military confrontation with the US. By the late 1970s, the US found a hostile power that it could no longer deal with from a position of strength. In frustration, most Americans concluded that détente was a failure. However, the nation that had just emerged from the crises of Watergate and Vietnam, now confronted a world more dangerous than ever before. How to manage it?

There were two possible solutions to this problem. One, advocated by Cyrus Vance (Carter’s Secretary of State), involved continuing negotiations and increased economic ties with the Soviets; it further required treating conflicts in the newly emerging nations as problems of nationalism, not superpower confrontation. The other view was advocated by Zbigniew Brzezinski (Carter’s National Security Adviser), and saw the world in strictly bipolar terms—it condemned détente, urged the “independence” of communist-bloc states like Romania, criticized the SALT, and insisted that every crisis in the world was a Soviet challenge. No one knew where Carter stood. It’s quite possible that Carter didn’t know where Carter stood. The president, who lacked any significant foreign policy experience, now had to manage two conflicting sources of advice.

At first he did relatively fine by following Vance’s advice. He pushed through a treaty in 1978 that returned the Canal Zone to Panama (scene of frequent anti-US riots); he ignored the presence of Soviet advisers and Cuban troops in Angola when conflict erupted between this country and the US-friendly Zaire. By refusing to treat it as a superpower confrontation, Carter allowed the war to fizzle out, which it soon did. Finally, in September 1978, Carter saw his biggest triumph when he helped Egypt’s Sadat and Israel’s PM Begin to finally end the 30-year war at Camp David. The pact provided for Egypt’s recognition of Israel and the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai.

Then it all went to hell, mostly because Carter began listening to Brzezinski, who went to China in May 1978 to begin negotiations that climaxed with the opening of formal diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979. He hoped to use the “China card” to trump the Soviets in Africa and the Middle East but it was the Chinese who used the “US card” to trump the Russians. In 1979 China invaded Vietnam after its Vice Premier visited the US, making it look like the US had approved the invasion. The Soviets were not amused; the crucial SALT process ground to a halt.

The Soviets, as usual, were having economic problems. Nobody believed in the bright communist future anymore. Russia could not feed its own population. The totalitarian system was not allowing the introduction of new technologies (e.g. computers) for fear that freedom of information would undermine it (as it did), and the economy was falling behind. The birthrate dropped and, more ominously,

infant mortality rose, and life expectancy declined to almost third-world levels. The inefficient Eastern European satellites, the falling Cuban economy, and devastated Vietnam were sucking in extraordinary amounts of resources that the USSR could ill afford.

The fear of “capitalist encirclement” was now replaced by fear of “encirclement,” capitalist, communist, nationalist, and religious. The Middle East erupted in violence at the very borders of the Soviet empire.

3.1 The Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis

Iran was still ruled by Mohammad Reza Shah, the great local friend of the U.S. who was using his country’s enormous resources to amass personal wealth, purchase enormous quantities of weapons, and generally enjoy authoritarian rule unmolested. Despite modernizing the country and his pro-Western ways, the shah had alienated most of his subjects with his political intolerance, with the stalling economy that was not yielding good prospects for many, and with the repressive brutality with which he persecuted political opponents. His secret police arrested and tortured tens of thousands, and executed many, perhaps several thousand. There was great discontent, clamoring for more political and economic freedoms, and desire for a halt to the humanitarian abuses. Unfortunately, the U.S. had almost no leverage with the shah. Ironically, because of his unflinching pro-American ways, he had lulled the U.S. into relying on him for information, making the U.S. dependent on his regime. It was no surprise that the Carter administration failed to predict the outbreak of the revolution.

When the revolution erupted on February 20, 1979, it was not the Islamic affair that it was to become. Iran had been in permanent economic crisis exacerbated by the shah’s prodigious spending on US arms and rising population that found no employment but provided willing listeners to the religious leaders. Various groups sought divergent goals: some wanted an Islamic state, others a liberal democracy, and yet third simply wanted more economic opportunity. Although these were all united by their determination to oust the shah, it was by no means clear which way the revolution would head.

In the confusion and ensuing chaos, the U.S. did not know what to do. Brzezinski urged Carter to help the shah drown the revolution in blood, and Vance urged him to distance America from the shah and engage the moderates in negotiations. The shah, however, refused to use massive force to silence the revolt, and fled into exile. He fell ill and requested permission to enter the U.S. for a surgery. When the Carter administration agreed to allow him into the U.S., the anti-American hatred fanned by the clergy in Iran became virulent: the act was perceived as a snub to the Iranian people, and, more ominously, as a sign of possible things to come, perhaps a repeat of 1953.

In this, the Iranians (as many foreigners are wont to do) completely overestimated

the extent of American power. As it happens, this would be a recurrent problem where, ironically, the belief that the U.S. is a superpower combined with an appalling ignorance of its political organization and society produces a very distorted picture of the world, where America can do whatever it pleases and can achieve whatever goals it sets of itself. In such a world, when one fails to obtain one's goal, blaming America becomes very easy. Since the U.S. could presumably do everything, it must have thwarted one, either by direct action or even through inaction. It is worth emphasizing that despite its enormous power, there are very many things that sadly remain beyond the reach of the U.S., and the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath were two among many.

At any rate, as Carter was vacillating and doing nothing, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized, and its personnel taken hostage by Islamic students. This happened on November 11, and was blessed by the emergent leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, whose strident anti-Americanism was only matched by his hatred for Iraq's Saddam Hussein. The apparent foreknowledge of the revolutionary regime and its complicity in the hostage-taking was different from the last time the embassy had been taken back on Valentine's Day. The first time it was done by non-Islamic students and Khomeini condemned the action. This time, however, he decided that some advantage could be had from humiliating the United States, which in his view richly deserved it both for its 1953 behavior and its recent admittance of the shah.

On the 12th, the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated its demands: the U.S. was to (1) return the shah for trial in Iran; (2) relinquish the shah's American assets; (3) end its interference in Iran; and (4) apologize for its past behavior. Although the first two were doable, the more important last two were problematic. First, as we have seen, one of the problems with U.S. policy for Iran was precisely its non-interference in its domestic affairs: the shah ran everything, and the U.S. could exert very little pressure on him. Second, an apology would not be forthcoming, both because the U.S. did not execute the 1953 coup but helped the shah and his military do it, but also because such apologies are true rarities in world politics because of the moral advantage they confer on the recipients. And it is unlikely to achieve anything in lessening hostility. When Clinton's Secretary of State Albright made an appeasing speech in 2000 and acknowledged the U.S. support for the 1953 coup, Ayatollah Khamenei responded angrily with "What good does this admission—that you acted this way then—do us now? [...] An admission years after the crime was committed, while they might be committing similar crimes now, will not do the Iranian nation any good." And this guy is supposedly more moderate than Khomeini.

The Carter administration considered several options: coercive military strikes on military and economic targets, a blockade, mining of Iran's harbors, seizure of strategic territory to hamper imports and commerce, and a covert rescue mission. The latter was dismissed almost immediately because of its infeasibility: Tehran is

deep inside the country and far from a port of entry by American special forces. This means the helicopters would have to be resupplied en route, and the extraction will be quite risky. The chances were very slim (even though the Israelis had recently pulled off a spectacular evacuation in Africa). It is interesting that in the end it would be attempted anyway. The other options Carter rejected because each carried a high risk that the students could respond by starting to kill the hostages, and the President had made getting them home unharmed his top priority. Some less clearly belligerent option would have to be found.

The option turned out to be mild economic and political pressure. The U.S. began a boycott of Iranian oil, but this was simply a preemptive move to Khomeini's own plan to stop selling oil to America. It would not hurt either country: the U.S. could always buy its oil from others, and that included Iranian oil through re-sellers. Carter then froze Iranian assets in American banks, somewhere close to \$12 billion. He also managed to get the U.N. to agree and pass a resolution that condemned the taking of hostages and ordered Iran to release them. This had a predictable effect of not accomplishing anything. Finally, the U.S. attempted to implement economic sanctions by curtailing trade everything excluding humanitarian assistance). But for economic sanctions to work, the Europeans and the Japanese had to agree to cooperate, and they would not. So in the end, the U.S. could not put enough coercive pressure on Iran, and predictably failed to obtain the hostages' release.

On April 7, 1980, the exasperated Carter broke diplomatic relations with Iran. The time had come to attempt to force a resolution. On the 25th, the rescue plan code-named Eagle Claw went into action and spectacularly failed midway when the local commander aborted it due to extremely bad weather that had caused the crash of a helicopter and the death of eight soldiers. Although this did nothing to improve the U.S. position, the Europeans had slowly agreed to support some limited sanctions, and economic pressure could therefore be expected to finally get some bite.

The situation further changed on September 22 when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in his ill-fated attempt at *blitzkrieg*. Iran now found itself at war, and needed to end its international political and economic isolation if it was to have any hope of surviving it. The hostages had become a great liability. Saddam Hussein, it must be noted, had picked a good time for the war and had good reasons to wage it. Iran appeared weak and chaotic, still reeling in the revolutionary throes, without clearly defined commanding authority in place. It was disorganized and many seemed to resent the Ayatollah, perhaps to the point of mounting a revolt against his shaky rule. Further, the ayatollahs had called out to Muslims everywhere to repeat their, by now Islamic, revolution, and overthrow their secular leaders. Hussein, whose supporting Sunni minority lorded it over a large Shia majority, was not amused. To add insult to injury, Khomeini specifically pointed to Hussein, fingering him for a target of *jihād*. Iran was exporting a dangerous philosophy. Further, it presented a juicy target. The region of Khuzestan is to the west of the Zagros Mountains, which means

it is relatively undefended against a land invasion by Iraq but, once conquered, could be defended against the rest of Iran. Khuzestan was tempting because it had a large number of Arabs (who would support a fellow Arab regime against the Persians), and a lot of oil that would dramatically expand Iraq's production and income. So Hussein had all the reasons to want to invade: good payoff from victory, high probability of success, high costs of inaction. As we shall see, it did not turn out quite that way, leading to one of the longest wars in recent history.

The last contributing factor to Iran's decision to release the hostages was Carter himself, or rather, his failure to win re-election. Iran perceived this as the retribution for 1953, it was believed (with very little basis in reality) that Carter's inability to resolve the hostage crisis had caused his fall. So Iran could congratulate itself on having forced an American President out of office. Therefore, the hostages had served some purpose. Perhaps more importantly, the new President Reagan had won on a platform that emphasized American strength and assertiveness. He was not going to be the meek, indecisive, and inactive opponent Carter had been.

Not surprisingly then, negotiations proceeded apace, and the hostages were released unharmed on January 21, 1981, exactly 444 days after they had become pawns in this stand-off. The final agreement did not give the Iranians anything. There was no apology, and no return of the shah. The U.S. did promise non-interference, which amounted to following its previous policy. And although the U.S. agreed to unfreeze the Iranian assets, it only released a small portion, holding the rest as collateral for Iranian obligations.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the resolution of the crisis was largely caused by external factors (Iraq's invasion) and internal developments (Reagan's victory) that had nothing to do with the coercive strategies pursued by the government. In other words, this was a clear example of the limits of American power and what it could achieve.

3.2 The Bad Year of 1979

The Iranian Revolution was not the only event that rocked 1979. In July, the revolutionary Sandinista forces overthrew the dictatorial Somoza dynasty which had been ruling Nicaragua with considerable US support for 40 years. This civil war had lasted over 20 years. When Carter failed to mobilize Latin American countries to intervene in Nicaragua, he asked Congress for \$75 million of aid to buy the Sandinistas off. They refused (the US had been helping Somoza kill them for two decades). Although they were neutral at first, the Sandinista government soon drew toward Cuba, and in 1980 supplied with arms the revolutionaries in El Salvador, a country which was ruled by the most brutal military regime in Latin America. Even Carter had cut US aid to it but once the revolutionaries launched a major offensive in January 1981, he quickly began aiding the military regime. We shall have an occasion to return to Nicaragua under Reagan.

Then on December 27, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Carter's entire foreign policy, never coherent to begin with, fell completely apart. Afghanistan had begun moving away from Soviet influence. To Brezhnev, who saw only hostile Chinese and fanatical Iranians, this country appeared a crucial pivot in the region. He soon overruled his military which strongly objected to the invasion. Soon their fears were justified and the Soviet Union found itself mired in a costly 10-year war with determined Muslim guerrillas, supported and trained by the Americans. In fact, recent revelations by Brzezinski show that the US administration was fully aware that its support for the Muslim rebels could trigger a Soviet invasion, yet it deliberately began doing just that in the late 1970s. U.S. spending on Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan and Afghanistan sky-rocketed to \$40 billion.

You could say that 1979 was a bad year. On January 23, 1980 the president announced his own **Carter Doctrine** warning the Soviets to stay away from Iran and Iraq: "an attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the USA, and such assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

Carter, who had begun increasing military spending in mid 1979, now accelerated it by ordering massive new forces to be built to fight a prolonged limited nuclear war. The presidential directive, PD-59 (July 1980), was quickly compared to NSC-68 but Paul Nitze, the author of the latter one, was one of the most outspoken critics of Carter's weak world leadership that was allowing the US to fall behind the USSR in military strength.

Nothing could save Carter, not the new programs, not the tough language, not even the Camp David Accords. The situation in Iran was getting worse by the day, the energy crisis persisted despite all efforts to deal with it, and inflation was steadily going up. On July 15, 1979, Carter addressed the nation on the energy problem for the fifth time, but before he talked about that, he delved into what he felt was a much deeper and more serious one, a "crisis of confidence... that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will... [a] crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation."

While he may have been trying to mobilize the American public to deal with this problem, Carter's speech became known as the "malaise speech" and was taken to reflect his administration's pessimism and gloom about the future. This did not help him in the 1980 presidential elections. Afghanistan, the first place outside the Warsaw Pact where the Soviets intervened directly with military force, brought Reagan to power, and with him the optimistic answer to what 84% of Americans believed was "deep and serious trouble"—an unprecedented military buildup and new assertiveness.

4 Developments in Strategic Doctrine

The strategic doctrine we last discussed was Flexible Response, which lasted throughout the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. It was modified a little by Nixon, who promulgated the doctrine of **strategic sufficiency**, that stressed that the US should have sufficient capability to deter nuclear attacks on its homeland and that of its allies, not very different from McNamara's strategy except it cut the two-and-a-half war readiness (ability to fight wars on 2 major and 1 minor front) to one-and-a-half level. Reagan and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger later wanted three-and-a-half. Perhaps more importantly, strategic sufficiency included a notion of "winning" a nuclear war in some discernible way, in this case defined as the ability to recover faster than the Soviet Union. The logic, as Secretary of the Air Force, Harold Brown put it, was the if the Soviets expected to recover much more quickly than the U.S., then deterrence might not work. As a 1972 secret White House memorandum put it, the U.S. had to possess sufficient forces "to ensure that the United States would emerge from a nuclear war in discernably better shape than the Soviet Union." This logic forgets that the living might envy the dead after a nuclear war. In other words, it is not clear what political purpose such a war, even if winnable in terms of survivability and eventual recovery, could possibly serve. As a result, it is unclear why one should even contemplate seriously its possible occurrence.

Recall that Flexible Response required a very significant buildup because of MAD and because of the counterforce component of the strategy. The Americans had a lot more nuclear weapons than it needed to destroy the Soviet cities. This was because the U.S. had to have enough nuclear weapons to overcome the ABM defenses the Soviets might deploy, and to destroy their many military targets. SALT and Vietnam changed some of the calculations. First, Nixon needed to curtail expenses, if possible. Hence his emphasis on America having to maintain somewhat fewer weapons to ensure strategic deterrence (threat to cities) as opposed to the multi-level concept that would give more options (by providing more targets and nuanced escalation) but require more weapons. Second, because there would be no ABM systems, there was no need to have weapons to overcome them. Third, the Soviets had placed their ICBMs in hardened silos underground, making them very difficult to destroy.

The last two developments left the U.S. with many weapons without targets. So what to do with the number in excess of the one needed for strategic sufficiency? In January 1974, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger announced the new doctrine of **Flexible Targeting**, which meant escalation control and ability to withhold early strikes against certain classes of targets. In other words, the U.S. would retain its variety of options during a crisis because these nuclear weapons would target military installations as opposed to cities. This, of course, was intended to invite reciprocal Soviet restraint, much like McNamara's No-Cities Doctrine: this would

not only spare US cities, but give the Soviets something to bargain for—by holding these valuable targets in jeopardy for later, the US had a bargaining chip, much like Schelling suggested.

Since the military targets were now less vulnerable, they had to be hit with greater precision, and hence the U.S. started spending a lot of money on improving the accuracy of the warheads. In 1977, Carter's Secretary of Defense Brown renamed Flexible Targeting to the **Countervailing Strategy**, which was supposed to reflect its broader goals. The Presidential Directive, PD-59, that specifies it, is still classified, and only parts are available to the public. From what could be discerned, the essential outline is that of Flexible Response with some nuance. It prescribes meeting Soviet aggression with proportional responses while seeking war termination under the best possible conditions. There is also a publicly stated emphasis on targeting Soviet leadership (decapitation mission), under the assumption that successful decapitation would lead to the quick military collapse of the opponent.

Our strategic nuclear forces must be able to deter nuclear attacks not only on our own country but also on our forces overseas, as well as on our friends and allies, and to contribute to deterrence of non-nuclear attacks. To continue to deter in an era of strategic nuclear equivalence, it is necessary to have nuclear (as well as conventional) forces such that in considering aggression against our interests any adversary would recognize that no plausible outcome would represent a victory on any plausible definition of victory. To this end and so as to preserve the possibility of bargaining effectively to terminate the war on acceptable terms that are as favorable as practical, if deterrence fails initially, we must be capable of fighting successfully so that the adversary would not achieve his war aims and would suffer costs that are unacceptable, or in any event greater than his gains, from having initiated an attack.

The employment of nuclear forces must be effectively related to operations of our general purpose forces. Our doctrines for the use of forces in nuclear conflict must insure that we can pursue specific policy objectives selected by the National Command Authorities at that time, from general guidelines established in advance.

These requirements form the broad outline of our evolving countervailing strategy. To meet these requirements, improvements should be made to our forces, their supporting C3 and intelligence, and their employment plans and planning apparatus, to achieve a high degree of flexibility, enduring survivability, and adequate performance in the face of enemy actions.

Many believed the doctrine called for forces that would permit the US to fight an extended and protracted nuclear war. The public exposition of PD-59 from which

the quote above is) called attention to the C3 system (command, control, communications) required to fight such a war. As we shall see, President Reagan continued this policy and his main contribution was actually to attempt its serious implementation.