

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 458

Published on 14 May 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

David Tal. “‘Absolutes’ and ‘Stages’ in the Making and Application of Nixon’s SALT Policy.”

Diplomatic History 37:5 (November 2013): 1090-1116. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht064.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht064>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR458.pdf>

Reviewed by **Marilena Gala**, University of Rome III

Over the last decade, the 1970s and détente have been extensively reviewed in the light of the archival material which has become available in most of the countries where détente was conceived, or theorized, and implemented. The 1970s have been defined as the beginning of the global era we live in;¹ to be sure, the early 1970s were first and foremost a time when the two main contenders in the Cold War attempted to stabilize their own relationship, pursuing a dialogue which was instrumental to curbing a growing, but in perspective unaffordable, arms race.

This embrace by the White House of negotiations to achieve nuclear arsenal limitations at the strategic level is the focus of David Tal’s article, which is mostly based on United States documents either published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) collection, or released from the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. Tal’s article examines the arms control policy of the first Nixon administration, when linkage was supposed to be used to make that policy part of a détente process aimed at securing Soviet cooperation in settling “outstanding issues such as Middle East, Berlin, and, foremost, Vietnam” (1091). Inter alia, President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger “through employment of linkage, hoped to change the nature and course of U.S. foreign policy, including U.S. nuclear disarmament and arms control policy, and to separate them from those practiced by Nixon’s predecessors” (1091). Indeed, and this is the assumption from which Tal develops his argument, among the scholars who have extensively worked on détente and Nixon’s foreign policy, a significant majority concur that the Republican President and his National Security

¹ Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, Daniel J. Sargent (Edited by), *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Advisor scored a substantial success in achieving the SALT I agreements without renouncing the defence of U.S. interests in other areas of the globe, including South-East Asia (footnote 6, 1091-1092).

The premise, therefore, is that linkage was conceived to allow the White House to shift U.S. arms control policy from an incremental to a comprehensive approach, as was the conception of the international balance of power and the related national interests that inspired the new administration in its updated version of containment.² Yet, throughout the first three years of his administration, Nixon gradually admitted and surrendered to a dual difficulty inherent in his theorized course of action: namely, to impose conceptual order to American policy, on the one hand, and to steer Soviet policy in desirable directions, on the other. In fact, Tal clearly explains why and when the White House ended up accepting that Moscow would not really cooperate with Washington to favor peace talks with the North Vietnamese in Indochina, or to foster a settlement between Egypt and Israel in the Middle East. He also points out that between 1970 and 1971, the U.S. administration “had put linkage aside” (1107), and acknowledged that “SALT and the [Nixon-Brezhnev] summit were now associated with Nixon’s reelection, and hence most necessary” (1108). He doesn’t fail to note that a compromise was eventually reached on an ABM treaty and an interim agreement on offensive strategic weapons, while the summit was confirmed for May 1972, in spite of Kissinger’s trip to Beijing in July 1971 and the U.S. military response to the North-Vietnamese offensive in the Spring of 1972. His conclusions, therefore, basically highlight that “from an arms control perspective, SALT and the summit marked the return of Nixon to the track paved by his predecessors: The United States was acting now, as it did before, to achieve an arms control agreement that would be independent of outstanding political issues up to a point, that point being Vietnam” (1111).

Tal’s article is, indeed, an accurate survey, but what I miss in his reconstruction is a plain and forthright consideration that the supposed shift in U.S. arms control policy from an incremental to a comprehensive approach, during the Nixon administration, never really happened. In effect, as Jussi Hanhimäki has observed, “much as détente refers to a policy that had plenty of historical precedents, the term linkage does not refer to some particularly innovative diplomatic formula but a simple set of trade-offs and bargains.”³ In other words - and Tal openly hints at this in the last page of his article - since arms control had never been and could not become either a one-player game, or an issue unaffected by other domestic and international matters, it would have never been implemented “in terms of absolutes” (1116).

² John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap. IX.

³ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, “Foreign Policy Overview”, in Melvin Small, *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 352.

But I would also like to see the whole argument developed a bit further. In particular, what is important to point out here is the deeply political nature of the arms control policy especially at a time when nuclear arsenals had become the most evident and loud expression of conflicting international goals and interests. The so-called incremental approach, initiated by President Dwight Eisenhower and pursued by the two superpowers since 1958, amounted to the admission that both contenders of the Cold War had realized that they shared a preoccupation which went beyond the need to allay the growing fear of the atomic fallout produced by nuclear tests. The common interest that rather soon became a common intention, driving the American and Soviet governments into negotiating and signing two important agreements, was the containment of the diffusion of nuclear arsenals. Both the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) in 1963 and, though to a different extent, the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 aimed at curbing nuclear proliferation and, in doing so, consolidating an international balance of power where the United States had been maintaining its strategic supremacy for most of the period. If “détente was not conceived [by Nixon and Kissinger] as a revolutionary policy that would change the world,”⁴ the arms control policy pursued and implemented within that conceptual framework could not but be equally conservative. Indeed, in Nixon’s White House, the motives for arms control and SALT agreements had shifted because of the limitations imposed by strategic nuclear parity, which Moscow reached around the end of the 1960s.⁵ In fact, the stabilization of the international system remained the core of U.S. foreign policy. The containment of the Soviet Union had to be reconciled with both the loss of credibility of military power as a means of achieving America’s foreign policy goals and the refusal of the U.S. Congress to authorize any significant increase in defense spending. More than a real and original initiation of a new era in the arms control field, therefore, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s strategy of linkage demonstrated that “it was only logical that diplomacy gained new currency as a policy-making tool,”⁶ once the loss of strategic supremacy, from an American perspective, had changed the general context up to the point of envisaging arms control as an instrument for gaining more room to maneuver against its major adversary.

⁴ Hanhimäki, “Détente: a three-way discussion. Conservative goals, revolutionary outcomes: The paradox of Détente.” *Cold War History* 8:4 (November 2008), 510.

⁵ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft. History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), chap. V.

⁶ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, “Foreign Policy Overview”, 351. See also: Mario Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist. Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010); Francis J. Gavin, “Nuclear Nixon: Ironies, Puzzles, and the Triumph of Realpolitik,” in Fredrick Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World. American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 126-145; Fredrick Logevall and Campbell Craig, *America’s Cold War. The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009) chap. VII; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

Marilena Gala is Senior Lecturer of History of International Relations at the Department of Political Science at the University of Rome III, where she teaches a Master's course on nuclear power in the international system. She is a specialist in Cold War transatlantic relations and arms control. She has been Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, in 2003, and again, with a six-month Fulbright Foreign Scholarship, in 2010. She was guest lecturer at the University of California at Irvine in October 2011, and is one of the instructors at the Nuclear Boot Camp – a summer school organized by the Non-Proliferation International History Project funded by the Carnegie Foundation. She has published: *Il paradosso nucleare. Il Limited Test Ban Treaty come primo passo verso la distensione* (Firenze: Polistampa), in 2002 and *John F. Kennedy. Il presidente diventato mito di tutte le nuove generazioni* (Milano: Mondadori Electa), in 2004, and several essays in English on the gradual transformation of the security agenda within the Atlantic Alliance. She is currently working on a book project on Transatlantic relations and European security issues between the late 1970s and the end of the Cold War.

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).