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Author(s): John Lewis Gaddis

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John Lewis Gaddis

THE RISE, FALL AND FUTURE OF DÉTENTE

One of the occupational hazards of being a historian is that one tends to take on, with age, a certain air of resigned pessimism. This comes, I think, from our professional posture of constantly facing backwards: it is not cheering to have to focus one's attention on the disasters, defalcations, and miscalculations that make up human history. We are given, as a result, to such plaintive statements as: "Ah, yes, I knew it wouldn't work out," or "I saw it coming all along," or, most often, "Too bad they didn't listen to me."

Such, I am afraid, is the tone we historians have taken in looking at the last decade or so of Soviet-American relations. Détente, we now tell each other, was not an end to cold war tensions but rather a temporary relaxation that depended upon the unlikely intersection of unconnected phenomena. There had to be, we argue, approximate parity in the strategic arms race, a downplaying of ideological differences, a mutual willingness to refrain from challenging the interests of rivals, an ability to reward restraint when it occurred and to provide inducements to its further development, and the existence of strong, decisive and intelligent leadership at the top in both Washington and Moscow, capable of overriding all of the obstacles likely to be thrown in the path of détente by garbled communications, sullen bureaucracies, or outraged constituencies. To have found all of these things in place at the same time, we maintain, was about as likely as some rare astronomical conjunction of the stars and planets, or perhaps a balanced budget.

As a result, we have tended to see the revival of the cold war as an entirely predictable development rooted in deep and immutable historical forces. Those of us who hedged our bets about the durability of détente can now comfortably pat each other on the back, exchanging statements like: "We were right all along," or "Too bad they don't listen to historians," or "Isn't pessimism fun?"

But if historians are ever going to provide much in the way of usable guidance to policymakers—which is to say, if we are not

John Lewis Gaddis is Distinguished Professor of History at Ohio University. This article is adapted from his recent book, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, and from a paper prepared for the Aspen Institute Preparatory Group on East-West Relations.

going to leave the field wide open to the political scientists—then we are going to have to address not only questions of what went wrong, but of what might have been done differently. Were there things that could have been done to avoid the collapse of détente? Might these provide a basis for reconstituting it—perhaps in a more durable form—at some point in the future?

What follows is an attempt to account for the decline of détente not in terms of historical inevitability—because, beyond death, and perhaps unbalanced budgets, nothing really is inevitable in history—but rather as a failure of strategy from which there are certain things we might learn. The emphasis is on deficiencies in American strategy, not because the United States was solely, or even primarily, responsible for the collapse of détente, but because it is the only strategy we are in a position to do anything about. The Russians will have to learn from their own mistakes, which, as recent events once again confirm, have not been inconsiderable.

First, though, a word about strategy itself. I see it quite simply as the calculated relationship of ends and means, whether in the realm of military, political, economic, ideological or psychological competition. It is a multi-dimensional process that cannot be reduced to, or entirely divorced from, any one of those components. Our own contributions to the failure of détente arose, I will suggest, to a considerable degree from just that failure to view strategy in all of its dimensions—from our tendency, instead, to place its various elements in separate and discrete compartments. If this analysis is correct, then the future of détente—if there is to be one—may well depend in large part upon our ability to recapture some sense of just what strategy is all about in the first place.

II

As the concept of détente has fallen into disrepute in recent years, it has become fashionable to call for a return to, or a revival of, containment. The implied message of such groups as the Committee on the Present Danger, and of such members of that organization as have been, since 1981, in positions of official responsibility, has been that we should never have abandoned a strategy that recognized so clearly the nature of the Soviet threat, that provided such decisive programs for action, and that thus served to keep the peace throughout most of the cold war. From the perspective of these observers, the decision to seek détente in the early 1970s was an unwise exercise in wishful thinking, the effect of which was only to

shift the signals, in the eyes of Moscow's watchful and ambitious ideologues, from red to yellow to green.¹

But this assessment reflects a misunderstanding both of containment and of the *détente* that followed it, for containment never was a consistently applied or universally understood strategy. Like most strategies, it evolved over time and under the pressure of circumstance, to such an extent that its original founder, George F. Kennan, came ultimately to deny paternity when confronted with some of its more exotic manifestations.² If one is to understand where the idea of *détente* came from and what functions it was intended to serve, one must first be aware of how the idea of containment has evolved over the years.

A good place to begin in tracing this evolution is with a proposition that is, or should be, unexceptionable: that strategy can never be divorced from the costs of implementing it. There is an unsailable link between the objectives one seeks and the resources one has with which to seek—between one's ends and one's means. No successful strategy can ignore this relationship; unsuccessful strategies often fail precisely for want of attention to it.

For the policymaker, this linkage normally boils down to one of two options: shall interests be restricted to keep them in line with available resources; or shall resources be expanded to bring them into line with proclaimed interests? Does one allow the perception of limited means to force differentiations between vital and peripheral interests, on the ground that one cannot afford to defend every point against every adversary? Or does one allow the perception of undifferentiated interests to force the expansion of means, on the ground that one cannot afford, anywhere, to leave flanks exposed?

The history of containment can be written largely in terms of oscillations between these concepts: between the belief that limited means require differentiated interests, on the one hand, and the belief that undifferentiated interests require unlimited means, on the other.³

The original strategy of containment, as articulated largely by Kennan and as implemented by the Truman Administration between 1947 and 1949, operated from the presumption that the American capacity to shape events in the world at large was severely limited, both by the fragility of the domestic economy, which could

¹ See, for example, Norman Podhoretz, *The Present Danger*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980.

² See George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1967, p. 367.

³ An expanded version of this argument can be found in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar National Security Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

easily slip into an inflationary spiral if spending was not kept under tight control, and by postwar pressures for demobilization, which had resulted in the abrupt dismantling of the wartime military establishment. As a consequence, the Kennan concept of containment was selective regarding interests to be defended—primarily Western Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East, and the Pacific offshore island chain—regarding the means of defense—primarily the economic rehabilitation of war-devastated economies, with military capabilities effectively restricted to the cautious use of air and naval power—and regarding the nature of the threat itself, which was seen quite precisely as the expansion of *Soviet* influence, with communism elsewhere in the world a danger only where it was directly and irrefutably under Moscow's control. The idea was to confront our principal adversary in arenas of competition chosen by us, employing means most consistent with the kinds of power we could most feasibly bring to bear.⁴

By early 1950, though, a succession of events—the victory of communism in China, the Soviet development of an atomic bomb, increasing concern about the dangers of piecemeal aggression in peripheral areas—all had contributed to the perception of vulnerable flanks having been left exposed. The result, in the form of NSC-68, was an expansion of means to fit more broadly defined interests: in the view of Paul Nitze, the principal author of that document, there was no real distinction between what was vital and what was not. Nor was there any reason to think that, through the adoption of Keynesian economic techniques—the use of deficit spending to stimulate the economy—the nation could not afford the means to sustain a strategy of global containment, in which we would be prepared to respond wherever and in whatever way our adversaries acted, without escalation or capitulation.

Korea, of course, provided a quick test of that strategy, and although that conflict did not result in a military defeat, its duration and costs—and particularly the fact that the strategy that governed it seemed to involve relinquishing the initiative, allowing adversaries to determine arenas and instruments of competition—forced yet another reconsideration of containment in Washington. For the incoming Eisenhower Administration, the global threat appeared no less dangerous than it had to the authors of NSC-68; the great difference was that the new President and his colleagues emphatically rejected Keynesian economics. Worried about the prospects

⁴ The famous "X" article in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* was, at best, a misleading explication of what Kennan had in mind. See, on this point, Kennan, *op. cit.*, pp. 364–367; and John Lewis Gaddis, "Containment: A Reassessment," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1977, pp. 873–887.

of both perpetual deficits and confiscatory taxation, the Eisenhower Administration concentrated on finding ways to make containment work more effectively at less cost.

The result was a contraction of means in the form of a scaling down of conventional forces, together with a proportionately greater reliance on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, which, whatever else one might say about them, had the advantage of being relatively cheap. Once again, as with the Kennan strategy, concern about costs had produced selectivity in means, although in this case no contraction of interests. Nuclear weapons seemed to provide a way to defend global commitments at reasonable expense—a way, as John Foster Dulles liked to put it, to choose the time and the nature of our own response, thus denying adversaries the luxury of determining how and where we would expend our resources.

The problem here, of course, was credibility: could one really expect the United States to initiate the use of nuclear weapons in order to defend such unpromising pieces of real estate as Quemoy and Matsu? Did one not run the risk, by limiting one's means so narrowly, of encouraging once again piecemeal attacks on peripheral flanks, of having one's position gradually eroded by low-level challenges, none of them of sufficient size or gravity to merit nuclear retaliation? Such was the argument John F. Kennedy and his advisers made against the Eisenhower strategy, and, upon coming into office, they reverted to the concept of NSC-68: that means had to be expanded to meet interests. Keynesian economics again came into fashion; budgetary deficits became less of a concern; and the United States embarked upon the strategy of "flexible response," aimed at giving us the capacity to respond to aggression wherever it occurred, at whatever level it occurred.

But just as Korea had exposed the liabilities of NSC-68, so too Vietnam, in ways far more painful and traumatic, revealed the limitations of "flexible response": if one resolved to restrict one's response to nothing more or less than the other side's provocation, did one not then again relinquish the initiative to the other side, leaving it with the ability to make the real decisions as to the commitment and disposition of one's forces? How could one indefinitely sustain such a strategy without wrecking not only the domestic economy, but also the domestic political consensus any government must have in order to function successfully?

It was with this dilemma in mind that the architects of détente began to frame their strategy. Confronted by the necessity of

cutting costs without abandoning containment, the Nixon Administration could have done several things:

(1) It could have returned to the early postwar concept of using economic development as a bulwark against communism—but attempts to transfer Marshall Plan solutions to the Third World areas that now seemed at risk had already proved to be unfeasible;

(2) It could have returned to the Eisenhower-Dulles concept of nuclear deterrence—but the Soviet Union had now attained approximate strategic parity with the United States, in part as a result of the distractions of Vietnam, and such an approach could hardly have carried much credibility;

(3) It could have done nothing at all, in the belief that the Russians and their allies would sooner or later overextend and exhaust themselves—but the new Administration was much too sensitive to the fragility of existing power balances to embrace such a passively optimistic course of action.

As it happened, Nixon and Kissinger did none of these things; instead they embraced “détente” *as a means of updating and reinvigorating containment*. The term had been in use since the early 1960s to connote a relaxation of tensions with the Soviet Union, and although such a relaxation was one part of the new Administration’s approach, it would be a considerable oversimplification to say that this was its chief priority. Rather, détente was a means of maintaining the balance of power in a way that would be consistent with available resources. It was a redefinition of interests to accommodate capabilities. It was, like the Eisenhower strategy, a way to make containment function more efficiently, but through a method at once more ingenious and less risky than the old “massive retaliation” concept.

This method, on the face of it, was breathtakingly simple: containment would be made to work better at less cost by reducing the number of threats to be contained. The Nixon Administration tried to do this in three ways:

First, it sought to contract American interests, thereby lowering the danger of overcommitment. Because limited resources would not permit the defense of all vulnerable points, distinctions would have to be made, once again, between what was vital and what was not. Both Nixon and Kissinger conceived of American interests in classical balance-of-power terms (much as Kennan had): for them, the preferred situation would have been a pentagonal world order, with independent power centers in the United States, the Soviet Union, Western Europe, Japan, and China all balancing one another. Admittedly, the kind of the power these nations could bring

to bear was not the same: only two of the five were nuclear superpowers; others, like Western Europe and Japan, were economic giants; China's strength lay in neither the military nor the economic sphere, but in its sheer size and unique ideological position. The point though, Kissinger argued, was that the balance of power did not depend solely on an equilibrium of military strengths: what was required instead was an overall balance among all of the various components of power—a balance that would maintain itself without disproportionately large, and therefore disproportionately exhausting, American efforts.⁵

Second, the new Administration revised its criteria for identifying adversaries. Ideology alone, Nixon and Kissinger insisted, would no longer ensure hostility, because even ideologically antagonistic states could share common objectives in certain situations. By this logic, it might actually be possible to work with some communists to contain others. It was this reasoning that produced, of course, the dramatic reversal of policy toward China, and, as a consequence, an almost overnight contraction in the number of potential enemies to be contained.

Third, the Nixon Administration sought to engage the Soviet Union, for the first time on a sustained basis in the postwar period, in a direct effort to reduce tensions through diplomacy. These negotiations proceeded, not on the basis that all differences with the Russians could be resolved, but rather on the expectation that they could be managed: that despite competition between the two countries, there remained areas of congruent interest which, if identified, could provide the basis for a more efficient approach to containment by lowering still further the number of threats to be contained. Discussions were to be carried on with a keen sense of the relation between power and diplomacy: it could not be expected that the Russians would make concessions for nothing. Instead, both deterrents and inducements—sticks and carrots—would have to be used, and it was here that the idea of “linkage” came into play. Trade, credits, and technology transfers, it was thought, could be exchanged for Moscow's agreement to put a lid on the strategic arms race, to cooperate in managing crises in the Third World, and most immediately, to help the United States extricate itself gracefully from Vietnam. There was, thus, nothing idealistic about this approach to negotiation with the Russians; rather, it reflected what

⁵ See Kissinger's speech to the *Pacem in Terris* III Conference, Washington, October 8, 1973, printed in Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 3d ed., New York: Norton, 1977, pp. 128–129.

one would have to say was a remarkably cynical and manipulative view of human nature.

Détente, then, was hardly an abandonment of containment, as its critics have charged. It was, rather, an imaginative effort to accommodate that strategy to existing realities, to maintain that calculated relationship of ends and means that any strategy must have in order to succeed. "We did not consider a relaxation of tensions a concession to the Soviets," Kissinger has recalled. "We had our own reasons for it. We were not abandoning the ideological struggle, but simply trying—tall order as it was—to discipline it by precepts of the national interest." And, again: "Détente defined not friendship but a strategy for a relationship among adversaries."⁶

In a curious way, in fact, the Nixon-Kissinger strategy resembled the original idea of containment as articulated by Kennan during the first years of the cold war. For that strategy too had sought, by means short of war, to maintain the global balance of power against Soviet expansionism. It had involved as well the association of American interests with a pentagonal world order, the idea of working with some communists to contain others, and the use of negotiations to seek to modify Soviet behavior.⁷ In this sense, then, the architects of détente were not only functioning within the spirit of containment in shaping their strategy: they actually brought that strategy back, whether they realized it or not, to much the same point from which it had begun a quarter century before.

III

In some respects, this strategy of seeking containment by way of détente succeeded remarkably well. The SALT I agreements did limit significant aspects of the strategic arms race. Chronic issues perpetuating cold war tensions in Europe, notably Berlin, were now defused. Détente reversed, with deceptive ease, long-standing patterns of hostility by building a cooperative relationship with the Chinese at the expense of the Russians. Soviet power in the Middle East declined dramatically at a time when the dependence of Western economies on that part of the world was growing. Détente brought the Russians themselves into a position of economic dependence on the West that had not been present before. And, above all, détente ended Washington's myopic fixation with what Kissinger called "a small peninsula on a major continent"⁸—Viet-

⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1982, pp. 236–237, 600. See also pp. 594, 980–983; and Richard Nixon's recent discussion of "hard-headed détente" in *The New York Times*, October 2, 1983.

⁷ See, on this point, Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 25–88.

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1979, p. 1049.

nam—and focused its attention back on more important global concerns. It is no small tribute to the architects of détente—though one should not deny credit as well to the clumsiness of the Russians—that by any index of power other than military, the influence and prestige of the United States compared to that of the Soviet Union was significantly greater at the beginning of the 1980s than it had been a decade earlier.⁹

Despite these achievements, though, détente by 1980 was almost universally regarded as having failed. The Russians had surged ahead of the United States in both strategic and conventional military power, it was argued. They had tightened rather than loosened controls on their own people. They had continued efforts to destabilize Third World areas; they had violated solemn agreements and, of course, most conspicuously, in 1979, they had brutally invaded Afghanistan. If this was containment, critics asked, could appeasement be far behind?

To some extent, these charges reflect a misunderstanding of what détente was all about in the first place. As we have seen, it was never intended entirely to end the arms race, or to eliminate competitions for influence in the Third World, or to serve as an instrument of reform within the Soviet Union, although official hyperbole at times gave that impression in the early 1970s. Rather, it sought to provide mechanisms for managing conflicts among adversaries, thereby lowering the dangers of escalation and overcommitment without at the same time compromising vital interests. Still, the fact that détente had come under such widespread criticism by 1980 suggests that its problems lay deeper than simple misunderstandings over objectives.

I would argue that the failure of détente grew in large part out of its never having been fully implemented: that significant components of that strategy—components critical to its success—were never really put into effect. Let me illustrate this point by discussing three areas: linkage, the military balance, and human rights.

(1) *Linkage*. The objective here was to try to change Soviet behavior through a process of positive and negative reinforcement: Russian actions consistent with our interests would be rewarded; those of which we disapproved would in some way be punished. But this implied a clear and consistent view of what American interests were, and of the extent to which Soviet behavior either enhanced or undercut them. That clear vision, in turn, implied

⁹ For one recent measurement of the phenomenon, see “What the World Thinks of America,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1983, pp. 44–53.

central control over the linkage process: one could not divide authority and still expect coherent strategy.

But division of authority is precisely what occurred. The late Senator Henry Jackson and his congressional colleagues torpedoed the 1972 Soviet-American trade agreement by requiring increased rates of Jewish emigration before credits and most-favored nation treatment would be provided—this despite the fact that the agreement itself had been intended as a reward for Soviet cooperation on Berlin, SALT, the Middle East and Vietnam. Later on, others outside the Administration took it upon themselves to decide where in the Third World the Russians should have shown restraint in return for the favors we had provided them, or to what extent they should have cut back on military expenditures, or what internal changes they would have to make in order for the negotiating process to continue.

Now it is probable that the Administration overestimated from the beginning what linkage could accomplish. The Russians made it quite clear that they would feel free to continue competition in Third World areas; moreover, as Kissinger later acknowledged at least with respect to Vietnam,¹⁰ the Administration may have exaggerated its degree of control in such areas in the first place. Still, a final assessment on the principle of linkage cannot be made because the Administration was never allowed to define precisely what was to be linked to what, or to deliver the rewards it had promised in return for cooperative behavior.

(2) *The military balance.* Détente was, as we have seen, an approach to containment based on the perception of diminishing military means, these having declined as a result of the Vietnam War. The idea had been to attempt to constrain the Russians without further constraining ourselves. In the field of strategic weapons, Nixon and Kissinger accomplished their objectives with remarkable success: they managed to convince the Russians that they needed a SALT agreement more than we did, despite the fact that the agreement actually negotiated limited weapons programs only Moscow was likely to pursue. What is not often recognized about SALT I is that Nixon and Kissinger had intended to couple it with a military buildup of their own in areas not restricted by the agreement—notably, the B-1 bomber, the Trident submarine, and the MX and cruise missiles.¹¹

But again, this could not be done without congressional approval, and once more the problem of divided authority came into play.

¹⁰ Kissinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 1135, 1145–1146, 1151, 1153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1245–1246; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 998–1010.

Senator Jackson again imposed his priorities on the negotiating process, this time with a demand for across-the-board numerical equivalence in strategic weapons systems, despite the fact that the military had never sought, and Congress would never have authorized, building programs to reach those equivalencies. Vietnam had brought anti-military sentiment on Capitol Hill to an unprecedented intensity; there grew out of this a corrosive skepticism toward all government pronouncements on defense needs—including its warnings, now known to have been conservative, on the extent of the post-SALT Soviet military buildup. As a result, strategic modernization programs that Nixon, Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird had intended to accompany the SALT I agreement were seriously delayed; more seriously, in order to get even these scaled-back appropriations through Congress, the Administration had to make significant cutbacks in conventional forces as well.

The consequence of this is something still not fully appreciated to this day: that the Nixon and Ford Administrations presided over the most dramatic reallocation of resources from defense to domestic purposes in modern American history. Defense spending as a percentage of total national budget had dropped from 44 percent at the time Richard Nixon took office in 1969 to 24 percent by the time Gerald Ford left it in 1977. Defense spending as a percentage of gross national product went from 8.7 percent in 1969 to 5.2 percent in 1977.¹² To be sure, some reduction in military spending would have occurred in any event as the Vietnam War came to an end. But reductions on this scale clearly exceeded what the two Administrations wanted, or what, in retrospect, can be considered to have been wise, in view of what we now know of Soviet military spending during the same period. If, in the case of linkage, the carrots Washington had intended to use to make détente work had been held back, now, in the military field, so too had been the sticks.

(3) *Human rights*. One of the grounds upon which the strategy of détente was most criticized was that it ignored the moral dimension of foreign policy. The United States could not expect to have its views prevail in the world, the argument ran, if those views were at variance with the deepest and most fundamental principles for which the nation was supposed to stand. Only by abandoning strategies based solely on considerations of power could the United States achieve the respect it needed both at home and abroad if its policies were to succeed.

¹² Based on figures in U.S. Bureau of the Budget, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1979*, Washington: G.P.O., 1979, pp. 364, 435.

Once again, though, this charge that détente proceeded without reference to moral questions reflected a poor understanding of what that strategy actually involved. For despite the seemingly cold-blooded geopolitical orientation of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy, and despite some obvious moral lapses on the part of that doctrine's chief practitioner, the strategy of détente did not ignore moral issues. It did, however, insist upon the priority of order over justice. Without some framework of order, Kissinger repeatedly maintained, echoing the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, there could be no justice: that quality tends not to flourish in conditions of war, anarchy or revolution. Accordingly, the priority for détente was to build a stable international order within which the security interests of great states could be satisfied; that having been achieved, then the claims of justice might, for once, have some chance of being honored.

The only problem, as Kissinger recognized, was that "stability" was not the kind of concept to which passions would rally.¹³ When it became clear that, from the viewpoint of the Administration, "stability" required prolonging the American involvement in Vietnam, or attempting to overthrow a constitutionally elected government in Chile, or consorting with repressive dictators on both the right and the left, then cries of outrage began to be heard, from both right and left at home. It is an indication of the potency of this appeal that both Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter could invoke the human rights issue during the 1976 campaign—albeit from different perspectives and with different targets in mind—and that this could become, once Carter took office in 1977, the major area in which he sought to distinguish his Administration from the one that had gone before. The opportunity to approach justice by way of order, like the attempts to approach containment by way of linkage and by way of increasing American military power, never really got off the ground.

Clearly, Nixon and Kissinger must bear some of the responsibility for all of this. Despite earnest and, on the whole, candid efforts to explain what was in fact a sophisticated and far-sighted strategy, they never really succeeded in putting it across, whether to their own bureaucracies, the Congress, or the public as a whole. To a considerable extent, their method undercut itself: they relied on secrecy and tight control to achieve major breakthroughs on China, Vietnam and arms control, yet that same shielding of the policy process from public scrutiny was seen by many as having got the

¹³ Henry A. Kissinger, "Central Issues of American Foreign Policy," in Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, p. 94.

nation into Vietnam in the first place and, for that matter, into Watergate as well. Secrecy, in itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. But unwise things done in secret can later come back to haunt those who would seek to do wise things in the same way.

Similarly, Nixon, Ford and Kissinger led the public to expect too much from their initiatives. Although they never claimed that *détente* would end all difficulties with the Russians, they did participate in the conclusion of two sweeping but meaningless agreements that seemed to imply something very much like that. I have in mind here the statement on "Basic Principles" to govern Soviet-American relations, signed at the Moscow Summit in 1972, and the Helsinki Accords of 1975. No one who knew anything about the Soviet Union should have expected that these agreements to refrain from seeking unilateral advantages or to observe human rights would actually be kept. But the White House incautiously agreed to them, thereby laying the foundation for future arguments that one could not expect the Russians to keep any agreements under any circumstances.

It must be said as well, though, that *détente* also ran into an unusual amount of plain bad luck. It was unfortunate that the strategy had to be put across in the atmosphere of mistrust and cynicism that followed the Vietnam War, that Nixon's own lack of scruple should have brought the Watergate crisis down upon his Administration just as *détente* was getting under way, that the Russians should have chosen the succeeding years to test the limits of *détente* in a series of provocative maneuvers ranging from Angola to Afghanistan, and that it should have fallen to the Carter Administration, which, although it favored *détente*, at no point clearly understood the strategy that lay behind it, to deal with them. Life is unfair.

Any strategy conducted on the basis of diminishing resources, whether at the level of geopolitics or below, will involve making distinctions between vital and peripheral interests, between mortal and simply bothersome threats. One cannot defend all points against all challenges. But this principle of concentrating one's resources and using them economically does have the disadvantage of leaving flanks exposed. If one misjudges the interests at stake or the threats that confront them, then one risks having one's position undermined in sudden and dangerous ways. A great premium is placed, therefore, upon the accurate assessment of defensive requirements, and of the risks posed to them. Discriminating judgments have to substitute for indiscriminate deployments, and that, given the American constitutional system, is a lot to expect of any

Administration, whether Democratic or Republican, liberal or conservative, moral or amoral.

IV

Since 1981 we have reverted to the idea of making containment work through deployment rather than discrimination. The Reagan Administration has rejected détente, with its emphasis on distinctions between interests, on gradations of threat, and on multi-dimensional responses. Instead we have returned to an earlier form of containment: one that assumes virtually unlimited resources for defense and little real prospect of settling differences through negotiation until what Dean Acheson used to like to call "situations of strength" have been created.

Few serious observers of the international scene would have questioned the need, in 1981, for substantial increases in defense appropriations—indeed, it is worth recalling that the Pentagon budget actually bottomed out during the last years of the Carter Administration, and was already on its way up at the time Reagan took office. Still, the current leadership has stressed defense over diplomacy in its dealings with the Soviet Union to a greater extent than would have been the case had Carter won reelection; one would, in fact, have to go back to the late Truman Administration to find a comparable emphasis upon the accumulation of military hardware and a corresponding degree of skepticism regarding negotiations.

To be sure, Kremlin leaders have done little to allay this skepticism. Their own military buildup, until very recently, has proceeded at an alarming rate, even allowing for the characteristic Russian tendency to "overcompensate" in such matters. They have maintained an opportunistic policy of attempting to exploit Western weaknesses wherever possible, often without regard to what concrete gains this might bring them. The recent Korean airliner incident demonstrates once again their chronic inability to anticipate the effects their own actions have on the rest of the world: to the extent that cohesion exists among the Soviet Union's adversaries, it is due, one suspects, more to Moscow's belligerent and at the same time querulous behavior than to Washington's diplomatic skill.

Still, the ineptitude of one's adversary provides little greater long-term protection against the defects in one's own strategy than does a related phenomenon that has benefited the Reagan Administration until quite recently: the fact that, compared to its immediate predecessors, it has been unusually fortunate in not having to face

hard choices, either at home or abroad. It is worth examining these shortcomings, because they could become significant if that good luck—or the Kremlin leadership's habit of periodically shooting itself in the foot—should at some point run out.

(1) First, and most important, the Reagan Administration has embraced a defense strategy based on unlimited resources without providing reliable mechanisms for generating those resources. Financing a defense buildup through the economic stimulus of deficit spending—"military Keynesianism," one might call it—was a plausible enough approach during the Truman and Kennedy Administrations, when inflation was negligible and there was still some foreseeable prospect of balancing the budget. But the current economic climate is very different. For even though the Reagan Administration has brought inflation under control—with a considerable assist from Chairman Paul Volcker of the Federal Reserve Board, one might add—it has done so by tolerating the highest levels of unemployment we have had since the Great Depression, a policy that may prove difficult to sustain over time. And even if unemployment does decline, as it slowly seems to be doing, there remains the problem of massive budget deficits which seem likely to keep interest rates high, and thus to endanger recovery, for years to come.

To be sure, the Administration has attempted to apply to this problem its own backhanded version of Keynesianism—supply-side economics. But where previous flirtations with Keynesianism had involved expanding the budgetary pie for everyone, supply-side economics seemed to imply vast increases in the military's share and vast cutbacks in everything else, including curiously enough taxes, with the balance not to be made right until some distant day when the presumed benefits of this procedure would, as Mr. David Stockman inaptly put it, "trickle down."¹⁴ Whatever its effect on the domestic economy, this was not an approach well calculated to build the public support that will be necessary if high levels of defense spending are to continue for very long.

And yet, there seems to prevail in the higher circles of this Administration the belief that if only we "stay the course" on defense spending, we can ultimately force the Russians to bankrupt their economy in the effort to keep up. If the historical record is any guide, we should be wary of this vulture-like argument: predictions of a Soviet economic collapse have been circulating since 1917 and it has not happened yet, any more than Moscow's own persistent

¹⁴ William Greidner, "The Education of David Stockman," *Atlantic*, December, 1981, p. 47.

predictions of our impending economic demise have come true.¹⁵ A government's ability to tolerate discomfort in the name of defense depends, in large part, upon the extent of its authority over its own citizens, and there is no reason to expect, soon, a concentration of power in Washington that would rival Moscow's in that respect.

We are stuck, then, with the fact that there is a direct relationship between the national security and the national economy. If one appears aimed at the moon while the other seems headed in the opposite direction, a certain imbalance results that is not likely to produce a stable domestic consensus. Of all the postwar Presidents, the one who would have been most appalled by the Reagan Administration's emphasis on military spending would have been the most military of all of them—Dwight Eisenhower. For it was Eisenhower's fundamental conviction, held with rock-like tenacity, that one could not have a healthy defense without a healthy economy: the two went hand in hand, and if seeking one meant sacrificing the other, then the whole game was lost. "We must not destroy," he said more than once, "what it is we are seeking to defend."¹⁶

(2) Second, the Reagan Administration, in its zeal to accumulate new weapons, has been slow to seek opportunities to make containment work through negotiation. Defense spending does not take place in a vacuum: in calculating its costs, one should take into account not only the immediate expenses involved in research, development, production and deployment, but also the probable response of the other side, which may make further expenditures necessary at a later date. One thinks of our decision, more than a decade ago, to place multiple warheads on our land-based missiles: the Russians' determination to follow our lead, and the fears we then developed about the vulnerability of those very missiles, led first to plans for deploying the cumbersome and costly MX, and more recently to a new conceptual breakthrough—the "Midgetman" single-warhead missile.¹⁷ Might it not have been to our advantage to have sought a negotiated ban on multiple-warhead land-based missiles in the first place? Diplomacy, it is too often forgotten, can also be a means of achieving security—often at less cost and with fewer unfortunate side effects than a crash defense buildup.

But what is there to negotiate about? How can we trust the Russians to abide by agreements reached, given their dismal record

¹⁵ See, on this point, Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica, "Reagan and Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1982/83, p. 263.

¹⁶ Eisenhower press conference, November 11, 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953*, Washington: G.P.O., 1960, p. 760.

¹⁷ Henry Kissinger, "A New Approach to Arms Control," *Time*, March 21, 1983, pp. 24–26.

in the past? In fact, if one looks at agreements which were in the Russians' own best interests to keep, such as the Limited Test Ban Treaty or SALT I, their record is much better than it has been on such things as the 1972 "Basic Principles" statement, or the Helsinki Accords. Agreements among great nations are only as good as the interests that lie behind them. No one should expect treaties permanently to constrain sovereign states against their will; the trick, rather, is to base such agreements upon specific areas of overlapping interest.

Such areas do exist, most obviously in the field of arms control. Both sides have found it to their advantage to observe the provisions of the unratified SALT II treaty: one wonders what possible disadvantage there could now be to going ahead and ratifying it? Why not proceed with the negotiation of a comprehensive Test Ban Treaty? Why not investigate opportunities to reduce *both* theater and tactical nuclear forces in Europe, perhaps in connection with the "no-early-use" strategy that progress in conventional weaponry has now made "thinkable"?¹⁸ And yet, the Reagan Administration confines its efforts to a series of separately pursued and so far unproductive negotiations on strategic and theater nuclear forces. Despite recent indications of greater flexibility in these talks, it still does not appear to have worked out a consistent position—how does one reconcile the "build-down" concept with deploying the MX in existing silos, for example, since the "build-down" would appear to require destroying two older warheads for each new but highly vulnerable one? Nor does the Administration seem to have grasped the possibility that broadly conceived and reliably verifiable arms control agreements, even those requiring substantial concessions on the part of ourselves and our allies, might well purchase greater security at less cost than the current tendency to deploy first, and then hope for negotiations afterwards.

Where it reflects the interests of both sides, and where it is verifiable, arms control works. It is not disarmament. It may not even involve arms reduction. But a framework of agreement between the superpowers can slow down and even stabilize the arms

¹⁸ Whether or not one agrees with the "no-first-use" proposal put forward in 1982 by McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara and Gerard Smith in "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1982, pp. 753–768, there is no question that it has caused the strategy of "no early use" to be discussed seriously for the first time. See, for example, Bernard W. Rogers, "The Atlantic Alliance: Prescriptions for a Difficult Decade," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1982, pp. 1145–1157; Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes and Franz-Josef Schulze, "Nuclear Weapons and the Preservation of Peace: A German Response," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1982, pp. 1157–1171. See also the "Comment and Correspondence" sections in the Summer 1982 and Fall 1982 issues of *Foreign Affairs*, and McNamara's further discussion of the subject, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983, pp. 59–80.

race; if nothing else, it can enhance each side's ability to monitor what the other has. That in itself is sufficient reason to pursue the opportunities, with greater vigor and on a broader scale than has been done up to now.

(3) Third, the Reagan Administration has allowed support for containment to erode both at home and abroad by taking too casual an attitude toward the dangers of nuclear war. One of the arguments frequently cited against arms control—and against the whole détente strategy, for that matter—is that it induces complacency among one's own citizens and among allies overseas. But if the past three years have demonstrated anything at all, it is that the reverse is also true: overzealousness in the pursuit of defense can induce fears, not so much of the enemy himself, but of the very means by which one is trying to deter him. The purpose of a deterrent, Michael Howard has wisely commented, is both to discourage and to reassure: to discourage one's adversary from aggression, and to reassure one's own population and allies about their safety.¹⁹

The Reagan Administration's limited interest in arms control, together with its early pronouncements on fighting limited nuclear wars, firing nuclear warning shots, and do-it-yourself backyard civil defense—the “three feet of earth” theory—all of this has succeeded in undermining reassurance to a dangerous degree. It has also validated, once again, what historians will recognize as the Law of Unintended Consequence: the tendency of governments to bring about, through their own lack of foresight, precisely what it is they most seek to avoid.

For there now exists, both in this country and abroad, an anti-nuclear movement of unprecedented proportions. The strength of this campaign goes far deeper than the few conspicuous protesters who chain themselves to the gates of nuclear weapons plants; nor does it depend upon the immediate fortunes of the freeze movement. A revulsion against the very idea of nuclear deterrence is well underway, and if the Administration does not make progress soon on arms control, it is likely to see the initiative taken away from it both here and in Europe in ways it may regret, and which may not always be in the national interest. For it is the very weapons that are now the object of so much concern that have played a major role in keeping the peace for almost four decades; it would be tragic to see their deterrent role curtailed in the name of peace because a national administration did not know how to make use of them in that capacity without appearing to relish war.

¹⁹ Michael Howard, “Reassurance and Deterrence: Western Defense in the 1980s,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1982/83, pp. 309–24.

These lapses on the part of the Reagan Administration reflect, it seems to me, a mono-dimensional approach to national security policy: they reveal a tendency to define interests and threats in chiefly military terms, with little or no awareness of the political, economic, or psychological components of strategy. As a result, this Administration runs the risk of generating something of the same antimilitary backlash that made the conduct of our affairs so difficult in the early 1970s. Containment, if it is to be accomplished successfully and sustained over the long term, is going to have to involve a keener awareness of these nonmilitary dimensions of strategy than the current Administration, to this date, has shown.

v

Containment will no doubt remain the central focus of our strategy in world affairs for some years to come. The Soviet Union shows no signs of contenting itself with the existing distribution of power in the world; experience certainly should have taught us by now that our capacity to moderate Moscow's ambitions by any means other than some fairly crude combination of sticks and carrots is severely limited. Still, there are a few things we might learn from our experience with containment to this point; things any future administration might do well to keep in mind as it seeks to devise strategies for dealing with the Russians.

(1) One is precisely how little we have learned from the past. We have shifted back and forth between the polarities of limited means and unlimited interests—between the risks of discrimination and the excesses that flow from its absence—having to learn each time the problems with each approach, oblivious, for the most part, to the possibility that we might do better with less dramatic swings of the geopolitical pendulum. Has the time not come to attempt to build into our policy-formulation process some sense of what has gone before, and at least of what elementary conclusions might be derived from it? There are various ways in which this might be accomplished: one might establish a permanent nonpartisan staff for the National Security Council, the only key policymaking body in this field that does not now have one; one might draw in a more formal and systematic capacity than is now done upon the expertise of retired presidents, national security advisors, secretaries of state and other experienced “elder” statesmen; one might even take the drastic step of encouraging high officials actually to read history themselves from time to time. The point would be to get away from our amnesiac habit of periodically re-inventing the wheel; after all,

the general shape of that device is reasonably well understood and may not need to be re-thought with each revolution.

(2) A second and related priority should be to insulate our long-term external concerns from our short-term internal preoccupations: no single deficiency in our approach to strategy and diplomacy causes us more grief than its subordination to the volatile and irresponsible whims of domestic politics. As a historian, and therefore something of a skeptic about the possibilities of human perfection, I cannot be very optimistic about achieving this. Indeed, the trend, in recent years, has been in just the other direction, toward the more frequent and more flagrant intrusion of politics into national security issues, and toward longer and longer periods of time required to repair the damage. No other great nation in the history of the world has fallen into the curious habit of re-thinking its foreign policy at quadrennial intervals to meet the anticipated desires of a particular small and snowy northern province, or one chiefly noted for the production of corn and pigs. A compression and rationalization of our presidential selection procedures would help remove these temptations; so too would a return to the tradition of bipartisan consultation on controversial foreign policy questions, a direction in which the Reagan Administration quite wisely is moving. What is really needed, though, is a change in our standards of political decorum: if we could get to the stage at which it would be as unacceptable to play politics with critical issues of foreign and national security policy as it has now become to joke about women and minorities from public platforms, then we would be well along the way toward solving this problem. But not until then.

(3) At the same time, there should be a greater and more deliberate effort made to relate national security policy to the national economy. We should never again succumb to the illusion that means are infinite, and that therefore the ends of strategy can be formulated quite independently of them. Means in fact will always be limited in some way; the art of strategy consists largely of adjusting desirable ends to fit available means. The Vietnam experience ought to have taught us that no nation can sustain a defense policy that wrecks its economy or deranges its polity; we need to recapture Eisenhower's insight that there is no more critical foundation for national strength than the national consensus that underlies it.

(4) We could also learn to be more precise about just what it is we are out to contain. Is the adversary the Soviet Union? Is it the world communist movement? Is it the great variety of non-com-

unist Marxist movements that exist throughout the world? Surely in an era in which we rely upon the world's most populous communist state to help contain the world's most powerful communist state, in an era when some of our best friends are socialists, there can be little doubt about the answer to this question. And yet, as our current policy in Central America and the Caribbean shows, we persist in lumping together the Soviet Union, international communism, and non-communist Marxism in the most careless and imprecise manner—to what end? It is a fundamental principle of strategy that one should never take on any more enemies than necessary at any given point. But we seem to do it all the time.

(5) It follows from this that we could also make greater use than we do of our friends. Most other nations heartily endorse our goal of a world safe for diversity; few, given the choice, would align themselves with the quite different goals of the Russians. Nationalism, in short, works for us rather than against us. And yet, we seem to go out of our way, at times, to alienate those who would cooperate in the task of containment. The blank check we have extended to the Israelis over the years—however useful in producing occasional grudging concessions on their part—has nonetheless impaired our ability to make common cause with the other nations of the Middle East whose interests we largely share: that the Russians have been able to take so little advantage of this situation is more a testimony to their ineptitude than to our wisdom. Our support for Taiwan for years prevented any exploitation of the Sino-Soviet split, and to this day retains the potential for weakening our very important relationship with mainland China. Our attitude toward white minority regimes in southern Africa has not always been best calculated to win us influence in the rest of that continent, most of whose leaders emphatically share our desire to keep the Russians out. Recently we even went out of our way to alienate some of our closest European allies by imposing a set of sanctions on the Soviet Union that no one thought would work, while at the same time, and for the sake of a domestic constituency, withholding another more potent set of sanctions (on grain) that might have. Containment would function more efficiently if others shared some of the burden of containing. And yet, we sometimes seem to make that difficult.

(6) Another trick that would make containment work better would be to take advantage, to a greater extent than we have, of the Russians' chronic tendency to generate resistance to themselves. This is one reason why Moscow has not been able to exploit the opportunities we have handed them in the Middle East and Africa;

it is why they have such difficulty consolidating opportunities they have taken advantage of themselves, as in Afghanistan. It is a cliché, by now, to describe the Soviet Union as the last great imperial power; what is not a cliché, but rather one of the more reliable “lessons” to be drawn from the admittedly imprecise discipline of history, is that imperial powers ultimately wind up containing themselves through the resistance they themselves provoke. Nothing could be clearer than that this is happening to the Russians today, and yet we seem not to take it much into account in framing our policies. We should.

(7) It would also help if we would cool the rhetoric. The current Administration is hardly the first to engage in verbal overkill, but the frequency and vividness of its excesses in this regard surely set some kind of record. The President has informed us that Jesus—not Kennan—was the original architect of containment.²⁰ The Vice President has recently criticized not only Soviet but Tsarist Russia for arrested cultural development, pointing out (with some historic license) that that country took no part in the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment;²¹ this would appear to be the diplomatic equivalent of saying: “Yeah, and so’s your old man!” These are childish, but not innocent, pleasures. They demean those who engage in them, and therefore dignify the intended target. They obscure the message: how many people will recall Ambassador Charles Lichenstein’s eloquent and amply deserved condemnation of the Korean airliner atrocity once he had coupled it with his offer to stand on the docks, waving goodbye to the United Nations? That the Russians themselves have long been masters of the art of invective is no reason to try to emulate them; this is one competition in which we can safely allow their preeminence.

(8) Finally, and in this connection, we should keep in mind the ultimate objectives of containment. That strategy was and still should be the means to a larger end, not an end in itself. It should lead to something; otherwise, like any strategy formulated without reference to policy, it is meaningless. There is a tendency in this country to let means become ends, to become so preoccupied with processes that one loses sight of the goal those processes were supposed to produce. We have been guilty of that to some extent with containment; we have missed in the past and are probably

²⁰ Reagan speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Vol. 19, March 14, 1983, Washington: G.P.O., 1983, pp. 367–369.

²¹ Bush speech to the Austrian Foreign Policy Association, Vienna, September 21, 1983, as quoted in *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1983.

today still missing opportunities to manage, control, and possibly resolve many of our disagreements with the Russians, apparently out of fear that such contacts might weaken the public's resolve to support containment. But that is getting things backward. The original idea of containment was ultimately to facilitate, not impede, the attainment of a less dangerous international order. It would not be a bad idea—from the point of view of everybody's interests—to get back to that concept.

VI

It would not be inappropriate, in thinking about these problems, to recall the story of Dr. Samuel Johnson and the dog that walked on its hind legs. What was remarkable, the great man pointed out, was not that the dog walked badly that way, but that it was able to do it at all.

Given all the impediments that exist in our society to the rational formulation of strategy, what is remarkable is not that we have done less well than we might have these past three and a half decades, but that we have done it at all. Containment has, on the whole, been a successful strategy, despite all its imprecisions, inefficiencies, and inconsistencies. One reason for this is that we have been fortunate in our antagonists—the Russians have been even more inept than we in seeking to promote their interests in the world.

Still, that is no excuse not to do better. We really ought not to go on framing long-term national security policy in response to short-term domestic political expedients, crossing our fingers each time in the hope that the result will relate, in some way, to the external realities we confront, and to our own long-term interests. We ought not to neglect, to the extent that we do, the relationship between national security and the national economy. We ought not to make unnecessary difficulties for ourselves through imprecision about what it is we are containing, through the impediments we place in the way of those who would join with us in that enterprise, and through our absent-mindedness about the ultimate objective that strategy is supposed to produce.

All of these things fall under the category of what Clausewitz, a century and a half ago, called “friction”—the problems an army, or a nation, inadvertently creates for itself by implementing what may be a perfectly good strategy in a short-sighted, haphazard, or poorly thought-out way. They make the difference between doing something well and just doing it, like Dr. Johnson's dog.

Détente, as conceived by Nixon and Kissinger in the early 1970s,

was a well-intentioned effort to minimize this kind of friction: to make containment work more efficiently by taking a more precise view of what it was we were trying to contain, and by enlisting the aid of others in doing the containing. The fact that it failed says less about the flaws in that strategy than about the imperfect way in which it was executed—and that, in turn, raises an interesting dilemma. For if the evidence of Korea and Vietnam tells us anything at all, it is that this country will not support a foreign policy based on containment that disregards. But if we are to minimize costs, we will need to have a strategy, and that implies the need for discrimination, consistency, and central direction: qualities not easily incorporated into the American political system.

The task, then, will be to reconcile the division of authority our constitutional structure demands with the concentration of authority our position in world affairs requires. It will not be an easy task, to be sure, but it is not an entirely unfamiliar one either. We have managed it in the past, though at about the level of competency of Dr. Johnson's dog. One would hope, with experience, that we could learn to do it more gracefully, with less upsetting of furniture and shattering of crockery along the way. But better to do it awkwardly than not to do it at all.