

## In Light of Recent Events

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Research

In the mid-1980s they achieved the seemingly impossible. With their summit diplomacy, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev blazed a trail for the political imagination, revealing how a world beyond containment, distrust and suspicion might look – only a few years after East-West relations appeared to have suddenly gone to the dogs again.

Probably the most important lesson to be learned from the history of this Great Thaw has to do with the gold standard of international politics. This is, of course, trust and the precondition for its growth: a willingness to see matters from the other's viewpoint. During the Cold War this capacity was damaged again and again, at times even lying in ruins. Hence the characterizations of an age without empathy and policies blinded by prejudice. From the late 1960s, Willy Brandt and Richard Nixon set a marked contrast to this trend with their brands of summit diplomacy. Fundamentally it was about seeing the world with one's own eyes, then through the other's, and finally examining the two to identify their meeting points and gauge the divergences. Only with this "six-eyes politics", to borrow Frank-Walter Steinmeier's term, can differences be discussed and (the other side's) interests comprehended. To be sure, substance was often sacrificed for the sake of symbolism. Importantly,



though, in the end the talking was no longer about each another but with each other, thereby dramatically broadening the space for what was politically feasible.

It was on this foundation that relations between the US and the Soviet Union, which in the early 1980s appeared hopelessly disarrayed, could be reactivated after all. Between November 1985 and June 1988, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev achieved the once-unthinkable or supposedly impossible: Security policy was no longer perceived as a zero-sum game, a contest in which one side could gain only as much as the other gave up. Accordingly, Gorbachev let the US proceed with its pet project of a space-based missile shield, even though the USSR had nothing comparable in its arsenal. Even in case of a technological breakthrough, he lectured his domestic critics, the US would still be unable to neutralize Moscow's destructive capability in any scenario. In other words, Gorbachev risked a policy of unilateral concessions, underscored by his willingness to allow Western experts greater leeway for inspecting Soviet nuclear installations than the US would accept on its territory.

This not only cleared the way for a complete ban on nuclear medium range missiles. Even the dream of a nuclear-free world no longer seemed so harebrained anymore. In any case, with their summit diplomacy Reagan and Gorbachev broke new ground for the political imagination and demonstrated what a world free from isolation, suspicion and distrust could look like. That [historians](#) are now weaving laurel crowns for the two of them – together with the other grandees of détente – is



something that hones our view of the past. Even more, it is a commentary on today's seat-of-the-pants brand of politics. Or a very topical appeal.

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**Recommended Citation:**

Bernd Greiner, In light of recent events, 11/30/2016, <http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/light-recent-events> (please add the date of the last call to this page in brackets).