

Détente Revisited

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The incipient détente was a pivotal phase in the evolution of East-West relations. The consolidation of the status quo in Europe went hand in hand with efforts on both sides to deescalate the Cold War and to manage East-West rivalry. To different degrees, both superpowers encouraged their allies to follow their lead and develop measures aimed at improving relations between the two blocs. The search for stability was compatible with policies to perforate the Iron Curtain and to pursue détente as a dynamic policy to overcome Europe's division over the long term.

Stephan Kieninger's book examines the evolution of Western policies to transform Europe peacefully through the kind of dynamic détente that was codified in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Kieninger emphasizes that the transformative effects of the Helsinki Accords had been envisaged since the 1960s: Lyndon Johnson's bridge building and Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik were the forerunners for the Helsinki process. Johnson and Brandt were eager to foster liberalizing changes in Eastern Europe through an expansion of East-West communication. The assumption was that Communist rulers were prepared to open up their systems gradually for freer movement of people, information and ideas provided that they were granted international security.



Relying on multi-archival evidence, Kieninger depicts the durability of the transformation approach during the Nixon and Kissinger years. While Johnson had contemplated détente as a strategy towards peaceful change, Nixon's efforts focused on stabilizing East-West relations and mitigating the consequences of the conflict in Vietnam. Kieninger argues that Nixon and Kissinger were more cautious in their approach to East-West relations: They feared the erosion of America's strength and had a more static view of East-West détente. In addition, the escalation of the race in strategic weapons and the flaws of Nixon's and Kissinger's linkage policy were major setbacks for the transformation approach.

Kieninger's convincing argument is that America's transformation policy survived through transatlantic networking. Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and NATO's preparations for the CSCE negotiations helped the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs to continue bridge building. Kieninger discusses the parallels and frictions that developed between Nixon's and Brandt's approaches to détente. Nixon and Kissinger did not subscribe to the ideas at the heart of Brandt's dynamic policy. They merely tolerated them. But their static détente policy left the transformation approach room to co-exist.

The bridge builders needed a sophisticated approach to continue their policy. Kieninger argues that they minimized conflicts on contentious issues with the Nixon White House, they kept their policy sufficiently low key, and they used long established transatlantic networks to pursue détente as a dynamic policy. Among the key figures were the Directors of



the State Department's European Bureau, Martin Hillenbrand and later Arthur Hartman, and the deputy chief of the U.S. mission to NATO and later head of the U.S. CSCE delegation George S. Vest. Together with the Western European governments they continued to pursue Johnson's transformation approach even after Kissinger's appointment as Secretary of State in 1973.

Kissinger could not bring his European partners to trim their ambitious objectives in the CSCE. Within NATO, he was alone in demanding premature Western concessions on human rights and on the freer movement provisions under Basket III. Kieninger points out that the bridge builders in the State Department's European Bureau utilized the need for NATO's solidarity as a cover for their efforts to continue the transformation approach. Finally, the transatlantic network prevailed. Kissinger joined the bandwagon in 1975 when he put his bargaining power behind the ambitious objectives of the transformation agenda. Although in the CSCE's aftermath much scepticism emerged in the U.S. for a continuation of a policy of engagement with the Soviet Union, Kieninger proves that static and dynamic notions of détente continued to coexist in the following years, laying the foundation for the long term durability and success of the West's transformation policy.

Stephan Kieninger, *Dynamic Detente. The United States and Europe, 1964-1975*, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).



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Recommended Citation:

Luca Ratti, Détente Revisited, 07/25/2016,
<http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/detente-revisited> (please add
the date of the last call to this page in brackets).