Détente and the Global Sixties

In this paper I will discuss the basic drivers and fundamental contradictions of the process of détente between the United States and the United States of the late 1960s and 1970s. I will try to show how détente was driven by a Euro-centric logic, which stemmed also from global processes and have important, although often inadvertent, global implications. Détente was, in other words, in its own way connected to the global Sixties and a product of them.

With the term of détente – and with the more specific definition of a “bipolar” (i.e.: Soviet – American) détente – we intend the relaxation of tensions between the superpowers that reached its zenith in the first half of the 1970s. Periodizations of bipolar détente vary, depending on which of its many traits and causes one privileges and gives more weight to. We have thus proponents of a long détente covering most of the 1960s and 70s, whose beginning is defined by the post-Cuban missile crisis efforts of the US and the USSR to discipline the arms race and reducing the risk of war, and whose definitive implosion came only in 1978-79, détente having been ultimately entombed by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. And we have very short détentes (1969 -1974), centered primarily on the role played by the United States and the radical foreign policy discursive shift brought by the Nixon administration. We have, finally, periodizations stressing the non-Cold War nature of détente: equating, in other words, the mutual recognition and diplomatic engagement between Moscow and Washington with the end of a Cold War, whose basic element was the refusal of legitimacy (and therefore the lack of interaction) between the two archrivals. From this perspective, what began in the early 1960s – the 1963 Test Ban Treaty is usually taken as the key, defining moment – was not the opening of a new phase of the Cold War but its end tout court; détente was not another phase of the Cold War or a sort of interlude in the bipolar competition: it was the post-Cold War, period.

Each of these periodizations has its own merits. Each highlights, and helps explaining, some important aspect, and fundamental matrix, of bipolar détente. Each reveals how preconditions for US-Soviet engagement germinated in the 1960s, rendering 1968 a convenient chronological hook around which it is possible to construct a possible narrative of détente: of its European origins, global reverberations, inner contradictions and – also - ironical and unexpected consequences.
To do so it is first necessary to examine the fundamental drivers of bipolar détente: the stimuli that spurred the choice of the two superpowers to gradually, but inexorably, move away from the irreconcilable antagonism of the early Cold War and seek forms of mutual accommodation that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. Of these drivers, I’d like to mention here four. The first, unfashionable as it has become in recent Cold War studies but nevertheless central, was represented by nuclear weapons. Fear of a nuclear war, and full awareness of its potential implications, represented powerful, indeed indispensable incentives to lay down arms and negotiate. Détente was centered on nuclear diplomacy and – sometimes we tend to forget – its main, and indeed very relevant achievements were in the realm of arms control (the long term effects and consequences of such agreements, the non-Proliferation Treaty in particular, are again often forgotten or overlooked). Through cooperation on nuclear weapons, the United States and the Soviet Union hoped to achieve several interrelated objectives. The first was to institutionalize strategic interdependence: to formalize a situation of Mutual Assured Destruction on which the two sides came, quite paradoxically, to build their security strategies (the paradox being that MAD implied a significant, indeed monumental, relinquishment of sovereignty on the part of the two Cold War enemies, which accepted to place their security, indeed their very survival, into the hands of each other). The second objective of détente’s nuclear diplomacy was to set in motion a process aimed at controlling, containing and eventually rolling back nuclear proliferation (a goal that, in retrospect, was again largely achieved). A duality of motivations explained this common, bipolar interest in preventing nuclear proliferation: on the one side, there was a shared concern for the risks that could derive from a multiplication of national nuclear arsenals; on the other, there was a clear desire to preserve, and freeze, an uncontested hierarchy of power in the nuclear realm, which placed the US and the USSR in a sort of league of their own. A negative element (reducing the risk of nuclear war) and a positive one (strengthening and rendering permanent a nuclear ranking where the US-Soviet duo stood clearly, and uncontestably at the top) thus complemented each other, producing a paradoxical convergence between the superpowers. This convergence was founded on the commonality of interests generated by the mutual possession of immense, and ever growing, nuclear arsenals and the consequent ability to inflict immense damage to each other (by what Henry Kissinger described once as an “interdependence for survival”). The third and last objective was to use negotiations to bring under control an arms race that was taking a heavy toll on
the defense budget of the two sides, all the more so (particularly for the United States) in the second half of the 1960s. In a nutshell: a) willingness to institutionalize nuclear deterrent as a way to guarantee reciprocal security (by rendering war intolerable); b) desire to prevent proliferation and preserve a favorable hierarchy of power in the nuclear realm; and c) budgetary interests in arms control and agreements, they all explain the nuclear diplomacy that was at the heart of bipolar détente. All of this took place in the Sixties because it was then that the Soviet Union began to finally filling the nuclear gap with the United States thus rendering MAD and strategic interdependence something more than a simple theoretical possibility. Furthermore, it was in the 1960s that a possible challenge to the US-Soviet nuclear primacy seemed to arise with the Chinese and the French programs. Finally, it was in the 1960s that the full awareness of the possibility, and implication, of a nuclear exchange definitely emerged. From this perspective, détente was opened and somehow kick-started by the Test Ban Treaty of July 1963, the first, explicit recognition of how nuclear weapons had produced a powerful if not decisive commonality of interests between Washington and Moscow.

The second driver of détente was geopolitics. Over time (and fairly soon) both parties came to appreciate the stability guaranteed by the bipolar equilibrium and geopolitical restructuring that had ensued in Europe. Official rhetoric notwithstanding, the partition of Europe and Germany had offered what seemed to be a reliable solution to the intractable German problem. The existence of two, in part symmetrical, blocs guaranteed a hegemonic role to the two superpowers, while impairing in different ways the sovereignty of their lesser allies. But such mirror-like equilibrium began to show fissures and fragilities in the 1960s. Within the US-led side, the French defection, the West German increasing insubordination, the tensions over Vietnam and the dollar, they all seemed to reveal a decreasing ability of Washington to preserve discipline in its own sphere of influence: the transatlantic compromise appeared in other words weaker and shattered. Similarly, the Soviet bloc was characterized by centrifugal pressures and an inexorable erosion of Moscow`s ability to peacefully keep its allies in line, as the 1968 Czechoslovakian crisis would dramatically reveal. Détente became therefore a way to preserve, or re-impose, order and discipline: a fairly conservative strategy aimed at propping up and strengthening the foundations of a postwar international order that showed fragilities and weaknesses. Again, the positive and the negative co-existed. Détente was a strategy for and against: for preserving a status quo that seemed to guarantee stability and
peace; against changes that could question and challenge a bipolar (i.e.: US-Soviet) hegemony founded on a rigid and unmodifiable “blocism”, on a division of Europe that had metamorphosed from being a consequence of such hegemony into constituting a fundamental precondition of it.

Geopolitics and strategy were matched and complemented by ideology, the third driver of détente. The ideological glue was clearly less effective in both sides and there were patent signs of ideological fatigue. The original, cohesive strength of Cold War ideology appeared in other words to be waning. In the US led-camp, the key elements of Atlantic unity/“Atlanticism” – being them anti-Communism and/or the embedded, and costrained liebarlism of the Bretton Woods model – were losing their effectiveness. Prosperity and affluence had been fundamental ideological pillars of Atlanticism: from its very origins, and increasingly so since the Marshall Plan, the polarity of the Cold War had been represented in the Western camp not just, or exclusively, through the binary dyads “Totalitarianism/Democracy” or “Slavery/Freedom”, but also through that of of “Misery/Prosperity”. The legitimacy of US leadership, and those of the domestic forces that had associated themselves with Washington, rested also on this: on them being on the side of a winning model of development centered on growth, high productivity and expanding consumptions. In the post -1968 years, this last dyad appeared to be less credible, being replaced by common analyses on the crisis of capitalism, and frequent invocations of politics of austerity to tackle the new, intractable beast of inflation. On the other side, the mythopoetic strength of the Soviet Union and the Soviet model appeared also to be also fading, with the memory of the great “Anti-Fascist” struggle of World War II progressively losing its original potency and allure, and the USSR finding itself challenged on its own turf by the Chinese alternative, by infatuations for rural revolutionary models or by popular forms of often non-aligned Third Worldism. The language deployed by both sides – as a simple perusal of their main strategic analyses of the period well reveals - is highly indicative of this change and the contrast with the ideologically supercharged discourse of the early Cold War is remarkable. Combined with the frequent emphasis on the shared geopolitical interests - regularly highlighted for example in the conversations between Kissinger and the Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin - the partial vanishing of the deep ideological gulf separating the two sides provided an additional element facilitating and stimulating bipolar détente.
The fourth and last driver of détente was provided by global dynamics influencing and sometimes informing the attitude and behavior of the US and the USSR in Europe. Stabilizing Europe, and preserving the achieved status quo there, was functional to relocate resources and focus elsewhere, being it the war in Vietnam for the United States or the regional containment of China for the Soviet Union. What seemed to emerge was a clash between a traditional, territorialized system of international relations and new transnational actors and dynamics. These actors and dynamics contributed to foster new forms of interdependence that eroded the sovereignty and freedom of action of the superpowers themselves. The ‘transnational’ – whether in the form of unrestrained money flows or of human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)s and activists who rejected traditional distinctions between internal and external affairs – challenged the fundamental axioms and rules of the Cold War regime. Interdependence, so well on display, for example, in the realm of energy, revealed how impracticable unilateral responses could be, and the resultant necessity of imagining and designing a new model of global governance. Détente was fundamentally linked to such effort: the consensually negotiated stabilization of Europe, via the freezing of its bipolar divide, appeared to Moscow and even more Washington a vital precondition to it.

To sum up: trends and processes which combined strategy (i.e.: the nuclear), geopolitics, ideology and global dynamics concurred to stimulate and kick-start the process of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. Détente – my argument is – was centered on Europe: it originated there and it was stirred by problems first emerged in Europe. But it derived also from extra-European factors and ended up contributing to unleash new global forces and trends. Because bipolar détente was not just Euro-centric, but also inherently contradictory. And its many contradictions produced unexpected, and often unwanted consequences: rendered détente an Erysichthon sort of beast, which ate and devoured itself. Let me then mention these contradictions.

The first contradiction is that a strategy aimed at preserving a specific international order did so by deliberately eroding its basic ideological underpinnings. As I said, one of the basic goals of détente was that of maintaining and, if necessary, re-imposing a Cold War discipline that was challenged on multiple fronts in Europe. But the idea of upholding the Cold War by going beyond the Cold War posed inescapable (and unsolvable) dilemmas, unleashing forces that proved ultimately uncontrollable. This became rapidly visible in several domains. Within
Europe a different, and often alternative, détente was promoted. Epitomized by Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*, this intra-European détente was stimulated and somehow permitted by bipolar détente: the more general frame of détente made much more difficult to obstacle regional forms of détente, such as *Ostpolitik*. But the European/German version of détente moved from different premises and, more important, targeted different goals. In a nutshell: whereas US-Soviet détente intended to prop up the shaky foundations of the bipolar *status quo* in Europe, Ostpolitik aimed at laying the conditions for a final overcoming of such *status quo*. The former wanted to hibernate the bipolar divide of Europe; the latter dreamed of defrosting it. Political rhetoric and diplomatic imperatives induced the two sides – Bonn and Washington – to downplay and minimize this essential difference between the two détentes. In private, however, the main West German and American actors (as well as the other European members of the Atlantic alliance) were fully aware of it, with Kissinger, as usual, giving often vent to his frustration with Brandt and presenting *Ostpolitik* as simply a replica of the 1922 Rapallo rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union: an appeasement of the USSR, which reduced the leverage of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviets and set in motion a process that Brandt could not control since – in Kissinger’s words – the German chancellor “possessed neither the stamina nor the intellectual apparatus to manage the forces he had unleashed”.

The erosion of the ideological foundations of the Cold War that détente inadvertently produced made itself felt also on many national political systems in Europe. These political systems had structured themselves along a Cold War axis which all of a sudden seemed to have lost its *raison d’être*. This was, for example, the case of Italy, where several politicians, beginning with the Christian Democratic leader Aldo Moro, argued that détente rendered obsolete the anti-communist veto and justified the formation of great coalitions including the Communist Party (which, on its side, was eager to reach a “historical compromise” with the Christian Democrats and finally share governmental responsibilities). Kissinger and president Ford responded harshly to this characterization of détente (“the fact that I shake hands with Brezhnev does not mean that I wish to have him as my vice President”, Ford told Moro in a tense meeting that took place in May 1975). And they came to fear (and despise) even more a reformed and more moderate Italian communist party, that by gravitating outside the Soviet orbit could act more independently and escape Moscow’s discipline and parallel (in a telling
comparison Kissinger would later pair the PCI with the movement of Czechoslovakian dissidents Charta 77, presenting them as troublemakers threatening the stability guaranteed by the cold war equilibrium in Europe). « I don’t give a damn whether these parties [the Communist parties of Western Europe] . . . are or are not the control of Moscow », Kissinger erupted during a meeting with his staff, again in 1975. Whatever the case, « a Western Europe with the major participation of Communist parties’ was ‘going to change the basis of NATO’; ‘Communists [coming] into power in Western Europe . . . would totally reorient the map of the post-war world. »

Finally, a de-ideologized Cold War in Europe was strongly reducing the US capacity to co-opt and mobilize domestic anti-Communist interlocutors. Combining with the other principal vehicle of legitimization the Cold War granted these actors – the possibility to present them as the natural deliverers of the prosperity, affluence and mass consumption derived from being in the US sphere of influence – this produced a significant weakening of the domestic groups more committed to the conservation of the Cold War in the continent. Détente aimed at preserving the Cold War in Europe; the means chosen to do so – engagement with Moscow and downplaying of ideological differences – were however generating an opposite result.

Even because similar effects were visible within the United States itself. This is the second contradiction of détente I want to stress here. The discourse of bipolar détente posited – often implicitly and sometimes even explicitly – a sort of moral and strategic equivalence between the two superpowers. MAD and strategic interdependence symbolized all of this and it’s hard to underestimate the shocking effect the 1972 Salt I and the ABM treaties had in the United States. Détente rendered somehow the US normal and vulnerable. It placed an end to the American exception, as Kissinger never tired of remarking. But the Cold War, and its discursive substratum, had been based on the very idea that an American exception existed: that it need to be protected and saved; and that it represented the best sageguard, and the ultimate line of defense, against Communism and Soviet global designs. The neocons, the new Republican Right, human rights advocates they all activated to challenge this notion. And they used against Kissinger the same accusation he had levelled at Brandt: that his détente was a form of appeasement of the Soviet Union, a morally bankrupted and strategically flawed approach that had to be stopped at any cost. They, in other words, used the Cold War – its binary categories, simple lexicon and moral certainties – against Kissinger’s efforts to maintain, via
détente, that very Cold War order to which they appealed.

Finally, the third and last contradiction of détente involved both the superpowers. What appeared a successful stabilization of the Cold War in Europe made all too tempting to try to score points outside Europe, particularly in the many Cold War fronts that opened in Africa in the 1970s. There is no time to discuss this here, nor the fact that the situation was made more complex by the presence and actions of other Cold War players, Cuba and South Africa overall. The consequence was however to see even in the phase of détente the reproduction of a quintessential, and dramatic, Cold War dynamic, as a consequence of which the stabilization in Europe – the “long peace” nature of the Cold War on the continent - was matched by, and contributed to, a multiplication of Cold War activity and violence outside Europe. Détente in Europe, to summarize, led to increase tension outside Europe with final, circular and paradoxical effects on détente itself, with both sides accusing the other of having betrayed its original spirit, by going global and limiting to Europe their conservative and status quo-oriented policies.