

From détente to renewed tensions (1962–1985)

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Having narrowly avoided nuclear war, the United States and the USSR drew conclusions from the Cuban Crisis. This direct clash between the two superpowers brought about a sort of truce in the Cold War. In 1963, a direct line — the famous ‘red telephone’ — was established between Washington and Moscow and the two Great Powers opened discussions on limiting the arms race. There were other reasons behind the moderate approach adopted by the two parties. The United States was finding it increasingly difficult to finance its global military presence, and its growing involvement in the Vietnam War from 1964 onwards met with strong criticism from the general public. In Europe, all eyes now turned to the Ostpolitik: the Federal Republic of Germany was developing closer relations with the German Democratic Republic, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR. As Europe remained at the heart of the East-West confrontation, it sought to promote détente between the two military blocs. It also contributed to the maintenance of world peace and raised hopes of a reunification of the continent at the Helsinki Summit in 1975.

However, the attempt by Alexander Dubček to liberalise the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia was crushed in August 1968 by the troops of the Warsaw Pact. In the late 1970s, the two superpowers sought to extend their respective influence. The Soviet policy in Africa and the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan led to a cooling of relations between the US and the USSR. In the United States, the ‘America is back’ rhetoric adopted by new President Ronald Reagan set the tone for the Cold War in the 1980s. This period was marked by a new arms race.