

Improvements in East–West relations

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On 1 August 1975, the Final Act of the Helsinki Summit closed the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which had opened on 3 July 1973. The CSCE was a standing forum for negotiation that, without being institutionalised, sought to enhance cooperation between long-standing foes and, indirectly, to overcome the division of Europe into two major blocs on either side of the Berlin Wall. Based on a Euro-Atlantic approach, all states whose territory was partly or wholly located in the continent of Europe were entitled to participate as full members, as were the United States and Canada. Only Albania declined to attend the CSCE. The 35 participants, including members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, as well as non-aligned states, recognised the de facto borders established in Europe following the Second World War. The Helsinki Agreement covered non-interference in internal affairs, military issues, economic, technical and scientific cooperation, democratic principles and even environmental protection.

The early 1970s were also marked by the two superpowers' wish for détente. In the SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) Treaty of 26 May 1972 on limiting strategic weapons, they agreed not to manufacture strategic weapons for a period of five years, not to construct land-based launchers and to limit the number of ABM anti-missile missiles. However, the agreement did nothing to limit the power of the United States and the USSR, since each retained a nuclear arsenal with multiple overkill capability; in other words, the two countries had enough nuclear weapons to destroy one another many times over.

Another sign of détente was the partial lifting by the US of the trade embargo imposed on the USSR in 1949 and the signing with Moscow of a trade agreement in October 1972. Leonid Brezhnev's visit to the United States in June 1973 was the occasion for the signing of a treaty on the prevention of nuclear war. A third summit between Leonid Brezhnev and Richard Nixon in Moscow and the Crimea in June and July 1974 was less successful, since superpower relations were adversely affected by the Yom Kippur War between Israel and an Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria.

Paradoxically, the SALT I agreement fuelled the arms race: development of missiles with multiple nuclear warheads, tactical weapons, bombers and the 'neutron bomb' was stepped up because these weapons were not covered by the 1972 agreement. This meant that negotiations for a second SALT agreement dragged on and Soviet and US military expenditure increased. The SALT II agreement, which limited the number of missile launchers and bombers, was finally signed on 18 June 1979. It did not enter into force because of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, it did not prevent the deployment of new Soviet medium-range missiles, the SS-20s, in Europe: the late 1970s saw the start of the Euromissile crisis.