

SEPTEMBER 2023

# Cooperation amidst Great Power Rivalry

*The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*

AUTHOR

Melvyn P. Leffler



A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies and the Brookings Institution

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1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
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# Introduction

As one of the most harrowing crises in human history wound down over the Russian installation of missiles in Cuba, Nikita Khrushchev, the chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, wrote to President John F. Kennedy: “There is no evil without good. Evil has brought some good. The good is that now people have felt more tangibly the breathing of the burning flames of thermonuclear war and have a more clear realization of the threat looming over them if the arms race is not stopped.”<sup>1</sup> But arms alone were not on Khrushchev’s mind. “The people of the world,” he wrote in another letter, “expect from us energetic efforts aimed at the solution of urgent problems.”<sup>2</sup> In these personal letters, Khrushchev beseeched the president and specified the issues that merited attention—including a nuclear test ban, the dissolution of hostile blocs, the peaceful settlement of differences over Germany, the threat of nuclear proliferation, and the admission of the People’s Republic of China into the United Nations.

On June 10, 1963, President Kennedy responded publicly with one of the most eloquent speeches of his presidency. He began by addressing a topic “on which ignorance too often abounds and the truth is too rarely perceived.” The topic, he emphasized, was world peace. Peace had to be “the rational end of rational men.”<sup>3</sup> And Americans had a vital stake in recognizing the legitimate security interests of their greatest adversary, the Soviet Union, even while they pursued their own interests and kept true to their own values. Kennedy then announced a series of steps he would take to mitigate tensions, open communication with the Kremlin, invigorate disarmament talks, prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and modulate harm to the environment. Nothing he would do, Kennedy emphasized, would endanger U.S. allies or injure U.S. interests.

President Kennedy realized—as did Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan—that in the midst of competition with a great power rival and an ideological foe, cooperation could augment U.S. wellbeing and security. Cooperation could boost U.S. interests, underscore American values, and enhance the country’s long-term ability to compete while showing

sensitivity to an adversary's vital interests and catering to the yearnings of people everywhere for peace. Rivalry, policymakers grasped, was not the end in itself. The Soviet Union had to be contained, but peace, prosperity, and freedom of the American people were the overriding goals; competitive impulses must not hinder concrete objectives.

Throughout the Cold War, without losing sight of the fundamental rivalry, U.S. presidents grasped the value of modulating competition and seeking cooperation with the Soviet Union in order to serve U.S. interests and values. They recognized that they must avoid nuclear conflict; control the spread of atomic weapons; preserve order; and promote the fiscal, financial, and economic health of the United States. In order to achieve these ends, cooperation assumed various forms, from formal agreements to informal understandings. U.S. officials signed numerous bilateral and multilateral treaties with the Soviet Union, including the Austrian State Treaty (1955), the Lacy-Zarubin cultural agreement (1958), the Antarctic Treaty (1959), the Limited Test Ban Treaty (1963), the Outer Space Treaty (1967), the Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), the Seabed Treaty (1971), the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on the High Seas and the Air Space Above Them (1972), the SALT and ABM treaties (1972), the Helsinki Accords (1975), and the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987). The aims of these were to mitigate the arms race, modulate sources of friction, lessen the chances of confrontation, address shared problems, and build trust and understanding. U.S. policymakers also managed their containment policy adroitly to avoid challenging the adversary in areas that Kremlin leaders deemed vital to their security. In return, Soviet officials learned not to cross the United States' own red lines—as Khrushchev did when he tried to sneak missiles into Cuba. Never again during the Cold War would Soviet leaders try to put nuclear weapons on the U.S. periphery; tacitly and informally, Kennedy returned the favor by secretly withdrawing U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey.<sup>4</sup>



# The Onset of the Cold War

## *Competing and Learning*

Cooperation evolved as Washington and Moscow recognized the vital interests of one another and accepted, however grudgingly, the results, precedents, and informal rules arising from their interactions, “especially those from their conflictual relations.”<sup>5</sup> At the very onset of the Cold War, even as President Truman and his advisers embraced the doctrine of containment, they did not challenge the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Understanding its vital strategic importance to an emerging adversary, U.S. officials regarded Soviet behavior in this region as a litmus test of Soviet intentions elsewhere—a test the Kremlin woefully failed. Acquiescing to Soviet behavior in this region, Truman and his advisers defined their own vital security interests and identified the western zones of occupied Germany, France, and Britain as such.<sup>6</sup>

This assessment set the framework for the initiation of the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and to integrate West Germany into an economic orbit that would resuscitate a region deemed vital to U.S. security. When Soviet leader Joseph Stalin made it clear that he would not tolerate any Western capitalist penetration of his zone of vital interests in Eastern Europe, the United States proceeded to focus on its core goals in the western part of the continent. Stalin challenged those efforts with a blockade of Berlin—parts of which were still occupied and governed by the British, French, and Americans—and the United States responded with an airlift. Stalin then backed down and ended the blockade rather than risk war, and the Truman administration acquiesced to Soviet consolidation of its own sphere of vital interest in Eastern Europe. Even when revolutions subsequently broke out in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Poland (1956), the Republican administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to intervene. Slowly, grudgingly, the two adversaries acknowledged the vital interests of one another and labored to establish formal and informal rules of behavior. Each grasped that it was engaged in a zero-sum strategic contest with the other yet recognized that direct confrontation did not serve the interests of either Washington or Moscow.<sup>7</sup>

This was highlighted during the Korean War, when the United States intervened militarily on the peninsula to thwart North Korea’s aggression against South Korea—an action that was interpreted in Washington as

orchestrated by the Kremlin and designed to expand Communist influence and Soviet power. Yet when the new Communist regime in China intervened to aid North Korea, Truman and Eisenhower did not attack China directly lest Washington provoke Stalin to aid his new ally in Beijing. At the same time, Stalin tried to shroud his assistance to his Communist allies lest he provoke U.S. retaliation and a worldwide conflagration.<sup>8</sup> Both Moscow and Washington were learning informal rules of behavior and carefully assessing the core interests and sensibilities of the other to avert a third world war. Such an outcome, leaders in both nations grasped, did not serve anyone's interest. Prudent behavior had to temper strategic competition lest the competition itself undercut the most vital interests of both nations: avoiding World War III.

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***Slowly, grudgingly, the two adversaries acknowledged the vital interests of one another and labored to establish formal and informal rules of behavior.***

Nonetheless, the strategic competition assumed a dynamic of its own as both sides believed they were engaged in an existential ideological struggle for the soul of humankind. No document better illustrated the U.S. view of the competition than NSC 68, the national security strategy statement written by Truman's key advisers in the winter and spring of 1950, just preceding the outbreak of fighting in Korea. Paul Nitze, the head of the policy planning staff at the Department of State, was the principal author of that document. He believed that the Kremlin lusted for world domination and that the United States needed to reckon with the new totalitarian threat, a threat more dangerous to democratic capitalism than anything previously encountered. Nitze and his colleagues urged a massive military buildup of conventional and strategic weapons, including the development of a hydrogen bomb. They dwelled on the recent Soviet explosion of an atomic warhead and predicted that the Kremlin would have an arsenal of 200 atomic bombs by the mid-1950s. Nitze acknowledged that this buildup did not portend premeditated Soviet aggression. He worried, however, that Soviet atomic capabilities might neutralize the diplomatic shadows heretofore cast by the U.S. atomic monopoly. Enemies and allies might doubt U.S. willingness to risk nuclear war over limited issues (like the blockade of Berlin). Nitze believed that the United States had to undertake a host of risky new initiatives, like rearming West Germany and bringing it into the European Defense Community, signing a peace treaty with Japan, and thwarting the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. These actions, Nitze insisted, required "an adequate military shield under which they can develop." He wrote that "without superior aggregate military strength, in being and readily mobilizable, a policy of containment—which is in effect a policy of calculated and gradual coercion—is no more than a policy of bluff."<sup>9</sup>

NSC 68 inaugurated a radical shift in U.S. military expenditures and catalyzed a vast acceleration of U.S. strategic air and atomic capabilities. The U.S. military budget more than tripled in a few short years and the number of atomic warheads in its arsenal increased from 110 in 1948 to 369 in 1950, then to 1436 in 1953.<sup>10</sup> "The United States and the Soviet Union are engaged in a struggle for preponderant power," insisted Truman's policy planning staff. "To seek less than preponderant power would be to opt for defeat. Preponderant power must be the object of US policy."<sup>11</sup>

# The Trajectory of Cooperation across the Cold War

## *Ideas and Initiatives*

### **The Eisenhower Administration**

But the costs—both financial and environmental—of that policy were exorbitant. President Eisenhower believed that this trajectory portended financial ruin for the United States. “I most firmly believe,” Ike wrote a close friend in May 1952, “that the financial solvency and economic soundness of the United States constitute together the first requisite to collective security and the free world. That comes before all else.”<sup>12</sup> The newly elected Republican president recognized that, locked in a Cold War with an inveterate enemy, the United States required military strength to support effective diplomacy, but he also believed that fiscal prudence and economic vitality were the foundations of national well-being. In pursuit of victory in a strategic competition, Eisenhower believed it was imperative not to undermine the pillars of the U.S. free enterprise system. With Stalin dead (in March 1953), he hoped there would be a chance for peace. Peace could be nurtured, Eisenhower declared in a famous speech, “not by weapons of war but by wheat and by cotton, by milk and by wool, by meat and by timber and by rice. These are words that translate into every language on earth. These are needs that challenge the world in arms.” If the United States and the Soviet Union could find areas to cooperate, Eisenhower continued, if Moscow and Washington could muster the courage to curb the arms race, they might generate the resources to fund reconstruction around the world, stimulate free and fair trade, and allow peoples everywhere to “know the blessing of productive freedom.”<sup>13</sup>

Rejecting a strategy of rollback of Soviet power because it was too costly and too provocative, Eisenhower sought to contain Soviet and Communist expansion and to explore prospects for cooperation. Under his watch, however, the arms race intensified, new technologies spawned new weapons systems, the testing of atomic and hydrogen warheads approached catastrophic proportions, and crises percolated over the competitive thrusts of each side in Germany, Indochina, the Taiwan Straits, and the Middle East. But at the same time Eisenhower recognized the dangers that lurked in such competition and sought areas of

cooperation. He put the finishing touches on a treaty that unified and neutralized Austria. He stunned observers at the Geneva Summit Conference in 1955 when he called upon both governments to share blueprints of their military establishments and allow aerial photography in order to build confidence that neither side was preparing a surprise attack. In 1959, he signed the Antarctic Treaty, obligating the 12 signatories to keep that continent demilitarized and free of nuclear weapons. Eisenhower also supported the negotiation and implementation of a bilateral cultural exchange agreement with the Soviet Union. For the first time, Soviet and U.S. educational, scientific, and athletic exchanges would take place under the official auspices of both governments. At the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park, the United States chose not to display its military prowess but to highlight the appeal of its culture of consumption.<sup>14</sup>

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***Rejecting a strategy of rollback of Soviet power because it was too costly and too provocative, Eisenhower sought to contain Soviet and Communist expansion and to explore prospects for cooperation.***

## **The Kennedy Administration and the Appeal of Détente**

In his farewell address, Eisenhower did more than warn against a military-industrial complex. He underscored the importance of balance between competing impulses. He stressed that “disarmament, with mutual honor and confidence, is a continuing imperative. Together we must learn how to compose difference, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose.” He acknowledged disappointment. “As one who has witnessed the horror and the lingering sadness of war—as one who knows that another war could utterly destroy the civilization which has been so slowly and painfully built over thousands of years—I wish I could say that a lasting peace was in sight.”<sup>15</sup>

But it wasn’t. The Soviet threat mounted as the Kremlin capitalized upon its own scientific and technological accomplishments, built up its long-range strategic weapons, and exploited revolutionary ferment and decolonization in the Third World to promote its own interests and ideological appeal. Nobody took this competition more seriously than John F. Kennedy, the youthful Democratic candidate who defeated Richard M. Nixon, Eisenhower’s vice president, in the elections of 1960. “Let every nation know,” Kennedy declared in his inaugural address, that “we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”<sup>16</sup> He was determined to meet the Soviet challenge in the Third World, thwart Soviet moves to bolster the legitimacy of the East German Communist regime, and reverse the perception of Soviet technological superiority stemming from its stunning launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 and its ability to put the first man into space. Close to home, Kennedy aspired to eradicate the Communist regime in Cuba and prevent the Kremlin from stationing missiles and nuclear warheads there. But the confrontation with Khrushchev in October 1962—and the realization that the two countries were indeed on the brink of nuclear war—chastened him.

Kennedy grasped that competition might be enduring, but that cooperation could serve U.S. interests. Nuclear testing was polluting the atmosphere and inspiring millions of people to protest the radiological fallout. The

arms race was preposterously expensive. The struggles in the Third World were portentous. “The Family of Man,” he told a New York audience three weeks before his assassination in 1963, resides in more than 100 nations. “Most of its members are not white. Most of them are not Christians. Most of them know nothing about free enterprise. . . . Most of them are engulfed in anticolonial wars, or regional strife, or religious and ethnic conflict.” They are “not faring very well,” he concluded. And they could ensnare the United States and the Soviet Union into conflicts unrelated to their vital interests.<sup>17</sup>

Faced with these issues, Kennedy saw the appeal of détente, of cooperation. He negotiated a Limited Test Ban Treaty that prohibited testing in the atmosphere, in space, and beneath the seas. Its primary purpose, said the president, was “to halt or delay the development of an atomic capability by the Chinese Communists.”<sup>18</sup> Khrushchev not only agreed that the two governments had a common interest in stopping China’s nuclear ambitions but also that the agreement augured well for the settlement of other issues. The test ban treaty, Khrushchev informed Kennedy, “could lead to a real turning point, and the end of the cold war.”<sup>19</sup>

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## *Kennedy grasped that competition might be enduring, but that cooperation could serve U.S. interests.*

Kennedy was not so certain, yet he too recognized that Moscow and Washington had mutual interests even as they competed for influence around the world. Consequently, the president responded positively to Khrushchev’s request to buy U.S. wheat, knowing that the deal also helped American farmers and the U.S. economy. More surprisingly, Kennedy also reversed his position on space exploration. Heretofore he had been eager to beat the Kremlin in the race to the Moon. But now he told a meeting of the UN General Assembly that the thaw in relations required new approaches—that the two nations should cooperate “to keep weapons of mass destruction out of outer space.” He continued, “if this pause in the Cold War leads to its renewal and not to its end, then the indictment of posterity will rightly point its finger at us all.”<sup>20</sup>

When Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, a more formal agenda of cooperation was evolving around arms control, nonproliferation, space, and trade. Even the friction over the interpretation of the rights of access to Berlin and the rules for quadripartite governance of East and West Germany receded once the East Germans built a wall in August 1961 to stop the outflow of refugees—and the Americans and West Germans did not tear it down. Officials in Moscow and Washington could not admit it publicly, but they shared a common interest in the division of Germany and the control of German power. Each side worried that a reunified Germany might again gather strength, tilt to one side or the other, and undermine the informal balance of power that had evolved.<sup>21</sup>

## **The Johnson Years: Converging Interests amid New Geopolitical Turbulence**

Nonetheless, cooperation was halting. Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy’s successor, blamed Moscow for supporting the North Vietnamese Communists in their struggle to control all of Vietnam. And Kremlin leaders felt, as strongly as those in Washington, that they needed to bargain from a position of strength. Forced to back down and withdraw their missiles from Cuba, worried about the growth of Chinese adventurism, fearful of the

ambitions of some West Germans to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, Soviet officials rebuffed overtures to negotiate and accelerated their buildup of strategic weapons, achieving virtual parity by the late 1960s or early 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

The United States was too enmeshed in the conflict in Indochina and too burdened by the expenses of that conflict to focus on matching the Soviet buildup in the mid-1960s. In fact, after Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson's worries gravitated increasingly to the behavior of Communist China. Beijing detonated its own atomic bomb in 1964, gradually escalated its assistance to the North Vietnamese Communists, and projected its influence into Southeast Asia and Africa at the expense of both its former Communist ally in Moscow and its capitalist imperialist adversaries in Paris, London, and Washington. Faced with China's bellicose behavior, many of Johnson's advisers now realized that Soviet and U.S. interests converged around the importance of thwarting the spread of nuclear weapons in an increasingly multipolar world. Faced with common danger, Moscow and Washington collaborated to ratify the non-proliferation treaty in 1968.<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1960s, officials on both sides of the Cold War realized that they were facing a turbulent new era.<sup>24</sup> Each superpower felt beleaguered by restless allies who clamored for more autonomy, as well as by proud and adventurous leaders of newly independent nations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East who wanted aid but were determined to pursue their own interests. In Western Europe, France and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) yearned to act more independently and challenged U.S. domination of the North Atlantic alliance. In the Communist world, Beijing denounced Moscow's cowardly behavior and disloyalty, while ferment and rebellion seethed in Eastern Europe. Once again, the Kremlin decided to intervene militarily and clamp down on a rebellious satellite, this time Czechoslovakia.<sup>25</sup>

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## *Faced with common danger, Moscow and Washington collaborated to ratify the non-proliferation treaty in 1968.*

Soviet actions and North Vietnamese defiance slowed Lyndon Johnson's penchant to mitigate competition with his great power rival, but it did not end it. Committed to building a "Great Society" at home—a grand vision that included Medicare, Medicaid, and a host of other domestic programs—Johnson recognized that the United States could not easily bear the costs of a hugely expensive domestic agenda while engaged in an arms race with the Kremlin and a war in Vietnam. Johnson wanted to work with Khrushchev's successors, Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin, to pursue mutual goals, like the outlawing of nuclear weapons in space and the nonproliferation of them on earth. He saw mutual advantage in cooperative efforts to deal with space biology and medicine, satellite communications, and the sharing of meteorological information. Bilateral agreements (1964) and an international treaty (1967) on these subjects were negotiated and signed, and Johnson would have done more if he had stayed in office and if the Kremlin had tempered its actions abroad.<sup>26</sup> On signing the Outer Space Treaty on January 27, 1967, Johnson declared that the agreement "holds promise that the same wisdom and good will which gave us this space treaty will continue to guide us as we seek solutions to the many problems that we have here on this earth."<sup>27</sup> But beleaguered by domestic unrest and a tenacious adversary in Hanoi, Johnson decided not to run for reelection. His decision created havoc in the Democratic Party and enabled former vice president Richard Nixon to win the presidency in 1968.

## Interest-Driven Cooperation during the Nixon Administration

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, recognized that strategic competition and the arms race with Soviet Russia, if left unchecked, posed a grave threat to U.S. national security. Grappling with creeping inflation, a gold drain, budget deficits, and an unruly Congress, they realized that the United States could not bear the costs of an unrestricted arms race because the American people would not pay the price. Nixon believed that the relative military power of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union had been eroding since the early 1960s and would continue to decline because of public opinion and legislative constraints. He lamented, “We simply can’t get from Congress the additional funds needed to continue the arms race with the Soviet [Union] in either the defensive or offensive missile category.”<sup>28</sup>

Seeking cooperation and negotiating a strategic arms limitation agreement and an anti-ballistic missile treaty therefore made sense. Nixon grasped that the United States and the Soviet Union were still locked in a strategic competition, but that each side had reason to curb the arms race, focus on rivals abroad (like China), and grapple with domestic problems and pressures. It made political and strategic sense to set limits and cooperate when competitive gains were unlikely, and when the other side might want an agreement as much as you did.<sup>29</sup> With great fanfare, Nixon signed these treaties at a summit meeting in Moscow in May 1972.<sup>30</sup>

Nixon, however, also believed that the source of friction between the two countries was not armaments, but geopolitics. In February 1969, in one of his first meetings with the Soviet ambassador, he declared: “History makes clear that wars result from political differences and political problems.” Nixon worried that smaller nations might ensnare the two great powers in a confrontation unrelated to their vital interests. He also realized that freezing strategic arms and limiting defensive missiles alone would not end the rivalry. “It is incumbent on us, therefore . . . to de-fuse critical political situations such as the Middle East and Viet-Nam.”<sup>31</sup> U.S. and Soviet diplomats labored to formulate rules of competition. At their summit meeting in 1972, Nixon and Brezhnev signed an agreement on the “Basic Principles” of their evolving cooperative relationship of détente. Despite their acknowledged differences in ideology, they would conduct their relations “on principles of sovereignty, equality, non-interference in mutual affairs, and mutual advantage.” They would seek to coexist and avoid actions designed to garner unilateral advantage. Most of all, “they would do their utmost to avoid military confrontations and to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war.”<sup>32</sup> To this end they signed, among other better-known accords like SALT and the ABM Treaty, an agreement to prevent incidents on the high seas and the skies above them, the aim of which was to avoid accidental confrontations that might precipitate war.<sup>33</sup>

In seeking to relax tensions and cooperate with their great power rival, Nixon and Kissinger never lost sight of the competitive underpinnings of the Soviet-U.S. relationship and its ideological foundations. While they signed additional multilateral treaties to eliminate biological weapons and to outlaw nuclear weapons from ocean floors, they assigned rather little importance to those agreements.<sup>34</sup> They cared more about the bilateral trade agreement. They realized that more trade might allow the United States to exert more leverage. They knew that Brezhnev desired to promote commercial relations and to purchase U.S. wheat, and they hoped to exploit Soviet economic vulnerabilities and promote agricultural sales that would be popular in the American hinterland. When Senator Henry Jackson linked trade to the emigration of Russian Jews and when the administration poorly handled its first big grain deal, prospects for exploiting this leverage declined.<sup>35</sup> But what all of this illustrated was that détente was regarded as a means to pursue fundamental interests when the United States’ competitive edge appeared to be eroding. Cooperation meant efforts to avoid war; mitigate tensions; reduce arms expenditures; thwart the acquisition of nuclear weapons by smaller powers; and make the seas, outer space, and Antarctica safe from nuclear weapons and environmental degradation. But it also involved linkage—efforts to leverage U.S. strengths against Soviet vulnerabilities.<sup>36</sup>



Détente and the relaxation of tensions initially involved very popular initiatives that garnered much praise in the United States and abroad. Nixon pursued détente with vigor because he believed it would redound to his popularity and help get him reelected.<sup>37</sup> But his policies were also a calculated response to French and West German efforts to reconfigure relations between East and West. Those initiatives worried U.S. leaders because they reflected the desires of their allies to break out of the bipolar Cold War international order that reduced their freedom of action. These allies wanted to engage more freely with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They desired to expand trade, investments, travel, and educational and cultural exchanges. West German leaders, in particular, pursued détente with the Kremlin and with their counterparts in East Berlin in order to overcome the division of their country and to allow families to reunite and see one another. In many ways, Nixon and Kissinger were playing catch-up. In order to retain allied cohesion, Nixon and Kissinger knew they needed to relax tensions and pursue détente with the Kremlin. Strategic calculations—the unity of NATO—required a more cooperative approach to the adversary in Moscow.<sup>38</sup>

Nothing illustrates this better than the negotiations that led to the Helsinki accords of 1975, the high-water mark of cooperation during the Cold War. For decades the Kremlin had wanted an agreement that would ratify the territorial arrangements that grew out of World War II, including the division of Germany, the borders of Poland, the incorporation of the Baltic states inside the Soviet Union, and the dominant Soviet position over Eastern Europe. Neutral nations in Europe and some of their West European friends engaged the Kremlin in such talks and presented their own desires for more trade, cultural exchanges, and the protection of human rights in all prospective signatories of any agreements. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger were enthusiastic supporters of these negotiations, but they were carried along by the momentum of events. The Helsinki Final Act, signed by 35 nations, including the United States and Canada, contained four “baskets” of agreements. The Kremlin more or less got what it wanted in terms of ratifying borders (subject to peaceful change) but assented to demands to honor the rights of individuals; to allow for the freer flow of goods, investments, technology, people, and ideas; and to increase transparency and ease fears of a surprise attack by providing advanced notification of any sizeable troop movements.<sup>39</sup>

By the time the Helsinki Final Act was signed in August 1975, its critics in Washington were gaining traction. They mocked the human rights provisions, condemned the territorial concessions that catered to Moscow’s security demands, and warned against the growing military prowess of the country’s Cold War rival. They ridiculed the alleged naivete inherent to the cooperative thrust of these accords and warned against the growing Soviet military menace. They remonstrated against the burgeoning financial and commercial ties between East and West Europe and between East and West Germany. They predicted that these ties would lead to the Finlandization or neutralization of the United States’ West European allies and weaken the NATO alliance. Their allegations gained credence as the Soviet Union flouted the human rights provisions, deployed new weapons systems, supported leftist movements in Africa and Central America, and then deployed troops to Afghanistan to support a newly installed Communist government. The Soviet-American détente collapsed. Notional ideas about cooperating with a great power rival were challenged.<sup>40</sup>

## Reagan and the End of the Cold War

Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980 condemning détente and promising a bolder, more assertive foreign policy. Quoting Eugene Rostow, Reagan declared that the Cold War was not over. The Soviet Union, he wrote, “is engaged in a policy of imperial expansion all over the world, despite the supposedly benign influence of Salt I, and its various commitments of cooperation in the name of détente.”<sup>41</sup> Reagan wanted to repudiate Nixon’s treaties and Jimmy Carter’s follow-on initiatives. He wanted to build strength and negotiate a



new set of agreements aimed at redressing the strategic balance (which he said was now in Russia's favor) and reversing Soviet inroads in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

What Reagan did not see was the subversive role that détente had played in the Communist world. When oil prices skyrocketed in the 1970s, OPEC nations deposited their revenues in Western banks, and the latter made greater and greater loans to Communist governments in Eastern Europe. These regimes lusted for new money to develop industry and to finance their social welfare programs. Trade and debt increasingly bound East and West Germany, Eastern and Western Europe. Cooperation had not compromised Western values and interests but had promoted them by subverting Communist regimes and increasing their dependence on Western economic and financial ties. When oil prices plummeted in the mid-1980s and Soviet Russia could no longer underwrite the economic wherewithal of its East European subordinates, ferment grew and the Communist regimes tottered. The economic and financial ties spawned by the relaxation of tensions and the cooperative norms of intercourse and exchange catalyzed by détente exposed Communist governments in Eastern Europe to relentless pressure and agonizing choices when loans fell due and austerity loomed. The Kremlin would neither support their comrades financially nor intervene militarily to keep them in power. By the end of the 1980s, the East European Communist governments collapsed.<sup>43</sup>

Reagan began his presidency watching the Polish regime succumb to Soviet pressure and remonstrating against the economic ties that bound West Germany to Soviet Russia. He finished his second term as president watching the Polish Communists prepare to relinquish power and observing the growing dependence of the Kremlin on West German loans—loans that in 1990 purchased Soviet acceptance of German unification inside NATO and the end of the Cold War in Europe. None of this would have happened had West Europeans and U.S. financiers forsaken détente; little of this could have been imagined without the work of human rights activists, nongovernmental organizations, and peace groups empowered by the Helsinki accords and inspired by the fear of nuclear war.<sup>44</sup>

Triumphalists in the United States declared that Reagan's determination to build military strength, intimidate the Kremlin, and subvert Communism won the Cold War. They believed that his repudiation of détente and his commitment to a zero-sum competitive mindset vanquished an inveterate foe.<sup>45</sup> Reagan, however, knew the story was far more nuanced. He realized that strength alone would not prevail. Although he believed from the outset that Communists lied, cheated, and wanted to rule the world, he recognized that Soviet leaders nonetheless had legitimate security imperatives. In a six-page letter to Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko in 1984, he added a hand-written postscript to make certain that his Soviet counterpart grasped his personal imprimatur: "In thinking through this letter," Reagan wrote, "I have reflected at some length on the tragedy and scale of Soviet losses in wartime through the ages. Surely those losses which are beyond description must affect your thinking today. I want you to know that neither I nor the American people hold any offensive intentions toward you or the Soviet people. . . . Our constant & urgent intention must be . . . a lasting reduction of tensions between us. I pledge to you my profound commitment to that end."<sup>46</sup>

To the American people, Reagan also spoke candidly along these lines, although all too frequently his conciliatory words were overshadowed by his tirades against an "evil empire." But the belligerent rhetoric, Reagan knew, did not produce the results he yearned to achieve. In a major speech on January 16, 1984, he acknowledged that "Neither we nor the Soviet Union can wish away the differences between our two societies and our philosophies." But, he then continued, "the fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk. Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk." He therefore committed his administration to a policy "of credible deterrence, peaceful competition, and constructive cooperation."

He stressed, “We want more than deterrence. We want genuine cooperation. We seek progress for peace. Cooperation begins with communication.”<sup>47</sup>

Reagan uttered these words before he met Mikhail Gorbachev. In fact, he gave Vice President George H. W. Bush a message to present to the incoming Soviet leader when they were scheduled to meet after the funeral of Chernenko in March 1985. “I bring with me, a message of peace,” Bush was scripted to say. “We know this is a time of difficulty; we would like it to be a time of opportunity.” Notwithstanding the differences in our systems and the competitive nature of our interactions, the United States and the Soviet Union must “compete and resolve problems in peaceful ways, and to build a more stable and constructive relationship.” Be assured, Bush was supposed to tell Gorbachev, “that neither the American government nor the American people has hostile intentions towards you.” Americans “recognize you have suffered a great deal, and struggled a great deal, throughout your history.” Opportunities for peace had been squandered in the past, but now they could be rekindled. The two governments could make serious headway. “We think it is a time to be more energetic, to tackle larger issues, to set higher goals. . . . We should strive to eliminate nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.” We should aim for “a stable deterrence based on non-nuclear defense. . . . We should approach the other issues between us with the same energy and vision. We should seek to rid the world of the threat or use of force in international relations.”<sup>48</sup>

Reagan grasped that amid great power rivalry, even with an ideological adversary with great military capabilities, the ultimate goals were the peace and prosperity of the American people. Toward these ends, the United States had to compete, but it also had to cooperate. It had to acknowledge the legitimate strategic imperatives of an adversary while demanding respect for its own. It had to negotiate from strength, but it had to negotiate, build trust, and allow an adversary to save face. Coaxing and maneuvering an adversary to cooperate toward mutual goals was as important as competing on disputatious issues that had zero-sum outcomes.<sup>49</sup>

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Throughout the Cold War, through formal agreements and informal understandings, U.S. officials sought to cooperate with the Soviet Union because they grasped that the two adversaries had common interests, not the least of which was avoiding direct confrontation and nuclear war.<sup>50</sup> When Ronald Reagan uniquely combined strength and understanding and when he fortuitously wound up negotiating with a Soviet leader no one could have imagined, his unique sensibilities and qualities produced almost unimaginable results—the end of the Cold War.<sup>51</sup> This was a product of his strength, tenacity, and empathy. This was the consequence of understanding that rivalry did not trump interests; that rivalry was about competing for tangible goods and principles, and that oftentimes, cooperation was as instrumental as competition.

# Conclusion

## *Lessons for Cooperation among Great Powers Today*

When thinking about the new great power rivalry with China today, the Cold War experience offers critical lessons. Leaders in Washington and Beijing must realize, as did their predecessors during the Cold War, that even more important than the rivalry between them is the avoidance of direct confrontation and nuclear war. From their conflictual interactions, U.S. and Chinese officials must discover the red lines they must not cross, as did U.S. and Russian leaders during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Like their predecessors, policymakers in both countries must learn to respect one another's vital interests, modulate their ideological differences, and establish informal rules of competition. Should they fail to do so, they could find themselves going eyeball to eyeball, as happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. They also must recognize that, while competing, they must not lose sight of the goals they share—like preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons; averting an arms race in outer space and Antarctica; protecting seabeds; promoting trade; thwarting the spread of infectious diseases; mitigating carbon emissions and greenhouse gases; and promoting transparency about the movements of naval vessels, aircraft, and troops. To achieve these objectives, U.S. and Chinese officials must cooperate.

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Today, these shared goals are far more compelling than during the Cold War because the economies of the United States and China are infinitely more interwoven and their prosperity so much more codependent than had been the case of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Moreover, the shared dangers that lie ahead—the threats emanating from climate change and pandemics, from cyberattacks and artificial intelligence—are so much more grave and more certain than ever before, arguably far graver than the threats either country presents to one another. So when thinking about the meaning of the Cold War rivalry for today’s challenges, three overriding lessons must not be forgotten: competition must be kept in bounds; ideological antipathy must be modulated; and cooperation must comprise an indispensable element of national security policy. A fourth, more surprising lesson—one that should generate optimism—is that cooperation, smartly pursued, can help lay the basis for victory in the rivalry itself.<sup>52</sup> After all, cooperation not only structured the competitive landscape during the Cold War and reduced points of conflict and sources of friction; it also bought time during a critical period, 1965 to 1975, when the United States was beleaguered with social, political, and financial strife at home and a debilitating war in Indochina. That time helped the United States to heal, recalibrate, and triumph in a Cold War rivalry whose end hardly anyone had foreseen.

# About the Author

**Melvyn P. Leffler** is emeritus professor of American history at the University of Virginia. He is the author of several books on the Cold War and on U.S. relations with Europe, including *For the Soul of Mankind* (Hill and Wang, 2007), which won the George Louis Beer Prize from the American Historical Association, and *A Preponderance of Power* (Stanford University Press, 1993), which won the Bancroft, Hoover, and Ferrell Prizes. In 2010, he and Odd Arne Westad coedited the three-volume *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Along with Jeff Legro and Will Hitchcock, he is coeditor of *Shaping Nations: Strategies for a Changing World* (Harvard University Press, 2016). In 2017, he published *Safeguarding Democratic Nationalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015* (Princeton University Press). He has served as president of the Society for the History of American Foreign Relations, Harmsworth Professor at Oxford University, and dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Virginia. His new book, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*, was published by Oxford University Press in February 2023.

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