

MEMORIE E STUDI DIPLOMATICI

COLLANA DIRETTA DA STEFANO BALDI

A GATEWAY TO THE FUTURE

ITALY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE HELSINKI PROCESS

a cura di

Andrea Cascone

Editoriale Scientifica



Memorie e studi diplomatici

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PAOLO SOAVE

USA AND THE CSCE

For many years, the US foreign policy proved reluctant about the Soviet proposal for a European security conference, as it was well known that the proposal first formulated in 1954 by Vyacheslav Molotov aimed to remove the American influence from Western Europe. In Washington's view, it was just an evolution of Stalin's peace proposal in 1952, which had envisaged German unification in exchange for its neutrality. With this initiative, the Soviet leader aimed to undermine the increasingly stronger bonds of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, hoping for a return to a Europe free of the American presence and exposed to Moscow's influence. After Stalin's death, the idea underwent an evolution linked to the Berlin question: on 26 November 1953, the Soviets proposed a European conference, an idea later developed at the quadripartite summit on 10 February 1954. Rejecting the Western proposal for free elections in Germany, Molotov launched the concept of collective continental security, to be based on certain principles such as the commitment not to use force in the resolution of disputes, consultations in the event of threats to a European country and a general *casus foederis*. Analysing Moscow's aims, Henry Kissinger, who compared the security conference to the League of Nations and the Locarno Pact, pointed out that it would have been a good deal for the Kremlin: it would have become a fully continental player with great influence in the European arrangements, while the Euro-Atlantic bond would have inevitably loosened as it would have been perceived as less important in Western Europe, the Soviet hegemony over the Central and Eastern countries remaining intact. The logical consequence of the advent of the European conference would have been the dissolution of NATO. The goal remained to "break up the Atlantic Alliance". Faced with predictable adverse reactions from the Western countries, Molotov rectified his proposal with a first important opening, the involvement of the United States in a general European security treaty.

It was only in the late 1960s and especially the early 1970s that the Soviet proposal started matching US interests. The key reason that made it more palatable to Western European countries and the USA was the *détente*. As widely acknowledged by historians now, *détente* was the main avenue chosen by the Nixon administration in order to achieve a new dynamism in the relations between the two super powers. On 18 February 1970, in his foreign policy message to Congress, Nixon overturned the USA foreign policy paradigm by stating that “We are not involved in the world because we have commitments; we have commitments because we are involved. Our interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around”. Along this realist line, the priorities of the new American policy of *détente* should have been the search for an honourable way out of the Vietnam conflict; the containment of public outcry by proving that the administration was not rigidly bound to the bipolar scheme but also knew how to go further, in particular by widening the international chessboard to include the People’s Republic of China; strengthening alliances; and taking the diplomatic initiative in the Middle East. The attempt to make Moscow more receptive to the *détente* implicitly confirmed the primacy given to constructive dialogue between superpowers by the Nixon administration, to launch a new dynamic phase in international relations based on sharing major international responsibilities with the Soviets.

Détente as a main avenue of the Cold War sounded contradictory to conservatives, who accused the Administration of being weak towards the Kremlin, as well as to liberals for whom it was necessary to increase the pressure on human rights and freedoms violated in the area under Soviet influence. For both political sides Nixon’s policy would ultimately turn to be to the advantage of the USSR. In his memoirs, Kissinger replies to such criticism observing that the White House shared the same judgement - critical and concerned – of the American public opinion on Moscow, considering that the USSR was the only global and antagonising power that could threaten USA national security. However, for the Republican Administration the most immediate concern was much more subtle, being the diplomatic flatteries by the Kremlin towards the Western European countries with an eventual proposal of a re-organization of the European continent. Kissinger remained convinced that prolonging the peaceful competition with Moscow would

have made more remote the risk of a nuclear conflict and in perspective would have led to the only rationally possible solution of the Cold War i.e., the predominance of the liberal-democratic world. The proposal of a security conference could look like a variation of the theme of a *détente* to be conducted mainly between super powers and, therefore, not without the risks of multilateralism. America would have made no concessions to the Kremlin that could not have had the possibility to avoid or condition the direct discussion with the USA, nor unrealistic or unbalanced expectations would have been allowed to the Western European countries. The security conference in Europe would have developed like a reasonable and sustainable compromise between the *détente* in the Cold War - in line with the will of the two super powers – and the *détente beyond* the Cold War, as hoped by the Europeans more far-looking.

The Soviet proposal also had the effect of generating different reactions between the White House and the State Department. Such a divergence was not a surprise nor did it represent a problem for Nixon, who had decided to co-opt the former Harvard professor exactly with the aim of taking full control of the foreign policy and bypassing the establishment. While the State Department regarded the conference as a historic opportunity to introduce more freedom in East Europe and to undermine the USSR, the Nixon Administration was wary of the Soviet proposal and believed that it should have remained at the margins of the *détente*, in order not to make European allies think that the Atlantic commitments – starting with the financial contribution to NATO budget - would be less important.

The CSCE process became a chapter of the so-called Great *Détente*, which eventually culminated on August 1, 1975, through the signature of the Helsinki Final Act. Nixon and Kissinger exploited the Soviet interest in formally recognizing the European status quo, which was the real meaning of their proposal after they had accepted the strategic connection between the USA and Western Europe. Through Kissinger's well-known "principle of linkage", the U.S. foreign policy achieved the Soviet openings on some strategic issues like the MBRF-Multilateral Balanced Reductions Forces, and CBM-Confidence Building Measures which was eventually inserted in the Final Act, even if Moscow had initially proved reluctant to scale back its conventional superiority in

Europe. The CSCE advanced as a consequence of the Great Détente and the superpowers' will to cooperate, as the 1972 bilateral agreements clearly showed, like the SALT, ABM, and the Declaration on principles of peaceful coexistence between superpowers in a spirit of détente, all of them signed by Brezhnev and Nixon.

Despite the United States' will to leave the floor to its Western European allies, the preliminary stage was characterized by increasing coordination among NATO countries, as witnessed by John Maresca, a US diplomat serving at NATO HQs and involved in the process. According to Maresca, when the negotiations entered their decisive phase, the White House's attitude towards the CSCE also changed and Kissinger's entry onto the scene was noticeable, as he was able to monopolise the most important dossiers. It was no coincidence that in 1974, Albert "Bud" Sherer, US Ambassador in Prague, an experienced and skilful negotiator, took over as head of the American delegation, which finally had a diplomat of the highest rank, equal to the qualified Soviet representation, as its leader.

Even if late, Kissinger was the protagonist in dealing with the Soviets. One of the most relevant points of the CSCE was the possibility to peacefully change the borders, according to international law and through negotiations. Moreover, he successfully introduced another cornerstone: the free choice of alliances. As Hans Dietrich Genscher admitted in his memoirs, West Germany could not have signed the Final Act without the decisive U.S. intervention.

It is noteworthy that the U.S. engagement in the CSCE process, even if late and behind the scenes, was enough to raise harsh criticism against the Nixon and Ford administrations. Democrats and most conservative Republicans opposed the White House's decision to invest in the CSCE because it sounded like a weakness toward Moscow. Criticism against CSCE and détente was personally led in the USA by Solzhenitsyn after he was expelled from the USSR. As proof of general embarrassment, the Soviet dissident wasn't received at the White House before the Helsinki Final Act. The liberal press invited President Ford to ignore the event ("Jerry, don't go"). However, U.S. diplomacy had already invested in the process.

Kissinger wanted the President to reaffirm U.S. interest for Europe in Helsinki, whose security was going to remain linked to the Atlantic

dimension. What was envisaged in the Final Act had a clear political and moral significance, a multilateral commitment to reduce tensions and to increase cooperation between East and West. It would have been important also to recall that the CSCE represented an important but not exclusive framework for the détente, which would continue to have in disarmament its major chapter.

In Helsinki, Ford reached what is supposed to be the highest point of his presidency, at least in foreign policy. Looking at Brezhnev, the President said that the USA would take the new commitments seriously, and that the Soviets were expected to do the same.

Kissinger reported in his memoirs that all the criticism against the White House for supporting Helsinki was short-sighted. What was felt everywhere as a Soviet victory and the recognition of the status quo of spheres of influence on Europe was the end of the Brezhnev doctrine. Maybe the Soviets weren't aware of the significant change they had accepted while celebrating such a long-awaited success.

As history would show fourteen years later, Helsinki was a Western victory and the USA had contributed to it.