

Dealing with the Russians: conceptions of detente

François Puaux

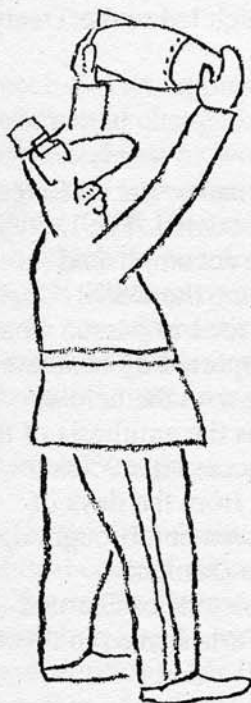
Most European historians consider that the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 signified an end of the Cold War. But did it also mark the beginning of detente? Here assessments vary, and an opinion must be unanimous. In fact, detente encompasses two Western policies which coincided only occasionally—when they were not at odds—and whose architectures were very different depending on whether they were conducted by the United States or by the Europeans. The general tendency among commentators is to focus on detente in its duration and results essentially from one angle: relations between the two superpowers. Gaullist detente, is often treated even by French authors as a marginal phenomenon, whilst in reality it preceded that of the United States by many years, and lastingly modified the political landscape of Europe, i.e. of the principal theatre of East-West confrontation.

Use of the word “detente”, which Americans strive to pronounce *à la française*, prevails for lack of an equivalent term in English. The French, however, hold no copyright on the policy. In its current acceptance, the word “detente” meaning, a lessening of tension between countries through Treaties, first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1908. Nevertheless, the term was not adopted by American political scientists until the middle of the 1960s, even though already used by the French at the end of the preceding decade.

Since 1959, de Gaulle had publicly spoken of his perceiving “some signs of detente”, but it was not until Nikita Khrushchev’s visit of March 1960, that he

had an opportunity to propose a vast policy which could “lead to detente, and even entente” (an agreement). At Rambouillet he added as a conclusion that “the policy he embraced was to see Western Europe and Eastern Europe reach understanding one day, so as to create together one single Europe”. All the while knowing that Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership defended “peaceful coexistence” as dogma, de Gaulle skillfully succeeded—after energetically putting an end to the Soviet premier’s blackmailing over Berlin—in securing Khrushchev’s adoption of his terminology and in congratulating him for “having assumed the role on the international stage as the man of detente”.

The General attached a great deal of importance to his conversations with Khrushchev, for the most part centred around the German question, to such an extent that he dedicated ten pages to them in his *Mémoires d’espoir*. It is true that everything of consequence was said between March 24 and April 1, 1960, and de Gaulle did not fundamentally modify his vision subsequently, a vision which imposed itself on his successors.



De Gaulle's capital sins:
Pride

The general framework had therefore been set by the French since 1960, well before the Cuban crisis. Yet many years would pass before this policy could be put into operation by the General. The Algerian War had continued longer than he had expected, and this did not permit him, in the first years in power, to seek affirmation of the policy on the world scene. On the other hand, the failure of the Paris conference two months after Khrushchev’s visit, the building of the Berlin Wall the next year and the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962 created a state of tension hardly providing the conditions to undertake a constructive dialogue with Moscow.

For their part, however, the Russians had been thinking to the possibility of such a dialogue ever since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. They were simultaneously interested, intrigued and disturbed by the General’s policy. French recognition of the Oder-Neisse line and the

withdrawal from NATO of the French Mediterranean fleet in 1959 had held their attention. The Gaullist policy of independence was considered, in Khrushchev's very terms, "with sympathy". But the General's firmness in the Berlin crisis, as compared with MacMillan's desire to find a compromise and US President Dwight Eisenhower's hesitations, irritated the Soviets. Shortly afterwards, the signing, on January 23, 1963 of the Elysée Treaty with the German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, provoked the delivery of two letters to Paris (in February and in May), the latter inviting France to clarify its position on European matters, a position that the Soviets found difficult to accept, taking into account Moscow's position vis-à-vis Germany. The Federal Republic, in Khrushchev's eyes, was "warmonger and chauvinistic"; it was seeking to "take advantage of France" for the benefit of its policy of "revenge". After all, in Paris in 1960, the Soviet premier had not hesitated to compare Adenauer to Hitler. The Soviets were irritated with France because it did not participate in the negotiations Moscow was conducting with the Americans and the British on banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere, which led to the Treaty of Moscow of August 9, 1963.

A turning point

It was in 1964 that things in the East started to move. Adenauer was no longer on the scene, and French-German relations had somewhat cooled. The Ludwig Erhard government was certain that reunification could be accomplished through tension, by leading the Americans to put pressure on the USSR. Schroeder, Erhard's Foreign Minister, wanted at the same time to pursue what he called "a policy of movement" (*Bewegungspolitik*), supported by business and big industry, both wishing to open up Eastern markets with the help of government aid. Needless to say, this policy of tension was the antithesis of the French policy. In this approach, Bonn dreams of gaining access to nuclear weapons through the "multilateral force", a project dating from the days of General Norstad and which Kennedy, after the Nassau agreement, brought up once again, in the context of his "grand design" to appease German frustrations. This was quite sufficient to feed Russian suspicions of German "revanchism", and here it can be noted with interest that Paris strived to divert the German government from this fallacious project.

There were also other areas on which the French and Soviets views of detente came quite close, such as the Vietnam question, where both countries demanded a return to the Geneva Agreement. On the contrary, de Gaulle's



Avarice

recognition of Communist China in January 1964 must have given mixed feelings to Moscow. Soviet official statements declared their satisfaction and spoke of proof of France's independence from Washington. But in reality Chinese-Soviet relations had seriously deteriorated, as serious disagreement affected both State relations, and the ideological identity of the two Communist parties. China was feverishly preparing its own atomic weapons and the Soviets could only have been preoccupied by seeing China move closer to France, a country which was equally opposed to the "double hegemony" and was also accomplishing rapid progress in the ultra-sensitive nuclear domain. Realists that they were, this was without a doubt an additional reason to resume dialogue with France, as the latter was beginning to count on the international scene.

French-Soviet rapprochement was in the end simplified in the year 1964 by a fundamental change in Khrushchev's policy regarding Germany. He understood that he would never be able to succeed in forcing a decision on Berlin, and signed on June 12, 1964, a Treaty of friendship and cooperation with the GDR. In doing so he renounced his pursuit of the famed Peace Treaty with which he was threatening the West and which would have rendered obsolete Western rights in Berlin. He had thus cleared the table from what de Gaulle considered the main obstacle to detente. At the end of February, Nicolai Podgorny, President of the Supreme Soviet and head of a parliamentary delegation, made a courtesy visit thus opening dialogue with Paris.

Eastern Europe

As for the French side, it should be mentioned that at this point a particular political contact added a new dimension to detente. In July 1964, Ion Maurer, the Romanian Premier, made at his own request an official visit to Paris, and General de Gaulle received him. Maurer had taken the precaution of visiting Moscow prior to his French journey in order to dispel suspicions inspired by his policy of national emancipation.

Maurer's words reflected the Eastern European vision of French policy, and this vision very much interested de Gaulle. According to Maurer, Romania was

developing its relationships with the Federal Republic and with the United States, but as far as the Germany was concerned, it was purely a business relationship. When it came to the Americans, there was no mystery as to the US desire to detach Romania from the socialist camp. With France, thanks to its independent policy, things were different, and nowhere else at the time could these same words have been spoken but in Paris. In effect, he spoke very freely about the socialist world, whose solidarity he had no intention of breaking, but whose equilibrium had undeniably been modified since the death of Stalin, in particular by the rupture developing between the USSR and China.

The General responded that he had “listened with attention and surprise”. If Romania were indeed as Ion Maurer represented it, then there would be no reason not to establish new relations. Disagreements of an ideological kind should not present obstacles to satisfactory relations.

Maurer’s visit was important because it opened up new prospects. It allowed for the beginnings of an enrichment of detente, which from that moment on could go beyond the German problem alone, and take up a significance that only de Gaulle among the Western leaders was in a position to give. This meeting, conducted in a great freedom of language—frankly exceptional, considering the epoch—took place without Moscow wanting or being able to oppose it. De Gaulle and Couve de Murville did not make the same error that the German Chancellor, Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, will commit in the future by seeking to isolate the Federal Republic and to short-circuit Moscow by “buying” the Eastern countries, a policy that would fall short. To enable the forced allies of Moscow entering into the “concert of nations” it will be necessary to start talking to the Soviet Union. And this is what the General and his foreign ministers methodically set out to do.

A journey to the USSR

The firing of Khrushchev in October of 1964 changed nothing in Moscow’s attitude towards France. A long-term trade agreement was signed at about the same time and the USSR’s adoption of the SECAM color-TV system came about five months later. In December 1964, Prime Minister Kosygin summoned the French Ambassador Philippe Baudet, leaving him with a letter developing an entire argument in favour of a dialogue with France, plus the request—already at this point—that would keep reappearing like a leitmotif “to give a contractual form” to the entente between the two countries.

The international situation in 1965 made France the sole Western nation on speaking terms with the Soviet Union. President Johnson was at that moment engaged in escalating the war in Vietnam (in February he initiated bombing north of the 17th parallel, precisely when Kossygin was visiting Hanoi), putting an end to the US-Soviet dialogue that appeared to have begun on nuclear non-proliferation. As for the Germans, in order to console them for the failure of the

multilateral force project (which aside from them no one else wanted), Washington proposed its participation in a restricted atomic consultation committee (the "MacNamara Committee") that in December 1966, after France's withdrawal from the joint command, became the "nuclear planning group" of NATO.



Lust

In Moscow, the Federal Republic's flirting with nuclear arms was taken seriously, or at least this was the impression given, and was tied in with Bonn's "revisionist" border policy. The two policies together "endangered peace, because both [had] the support of the United States", as Gromyko stated to Couve de Murville, who in October 1965 travelled to Moscow to return the Soviet minister's April visit in Paris.

In fact this became an essential theme of conversations leading up to the General's June visit to the USSR, the apex of his detente policy.

Of all de Gaulle's journeys, his Soviet trip uncontestedly holds the most significance. Having left NATO joint command three months earlier, the General's hands were free. He was received in a manner never before accorded a Western leader. During his numerous in-depth conversations, the triumvirate of Brezhnev, Kossygin and Podgorny listened to him with the utmost of attention. He succeeded, if not in drawing them into the genuine spirit that animated him, at least in securing their usage of his own vocabulary, especially the famous triptych "detente, entente and co-operation", which the Russians

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would then insert the following month into the communiqué at the Warsaw Pact summit in Bucharest.

The Gaullist conception of detente required from both, allies and adversaries alike, a real effort for an intellectual conversion. At this point it would be helpful to outline its principal traits.

Visionnaire and realist

Gaullist detente was actually a comprehensive vision not limited to defining its objective but also suggestive of the means by which to achieve it. Its first trait was the rejection of bipolar politics, or "bloc" politics. For the General, the goal was clear: to release the various countries from the grips of one or the other superpower. In attempting this, he used each hegemonic power to balance the other, and this idea can be traced back in de Gaulle's actions as far as 1944, at the time of his visit to Stalin. The ambition remained the same all the while: France's freedom of action. Detente was the necessary condition to the maintenance of France's rank on the international scene. In order to do so the Russians had to be convinced that in the multipolar world that was forming, their interest lay in not allowing the European countries to become uniquely American clients. To this end, the USSR had to be reminded it was Russia, a European power, and from here originated the formula "from the Atlantic to the Urals"—a formula often poorly understood.

European problems did not have to be handled in the framework of a Russian-American tête-à-tête. This was one of the successes of de Gaulle's Moscow

journey, the convincing of his hosts that “the problems of Europe had to be considered first of all in the European context”.

A second trait was that it sought to release Germany from US-Soviet rivalry. The object of East-West confrontation, Germany was at the heart of the Cold War and was the principal reason behind the tension. The three Soviet demands were well known: the maintenance of the postwar borders, a ban on the Federal Republic’s access to nuclear weapons and the recognition of the GDR. De Gaulle was vehemently opposed to the third point; East Germany was an “artificial institution”. But with regard to borders and nuclear access, he agreed. He had clarified his position on the Oder-Neisse line since 1959. As far as reunification was concerned, France was “neither very ardent, nor in a hurry”. This hope, however, could not be denied to the Germans. In de Gaulle’s position there was a coy mixture that irritated France’s eastern neighbours, but reassured them as well, for on the eve of the Moscow trip, there was lively talk in Bonn about an “overturning of the alliances” and of recognition “of the Soviet zone” by France.

The idea of the move, as de Gaulle explained at the Kremlin, was “to remove the German problem from sole contestation by the USSR and the United States...and to organise concertation among the European countries, including the Germans themselves”. He explained that it was the only way for Moscow to feel some security, otherwise the Germans would speculate in the USSR-US rivalry. This was still the era of the Erhard and Schroeder leadership in Bonn. Brezhnev admitted that this point “was profound and merited some thought”, and

recognised that the German problem needed to be settled in Europe. He proposed a project that he had already put forward before: a European conference on security, “without the Americans”, he added. This idea was not turned down by the General. While he did not clarify himself on the participation of the United States in such a conference, he did remind the Soviets of the reasons for why the US had to be a party to any German settlement. As for the conference itself (the future CSCE) “it could only be the culmination” (which in effect it would be). The conference therefore could only be the result of detente and not its cause. And this leads to the freshest idea in the new philosophy proposed by de Gaulle to the East and the West, an idea up until then neither acceptable to Moscow, nor Washington nor Bonn.



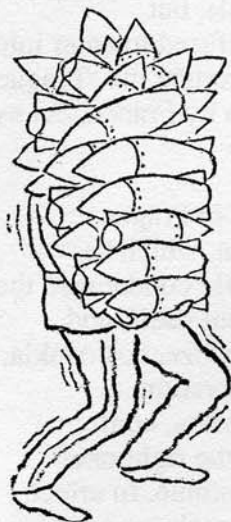
Anger

Another aspect of de Gaulle's detente was a reversal in the accepted order of problems. Having learned from the failure of all attempts to resolve the German question by vain international conferences, the General proposed to reverse the terms of the syllogism that had pretended to regulate the problem since the war. Until then, it had been assumed that detente would be the fruit of security (that is, the negotiation of a peace treaty). He stated—and the future would prove him correct—that it was security that would follow detente and not the opposite. The Soviets—and without a doubt this is the most important development of de Gaulle's conversations in Moscow—accepted this approach. Whereas until this point the Soviets had considered that peace in Europe could only be the consequence of an imposed settlement consecrating the division of Germany, they now accepted that priority would be given to detente, without which no solution could be possible. This is quite apparent in the French-Soviet statement of June 30, 1966.

Fourthly, detente for de Gaulle was not indivisible. In conversing with the Soviets at the very moment when the Vietnam War prevented the Americans from doing the same, de Gaulle rejected already what would become one of the main points of the Nixon-Kissinger approach, the indivisibility of detente (linkage).

A fifth trait concerned ideology. Up until that time, approaches to the German question largely had been dominated by ideology. Jean Monnet said to Hervé Alphand in December 1962, that de Gaulle's policy was leading to the "Bolshevisation of Europe". In the same spirit, America had been convinced that it was fighting in Vietnam against what it called "international communism". Equally on the Soviet front, no one hid the fact that the Leninist principle of peaceful coexistence was to be a new step in the progress of the socialist states toward the victory of communism. This is what Khrushchev described to Kennedy, in their rather tense 1961 meeting in Vienna, as the "dynamic status quo". De Gaulle, in his press conference of Feb. 4, 1965, was the first to say that real peace would not be attained "by the confrontation of the ideologies and forces of the two camps opposing each other in the world today". A shift in the majority was necessary for him to be understood in Bonn.

Finally, detente and disarmament were not to be linked. De Gaulle was not opposed to disarmament, on the condition that "it would not be a matter of the two giants settling among themselves the problems of others, in particular,



Gluttony

European problems”¹. In no way would France allow its own defence effort to be limited in face of the extremely disproportionate Soviet threat. What de Gaulle did not want was for a “Rapacki plan” or some other type of plan aimed at crystallising the two blocs, giving Moscow a right of control over the level of allied forces in Europe, and splitting in two the Community of Six on the defence matters.

Detente becomes respectable

The Moscow journey was received coldly by France’s European allies. In German political circles, the General’s loyalty with respect to the alliance was recognised, but it was commented that he had accomplished nothing. Happily so, some might have added, for if the case had been otherwise, his success would have contributed to a detente that opposed German interests, for which “tension was more promising than detente”. In the US press, de Gaulle’s trip was unanimously considered quite an exploit, and new possibilities were seen to open up in Europe. At the State Department, however, there was only irritation and scepticism.

Yet it took only four months for the Johnson administration, in the hope that the Soviets could help reach a peace settlement in Vietnam, to accept the idea of detente. In a speech made in New York on Oct. 7, 1966, the President became a detente advocate. In consequence, as Couve de Murville noted, detente became respectable, and at the Atlantic Alliance summit in December, the French idea was adopted, that made trust and cooperation the conditions for progress toward peace². This was the basis of the Harmel report adopted by the alliance the following year.

Nevertheless, a long time will however be necessary for the West to achieve a common concept of detente. On the one hand detente still had some ferocious adversaries, mainly for ideological motives. On the other hand was the fact that each ally set off on the detente route in its own manner. While Ostpolitik is certainly an offspring of the Gaullist policy, American detente stems from a completely different concept.

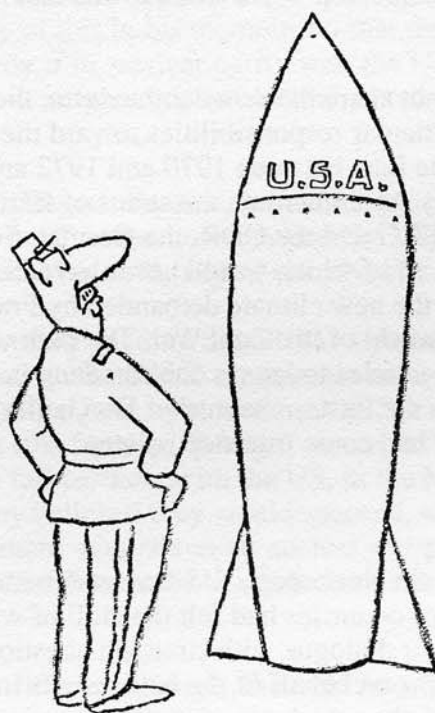
As for the Socialist world, it was flooded with great popular hope, in contrast to the interested yet wary attitude of the governments in place. In Poland in September 1967, de Gaulle was greeted by enthusiastic crowds, but Gomulka—obsessed with the idea of a “German danger”—refused to enter into the logic of detente. The following year in Czechoslovakia brought the “Prague Spring”, which certainly can be ascribed to the process begun by France, but as all know by now, was answered with repression.

In the West, detente's foes insist on affirming that the events in Prague condemned such a policy. The General was not of this opinion, which he explained very clearly in his press conference Sept. 9, 1968. He condemned the “oppressive totalitarianism” in which the Soviet world had shut itself, and added the following: “But at the same time, what happened in Czechoslovakia, I mean the people's movement to obtain the beginnings of liberation ... demonstrates that our policy, momentarily countered as it appears, conforms with the profound European realities, and in consequence, is the right one. The way things are going...the evolution unavoidably will continue. In effect, it is too late...for any ideology, especially communism, to triumph over national sentiment”. De Gaulle concluded stating that policy of detente would have to be pursued.

Ostpolitik

General de Gaulle had just left power when the Federal Republic came around to his vision. Willy Brandt ascended the Kanzleramt on Oct. 21, 1969. His name remains attached to Ostpolitik, what constituted a complete upheaval of the German attitude, and can be summed up by his famous phrase that rings like an echo of the Gaullist Weltanschauung: “in order to change the status quo, one must start by accepting it”.

In his memoirs, Brandt relates that when he was Kiesinger's Foreign Minister, de Gaulle had encouraged him to open up the FRG to the East. The General, according to Brandt, had stated to the Soviets how he was “favourable to a Russian-German detente and had added to his intention that ... if Germany desired, France would help it along this path”, it being understood that Germany was to renounce nuclear arms and to accept the existing borders. Pompidou confirmed France's support of this German opening up to the East from the time of the French-German summit of Jan. 30, 1970, not, however, without some uneasiness. It is no secret that Georges Pompidou was without a



Envy

particular affinity for the Germans. In his eyes, Ostpolitik, of which he approved in principle, put Willy Brandt exaggeratingly into view and gave Germany too much weight in Moscow.

Fear of another Rapallo was fed by the procedure and ideas of the principal craftsman and inspiration of Ostpolitik, the Secretary of State Egon Bahr, a “nationalist tainted by neutralism” (according to the CDU), who, had he not been stopped, would have gone much farther than the Chancellor. In 1968, when the Socialists were still in the opposition, Bahr had presented a project for “Deutschlandpolitik” which prescribed the dissolution of the alliances, the withdrawal of foreign forces and the right to reunification in exchange for the denuclearisation of the two German states, the Benelux region, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

It is understandable how Nixon and Kissinger, who generally were not in favour of the emancipation of Europe, were quite reserved with respect

to Ostpolitik. Yet they could not stop it, for detente was moving in the direction of history.

Even though everyone did not share the same enthusiasm, the Federal Republic and the three allies with particular responsibilities toward the whole of Germany negotiated with the East between 1970 and 1972 an impressive array of legal tools (the Four-party Agreement on the status of Berlin, the *Grundvertrag* between the FRG and the GDR, the German-Soviet Treaty and the German-Polish Treaty), all of which would never have been possible had it not been for the creation of the new climate demanded by France. Accordingly, Europe left the Manichean world of the Cold War. The path was open to the CSCE and to Helsinki, whose roles today no one can deny in support of the struggle for human rights in the Eastern countries. De Gaulle's point of twelve years before to Khrushchev had come true step by step.

US-Soviet detente

In parallel, but with a different chronology, US-Soviet detente unrolled. In the Cuban crisis of 1962, the two countries had felt the chill of war. It was only normal for them to begin their dialogue with strategic questions. In fact, except for simultaneous interventions on behalf of the belligerents in the two Arab-Israeli wars, detente between the two superpowers never went beyond the mutual problems of defence. The 1963 Test Ban Treaty had raised great hopes, but the war in Vietnam put a stop to all conversations until Johnson's speech of October 1966. In January 1967, a Treaty was signed concerning the peaceful use of nuclear material in space. In spite of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which Johnson (and not Michel Debré) qualified as an "roadside incident", the American President proposed the opening, in December 1968, of a Conference on strategic arms limitations. Moscow preferred to wait for the new administration. Nixon was elected in November 1968 and named Kissinger to head his National Security Council. The SALT negotiations began in November 1969 in Helsinki.

Detente as it was conceived of in Washington proceeded from the conviction that negotiating with Moscow to arrive at a "structure of peace" which rested on a stable arms balance was possible. This illusion was part of what was called the "game theory", formulated in 1965 by a group of scholars, including Henry Kissinger, professor at Harvard: "Our adversaries are intelligent people, but their objectives are directly opposed to our own. The problems of decision

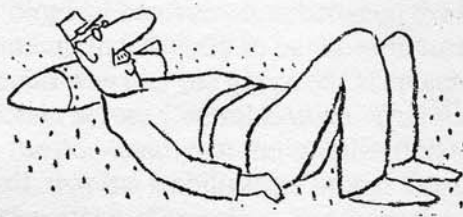
very much resemble those of gambling". Kissinger truly believed—and he makes no mystery of this in his memoirs—that the USSR would renounce strategic superiority if its nuclear parity with the US were recognised. Precisely there lay an error in judgment which fundamentally spoiled the first SALT accord of 1972.

“Our mistake”, as Eugene Rostow, former Under-Secretary of State to Johnson, pointed out, “was to consider that the USSR had the same conception of detente as we did. We really duped ourselves”³.

This strategic misunderstanding doubled as a political misunderstanding. The Americans counted on the SALT agreements being completed by a Soviet hand in the Vietnam conflict, and by a minimum of Soviet moderation in other regional conflicts (the famous “linkage” concept). The Russians, on their part, hoped to become full partners with the US, in the Middle East, for example. For a moment they believed they would succeed, when Brezhnev signed the June 1973 Agreement with Nixon on nuclear war prevention, an agreement that to some French officials seemed to create the basis for a US-Soviet “condominium”.

Reality was very different, though. Current historiography in the United States considers that detente, for Washington, had never been anything other than pursuit of the containment policy defined by George Kennan under the Truman presidency. The Soviet leadership had no intention, for its part, of renouncing the ideological struggle.

Of course, the “partner-adversaries” did succeed in some understandings on specific subjects, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, an “unequal” treaty which France refused to underwrite. This entente often bargained with the interests of Eastern Europe, which the negotiators of SALT I called the



Sloth

“grey zone”. In May 1972, an American-Soviet communiqué replayed the term “peaceful coexistence” which France had banished from its political vocabulary along with the Eastern countries, but which in reality corresponded rather well to the relations between the two superpowers.

Under its rather cynical appearances, Henry Kissinger's detente deep down was not realistic. In order for the gambling theory to have applied, the two partners would have had to respect the same rules. This was not the case. Following the fall of Saigon, American public opinion began to question detente, the advantages of which for the American public were unclear and apparently one way, to the benefit of the Soviet Union. This feeling of frustration was reinforced by the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola. After the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Nixon, President Ford and Kissinger were no longer in a position to demand respect from the Russians, nor from Congress. On March 1, 1976, Gerald Ford declared that the word "detente" no longer corresponded to the current situation, and that in consequence, should cease to be employed. Nor were angelic Jimmy Carter and his desperate efforts to conclude the SALT II agreement (which the Senate refused to ratify) capable of preserving this particular conception of detente, which then sunk like lead on Dec. 27, 1979, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Nothing worthwhile was left of the exercise. Kissinger himself recognises today that "arms control" more or less aggravated the military situation. This is why it appears necessary to avoid all confusion between the American experience and the French policy, which should not be dragged into similar discredit.

The detente that General de Gaulle made prevail in Europe 20 years ago was fruitful in that it sprang not from purely strategic worries, but from a political vision. The penetrating force of this shock wave into the social and human fabric of Central and Eastern Europe was in action throughout the years of Brezhnev's stagnation. Without this force, the Polish "renewal" and the hardly believable events that put an end to the division of Europe would have been inconceivable. It should be remembered with significance that far from being a temporary expedient, de Gaulle's policy was a victory of intelligence over time.

References

¹ - Maurice Couve de Murville, *Une politique étrangère*, Plon, 1971.

² - Ibid.

³ - From an interview in the weekly *Le Point*, December 14, 1981.