

History: The Cold War  
Lesson 23 of 30

## **Worksheet:**

**What was detente and why did it happen?**



# What was detente?

Detente was a phase in the Cold War, **mainly in the 1970s**, when there was a **relaxation of tension** as the two sides **focused on common interests** to avoid the possibility of nuclear war and mutually assured destruction. Many of the treaties signed as part of detente were aimed at slowing down the arms race. Even **before the 1970s** which this lesson focuses on, some agreements had been made to control nuclear weapons in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. For example, the **Test Ban Treaty 1963, the Outer Space Treaty 1967, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968**. These treaties were designed to control nuclear weapons, because there was a belief that the Cuban Missile Crisis had got out of hand and nuclear weapons needed to be restricted and controlled.

In the 1970s, instead of working to prove who had the most powerful military, as they had in the early Cold War, based on the principles of deterrence and massive retaliation, the two sides are now focused on avoiding mutually assured destruction by focusing on common interests and relaxing tension between them.



# Causes of detente

The Cuban Missile Crisis had escalated partly because of poor communication. This led to the introduction of the Hotline between Moscow and Washington so that issues could be resolved more easily. The arms and space races had developed tension throughout the 1950s and 60s as the superpowers competed to be more powerful and to show that their ideology was best. This all changed after the Cuban Missile Crisis as the world had come so close to nuclear war that the **US and Soviet Union took active steps to slow down the arms race, focus on common interests and reduce tension in the Cold War.**

## Soviet reasons for detente

There were **poor living standards** in the Soviet Union and the **economy was not developing**. Nuclear weapons were incredibly expensive and the **Soviets wanted to spend less on weapons** and focus instead on their economy and living standards. They felt that they had **caught up with the US in terms of weaponry and felt safe to spend less on the arms race**. The Vietnam War had also shown that the US army could be beaten and therefore the **Soviets were willing to follow the policy of detente.**



# Causes of detente

## US reasons for detente

**President Nixon** was elected in 1968 and had other priorities than Cold War tension. The **Vietnam War was going badly**. Nearly 60,000 US soldiers had died and the war was costing billions of dollars. There were also **social problems in the US**. There were anti-war protests about Vietnam and the **Civil Rights Movement** was demanding more attention. When **Martin Luther King** was assassinated in 1968 there were **riots** across America. **Nixon** was also aware of the cost of nuclear weapons; following detente would mean more money could be spent on the social issues in the US.

## Shared reasons

Both countries were **concerned about money**. The price of oil increased in the 1970s, and both superpowers experienced economic problems. **As the arms race was very expensive if they could spend less on weapons they could spend more on their social issues at home.**



# Detente Treaties

Year	Agreement	Effect
1963	<b>Nuclear Test Ban Treaty</b>	Signed by the USSR, USA and UK. Banned the testing of nuclear weapons on the ground and in the atmosphere but not underground.
1967	<b>Outer-Space Treaty</b>	Signed by the USSR, USA and UK. Banned the placement and testing of nuclear weapons in space and on the moon.
1968	<b>Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty</b>	Agree to stop or limit the spread of nuclear technology to non-nuclear countries. The five recognised nuclear countries were USA, USSR, UK, China and France. No one else could develop nuclear weapons.
1971	<b>Seabed Treaty</b>	Signed by the USSR, USA and UK. Banned the placement of nuclear weapons anywhere on the seabed (the bottom of the sea).
1972	<b>SALT I</b>	Signed by Nixon and Brezhnev in 1972. The first superpower agreement which put limits on nuclear missile numbers. Limits were so high and nothing was said about reducing numbers.
1975	<b>Helsinki Agreement</b>	Three 'baskets' of agreements; European borders, international co-operation, human rights.
1979	<b>SALT II</b>	There was agreement over limiting the production of long-range missiles. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan meant that it was never <b>ratified</b> .



# Key features of detente

Event	What happened / What was agreed?	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>SALT 1 Strategic Arms Limitations 1972</b>	<p>-ABM Treaty stated that <b>ABMs</b> were only allowed on two sites. Each could have 100 maximum</p> <p>-Interim Treaty stated that both powers were limited in the <b>ICBMs and SLBMs</b>. USA 1054, USSR 1618 <b>ICBMs</b>. USA 740, USSR 740 <b>SLBMs</b></p> <p>-Basic Principles Agreement – rules for nuclear war (no warheads on seabed), steps to avoid war.</p>	<p>-It was symbolic of their co-operation –they both wanted to reach an agreement publicly.</p> <p>-Both leaders visited each other as a sign of these negotiations.</p> <p>-1974 talks began on SALT 2</p>	<p>-It was agreed only by a piece of paper</p> <p>-Both sides still had the capacity to destroy the other with their nuclear weapons</p> <p>-Did not cover the latest technology <b>MIRVs</b> (multiple weapons, one missile)</p>





# Key features of detente

Event	What happened / What was agreed?	Strengths	Weaknesses
Helsinki 1975	<p>Three ‘baskets’ were agreed.</p> <p>1.European Borders: Boundaries between East and West Germany were recognized for the first time and boundaries of the Soviet Union’s satellite states were accepted.</p> <p>2.International Co-operation: 1975 there was a joint space mission (Apollo-Soyuz) Both sides agreed to work for closer relations with trade agreements and technology exchanges.</p> <p>3.Human rights: Respect for human rights such as freedom of speech, religion and movement across Europe.</p> <p>33 countries from NATO and Warsaw Pact met to build on good relations from SALT 1</p>	<p>1.It was progress since 1949 and the separation of Germany.</p> <p>2.High point of détente and international cooperation</p> <p>3.Better liberties for people in Soviet controlled countries</p>	<p>Both sides were wary of each other’s motives. The Soviet Union wanted to improve their economy and the USA wanted people in the East to break from Communist control.</p> <p><b>Brezhnev</b> happy with Baskets 1&amp;2, some USA politicians were not.</p> <p>USA was happy with Basket 3 as they wanted human rights in satellite states to weaken Soviet control. USSR concerned their policies would be monitored.</p>



# Key features of detente

Event	What happened / What was agreed?	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>SALT 2</b> <b>Strategic Arms Limitations 1979</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Restrictions on missile launchers and strategic bombers</li> <li>-Ban on testing or development of new <b>ICBMs</b></li> <li>-Reduce nuclear missiles to 2250 each</li> </ul>	<p>Further sign of co-operation, but <b>Carter</b> had it removed from the Senate and it was never <b>ratified</b> (formally approved to become US policy).</p>	<p>America was growing concerned about the Soviets' trustworthiness</p> <p><b>President Carter's</b> advisers wanted a stronger stance on USSR</p> <p>Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan ending détente</p>





## Mutually Assured Destruction

Since the end of WW2, the USA and the USSR had **greatly increased their stockpiles of nuclear weapons**. The power of these weapons had increased as the arms race had delivered and more sophisticated methods of launching weapons had also been developed.

In 1961, the USSR detonated the Tsar Bomba. This nuclear bomb was so powerful that the fireball it produced nearly destroyed the plane that had dropped it. By **1969 the Soviets had caught up with the USA in terms of their nuclear capability. This meant that Soviets began to feel safer.**

The threat of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) created fear of using nuclear weapons. This **theory assumed that each superpower had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other. If one superpower attacked the other, they would also be destroyed**. However, **nuclear deterrence**, with MAD meant that neither country would actually use their weapons.



# Key features of detente

## Sports

In April 1971 the **US accepted an invitation from the Chinese table tennis team to tour China.** The visit included exhibition matches and visits to the Forbidden City and the Great Wall of China. There was a lot of media attention in both countries. The tour allowed expressions of trust and goodwill between East and West without showing any political weakness. This **'ping-pong diplomacy'**, as it became known, paved the way for higher-level visits and meetings and, eventually, rapprochement between China and the US.

## Space

Having spent decades competing to have the first man in space and on the moon, in **July 1975, the US and Soviets had a joint space mission Apollo–Soyuz.** This was the first international space mission, carried out jointly by the United States and the Soviet Union. The mission was a powerful symbol of détente between the two superpowers. **Russian and American aircraft docked in space and Russian and American astronauts were photographed shaking hands.**



## Special visits

The signing of SALT 1 had an important effect on international relations because, as a result of signing SALT 1, in May 1972 the US President, **Richard Nixon**, made a **historic trip to Moscow to meet the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev**. **Nixon's** visit to Moscow was a **hugely symbolic moment**, and photos of Nixon shaking hands with **Brezhnev** signalled the beginning of a new, more peaceful relationship between the two superpowers. In **1973, Brezhnev went to Washington** and talks began for a second SALT agreement in 1974 to resolve issues that were not settled at the first SALT talks.

## Propaganda

The US and the Soviets both wanted to show that their ideology was best throughout the Cold War. They used propaganda to do this. They did the same thing during detente, events such as **sports, the space mission and visits were all used as propaganda** to show that the two superpowers were co-operating. By focusing on common interests and showing that they were doing so, tensions were reduced.



# Limits to detente

- The Non-Proliferation Treaty **did not stop other countries developing nuclear weapons** so it did not reduce the potential for nuclear war.
- The US and the Soviets did not stick to SALT 1. Neither side reduced their conventional weapons. There was nothing in the treaty to force them to stick to it; **it was just a piece of paper.**
- Some historians have suggested that the Helsinki Accords achieved nothing. In confirming the borders of satellite state countries, it confirmed the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union did not stick to the agreements about human rights.
- Table tennis and space meetings were just **one-off propaganda stunts.**
- The two sides were **still suspicious of each other.** Brezhnev said that Communists would still try to destroy Capitalism and US politicians and political advisers thought that detente was a sign of weakness.



**Q5 -  
challenge  
question  
help**

<b>Strengths</b>	Willing to discuss weapons limits, want to avoid war	US and Soviets both had things to be pleased about	Limits on weapons and testing or using new ICBMs	Showed co-operation agreed at Helsinki	Paved the way for better US-Chinese relations	Photos of US-Soviet handshakes were hugely symbolic
<b>Weakness</b>	Just a piece of paper, not cover new weapons, still have plenty	Human rights were an issue - cannot make USSR respect them, they thought would weaken them	Never put into action	Was just one event	Just a propaganda stunt, no real impact	Change in president and attitudes of US politicians and advisors
<b>Decrease tension?</b>	Yes - relations improve	Yes - high point of detente	Failure is a sign of increased tension	Yes - very clear symbol of detente in action	Yes - in the long term	Yes - in the short term





# Glossary

**Civil Rights Movement** – a protest movement in the United States when African-Americans were protesting for the same rights as other Americans, **Martin Luther King** was a key figure in this movement

**SLBM** - Submarine Launched ballistic missile - a nuclear weapon launched from a submarine

**ICBM** - Intercontinental ballistic missile, a missile which can travel 5,500km

**ABM** - Anti-ballistic missile, a missile that can shoot down ICBMs

**MIRV** - Multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicle. New weapon which carried more than one nuclear warhead

**Ratify** - formally accepting and agreeing a treaty eg. SALT 1 or 2

