

THE HEGEMON TRAP: UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY REQUIREMENT FOR A NEW NIXONIAN PIVOT AND RETURN TO REALISM*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of American foreign policy during the Nixon and Trump presidential eras. It argues that both periods are defined by the necessity to recalibrate strategic commitments in response to the exhaustion caused by protracted military interventions. By examining the Nixon framework of détente and triangular diplomacy, the research demonstrates how pragmatic engagement with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China maximized American leverage during the Cold War. In contrast, the contemporary abandonment of the international arms control architecture and the pivot toward a doctrine of strategic flexibility have created a destabilized multipolar environment. The author argues that the current strategy of confrontation with both Russia and China risks strategic overextension. Drawing on historical lessons from the 1970s, the paper advances an argument for transition away from the orthodoxy of universal containment. It suggests that a measured rapprochement with Russia is essential to address the primary geopolitical challenge of the twenty-first century: the rise of China.

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Introduction

This paper takes a comparative approach to the Nixon and Trump presidential eras. The author argues that both presidents faced similar, albeit very different geostrategic environments. Within the context of these similarities is the need to recalibrate American foreign policy away from foreign wars and entanglements that are alienating other great powers. In parallel with disengagement with foreign entanglements that are weakening American power, American policymakers should be seeking rapprochement with Russia in order to face the greatest competitor, the People's Republic of China. This paper seeks to draw on Nixon and Kissinger's policy of détente and lessons learned to point a strategic direction for the present and future of American foreign policy moving forward. If the United States continues to alienate and confront both Russia and China simultaneously, it will lessen the prospects for retaining its global position as a dominant foreign policy actor.

The Nixon presidential years, 1969 to 1974, saw some dramatic changes in American foreign policy. The trauma of the Vietnam War, which had led to massive protests against the war, coincided with the Civil Rights movement. This confluence of social protest came as a result of direct American involvement in the war, causing division between people and their government (Hadavas, 2025; Zysett, 2019). Protest after protest sprang up throughout the country as the credibility gap between government statements and reality widened. A new American attitude toward its two key rivals, the USSR and the PRC, would be the key to unlocking the Vietnam debacle.

Richard Nixon, like the other two of his competitors in the 1968 presidential election, insisted on the continuation of the Vietnam War. Losing

Vietnam, at least during their presidential years, was undesirable. For the US, having superiority in firepower and technology and still losing to the third-world country meant a major embarrassment for the US, as the defeat would taint the American superpower's prestige in the international arena. Losing South Vietnam would mean that the United States could not keep its promise to countries that faced the communist threat and, subsequently, lose massive credibility and prestige. The domino theory still haunted many American policymakers at that time. What is going to happen if South Vietnam falls? If South Vietnam falls, then the entire region of Southeast Asia would inevitably fall to communism as one domino collapses and pushes the other dominos in the row as well. Japan, as an American outpost against communist power, would lose the raw material it needs for the economy and be at risk in communist emergence; the communist expansion would be out of control, as the worst fear of Americans could be imagined. Losing Vietnam would also affect American credibility as a whole, from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, as one event links to the other. Because of that, the American could not let go of South Vietnam.

Donald Trump's messaging in both elections, 2016 and 2024, had a foreign policy plank of consistently emphasizing a non-interventionist "America First" agenda, positioning himself as an outsider of rational means against the Washington elite 'deep state', which had dragged the United States into many foreign entanglements (Mondschein, 2026). Throughout his campaigning, Trump promised to conclude "endless wars," specifically targeting the conflict in Ukraine as a drain on national resources that Trump's deal-making could resolve (Walker, 2025). This message resonated with a base increasingly characterized by voters who prioritized domestic economic stability over protracted international security architectures (Holesch & Martill, 2026).

However, geopolitical analysts argue that a perceived American retreat or a settlement favoring Russian territorial gains would constitute a critical blow to American prestige. Hooker (2026) posits that a Russian victory would deeply

discredit NATO and embolden autocratic regimes, potentially signaling the end of the post-Cold War liberal order (Hooker Jr., 2026). This foreign policy message was echoed consistently during the Biden administration, which was one of abandoning Ukraine, and could impose a heavy political price by undermining the security guarantees that sustain U.S. hegemony (Bergengruen, 2025). While the domestic appeal of ending foreign entanglements remains potent, with 2026 polling showing significantly declining Republican support for continued military aid, the resulting erosion of international standing threatens to leave the United States increasingly isolated in a nascent multipolar landscape (El Baz et al., 2026).

Public dissent on American involvement in the Vietnam War could not be overlooked. Death tolls of American soldiers mounted while General Westmoreland kept asking for more troops; no clear achievements were made (11,616 American troops were casualties in 1969 alone) (Price, 2025). The Tet Offensive in 1968 disillusioned much of the American public toward their government's credibility. Even though the Tet Offensive was a North Vietnamese military disaster, it was a major political victory. The public no longer believes that America is in grasp of victory. How could the government say that the North Vietnamese were on the edge of losing when they could launch such a large-scale attack on South Vietnamese soil that even the American Embassy in Saigon was attacked? During Nixon's campaign, he announced that he had a secret plan to end the war without explaining what it was. After winning an election, Nixon's secret plan came down to something called "Vietnamization," where he announced the gradual withdrawal of American troops while strengthening the supply to ARVN with American weapons and military hardware and providing the air and naval support. However, it did not end the war; it just kept the war going while reducing the American casualties (Ambrose, 1997).

Similarly, the trajectory of the Ukrainian conflict during the 2023–2024 period was marked by a transition toward attritional warfare, with reports from

The New York Times citing total combatant casualties approaching 500,000 (Cooper et al., 2023). Following the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the executive transition in early 2025 fundamentally altered the conflict's logistics through a strategy described as the "Europeanization" of the war (Wolinski, 2025). Under this America First framework, the United States significantly curtailed direct military aid and munitions shipments, mandating that European allies assume the primary financial and material burden of Ukraine's defense (Desmaele, 2024). This policy pivot was predicated on the argument that continental security is a regional responsibility, effectively leveraging a U.S. drawdown to compel increased defense spending within the European Union (Murray, 2025). However, as Ukraine continued to face territorial losses, critics argued that this rapid reduction in U.S. support exacerbated the risk of operational collapse, potentially signaling a permanent retreat of American hegemony in Eastern Europe (Jentleson, 2026).

Nixon believed that the end of war could only be achieved with cooperation from two communist superpowers. With both the Soviet and Chinese refraining from supplying, it could leave North Vietnam no choice but to cease fire and bring North Vietnam to the negotiation table. Even though the American side did not recognize some of the loopholes in their generalization, such as Hanoi having their own agenda, the US military supply to South Vietnam exceeded any Soviet and Chinese supply combined, and it did create a new atmosphere that would open new possibilities for peace in the future.

Review Literature

The foundations of contemporary great power dynamics are often traced back to the mid twentieth century. Do (2014) contends that the roots of Sino-American and Soviet-American rapprochement formed earlier than commonly acknowledged, beginning between 1965 and 1968. During this period, a mutual

devaluation of ideology predisposed both Beijing and Moscow toward limited understanding with Washington. Building upon this transition, Thomas (2015) argues that the subsequent policy of rapprochement orchestrated by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger was an essential diplomatic balancing act. By capitalizing on the Sino-Soviet split, the United States utilized triangular diplomacy to shift the global balance of power, a strategy fundamentally rooted in *realpolitik* and a scrupulous attention to the strategic fears of communist adversaries.

The methodology of Cold War engagement further evolved through distinct strategic phases. Darchia and Khevtсурiani (2025) compare the *realpolitik* strategy of *détente* in the 1970s with the later peace through strength doctrine of the 1980s. While *détente* provided stability during a period of power parity, the subsequent escalation of military and moral pressure successfully exploited Soviet vulnerabilities. Despite these shifts, Apichatsakol (2023) posits that the wisdom of *détente* remains highly relevant today. The author suggests that modern US foreign policy should prioritize rebuilding mutual trust and constructive engagement with China rather than pursuing self-defeating confrontation.

Increasingly scholarship points towards analysis of the Russo-Sino partnership and its possible impacts on global order. Papageorgiou and Feklyunina (2025) frame international alignment as a dynamic process driven by compatible threat assessments, identity interpretations, and status expectations. They find that the Sino-Russian alignment has progressively deepened due to converging perceptions of the American threat and a shared commitment to a multipolar world order. This view is supported by Kwon, Jeh, and Lee (2023), who utilize a critical juncture framework to argue that specific United States actions, such as the Pivot to Asia and the deployment of missile defense systems in South Korea, inadvertently forged a powerful anti-hegemonic coalition.

However, the nature of this partnership remains nuanced. Krickovic (2017) observes a symbiotic yet asymmetrical relationship wherein China acts as a cautious riser, benefiting from the existing order, while Russia serves as a desperate challenger seeking to reverse its decline. Feng and He (2024) further explore why these nations refrain from a formal military alliance despite their close ties. They argue that distinct worldviews and a mutual desire for independent great power status prevent full formalization. They warn that treating Russia and China as an identical autocratic bloc is a strategic misjudgment that could hasten the decline of American hegemony.

The full scale invasion of Ukraine has introduced new complexities into the Sino-Russian relationship. Zhao (2025) characterizes China's position as a delicate balance between empowerment and entrapment. While Beijing seeks to use Russia as a partner against Western hegemony, it remains vigilant against being drawn into Russian military adventurism that could trigger secondary sanctions. Sagild and Hsiung (2025) add that the conflict has forced Chinese strategists to re-evaluate Russia's reliability. They find that significant fissures exist due to divergent visions of global governance, suggesting the partnership may be more a marriage of convenience than a monolithic bloc.

Yang (2026) suggests that Beijing views the war not only as a test but as a unique opportunity to shape a post-Western international system. By positioning itself as a mediator and promoting initiatives like the Global Security Initiative, China seeks to attract the Global South to an alternative model of governance. This effort to garner broader support is empirically validated by Nurullayev and Papa (2023), whose research on United Nations voting patterns reveals that Sino-Russian positions often enjoy significantly broader global support than those of the United States, particularly among members of the G-77 and BRICS.

The ability of the United States to respond to these shifts is often hindered by internal and external factors. Chivvis et al. (2024) argue that the

American foreign policy establishment is deeply entrenched in a legacy of unrivaled primacy, making it resistant to the strategic changes required by a multipolar world. This institutional inertia complicates efforts to realign policy with current capabilities. Externally, Paquin (2023) identifies the challenge of populist blackmail, where allies like Turkey and the Philippines use threats of realignment with China or Russia as a coercive negotiation tactic to extract concessions from Washington.

The effectiveness of strategies designed to divide these partnerships remains a subject of theoretical debate. Huang (2020) proposes an interdependence theory of wedge strategies, suggesting that attempts to split alliances are only successful when there is a specific type of symmetric reliance between the partners. Kim and Simón (2025) expand this understanding by noting that modern wedge strategies now operate on multiple levels, including hybrid interference and the manipulation of domestic corporate networks. Ernst and Kim (2023) conclude that while autocratic partners use maritime cooperation for systemic balancing, democratic coalitions may be more resilient to such wedge tactics due to their institutional transparency and internal political veto players. This paper seeks not to add new knowledge to the scholarship but rather anchor analysis from the historical record by identifying a few critical features of the historical to contemporary for consideration of realignment.

Comparative Historical Methodology and Realist Theory

The research methodology for this paper utilizes a qualitative Comparative Historical Analysis to examine the shifts in American grand strategy during two critical periods of transition and perceived hegemonic decline. This methodology is anchored in the tradition of structural realism, which posits that the behavior of states is primarily determined by the distribution of power within the international system rather than by domestic ideology or individual

leadership traits (Mearsheimer, 2001). By employing a diachronic comparative framework, the study evaluates the Nixon administration from 1969 to 1974 alongside the contemporary geopolitical landscape of the mid-2020s. The primary objective of this methodology is to identify the recurring structural pressures that necessitate a recalibration of strategic commitments following periods of protracted military overextension and domestic exhaustion. This approach allows for a systematic exploration of how global powers respond to the hegemonic trap by transitioning from universal containment toward more pragmatic and flexible alignments.

The selection of these specific historical cases is based on a most similar systems design, where the units of analysis share key structural variables despite being separated by half a century. Both the Nixon and contemporary eras are characterized by the conclusion of long and indecisive military interventions that significantly depleted national resources and eroded the social contract between the state and its citizenry. During the Nixon era, the trauma of the Vietnam War forced a fundamental reassessment of American capabilities and the limits of global containment (Ambrose, 1997). Similarly, the contemporary era is defined by the transition away from endless wars and the movement toward a Europeanization of regional conflicts, specifically the war in Ukraine. By comparing these two instances of strategic withdrawal, the methodology highlights the importance of transferring the material and financial burdens of defense to regional allies to preserve the core strength of the hegemon.

The theoretical foundations of this methodology are further strengthened by the insights of realism, which emphasizes that effective statecraft requires an unvarnished appraisal of power dynamics and a prioritization of national interest over moralistic or ideological goals (Morgenthau, 1948). Realist theory posits that the international system is characterized by an inescapable state of anarchy where no central authority exists to govern the behavior of sovereign states. Under these conditions, the primary objective of any state is the pursuit of

security and the maximization of power relative to its competitors to ensure survival (Morgenthau, 1948). Structural realism further clarifies that the distribution of material capabilities among great powers dictates the constraints and opportunities within the global order (Waltz, 1979). When a dominant power like the United States experiences hegemonic exhaustion due to overextension, it must recognize the limits of its influence and adapt to the rising power of rivals to avoid a systemic collapse (Mearsheimer, 2001). This theoretical perspective suggests that the current shift in American strategy is not a matter of choice but a systemic necessity driven by the emergence of a multipolar environment where traditional containment is no longer sustainable.

Effective statecraft within a realist framework requires the prioritization of national interest over ideological preferences or moralistic considerations (Kissinger, 1994). This pragmatism is best exemplified by the use of the balance of threat, where a state recalibrates its alliances to counter the most immediate and dangerous challenger in the system (Walt, 1987). By applying the logic of triangular diplomacy, a superpower can maintain a favorable balance of power by preventing the formation of a monolithic adversarial bloc. The historical precedent of the Nixonian pivot illustrates how engaging with a secondary rival can provide the necessary leverage to contain a primary geopolitical competitor. Consequently, the contemporary pursuit of strategic flexibility and a potential rapprochement with Russia serves as a rational response to the structural challenge posed by the rise of China in the twenty first century.

This study incorporates the concept of the balance of threat, suggesting that states do not merely react to the total power of an adversary but specifically to the perceived intentions and geographic proximity of that power (Walt, 1987). This theoretical lens is applied to the contemporary Sino Russian alignment to determine whether it represents a monolithic bloc or a marriage of convenience that can be influenced by American diplomatic maneuvering. The methodology

utilizes process tracing to examine how the Nixon administration successfully operationalized triangular diplomacy by exploiting the Sino Soviet split to maximize American leverage. By tracing these diplomatic mechanisms, the research evaluates the feasibility of a modern rapprochement with Russia as a means to address the primary challenge posed by the rise of China.

In addition to qualitative historical comparison, the methodology integrates an analysis of quantitative indicators such as defense outlays and nuclear stockpile data to illustrate the material necessity of arms control. The research contrasts the 1970s era of détente and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with the contemporary dismantling of the international arms control architecture (Stoessinger, 1990). The study specifically examines the impact of the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in early 2026 as a variable that increases the probability of accidental escalation and strategic instability. As historical precedents indicate, the maintenance of strategic stability through verifiable treaties is a cornerstone of realistic engagement between great powers (Kissinger, 1994). This analysis serves to demonstrate that the return to a rules based nuclear framework is not merely a diplomatic choice but a structural requirement for survival in a multipolar world.

Finally, the methodology acknowledges the limitations of historical analogies while asserting that the structural similarities between the two periods provide a robust foundation for predictive analysis. The emphasis remains on the pragmatic adjustments necessary when a superpower faces the rising costs of maintaining a global status quo that no longer reflects the underlying distribution of power. This comprehensive approach ensures that the recommendations for a new strategic pivot are grounded in both historical precedent and the current geopolitical realities of 2026. Ultimately, this comparative historical approach seeks to validate the hypothesis that a return to a tripartite framework and the abandonment of universal containment is essential for the United States to retain its global position as a dominant foreign policy actor. By focusing on the

continuity of realist thought across these eras, the paper provides a cohesive framework for understanding the evolution of American grand strategy in the twenty first century.

Détente: Strategic Realignment with Geopolitical Reality

The overarching geopolitical framework that emerged during this era was détente, a deliberate diplomatic relaxation of bilateral tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The fundamental catalyst for this paradigm shift occurred in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the superpowers to the precipice of a nuclear exchange. In the aftermath of this crisis, both nations recognized an existential imperative to avoid risk factors that could precipitate direct military confrontation (Stoessinger, 1990). For the United States, cultivating improved relations with Moscow offered specific tactical advantages, particularly regarding the protracted conflict in Vietnam. Because the Soviet Union served as a primary military benefactor to North Vietnamese forces—supplying critical materiel such as the surface-to-air missiles responsible for significant American aerial losses—the Nixon administration sought to leverage bilateral diplomacy to facilitate an American withdrawal. Consequently, American policymakers frequently employed the strategy of linkage, attempting to condition broader diplomatic agreements upon Soviet assistance in resolving the war in Southeast Asia (Larson, 1991).

A critical diplomatic achievement born from this era of détente was the initiation of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). At the inauguration of the Nixon administration in 1969, the United States possessed approximately 28,200 nuclear warheads, whereas the Soviet Union maintained a stockpile of roughly 12,700. In terms of delivery systems, the United States deployed 1,054 intercontinental ballistic missiles compared to 1,274 within the Soviet arsenal (Kristensen & Norris, 2006). The sheer magnitude of these arsenals represented a

capacity for unprecedented global devastation. Furthermore, the bilateral arms race exacted a severe economic toll on both nations, diverting crucial resources away from domestic development. This financial strain was particularly acute for the Soviet Union, which allocated nearly 40% of its national revenue to defense expenditures in an effort to match American military capabilities, thereby prompting Soviet leadership to seek arms reductions to fund civilian programs (Ambrose, 1997; Garthoff, 1985; Larson, 1985). Similarly, the United States faced escalating defense budgets exacerbated by military engagement in the Vietnam War, which subsequently constrained federal investment in domestic social welfare initiatives.

Strategically, United States policymakers recognized that the overwhelming nuclear superiority enjoyed during the previous decade was no longer sustainable. Continuing an unconstrained nuclear buildup would yield marginal strategic advantages while significantly escalating bilateral tensions. Therefore, arms limitation emerged as a preferred strategy to alleviate economic burdens, stabilize the balance of power, and preserve relative American strategic advantages. Although prior agreements had successfully addressed nuclear nonproliferation and prohibited atmospheric testing, efforts to constrain strategic arms deployment had historically stagnated. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks represented a breakthrough in bilateral arms control. Initially scheduled during the Johnson administration, the negotiations were suspended following the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (Hanhimaki, 2004). Subsequent progress was further delayed by the diplomatic strategy of linkage, through which the Nixon administration attempted to condition arms control progress on Soviet cooperation regarding a military settlement in Southeast Asia (Larson, 1991). Following protracted bilateral negotiations, the two nations successfully concluded the inaugural treaty in 1972 (Garthoff, 1985).

The Strategic Implications of Antiballistic Missiles and Treaty Limitations

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks produced agreements that constrained the deployment of existing strategic ballistic missiles and strictly limited antiballistic missile systems. The restriction of defensive missile networks was a central component of the negotiations. The deployment of comprehensive defensive systems fundamentally threatened the strategic doctrine of mutually assured destruction. Under this framework, deterrence was maintained by the guarantee that any nuclear first strike would result in the reciprocal annihilation of both belligerents (Jervis, 1979). The introduction of interceptor technologies destabilized this equilibrium. A functioning defensive shield capable of neutralizing incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles would theoretically immunize the possessing nation from retaliation, thereby shifting the strategic balance. Analytically, the unilateral pursuit of such defensive capabilities created acute security dilemmas, heavily incentivizing the vulnerable adversary to launch a preemptive strike before the defensive network became fully operational (Rathjens, 1969).

Despite these diplomatic achievements, the resulting treaties faced significant domestic criticism. Detractors argued that the agreements codified the forfeiture of American numerical superiority, permitting the Soviet Union to achieve technological parity while retaining a quantitative advantage in land-based delivery vehicles (Burr, 2001). A more systemic failure of the agreement involved its inability to regulate rapidly advancing military technologies. Specifically, the advent of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles allowed a single missile to deliver numerous warheads against distinct geographic targets. Because the initial treaty framework limited only the aggregate number of launch vehicles rather than the warheads themselves, both nations rapidly expanded their offensive capacities. Consequently, the agreement inadvertently

accelerated the proliferation of strategic nuclear payloads rather than successfully restricting the arms race (Ambrose, 1997; Lodal, 1976).

Dismantling Guardrails: Treaty Abandonment and the Nuclear Threats Again

The dismantling of the international arms control architecture represents a fundamental shift in United States strategic doctrine, moving away from bilateral constraints toward a posture of unrestricted military flexibility. This process began in June 2002 when the United States formally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The termination of this 1972 agreement was predicated on the requirement to develop advanced missile defense systems, which proponents argued were necessary to counter emerging threats from non-state actors, despite assertions that such systems undermined the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (Rusten, 2010).

In August 2019, the United States terminated its participation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty following allegations of Russian non-compliance regarding the 9M729 cruise missile system (Kimball, 2019). This was followed in November 2020 by the exit from the Treaty on Open Skies, a decision justified as a response to Russian restrictions on surveillance flights (DiNanno, 2020). Most critically, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty expired on February 5, 2026, after the U.S. executive branch prioritized a transition toward a trilateral framework inclusive of the People's Republic of China rather than seeking a further bilateral extension, leaving the global strategic environment legally unregulated (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2026).

Parallel to this diplomatic retreat, the United States military budget has undergone an exponential expansion, diverging from the peace dividend anticipated after the Cold War. After a brief reduction in the 1990s, defense outlays escalated rapidly to support great power competition. By fiscal year 2025,

the U.S. defense budget reached approximately 850 billion dollars, and projections for 2026 suggest a trajectory exceeding 925 billion dollars (O'Hanlon & Rocha, 2024; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026). This growth is characterized by an intensive focus on technological modernization, including artificial intelligence-integrated systems and hypersonic capabilities, which scholars argue reflects a military Keynesianism that prioritizes industrial defense growth over domestic socio-economic investment (Borch & Wallace, 2010).

Critics argue that the systematic abandonment of these treaties has removed essential guardrails that provided transparency and prevented miscalculation between nuclear-armed peers (Panda, 2024). The shift from a rule-based order to a doctrine of strategic flexibility is viewed by scholars as a destabilizing move that erodes the nuclear taboo and increases the probability of accidental escalation in a nascent multipolar landscape (Ifft, 2026). There is a distinct need to return to Cold War era nuclear treaties in order to security the strategic trust, at a basic level with the Russian Federation. This stands aside from the ongoing American and European support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. Nuclear arms control was a cornerstone of building verifiable relations which have been systematically dismantled since the Bush era and a return to this would at the strategic level stabilize relations between the great powers. It would further signal to the PRC that they need to engage in nuclear build up of their limited nuclear stockpiles.

Political Courage, Realities, and Breaking with Orthodoxy

In regard to the China mainland matter, the dramatic breakthrough was made in February 1972 when Nixon visited China, becoming the first American president in fifty years to set foot in China since the Communists took control in 1949. It was during the Nixon administration that the reassessment of American strategy toward China finally changed. Since 1949, Americans had no diplomatic

relations with the Chinese communist regime while still turning their blind eyes to the Nationalists in Formosa, which the US still endorsed as the legitimate Chinese government. In the beginning, the US could have implemented the same policy toward Tito of Yugoslavia when he broke away from the Soviet camp. But the Korean War destroyed all that possibility, in which Sino-American relations became hostile. The lobbyist from Taiwan and American opinion toward communist China also prevent any reconciliation between the US and the PRC, even though the Sino-Soviet split became obvious for the Western observers during the 60s. The American policy toward China was still based on the belief that Beijing and Moscow were mutual allies in a monolithic Sino-Soviet bloc (Garrett, 1991).

After the Communist victory in the civil war and governance of the mainland, American foreign policy was based on the American perspective and considered the US strategic rather than a bilateral relationship with China (Garrett, 1991). It meant that a non-recognition of reality had taken hold as well as a possible retaking of the mainland in the future by KMT forces. Even when the Sino-Soviet split became apparent, it took another eight years before the American finally grasped this and changed its policy to align with strategic geopolitical realities (Athwal, 2004).

The shift in American policy attitude toward China changed when policymakers realized that the American strategic interests aligned with geopolitical circumstances in Eurasia, which may allow for an advantage over the Soviet Union whilst maintaining its dominant position in the world (Do, 2014). American policymakers also realized that the communist camp was not monolithic but heterogeneous and included different sets of ideologies, interests, and practices.

The prospect of a formal Sino-American strategic alignment represented a paramount security concern for the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The realization of such an alliance threatened to precipitate a profound shift in the global balance of power in favor of the United States. In response to the

escalating Sino-Soviet split, Moscow was compelled to divert significant military resources to establish a secondary front along the extensive Sino-Soviet border.

By pursuing a dual strategy of detente with the Soviet Union and diplomatic rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, the United States effectively operationalized triangular diplomacy. This geopolitical maneuvering enabled Washington to exploit the bilateral tensions between the two major communist powers, thereby balancing their respective global influence. Consequently, the United States leveraged this diplomatic tripartite framework to elicit greater cooperation and pressure from both Moscow and Beijing toward achieving a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Vietnam.

Politically, the United States successfully executed a strategy of dual containment through concurrent diplomatic engagement with both communist superpowers. By exploiting the Sino-Soviet split, Washington enhanced its global hegemonic position and orchestrated a triangular diplomacy that maximized American strategic leverage. Consequently, the United States bolstered its international prestige by demonstrating a pragmatic adaptability to the evolving geopolitical landscape. Domestically, however, executive credibility remained severely compromised by the deepening public disillusionment stemming from the conflict in Vietnam. Furthermore, this profound diplomatic realignment generated significant domestic uncertainty. The sudden normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China and the pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union represented a stark departure from established Cold War orthodoxies. This transition forced the American public to reconcile bilateral cooperation with governments previously designated as existential threats to democratic institutions.

The People's Republic of China derived substantial strategic advantages from this geopolitical restructuring. International recognition as the legitimate Chinese government, coupled with the acquisition of a permanent seat on the

United Nations Security Council, reinforced broader historical ambitions regarding territorial sovereignty. This diplomatic legitimization validated long-term national objectives to reincorporate historically contested regions, including Macau, Hong Kong, and ultimately Taiwan. Additionally, the normalization of Sino-American relations facilitated vital foreign economic integration, providing developmental opportunities necessary to recover from decades of internal socioeconomic disruption. From the Soviet perspective, the framework of detente engendered an illusory sense of strategic stability, fostering a complacency that temporarily masked the rapidly shifting global balance of power.

The strategic recalibration of American foreign policy toward Taiwan necessitates a return to the foundational principles of the 1972 rapprochement, characterized by a pragmatic non-recognition of reality that prioritizes broader geopolitical stability over ideological absolutism. As historical precedent suggests, the transition from endorsing the Nationalists in Formosa to acknowledging the PRC was rooted in the realization that American strategic interests are best served by aligning with the geopolitical circumstances of Eurasia rather than maintaining an obsolete Cold War orthodoxy. By reverting to a framework of formal non-recognition while simultaneously providing the defensive capabilities necessary for regional deterrence, Washington can effectively operationalize a modern version of triangular diplomacy. This approach mitigates the risk of direct confrontation with Beijing, allowing the United States to balance the PRC's regional influence without precipitating a profound shift in the global balance of power that could destabilize the international system.

The maintenance of a robust arms sales program within this status quo serves as a critical instrument of dual containment, ensuring that the integration of China into the global order does not compromise the security architecture of the Western Pacific. The normalization of Sino-American relations was originally predicated on the understanding that the communist camp was heterogeneous and that American policymakers could exploit bilateral tensions to enhance

Washington's hegemonic position. A contemporary policy of calculated ambiguity combining diplomatic legitimation of the PRC with significant military support for Taiwan reflects the pragmatic adaptability required to navigate a landscape where China seeks to reincorporate historically contested regions. Ultimately, by acknowledging the PRC's ambitions while maintaining a credible deterrent, the United States can avoid the pitfalls of a zero-sum conflict, thereby preserving strategic leverage and fostering a state of managed competition that upholds global stability.

Strategic Miscalculations of the Linkage Approach

The diplomatic strategy of linkage, through which the United States sought to contain communist expansion and ensure the survival of the South Vietnamese state through the end of the Nixon administration, suffered from several fundamental strategic miscalculations. First, the defensive capabilities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam remained critically inadequate despite extensive American financial investment. The South Vietnamese economy functioned almost exclusively as a subsidiary of the American military presence, lacking the structural independence necessary for sovereign viability. Second, the linkage framework erroneously presumed that smaller nations operated merely as proxy pawns for superpowers, fundamentally underestimating the independent nationalist agenda of Hanoi. Attempts to leverage bilateral arms control negotiations to resolve the Vietnam conflict proved ineffective because the Soviet Union possessed limited coercive influence over North Vietnamese strategic objectives (Larson, 1985). Third, American policymakers failed to account for the massive disparity in military assistance. United States materiel support elevated the South Vietnamese military to the fourth largest globally, vastly exceeding the combined assistance provided to the North by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (Ambrose, 1997). Logically, mandating a

reduction in Sino-Soviet proxy support would have necessitated a reciprocal de-escalation of the overwhelming American military subsidization.

Geopolitical Legacy and the End of the Vietnam War Conflict

The conflict concluded on April 30, 1975, when North Vietnamese armored units breached the presidential palace in Saigon, precipitating the unconditional surrender of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. However, the geopolitical ramifications of the era extended significantly beyond the immediate military defeat. The diplomatic framework of détente persisted until the Reagan administration, and the People's Republic of China formally secured its permanent position on the United Nations Security Council. The institutionalization of both détente and the diplomatic opening to China required substantial time to permeate the entrenched bureaucratic structures of United States foreign policy. This realignment necessitated a profound perceptual shift among American policymakers, requiring them to transition from viewing the Soviet Union as an inherently expansionist revolutionary force to engaging with it as a legitimate state possessing defined and manageable geopolitical objectives (Stoessinger, 1990). A parallel cognitive shift was applied to relations with Beijing. Ultimately, this structural transformation in diplomatic relations constitutes the enduring legacy of the Nixon administration, establishing a new pragmatic paradigm for American foreign policy.

Conclusion

The historical parallels between the Nixon and Trump eras underscore a recurring necessity in American statecraft, specifically the requirement to reconcile domestic constraints with global ambitions. Both administrations inherited the geopolitical exhaustion of protracted and costly conflicts that significantly eroded public trust and national treasure. Just as the Nixon

administration sought to navigate the trauma of Vietnam through the strategic withdrawal of Vietnamization and the diplomatic maneuver of détente, the contemporary America First doctrine reflects a similar imperative to conclude endless wars and pivot toward a more sustainable global posture. The transition from the collective security of the post-Cold War era to the Europeanization of regional conflicts in 2026 demonstrates a profound shift toward strategic flexibility, wherein the United States mandates that regional allies assume the primary burden of their own defense.

However, the enduring lesson of the Nixon legacy is that disengagement from secondary conflict areas is only effective when aligned with a realignment of great power relations. The success of triangular diplomacy in the 1970s was predicated on the recognition that the communist bloc was not a monolithic entity. By exploiting the Sino-Soviet split, Washington successfully balanced its rivals and secured a position of maximum leverage. In the current landscape, the systematic dismantling of the international arms control architecture, which culminated in the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in February 2026, has removed the essential guardrails that once prevented catastrophic miscalculation. The resulting environment of nuclear instability and continuing war of aggression against Russia in Ukraine only serves to alienate a potential partner.

The contemporary strategy of simultaneous confrontation with both Russia and China represents a significant departure from the pragmatic realism that defined the Nixon era. If the United States continues to alienate both nuclear-armed peers, it risks precipitating a strategic overextension that its domestic socio-economic fabric may no longer support. To retain its global standing, American foreign policy must move beyond the orthodoxy of universal containment and embrace a new tripartite framework. By seeking a measured rapprochement with Moscow to address the primary challenge posed by the

People's Republic of China, the United States can avoid the pitfalls of isolation and maintain a favorable balance of power. The legacy of 1972 serves as a vital reminder that survival in a multipolar world requires the political courage to prioritize geopolitical reality over ideological purity.

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