

In: Ursula Lehmkuhl / Gustav Schmidt (Hg.): From Enmity to Friendship. Anglo-American Relations in the 19th and 20th Century, Augsburg: Wißner 2005, S. 115-130.

Anglo-American Relations in the Era of Détente and the Challenge of Ostpolitik

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The late 1960s and early 1970s can be described as a period of transition, being fluid and unstable but also with the chance of adjustments and full of new opportunities. The main features of the post war period had been dissolved or were going to disappear. There was the feeling of a “growing untidiness of the world”.¹ This applied not only to the sphere of international politics but also to international finance and trade relations and to societies at large.² With respect to the international system the familiar bipolar structure of the Cold War still shaped the main rules of the game. But the roles of the superpowers were changing. Both the United States and the Soviet Union felt the problem of imperial overstretch. Hence they were interested in a relaxation of tensions. The era of détente opened windows of opportunity for the superpowers as well as for the Europeans, particularly for the West Germans.

Analyzing recent trends in international affairs, Karl Kaiser pointed out in 1968 that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) had become a “major actor in international politics” and that “the erosion of bipolarity and West Germany’s new self-assertion are inextricably interwoven.”³ In East-West relations the FRG became increasingly important as a partner of the Soviet Union. In Western Europe the FRG challenged France as the dominant and leading power and supported the British application for membership of the EEC. Britain’s move towards Europe, accompanied by the withdrawal from East of Suez, marked a turning point in British foreign policy which had a noticeable impact on British-American relations. The United Kingdom continued to enjoy a close relationship with the United States but the European neighbours, particularly France and the FRG, gained in importance. In Prime Minister Heath’s view there was a “natural relationship” between Washington and London, but he avoided to talk of a special relationship. His Labour predecessor Harold Wilson too regarded the concept of a special relationship as outdated, even if he used to rely heavily on

¹ FCO brief “Anglo/United States Relations”, 23 September 1970. National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew (PRO), FCO 7/1839. – Research for this article was conducted with the financial support of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

² Fink, Carole/Gassert, Philipp/Junker, Detlef (eds.), 1968: *The World Transformed*, Cambridge 1998; Suri, Jeremi, *Power and Protest. Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, Cambridge, Mass. 2003.

³ Kaiser, Karl, *German Foreign Policy in Transition. Bonn Between East and West*, London u.a. 1968, p. 1.

the United States. He preferred “close relationship, governed by the only things that matter, unity of purpose and unity in our objectives.”⁴

Britain was still the centre of the Commonwealth and had obligations in the Middle East, in Asia and in Africa. Her foreign policy agenda was the agenda of a global power. But according to Denis Greenhill, Permanent Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) between 1969 and 1973, she lacked the resources of a global power and was “likely to play primarily a European and Atlantic role”. A new orientation was necessary: “We have been in retreat since the war and the time for consolidation has, I believe, now come.” Consolidation meant that Britain wanted to keep the “special links with the United States, e.g. in the intelligence and nuclear fields”, but was in need of a “new power base in Europe”. Otherwise the country’s influence in Washington was “bound to decline”.⁵

Greenhill’s stocktaking memorandum, produced for the incoming Conservative Government in June 1970, summarized succinctly what had been expressed by politicians and FCO officials time and again. Britain had lost her world power status. Depending on the perspective, one could call her a “major power of the second rank” (Labour Foreign Minister Michael Stewart) or a “medium power of the first rank” (Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath).⁶ Anyway, turning to Europe was an imperative. But Britain had still a weight in world politics and in order to preserve this position it was of utmost importance to have intimate relations with the United States. How to achieve the balance between the European and the Atlantic factor was a problem which became a leitmotiv since the late 1960s and can be traced in numerous FCO documents. To give the first of three examples: In September 1968 the American Department advised the Secretary of State that Anglo-American relations “remain good. But, by mutual agreement, their ‘special’ character is being played down. America continues to support the pound but mainly as the dollar’s first line of defence. In view of our reduced world responsibilities and decision to enter the European Economic Community there is a tendency for Americans to ‘write us off’ and to leave it to us to find a new role in the world.”⁷

Roughly two years later, after the change from a Democratic to a Republican administration in Washington and a change of government in Britain as well, the FCO realized that the relationship with the UK was “no longer central” to the

⁴ Bartlett, C.J., *The Special Relationship: A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945*, London 1992, p. 130; Owendale, Ritchie, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century*, Houndmills 1998, p. 132f.; Reynolds, David, *Britannia Overruled. British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. Harlow u.a. 2000, p. 214. For a recent summary of the literature on the UK-US ‘special relationship’ see Colman, Jonathan, *A ‘special relationship’? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American Relations ‘at the summit’, 1964-68*, Manchester 2004, p. 1ff.

⁵ Memorandum, June 1970 [no exact date], on the occasion of the change of government. PRO, PREM 15/64.

⁶ Dumbrell, John, *A Special Relationship. Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After*, Houndmills 2001, p. 72f.

⁷ Briefing paper by the American Department, 30 September 1968, for Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart before going to New York. PRO, FCO 7/803.

US. Anglo-American relations had deteriorated in some degree for various reasons (the emergence of such countries as West Germany, Japan and France and the relative economic decline of Britain; the war in Vietnam; the British withdrawal from East of Suez; the decline of the British contribution to world peace keeping; the American-Soviet rapprochement due to Soviet nuclear parity; differing attitudes in Britain and the United States to relations with the Communists generally). However, "it cannot be said that Anglo-American relations are bad. Taken across the board they still are good and very close indeed in a wide variety of fields." In particular, President Nixon was regarded as being interested in improving the relationship with Great Britain. He "did not conceal his pleasure in private conversation at the Conservative victory" in the general elections of June 1970. Nixon "evidently" felt that the Conservative Government "were more natural allies of a Republican Administration". Furthermore, the US, although being a power in a class apart, had to cope with the responsibilities of a superpower. "The Americans are always 'lonely' in the conduct of foreign affairs and look instinctively to us." The Americans were perceived as being obsessed with "their own problems and unsure of their place in the world". President Nixon seemed to be "a prisoner of circumstance". The FCO expected him "to see the United Kingdom as the main natural ally of the United States."⁸

The third quotation is from a planning paper of November 1971 which was dedicated to "Future relations with the US". It was approved by Foreign Secretary Douglas-Home and distributed widely as a "broad guide to policy": "Relations between Britain, Europe and the US are inevitably central to our foreign policy."⁹ The paper stressed that since the autumn of 1970 the fluidity in the international scene had gone on. The US dollar had been taken off the gold standard and new tariffs had been introduced in August 1971. These measures were detrimental to the interests of the British trading state because they resulted in "the fragmentation of the monetary and trading relations between the industrial countries of the free world and the risk of a slide into protectionism." Secondly, China was increasingly becoming a factor in American foreign policy. Thirdly, the European Community was about to be enlarged. Fourthly, the Soviet Union had not stopped its "efforts to exploit the possible weakening of US determination to defend Western Europe."

Against this background the "old US-UK relationship" was "bound to change". Furthermore, "as Europe develops," European-US strains were likely. At the same time the United States and Europe "will share common interests". In particular, "the United States will continue to regard it as essential on strategic grounds to keep Western Europe out of Soviet control." As to the British role, "our European commitment must now have priority but so far as possible we should try to eat our cake and have it and maintain as much

⁸ Anglo/United States Relations. Brief by FCO, 23 September 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1839.

⁹ Greenhill in his covering letter, 11 November 1971. PRO, FCO 82/84. The following citations are from the planning paper.

influence in Washington as we can. In particular we shall need to retain special links in the nuclear and intelligence fields.” In a period of profound transition the FCO wanted to concentrate on the European option but wished to keep open the Atlantic option as well. Speaking politically correctly, the UK was “involved in delicate problems of balancing European and US factors”. In plain language, the European commitment was not the whole story: “[...] we shall have to be discreet in dealing with the US. But lack of European solidarity means that links with the US will remain important to us.”

II

Summarizing the above observations and arguments, good relations with the United States remained central to British foreign policy. The American connexion, however, diminished in importance.¹⁰ There were three main factors which had an impact on Anglo-American relations: (1) the decline of Britain as a world power and her entry into Europe, (2) the process of détente in East-West relations giving the Europeans an extra room of manoeuvre, (3) the emergence of the FRG as a leading member of the transatlantic community and as a pacemaker in European détente.

In the late 1960s it became crystal-clear that the old and glorious days of Churchill’s ‘special relationship’ had gone. Britain’s decline in terms of political, military and economic power and her European commitment changed the Anglo-American relationship objectively. One should have in mind, however, that the notion of a special relationship was not invented because Britain was a powerful ally of the US. Rather it stemmed from the decline of Britain as a great power. Rhetoric was more important than reality. In fact, rhetoric became reality. The construction of a special relationship depended on a common enemy. Being a construct of warriors and war heroes from World War II and from the Cold War, it lost its grounds in the era of détente. At the turn from the 1960s to the 1970s the enemy either had disappeared (Germany, Japan) or was perceived in a different and milder light (Soviet Union).¹¹

Although the Anglo-American relationship underwent a profound transformation both for objective and for ideological reasons, one cannot say that there was nothing special at all in UK-US relations. The collaboration in intelligence and nuclear matters was outstanding.¹² According to Kissinger, “there was no government which would have dealt with so openly, exchanged ideas so freely, or in fact permitted to participate in our own deliberations.”¹³ Kissinger refers to the flow of communication between Washington and London

¹⁰ Reynolds, *Britannia*, p. 225 ff.

¹¹ See also Hahn, Peter L., *Discord or Accommodation? Britain and the United States in World Affairs, 1945-92*, in Leventhal, Fred M. and Quinault, Roland (eds.), *Anglo-American Attitudes. From Revolution to Partnership*, Aldershot u.a. 2000, p. 286.

¹² See the chapters by Wolfgang Krieger and Beatrice Heuser in this book.

¹³ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston 1982, p. 282.

in the run-up to the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War. Elsewhere in his memoirs he is full of praise for the working partnership with Burke Trend, the Secretary of the Cabinet, with whom he was in close touch many times.¹⁴ The exchange of views and British diplomatic skills, however, could not compensate for power,¹⁵ even if the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ was never based on a partnership of equals. During the Second World War Britain depended heavily on the United States and remained a junior partner after the war. She gave way to the US in world politics.¹⁶ At the same time Great Britain played a significant role in the Cold War empire of the United States.¹⁷ Until the late 1960s when the British government announced the retreat from East of Suez there was an Anglo-American division of labour in matters of international security. Even after that the security partnership did not come to an absolute end.¹⁸ But the above mentioned “decline of the British contribution to world peace keeping” inevitably reduced Britain’s weight in any American-led Western strategy. Defence Secretary Clark Clifford voiced the feeling which prevailed in Washington in June 1968 when he spoke of the beginning of a new era in Anglo-American relations.¹⁹

The second reason for the commencement of a new era was Britain’s imminent membership of the European Community. It is not an exaggeration to call it “the most profound revolution in British foreign policy in the twentieth century”.²⁰ In the context of UK-US relations the British move towards Europe was ambiguous. On the one hand Washington had always favoured a British membership because it strengthened Europe. On the other hand it would lead to a “greater distance” of Great Britain towards the United States.²¹ Furthermore, Europe, with its closed trading system, might become too strong economically. All was about a conflict of interests and a “clash of perception”.²² Both Wilson and Heath tried to reassure the Americans. In January 1970 Wilson did not dispute “the adverse impact on United States economic interests in the short run”. But he argued that one could expect a “considerable political benefit in the long term”.²³ “The political dividend of a united Europe must compensate the United States for the economic price of European economic unity.”²⁴ In

¹⁴ Kissinger, Henry, *White House Years*, Boston 1979, p. 92f. See also Reynolds, *Britannia*, p. 225.

¹⁵ See the remarks by Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 421.

¹⁶ Watt, D. Cameron, *Succeeding John Bull. America in Britain’s Place 1900-1975*, Cambridge u.a. 1984.

¹⁷ On Cold War empires Gaddis, John L., *We Now Know. Rethinking Cold War History*, Oxford 1997, p. 26ff. On Britain’s role Steiner, Zara, *The Fall of Great Britain: Peace, Stability, and Legitimacy*, in Lundestad, Geir, *The Fall of Great Powers. Peace, Stability and Legitimacy*, Oslo 1994, p. 71ff.

¹⁸ Colman, A, *‘special relationship’?* p. 169f.

¹⁹ Dumbrell, *Special Relationship*, p. 71f.

²⁰ Reynolds, *Britannia*, p. 224.

²¹ Lundestad, Geir, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945. From “Empire” by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift*, Oxford 2003, p. 181. See *ibid.*, p. 177ff. for a summary of the Nixon-Kissinger attitude towards European integration.

²² Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 937.

²³ Wilson in conversation with Nixon, 27 January 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1823.

²⁴ American memorandum of the same conversation. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA), Nixon Presidential Material (Nixon), National Security Council (NSC), Presidential-

December 1970 it was Edward Heath who explained British politics. Britain had to get into the Common Market first. She then would be able to play a constructive role with respect to American concerns. At present, however, the British would not make any concessions to Washington in bilateral talks, “partly because they did not want to appear to be an American Trojan Horse”.²⁵ Kissinger recollects that “no previous British Prime Minister would have considered making such a statement to an American President. [...] We were witnessing a revolution in Britain’s post-war foreign policy.”²⁶

By the time of Heath’s first trip to Washington as Prime Minister European détente with the Eastern treaties of the FRG at its heart was in full swing. On the level of the super-powers the talks on the limitation of strategic weapons had started. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 had disturbed the trend to détente only for a short while. In January 1970 the experts in the FCO, although they were not sure of Soviet motives and intentions, concluded: “We are now moving into a new phase in East-West relations.” The West must not fail to discover “how far the Russians are prepared to go, if indeed they contemplate anything more constructive than that we should ratify the status quo for their benefit.” Interesting enough, the United States was regarded to play the “main role” in probing the Soviets. But other members of NATO too “can make a useful contribution to this exploration of the Russian mind”.²⁷ As to Britain Foreign Secretary Stewart told his American colleague, “we should try to be constructive over our approach to East-West relations”, always provided that there was firmness “about our nuclear defence, of which the US commitment was the foundation stone”. Stewart wanted to expand links of all kinds with Eastern European countries. Still impressed by the forcible end of the ‘Prague spring’, Rogers wanted to be cautious in political matters and to give priority to links in the financial and economic sphere.²⁸

London and Washington agreed that there should be no drift in East-West relations, even if they felt somewhat in the dark whether the Soviet Union really meant business. Especially, it still had to be explored what the Soviet Union had in mind with the demand for a European Security Conference. The Anglo-American response was extremely restrained although the British appeared to be more forthcoming. The West could not reject the Soviet initiative “out of hand”.²⁹ During a meeting with his American, French and German colleagues in Brussels in December 1969 Stewart pointed out that public opinion in Western

HAK Memcons (Pres-HAK), 1023. On EEC versus ‘special relationship’ see also Bartlett, *Special Relationship*, p. 127ff.

²⁵ Heath in conversation with Nixon and Kissinger, 17 December 1970. NARA, Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State (RG 59), 2657.

²⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 937. See also Watt, David, Introduction: The Anglo-American Relationship, in Louis, WM. Roger and Bull, Hedley, *The ‘Special Relationship’. Anglo-American Relations since 1945*, Oxford 1986, p. 12f.

²⁷ Brief by FCO, 7 January 1970, in preparation of Wilson’s visit to Washington and Ottawa. PRO, FCO 7/1819.

²⁸ Conversation between Stewart and Rogers in Washington, 27 January 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1823.

²⁹ Stewart in Cabinet, 11 December 1969. Documents on British Policy Overseas, Third Series (DBPO), vol. I, p. 198f.

countries, in particular the younger generation, would not accept a pure Cold War attitude any longer.³⁰ Rogers was in a different position because “there was very little public interest in the United States in the proposal for a European Security Conference.” Furthermore, “the Russians had not given the impression of being serious.”³¹ Clearly, the Labour government was not willing to agree to any conference on Russian terms. But from a European point of view, which differed from the global view of the American super-power, London opposed a completely negative attitude either. Prime Minister Wilson pleaded for “a positive policy, directed towards the relief of tensions in Europe”. Instead of “letting the Soviet government make the running”, the Western powers “must show themselves politically enterprising and imaginative.”³²

The Heath government was much more sceptical and, in this respect, in principal accordance with the Nixon administration. In the context of its European orientation, however, it could not help sharing the European – in particular the West German and French – perspective. The differences between the United States and the European member states of NATO were not regarded as differences in substance but in pace, tactics and emphasis. Provided that the transatlantic relationship worked smoothly and British interests were saved, the United Kingdom had “nothing to fear from détente”.³³ Eventually, the United States did not prevent the CSCE but dealt with it as part of Kissinger’s overall linkage strategy.³⁴ The US had never wanted the conference, Nixon remarked grudgingly in July 1972. But the European countries, “not least the UK”, had pressed for it. Now one should try “to slow it down as far as possible”.³⁵ All in all, the different approaches to the CSCE proved to be compatible, due to the overriding interest on both sides of the Atlantic in (1) preserving the unity of NATO and (2) keeping the process of détente going.

With the negotiations on SALT and Berlin progressing, it was impossible for the US government to ignore the longstanding Soviet interest in a security conference. For the Europeans it was central to maintain harmony with the

³⁰ Dinner on the eve of the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, 3 December 1969. Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (AAPD) 1969, p. 1363f.

³¹ See above note 28.

³² Wilson in conversation with Nixon, 27 January 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1823.

³³ Steering brief by H.T.A. Overton (North America Department), 25 November 1971, for Heath’s meeting with Nixon on the Bermudas: “In the approach to East-West negotiations on European security and MBFR, the Americans would like to go more slowly than the rest of the European members of NATO. On timing our own basic position is to go no faster and no slower than the Federal German Government, and not to push them in either direction. On procedure we favour the French approach which is rather more flexible than that hitherto advocated by the Americans. But any differences between us are of pace, tactics and emphasis rather than major substance. The American approach could become less slow and cautious as a result of the President’s visit to Moscow next May. The Prime Minister’s basic message on East-West relations might be that, provided we get the transatlantic relationship right, and provided we stand firm whenever our essential interests are involved, we have nothing to fear from détente.” Minute by Douglas-Home, 26 November 1971: “Very good brief.” PRO, FCO 82/66.

³⁴ Unfortunately, the most recent account on Kissinger, although being a thorough study of Kissinger’s approach to world politics, is very short on European affairs: Hanhimäki, Jussi, *The Flawed Architect. Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, Oxford 2004.

³⁵ Conversation between Nixon and Trend, 28 July 1972. PRO, FCO 82/194.

United States in order to avoid an American-Soviet accord on strategic weapons which would not pay attention to European security. When visiting Washington in January 1970 Wilson expected an undertaking that the Americans would consult the British in matters of SALT and take the views of the Allies into account.³⁶ Continuously the British government felt the risk of super-power bilateralism at the expense of the West Europeans. Kissinger called it “the standard European theme”, “the profound ambivalence of our European allies”: “In times of rising tension, they feared American rigidity; in times of relaxing tension, they dreaded a US-Soviet condominium.”³⁷ The wording on both sides of the Atlantic was similar because the mutual perceptions resembled one another. Kissinger was afraid of selective détente and the Europeans dreaded being left behind. Consequently, Heath not only sent his congratulations to Nixon after the latter’s summit with Brezhnev in May 1972. He also warned of the dangers of détente. The “Russians” might succeed in driving “a wedge between the Allies”. Hence, the NATO governments were well advised “to continue to work together to prevent the Alliance being split by generalities during the period of active diplomacy ahead.”³⁸ The same could have been said by the Americans in case of a British-Soviet rapprochement. In fact, Kissinger called to order not only the Germans. There must be no race to Moscow, the British government was told in December 1970. Heath pleased his host and interjected spontaneously that he had no intention to see the Soviet leadership.³⁹

Heath for his part pointed out to Brandt that the Soviet Union wanted to test the solidarity of the Western alliance. One had to be “conscious of the pitfalls on the way”. Heath expressed his confidence, which could also be understood as a reminder, “that the Alliance can stand the strains of détente as it has survived the test of the Cold War. But in a climate of relaxation we shall have to be no less, and indeed more, on our guard.”⁴⁰ The ritual of demanding unity, which was also a German habit, had to do with differences in tactics and timing. How and when and at which pace should one proceed in East-West relations? The preferences of the US as a super-power with a global outlook, of Britain as a power in retreat from global commitments and of the FRG as a regional power were not identical. But as it turned out, their basic interests proved to be compatible.

III

³⁶ Ministerial meeting in 10 Downing St., 12 January 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1817. See also the FCO brief on SALT, 23 January 1970, which stressed the concern about the implications of SALT for British and European defence. The US should be aware of “real European anxieties”. Hopefully, any agreement on SALT “will ensure for Europe at least the same degree of security as at present.” PRO, FCO 7/1819.

³⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 94.

³⁸ Heath to Nixon, 16 June 1972. PRO, PREM 15/1274.

³⁹ Conversation 18 December 1970. NARA, RG 59/2657.

⁴⁰ Heath to Brandt, 27 September 1971. Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Willy-Brandt-Archiv, Bonn (WBA), Bundeskanzler 52.

British-Soviet relations in the early 1970s were shaped by mutual restraint. The Conservative government was prepared to welcome any progress in détente but was not active in pursuing a policy of détente. Rather it observed the changes in East-West relations, such as the German-Soviet treaty of August 1970, sceptically. Mainly this was due to the still overwhelmingly negative image of the Soviet Union in Whitehall. From the FCO's point of view "the potential Soviet threat to Western Europe" appeared "complex". The West had to reckon with the ongoing "Soviet probing for weak points in Western Europe".⁴¹ Douglas-Home did not rule out that Ostpolitik could eventually achieve positive results, but his perception of the Soviet Union was determined by a Cold War outlook. It remained to be seen whether the Soviets really wanted a relaxation of tension⁴² and "whether the long term advantages for which Herr Brandt hopes will ever be achieved."⁴³ This did not mean that the German-Soviet accord and "its accompanying talk of détente" were "in any sense unwelcome". But a strong "need for precision in the definition of détente" was felt in the FCO.⁴⁴ The British perception of the Soviet Union differed significantly from the West German one. In Brandt's Ostpolitik the Soviet Union appeared as a power which remained an adversary in East-West relations but was genuinely interested in a relaxation of tensions and in cooperation with the West, not least with the FRG. The British attitude of wait-and-see was shared by the Americans. Kissinger distanced himself from the "eternal optimism of the Germans".⁴⁵

The German question, the foreign policy of the FRG and Ostpolitik in particular were an issue which was regularly discussed when British and American statesmen and diplomats met. On the one hand Ostpolitik fit into the general trend of détente. On the other hand it constituted a challenge to the Western powers, being responsible for Germany as a whole and as victor powers having rights in Germany and Berlin. Furthermore, Ostpolitik had an impact on the Anglo-American relationship because, with Britain turning to Europe and counting on German support, the Anglo-German relationship reached a new quality.

⁴¹ Deputy Under-Secretary Thomas Brimelow to Embassy Moscow, 14 August 1970. DBPO, vol. I, p. 256.

⁴² Douglas-Home in Cabinet, 3 September 1970. PRO, CAB 128/47. See also Douglas-Home, Alexander Frederick, *The Way the Wind Blows: An Autobiography*, London 1976, p. 250: "[...] all Communists are dedicated to a single end – victory over every other creed and every other way of life."

⁴³ Brimelow as quoted above note 41, p. 253.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 257. On British attitudes towards Ostpolitik see Niedhart, Gottfried, *The British Reaction towards Ostpolitik. Anglo-West German Relations in the Era of Détente 1967-1971*, in Haase, Christian, *Debating Foreign Affairs. The Public and British Foreign Policy since 1867*, Berlin 2003, p. 130-152; Morgan, Roger, *Die Sorgen Washingtons und Londons über ein neutrales Deutschland 1969-1975*, in Geppert, Dominik und Wengst, Udo (eds.), *Neutralität – Chance oder Chimäre? Konzepte des Dritten Weges für Deutschland und die Welt 1945-1990*, München 2005, p. 249-263.

⁴⁵ Kissinger in a memorandum for Nixon, 1 September 1970: „The Germans theorize that the Soviets desire an improved relationship because of the pressure of the China problem and their need to gain significant access to German technology. [...] Whether the eternal optimism of the Germans will in fact be realized, and their plan implemented, still remains to be seen. There is considerable doubt that the process will develop as smoothly as they hope.” NARA, Nixon, NSC, Country Files Europe 684.

At first sight Ostpolitik was not a challenge but a relief. At last the Federal Germans accepted the post-war order. When the Grand Coalition government formed by CDU/CSU and SPD came into office in 1966 it launched a “new” Ostpolitik. The solution of the German question was not regarded as a precondition for an improvement in East-West relations any longer. The FRG had stopped to be an obstacle to détente. At the same time it still remained a stumbling-bloc to détente because it did not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which was agreed upon by the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain in July 1968. The Christian Democrats opposed the treaty for various reasons and thereby were out of step with the nuclear powers. The German signature was regarded as an essential contribution to détente not only by the Soviet Union but also by the allies of the FRG. The FRG was supposed to accept both the territorial results of the Second World War and its discrimination with respect to nuclear weapons. Only the SPD-FDP government was prepared to meet these expectations. The recognition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a state in October 1969 and the signing of the NPT in November 1969 were steps which signalled a new departure in West German foreign policy.⁴⁶

Inevitably, this break-through was applauded widely. At the same time it provided the FRG with a hitherto unknown freedom of action. Hence, Ostpolitik was perceived not only as a sound policy but also as a political course which was not without risk. That is why Ostpolitik became a challenge, namely for two reasons. Both were connected with the search for the underlying motives of Ostpolitik as well as for the true goals of Soviet policy. Firstly, Ostpolitik was a challenge because the FRG entered a new phase of its revisionist policy. The recognition of the status quo was meant as an initial step to overcoming it. In particular, Bonn regarded the German question as being still open. In the Eastern perception and, indeed, in the view of Western governments too, Ostpolitik was an aggression in disguise, an attempt to penetrate the East and thereby to change it. As early as in 1963 the appropriate formula was found: change through rapprochement (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). Its author, Egon Bahr, was widely depicted as an old style German nationalist. Neither in the East nor in the West did any idea of the resurrection of a German nation state arouse any enthusiasm. Secondly, Ostpolitik was assessed as a challenge because it indicated a new self-confidence of the West German foreign policy establishment and a more active role of the FRG in international affairs generally. In the late 1960s, the FRG regarded itself and was perceived from outside as being in a key position in Western Europa, not least because of the steady decline of France’s traditional dominance. The assumption of the FCO in May 1969 that “German influence in Western Europe will increase” was shared by most international observers.⁴⁷ The British ambassador in Bonn spoke of a “new trend” in West German policy: “Among its features are a greater self-reliance, a feeling that the period of

⁴⁶ A thorough analysis of the NPT issue will be included in the forthcoming book by Oliver Bange: Ostpolitik und Détente in Europa. Die Anfänge 1966-1969 (Habilitationsschrift Mannheim 2004).

⁴⁷ FCO memorandum, 15 May 1969. DBPO, vol. I, p. 146.

atonement for the war is over, impatience with restraints on German liberty of action.” There was a change of policy if not in substance but in style that amounted to “a new consciousness of national interest and power”.⁴⁸ The FRG was “moving slowly out of the era of tutelage and beginning to wonder whether and how she can use in world affairs the strength which her economic development has given her.”⁴⁹ This process became even more explicit when Brandt became Chancellor. Kenneth Rush, US ambassador in Bonn, was favourably impressed: “The change of government, with the new Ostpolitik of the Brandt government, along with Germany’s new approach to the West, and her also very important new steps in domestic policies, have created an atmosphere of change and excitement even greater than that of the New Deal thirties in our country.”⁵⁰

West Germany was back on the stage of international affairs. No wonder that this development brought up old questions and historical recollections. So far the FRG was a loyal ally in NATO and the European Communities. But how stable were these bonds really? Was there a temptation for the Germans to make a deal with the Soviet Union which would be detrimental to Western interests? Underlying anxieties of this kind played an important role in the Anglo-American perception of Ostpolitik. President Nixon did not miss any chance to raise the issue when he met European heads of government. In January 1970 he asked Prime Minister Wilson whether the German commitment to the Atlantic Alliance “might be gradually eroded by Herr Brandt’s new policy of promoting better relations with Eastern Europe.” Wilson’s answer was unequivocal. He was convinced of “Brandt’s loyalty” and did not “feel anxious about his new Ostpolitik”.⁵¹ Nixon was concerned about the possible dynamics of détente. Is Brandt “capable of managing a détente”? Wilson did not have any doubts: “He can manage it. He’s unfrozen the situation; he’s gotten the troops out of the trenches; he’s done away with stale, cold-war rhetoric.”⁵²

Wilson’s successor never made such an enthusiastic comment on Ostpolitik. In fact, Heath voiced his deep-seated anxieties in Cabinet: “Close relationships between Germany and the Soviet Union had seldom been to our advantage in the past.”⁵³ Of course, a statement like this was never uttered publicly. The Conservative government could not afford to antagonize the FRG if Britain wanted to succeed in its application for EC membership. Therefore it complied with the advice of the FCO to maintain “the present excellent Anglo-German relations”. The FRG had become “the strongest member of the EEC” and functioned as “a key both to our entry and to East-West relations”.⁵⁴ The other

⁴⁸ Despatch by Roger Jackling to FCO, 9 April 1969, entitled „Towards a National Foreign Policy“. PRO, FCO 33/566.

⁴⁹ Minute by H.T. Morgan, Head of the Western European Department, 9 May 1969. PRO, FCO 33/566.

⁵⁰ Rush in a private letter to F.L. Jennings, 22 May 1970. NARA, RG 59, Lot Files, Entry 5406, Box 4.

⁵¹ Wilson in conversation with Nixon, 27 January 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1823.

⁵² American record of the same conversation. NARA, Nixon, NSC, PresHAK 1023.

⁵³ Heath in Cabinet, 3 September 1970. PRO, CAB 128/47.

⁵⁴ Memorandum by Greenhill, quoted above note 5. See also a long despatch by ambassador Jackling to Douglas-Home, 25 June 1970. After having enumerated the priorities of British policy (security, prosperity,

key, at least with respect to East-West relations, was the US. When Heath travelled to Washington in December 1970 he became aware of the American reservations towards Ostpolitik. Heath himself did not rule out that the Germans perhaps were “going too far and too fast in their desire to normalize relations with the Soviet Union.” Nixon expressed the fear that the “real purpose” of the Soviet Union “remained the detachment of Germany from NATO”. For him “it was essential to tie Germany into Western Europe in both political and military terms.” Given the conflict between Soviet and Western interests in respect to the FRG, “the Ostpolitik was a dangerous affair”. The US government “would do nothing to encourage it.”⁵⁵

Simultaneously, the United States, although she could have done so, did nothing to put the brakes on Ostpolitik. As long as the FRG proved to be contained within the structures of NATO and the EC and Ostpolitik produced acceptable results, it was backed by the Western powers in principal, notwithstanding an emotional aversion and a fundamentally sceptical attitude. Ostpolitik was not regarded as a challenge because it jeopardized any Western interests, but because it might have this effect in a medium-range perspective. Assessing the conduct of Ostpolitik observers had to acknowledge that the FRG pursued its Ostpolitik in strict loyalty to the Western allies. From the very beginning diplomats and officials in the FCO as well as in the State Department tended to have a sober and realistic view. Deputy Under-Secretary Thomas Brimelow had no doubts about it: “Given Herr Brandt’s insistence that his Ostpolitik is only a part of his general European policy, we ourselves doubt whether the Soviet government entertain any hopes of detaching the Federal Government from the West in the short or medium term.”⁵⁶ Even Kissinger had to admit in December 1970 that nothing dangerous had happened so far.⁵⁷

However, Kissinger added: “What the long-term change might be was another matter.”⁵⁸ The spectre of Rapallo was still operating. This perception of Ostpolitik stemmed from the historical experience with Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. In order to forestall any unwelcome developments the Western powers reminded the government in Bonn of three essentials. Firstly, information and consultation on any moves in Ostpolitik was regarded as absolutely indispensable. Secondly, the preservation of Western unity must have

strength of NATO, entry into the European Communities), he concluded: “It is against this background that Her Majesty’s Government have hitherto thought it wise to support the Federal Government’s Ostpolitik, not only because we too favour the relaxation of tension, which is its main aim, but also because of our interest in developing as close bilateral relations as possible with the Federal Republic for a number of reasons, of which our negotiations for membership of the European Communities are prominent.” PRO, FCO 28/916.

⁵⁵ Conversation between Nixon and Heath, 17 December 1970. PRO, FCO 7/1842. For Heath’s attitude see also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 938. On different views with respect to pace and tactics of détente Niedhart, Gottfried, Zustimmung und Irritationen: Die Westmächte und die deutsche Ostpolitik 1969/70, in Lehmkuhl, Ursula/Wurm, Clemens A./Zimmermann, Hubert (eds.), *Deutschland, Großbritannien, Amerika. Politik, Gesellschaft und Internationale Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert. Festschrift für Gustav Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 2003, p. 243f.

⁵⁶ Brimelow, 14 August 1970. Quoted above note 41, p. 256.

⁵⁷ In conversation with the British, 17 December 1970. NARA, RG 59/2657.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

priority. The national approaches to détente had to be coordinated. Thirdly, there must be no infringement whatsoever on the rights of the Western powers in Germany as a whole and in Berlin.

The Federal Government in Bonn was ready to fulfil these expectations. Furthermore, all three points corresponded with the German view. Being dependent on the West and in particular on the United States in matters of security and being a not fully sovereign state, the FRG could pursue its foreign policy only in accordance with the rules which were set up after World War II. Having said this, however, it is important to add that the government in Bonn used each opportunity to act independently within these limits. The Western powers were informed, but not consulted at every stage. As to the Four Power rights, of course they were respected. At the same time the FRG worked for peaceful change and for the modification of the post-war regime.⁵⁹

As has happened always since the foundation of the FRG, the decisive support for Bonn came from Washington. Kissinger realized that he was not the only one who tried a linkage strategy. The success of Ostpolitik which could not be achieved without an agreement on Berlin proved to be crucial for progress in East-West relations, including the American-Soviet détente. In the typical Kissinger style of taking action an additional back channel network was established. It comprised Kissinger and ambassador Rush on the American side, ambassadors Dobrynin and Falin on the Soviet side, and Bahr in the Chancellery in Bonn.⁶⁰ There was not only a triangular policy US-USSR-China but also a triangle US-USSR-FRG. Bahr was involved in the talks paving the way for the Berlin Agreement of 1971, although the FRG was not entitled to participate in any of these negotiations. Behind the backs of Britain and France the FRG was allowed to play a major role. Nobody claimed a 'special relationship' between the US and the FRG. But the FRG, to use Brandt's wording, had become "more equal".⁶¹

⁵⁹ On Ostpolitik and its international context see Niedhart, Gottfried/Bange, Oliver, Die „Relikte der Nachkriegszeit“ beseitigen. Ostpolitik in der zweiten außenpolitischen Formationsphase der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Übergang von den Sechziger- zu den Siebzigerjahren, in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 44 (2004), p. 415-448.

⁶⁰ Geyer, David C., The Missing Link: Henry Kissinger and the Back-Channel Negotiations on Berlin, in Geyer, David C./Schaefer, Bernd (eds.), *American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969-1972*, Washington 2004 (Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Suppl. 1), p. 80-97. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 807ff.; Bahr, Egon, *Zu meiner Zeit*, München 1996, p. 354ff.

⁶¹ Brandt, Willy, *Erinnerungen*, Frankfurt/Main 1989, p. 189.