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978-1-107-09458-1 - Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World

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Excerpt

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Introduction

On January 20, 1969, Richard Nixon's first day as president, U.S.–European relations were at the lowest point they had been at any time since the end of World War II:

- NATO was set to expire in 1969. The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, its founding document, permitted members to leave after twenty years. While it is safe to say that Atlantic leaders would not have let NATO become obsolete, the situation did not look especially promising. One founding member, France, left NATO's integrated command structure in 1966 and expelled the alliance from French soil. This dramatic move left others to consider whether NATO in an era of détente served the same purpose it did two decades earlier. There were serious doubts, especially after NATO proved unable to agree on a response to the August 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia;
- A series of currency crises had plagued transatlantic relations since 1958, when the total number of dollars in circulation eclipsed the amount of gold backing them. This was a major threat to the stability of the Bretton Woods system, which only got worse as the gap grew between dollars in circulation and gold reserves. All that prevented global financial collapse (and a U.S. default) was a continued series of clever American inducements to prevent Europeans from exchanging dollars for gold, a right they had for accumulating U.S. dollars. A day of reckoning neared;
- European integration was stalled. Charles de Gaulle refused British admission to the European Community (EC) twice, blocked procedure

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in the European Council of Ministers, and withdrew French forces from NATO's integrated command structure, thus evicting the Western alliance from French soil. The EC teetered on evolving into an anti-NATO, anti-American inward-looking alliance.

Richard Nixon inherited this situation primarily because Lyndon Johnson had spent the bulk of his time and political capital between the Vietnam War and his Great Society initiatives. Nixon made it an early priority of his presidency to redress the situation. Transatlantic relations were one of the few issues other than Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union handled personally by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Both men had long experience with Europe, going back to the Marshall Plan, the founding of NATO, and American support of the European integration movement. They believed in maintaining strong ties with traditional American allies, especially at the beginning of Nixon's presidency, when it was important to show that he would not be obsessed with the Vietnam War. Nixon was eager to demonstrate that the United States could be a force for peace and constructive activity again and that not all of the nation's creativity and imagination had been sapped by the trauma of Vietnam (an average of 200 American soldiers died per week in Vietnam during the second half of 1968). Thirty days into his presidency, Nixon made a tour of West European capitals on this basis and to plan an American foreign policy that – in the future – would not be based around a war in Southeast Asia.

Nixon first publicly provided his vision of a post-Vietnam world in his influential *Foreign Affairs* article "Asia after Vietnam," published in October 1967, more than a year before he reached the White House and even before he was an official candidate for the nation's highest office. Although many observers immediately picked up on a more flexible tone in the article toward the People's Republic of China, he also hinted at the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship. "During the final third of the twentieth century, Asia, not Europe or Latin America, will pose the greatest danger of a confrontation which could escalate into World War III." Nixon signaled that the transatlantic relationship, which had been based on two decades of American assistance and European reconstruction and integration would enter a new phase. The phase was based on an assumption that the United States would soon enjoy a more peaceful era with the Soviet Union, a key feature of the coming détente era.

President Nixon articulated this view further in Guam on July 25, 1969. In an informal session with reporters dealing with questions mainly

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about Vietnam and China, Nixon made some important revelations about the way he saw the world and how he intended to govern. These remarks, which became known as the Nixon Doctrine, were not limited to simply the way he saw American Pacific interests.¹ They represented the first major revision to the Truman Doctrine in nearly a quarter century: the United States was no longer willing to mobilize forces anywhere to defend against any aggression. The simplicity in his language suggests that the Nixon Doctrine was indeed meant to have application beyond Vietnam. When Nixon said “we, of course, will keep the treaty commitments that we have,” and “we should assist, but we should not dictate,” he foreshadowed a new phase in transatlantic relations in which Europeans would be expected to take on more responsibility in the areas of their own defense, monetary and economic affairs, and political development. Future American commitments would be appropriated on a more realistic scale commensurate with a new era of reduced Cold War tensions.

Some have said that Nixon had no grand strategy and that the Nixon Doctrine was never intended to be applied universally. These same critics say that his remarks at Guam were intended mainly as a vehicle to articulate his policy of Vietnamization. These are obvious conclusions if one limits one’s view of Nixon foreign policy to Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. However, to test whether the Nixon Doctrine had application beyond Asia, we can see whether or not the concepts of the Nixon Doctrine were applied to other areas of foreign policy, such as transatlantic relations.

This work is not about every issue that transpired in U.S.–European relations during Nixon’s five-and-a-half year presidency. It is, however, about how, under Nixon’s watch, the United States’ most important alliance evolved during a turbulent period of the Cold War and how the vision of foreign policy provided by Nixon in his *Foreign Affairs* article and Guam remarks played out in terms of policy. In each of the five key facets of transatlantic relations explored in this study – the future of NATO, the collapse of Bretton Woods, the Year of Europe, American

¹ Some scholars, such as Jeffrey Kimball, have argued the opposite. See Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 2006): 59–74. Kimball’s article was written before the National Archives released Nixon tapes and other records that document how Nixon believed the Nixon Doctrine had application not only to U.S. policy toward Europe, but to other parts of the non-Vietnam world as well. In recent years, a new wave of scholarship is willing to concede more to the idea of a Nixon-Kissinger grand strategy, which “achieved much.” For example, see Dan Caldwell, “The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy.” *Diplomatic History* 33:4 (September 2009): 633–652.

support for European integration, and the Anglo-American “special relationship” – Nixon demonstrated a vision, one that was carried out by Henry Kissinger. To show the importance that Nixon ascribed to these issues, they were among the handful of issues – in addition to Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union – that he and Kissinger handled personally.

In each of these areas of transatlantic relations, Nixon made his mark with a bold new initiative, guided by the principles of the Nixon Doctrine. He made this clear to European leaders a month into his presidency, long before his Guam remarks, and also during his April 1969 address on the twentieth anniversary of NATO:

- After a period of neglect during the 1960s, Nixon came to power and prioritized the strengthening of the NATO alliance. Although formally reintegrating France was not possible, he established bilateral defense ties with France and repaired political relations with Charles de Gaulle. Nixon shifted NATO’s purpose from collective defense to collective security with the establishment of the détente era Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society, which remains an important pillar in NATO’s structure to this day;
- Nixon was the first president with the boldness to say (and act on it) that the United States should no longer shoulder the financial burden of Europe’s monetary system, especially since many European countries had rebuilt to the point of being commercial competitors of the United States by the time of his presidency. As a result of Nixon’s direct involvement, the Bretton Woods system and the gold standard were ended, which resulted in the birth of the modern age of globalization;
- In his proposed Year of Europe, Nixon called for a fresh commitment to work toward a strong transatlantic relationship rooted in an American relationship with both NATO and the EC. His guide was the 1941 Atlantic Charter, a statement of democratic principles drafted by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt that served as a blueprint for the postwar world. Nixon wanted the EC to become more outward looking at a time of inward development and expansion. He believed that Europe should play a bigger role in the world, but it should not develop in an anti-American direction;
- Addressing the Anglo-American “special relationship,” Nixon believed that Britain was stronger in Europe than out, a key revision of America’s closest alliance. He also believed the EC was stronger with Britain as a member due to Britain’s longer engagement with the world

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than other Europeans. Nixon laid out the vision and then, following his resignation, Henry Kissinger continued his policy under President Ford, ensuring that Britain remained tethered to both the EC and the United States, but especially Europe.

Despite Nixon's better known breakthroughs with adversaries, transatlantic relations were transformed in each of these categories. Although Nixon was not always eloquent and sometimes was guilty of being distracted, rarely does a new presidential administration come to power with such convictions about such a large part of the world. This transformation in transatlantic relations took place according to the principles of the Nixon Doctrine, and Richard Nixon immediately set a new tone in terms of foreign policy during the early days of his presidency.

The structure of negotiations that Nixon and Kissinger used, established as effective with adversaries, did not always work well with allies. Too many times, Nixon and Kissinger saw more exciting opportunities with China or the Soviet Union, and Europe was pushed aside. Because they – and their immediate deputies – handled European issues personally, this resulted in lost opportunities in cases where the State Department and other parts of the civil service could have been better utilized. Many were quick to mark détente as a failed experiment, but, at least in terms of transatlantic relations, the failure was far more often in implementation or execution than in a fault in the original idea. Still, by the mid-1970s, the efforts depicted here resulted in a new era of diplomacy with Europe, one that would not have been possible without the thinking of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

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I

A new dimension of NATO

“For 20 years, our nations have provided for the military defense of Western Europe. For 20 years we have held political consultations. Now the alliance of the West needs a third dimension.”¹ Speaking on NATO’s twentieth anniversary, on April 10, 1969, President Nixon challenged Western leaders to give fresh meaning to the defense alliance. Analysts on both sides of the Atlantic wondered whether NATO still had a purpose. One founding member, France, had already left the military alliance’s integrated command structure. Statements by leaders of Norway and Sweden added doubt in the minds of others as to the whether a defense alliance was still needed in the détente era.

Nixon shifted NATO’s role from collective defense to collective security. “It needs not only a strong military dimension to provide for the common defense, and not only a more profound political dimension to shape a strategy of peace, but it also needs a social dimension to deal with our concern for the quality of life in this last third of the 20th century.”² To the foreign policy establishment, it was a radical idea that international relations could benefit from a lesson in social or environmental policy. Less than three months in office, Nixon’s own centerpiece domestic policies were still largely unveiled, whether concerning the environment (Environmental Protection Agency, Earth

¹ The full text of Nixon’s address can be found at Richard Nixon, “Address at the Commemorative Session of the North Atlantic Council,” April 10, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1992>.

² RMN, White House Special Files, President’s Personal File, Box 47, “RN’s COPY: COMMEMORATIVE SESSION OF THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL, 4/10/69.”

Day, Endangered Species Act, Mammal Marine Protection Act), human health and disease (the War on Cancer, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act), or societal integration (desegregation of southern schools, extending the right to vote to eighteen- to twenty-year-olds with the signing of the Twenty-sixth Amendment, the Equal Protection Amendment, Title IX and preventing gender bias, returning sacred homelands to Native Americans).

Some have rightly questioned whether some of these achievements occurred simply because of a Democratic majority in Congress. On the other hand, for Nixon – who knew more about foreign policy than any of his advisors – to suggest they had application in foreign affairs confirms that he not only supported their passage but also sincerely believed they were the right things to do. In Nixon’s view, the philosophy behind his expansionary domestic policy was something that all advanced nations could agree on, even those separated by an Iron Curtain. There was an obvious overlap between domestic and foreign policy making. Free or unfree, all societies faced similar challenges, and we could learn from each other.

But, in April 1969, these were radical ideas to many NATO leaders. Nixon spoke these words in the same room at the State Department that his mentor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, used to address NATO leaders on its tenth anniversary. It was the same room in which the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in 1949 to create the alliance. This was no coincidence. Twenty years later, an era of reduced Cold War tensions was the reason some questioned the need for a defense alliance. Nixon did not just intend to save NATO from this talk; he planned to transform it beyond a defense alliance. That, he felt, was the best way to preserve NATO for another twenty years.

“We in the United States have much to learn from the experiences of our Atlantic allies in their handling of internal matters: for example, the care of infant children in West Germany, the ‘new towns’ policy of Great Britain, the development of depressed areas programs in Italy, the great skill of the Dutch in dealing with high density areas, the effectiveness of urban planning by local governments in Norway, the experience of the French in metropolitan planning.” Nixon’s words marked an intentional departure from his predecessors. American presidents have never been very willing to admit that the United States has much to learn from others. Early in his presidency, this new tone was intended to signal a new era in Washington, an era in which long-standing relationships with allies would be strengthened and new relationships with adversaries would be established.

“On my recent trip to Europe, I met with world leaders and private citizens alike. I was struck by the fact that our discussions were not limited to military or political matters. More often than not our talks turned to those matters deeply relevant to our societies – the legitimate unrest of young people, the frustration of the gap between generations, the need for a new sense of idealism and purpose in coping with an automating world.” Nixon’s first overseas trip to Europe in late February, only a month after his inauguration, was for the purpose of listening. Conversations with European leaders like Charles de Gaulle, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, Willy Brandt, Harold Wilson, Mariano Rumor, and Manlio Brosio filled Nixon’s schedule and covered topics like Vietnam, China, détente with the Soviet Union, European integration, NATO, and bilateral relations with each leader’s nation. Upon Nixon’s return from Europe, a period of analysis of these conversations helped him to set policy priorities for his presidency. He came away from his European trip convinced that U.S.–European relations lacked a forum to discuss problems other than military or political problems. In the United States, Nixon started the Council on Environmental Quality under Russell Train and the Council on Urban Affairs under Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He thought U.S.–European relations needed something similar, but that the discussion should not be limited to problems of the environment or urban areas.³

“I strongly urge that we create a committee on the challenges of modern society, responsible to the deputy ministers, to explore the ways in which the experience and resources of the Western nations could most effectively be marshaled toward improving the quality of life of our people. That new goal is provided for in Article II of our treaty, but it has never been the center of our concerns.” With arms talks beginning soon with the Soviets, Nixon believed NATO needed to be transformed from an alliance structured during the dangerous years of the early Cold War to an alliance that reflected a détente era of reduced superpower tensions. The likelihood of nuclear war with the Soviet Union was lower than at any point in the postwar period. The nature of the challenges and disagreements within the NATO alliance, as well as between the NATO and Warsaw Pact alliances,

³ Stephen Hess, Moynihan’s deputy at the Council on Urban Affairs, proposed for NATO a “Trans-Atlantic Council on Environmental Quality and Urban Affairs.” Moynihan approved and sent the recommendation to the president. The name changed several times in the course of speechwriter Ray Price’s preparation of Nixon’s April 1969 address to NATO, but the concept did not. For more information, see Stephen Hess, *The Professor and the President: Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Nixon White House* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

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had evolved. NATO could not be reformed without U.S. leadership, and key allies like France could not be brought back into the Western alliance without being backed by a new era of transatlantic relations and a new tone from Washington.

When Richard Nixon arrived at the White House in January 1969, he found an Atlantic alliance that had been splintered by the withdrawal of France and humiliated after disagreements among Western leaders prevented NATO from coordinating a response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. There were serious doubts whether the defense alliance would be renewed beyond its original twenty-year mandate, set to expire in April 1969. Nixon believed that, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union desired an improvement in relations with the West in general and the United States in particular. In a top secret report drawn up during the opening hours of the Nixon administration, the Pentagon concluded that the most that should be expected out of the Soviets in the future would be a “nonnuclear attack with limited mobilization.”⁴ The report also suggested that arms limitations discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union should be revived following the aborted effort by Lyndon Johnson at the Glassboro Summit a year earlier. NATO’s role in arms talks should be as an “ancillary and reinforcing forum for consultation, recognizing its limitation.” The Nixon administration intended to pursue high-level talks on a bilateral basis but promised European allies that adequate consultation would take place.

Nixon concluded during his 1968 presidential campaign that U.S.–European relations had outgrown the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949.⁵ The founding document of NATO permitted members to voluntarily leave after twenty years of membership. France began its departure in 1966, and other members also considered the future of the alliance and their roles in it. The Harmel Report of 1967, a study on “The Future Tasks of the Alliance” commissioned following the French decision to withdraw, proposed several modifications to NATO. These included taking on a greater political role and reshaping NATO beyond simply a defense alliance. However, lack of coordination among Western leaders following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia demonstrated that agreement was lacking on NATO’s

⁴ DNSA, Memorandum from Department of Defense to President Nixon, “Response to National Security Study Memorandum #9, Review of the International Situation as of January 20, 1969, Volume III, Western Europe.”

⁵ Hoover Institution Archives, Richard M. Nixon Notes, Box 1, Page 3.

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future or on the recommendations made in the study directed by former Belgian Prime Minister Pierre Harmel. West Germany's *Ostpolitik* ambitions were halted.⁶ French President Charles de Gaulle expressed doubt about the role of the United States and NATO leadership.⁷ Henry Kissinger, not yet in government, again called for NATO reform. "In its first decade and a half, NATO was a dynamic and creative institution. Today, however, NATO is in disarray as well. Action by the United States – above all, frequent unilateral changes of policy – are partially responsible."⁸

At the core of this discussion was a debate within the West over the reliability of the doctrine of "flexible response," which was NATO's guiding strategy up to the Nixon presidency. NATO had successfully prevented a nuclear conflict in Europe, in part, according to the CIA, because ideology in the Soviet Union was "dead."⁹ However, as the invasion of Czechoslovakia illustrated, a threat of a different kind remained. Faced with increasingly asymmetric threats, NATO formally adopted "flexible response" on May 9, 1967:

The Alliance should possess adequate conventional forces, land, sea, and air, many of which are supported by tactical nuclear weapons. They should be designed to deter and successfully counter to the greatest extent possible a limited non-nuclear attack and to deter any larger non-nuclear attack by confronting the aggressor with the prospect of non-nuclear hostilities on a scale that could involve a grave risk of escalation to nuclear war.¹⁰

The adoption of flexible response was not an entirely new concept.¹¹ A decade earlier, Harvard professor Henry Kissinger argued for a new strategic doctrine that would permit NATO to exact extensive but controllable damage on the Warsaw Pact in his 1957 book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.¹² A new strategy was needed, he said,

⁶ James Chance, "The Concert of Europe," *Foreign Affairs* 52 (October 1973): 96–108.

⁷ Harlan Cleveland, *NATO: The Transatlantic Bargain* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 101.

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays by Henry A. Kissinger* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 67.

⁹ CIA. DI. "Basic Factors and Main Tendencies in Current Soviet Policy." *NIE* 11–69. February 27, 1969.

¹⁰ NATO, MC, IMSWM-270-68, September 26, 1968, "Memorandum for the Members of the Military Committee."

¹¹ Stanley Sloan, *NATO's Future: Toward a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1985), 44.

¹² Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 153.