Can great power rivals establish a stable détente relationship? Analysts have grappled with this question for years. In general, there is little agreement on the answer: one need only examine contemporary debates over how the United States should structure its relationships with countries such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia.¹

Some scholars, such as Charles Kupchan, argue that rivals can achieve détente by adopting accommodating policies, even if they have very different political systems. “Accordingly,” he argues, “the United States should base its

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relations with other states primarily on the nature of their foreign policy behavior, not the nature of their domestic institutions.”

Most analysts, however, doubt that strategic rivals can develop and maintain a stable détente relationship. For example, Robert Jervis claims that there were limits beyond which U.S.-Soviet relations could not improve during the Cold War. “The root of the conflict,” he writes, “at best was a clash of social systems. Mutual security in these circumstances was a goal that could not be attained.” Arguing in a different vein, William Wohlforth writes that competition for status can undermine a budding détente between rivals. Détentes, Sean Lynn-Jones argues, might even prove counterproductive. “The lessons drawn from cooperative experiences,” he writes, “may be fundamentally inapplicable to events in which the conflictual aspects of a relationship are paramount.”

In this debate, the experience of the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s looms especially large. By almost all accounts, the détente policy the United States pursued toward the Soviet Union under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, which they crafted in conjunction with their influential national security adviser and secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, was wholly unsuccessful. “Détente by 1980,” John Lewis Gaddis wrote in 1983, “was almost universally regarded as having failed.”

Many analysts at the time argued that the Soviet Union, because of its ideological struggle with the United States, could not abandon its aggressive foreign policy. It was “obvious and beyond dispute,” Eugene Rostow wrote in 1978, that the Soviet Union was “engaged in a policy of imperial expansion all over the world, despite the supposedly benign influence of SALT I [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks] and its various commitments of cooperation to President Nixon in the name of ‘détente.’” The United States, former

Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger agreed, had been willing “to reach a long-term accommodation during the 1970s,” but abandoned that effort “as a consequence of the Soviets’ deep-seated impulses never to flag in the quest for marginal advantages.”

In short, as Gaddis pointed out, to many observers, “the decision to seek détente in the early 1970s was an unwise exercise in wishful thinking, the effect of which was only to shift the signals, in the eyes of Moscow’s watchful and ambitious ideologues, from red to yellow to green.”

The widespread view in the United States that the Soviet Union had pursued an aggressive policy during the 1970s generated a severe backlash against détente. Indeed, President Ronald Reagan’s effective use of Americans’ disillusionment with the policy played an important role in both his surprisingly strong primary challenge to Ford in 1976 and his defeat of President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 general election.

“Détente,” Reagan asked in 1978, “isn’t that what a farmer has with his turkey—until Thanksgiving Day?” Reagan’s foreign policy platform, his adviser, Richard Allen, later wrote, was “under cover of assailing Carter, a de facto indictment of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger policy of détente with the Soviet Union.”

Kissinger, one author thus concludes, had become conservatives’ “bête noire.”

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10. Other politicians, such as Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, also benefited from their criticism of détente.


mately, Jeremi Suri writes, he had come to symbolize “an old and discredited Cold War Realpolitik.”14

Many analysts still claim that détente failed because the Soviet Union refused to pursue an unideological, restrained foreign policy. Key Kremlin leaders, Jonathan Haslam writes, “explicitly identified themselves with Lenin and his priorities.”15 “However reactionary in preferences,” Haslam maintains, “Soviet leaders were driven by the nature of the system to pursue the expansion of the revolution,” and thus “had no intention of ending the Cold War through compromise.”16 “So long as the Stalin-bred generation . . . remained in charge,” Martin Malia claims, “the belief in the ‘international class struggle’ was a real guide to policy. And its concrete aim was to expell [sic] the United States from Eurasia.”17 Even scholars who hold a more nuanced perspective believe that détente “contained the seeds of its own eventual disintegration” because Marxist-Leninist ideology led Moscow to “exploit” certain “opportunities to expand Soviet power and influence in the Third World.”18

In this article, I argue that the conventional wisdom about the reasons for détente’s failure is deeply flawed. I do so with an examination of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1969 to 1977. In the Middle East, at least, the Soviet Union was eager to cooperate with the United States to reach a stable agreement, and its ideas for how the dispute should be settled essentially mirrored those of the United States. The United States, however, though tempted at points to respond favorably to the Kremlin’s initiatives, instead tried to expel the Soviet Union from the region. This finding suggests

that, for détentes to be successful, both sides must be prepared to structure their relationship on an essentially realpolitik basis by putting aside their ideological differences and cooperating in areas where their power political interests overlap. The root of the problem in the Middle East was the United States’ refusal to act on that basis.

The article has four sections. First, I explain why U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli dispute in the 1970s is a useful case for investigating why détentes fail. In the next two sections, I examine, respectively, Soviet and U.S. policy in the Middle East. I show that it was Washington, not Moscow, that refused to cooperate to achieve Arab-Israeli peace, a decision that contributed to the collapse of détente, and that the main obstacle was the United States’ failure to pursue a realpolitik policy. I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings for future research.

Incentives for U.S.-Soviet Cooperation on the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Any U.S.-Soviet effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute would have faced significant barriers. The bipolar structure of the international system, however, favored great power cooperation. With less reason to worry about relative power, Kenneth Waltz writes, the two leading states under bipolarity can more easily “lead in, or lend themselves to, collective efforts.” They will, under such circumstances, have incentives to manage the system jointly, especially in “areas whose instability may lead to their involvement and, through involvement, to war.”19 Indeed, the United States and the Soviet Union had cooperated in 1963 to reach a stable settlement in Europe.20 Likewise, they had collaborated in 1968 to try to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.21 They were, Waltz wrote in 1979, behaving like “sensible duopolists.”22

In the Middle East, too, both the United States and the Soviet Union had reason to support an Arab-Israeli agreement. A political solution that would allow the Arabs to regain the territories they had lost in the June 1967 war in exchange for peace with Israel was, from the Soviet standpoint, a very attractive outcome. To be sure, Moscow enjoyed expanded influence in the region

following the war, because the Arabs’ defeat had increased their dependence on the Kremlin. Yet, the postwar situation posed troubling dilemmas for the Soviets. The Arabs’ principal political objective was to regain the territories they had lost in 1967. If the Kremlin could not assist them in achieving that goal, then the Arabs might begin to question Moscow’s usefulness as a great power patron. As one Egyptian official put it, “The Soviets seemed to have reached a point of diminishing returns. When a friend can’t help his friend either by making peace or by the use of force, then he gradually loses his credibility.”

The Kremlin leadership could try to maintain Soviet influence with the Arabs through the provision of arms. Giving Egypt and Syria weapons would, however, raise the likelihood of another major Arab-Israeli war. The Soviets, thus, had to decide whether to risk a “loss of control” or a “loss of influence.” Moreover, Moscow’s support for the Arabs created a major financial burden, which, given how precarious its overall economic situation had become by the 1970s, was bound to shape its attitude on the Arab-Israeli issue. As a top journalist at Izvestia, the official newspaper in the Soviet Union, made clear to a messenger for the U.S. government, the Kremlin “really wanted to get [the Middle East] done. Too much of a drain on them. Too many problems at home for a drain of a protracted period of time.”

The United States also had a deep interest in an Arab-Israeli settlement. The Nixon administration, to the extent possible, wanted to maintain a balanced policy in the Middle East. The United States, Nixon wrote at one point, “should have a totally even-handed policy. As a matter of fact, the interest of the United States will be served in this case by tilting the policy, if it is to be tilted at all, on the side of 100 million Arabs rather than on the side of two million Israelis.” During the June 1967 war, Nixon had stressed the need for the United States to demonstrate that its “attachment to peace is impartial,” be-

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cause otherwise the Soviet Union would be given “an unparalleled opportu-
nity to extend its influence in the Arab world to the detriment of vastly
important United States and free world interests.”  

The emergence of the Persian Gulf as a vital center of global energy markets
only reinforced this concern. Especially after the October 1973 war and the
imposition of the Arab oil embargo against the United States, U.S. policymakers
became increasingly sensitive to the linkage between the Middle East’s strate-
gic energy resources and the Arab-Israeli issue. As Kissinger remarked,
“The United States has an interest in the survival of Israel; but we, of
course, have an interest in the 130 million Arabs that sit athwart the world’s
oil supplies.”

Moreover, the White House believed that a settlement would be in Israel’s
interest as well. “In a historical perspective,” Kissinger said in September 1969,
“[there is] no way 3 million people can survive in the midst of 60 million hos-
tile people unless they can change that hostility.” Consequently, Nixon and
Kissinger believed that the Israelis, who they felt were taking a very tough ne-
gotiating position with the Arabs and thereby potentially obstructing a settle-
ment, were pursuing a deeply misguided policy. Although Nixon admitted
that Israel’s position was “unassailable” for the time being, he considered it
“long range disastrous.” The Israelis, Kissinger believed, were pursuing “a
diplomacy which leads to suicide.”

Above all, U.S. and Soviet policymakers understood that the situation in the
Middle East was combustible. With the superpowers backing opposing sides
of an explosive political conflict, the Arab-Israeli issue could potentially lead
to a war in which both could become directly involved. After all, during the
1967 conflict Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin had warned the United States that
the Soviet Union was contemplating taking military action. The Middle East,
Nixon felt, “was an international powder keg, that, when it exploded, might

box 18, National Security File (NSF), National Security Council (NSC) Histories, Lyndon B. John-
son Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (henceforth LBJL).
29. Memcon, “Subject: Meeting with Jewish Leaders (Philip Klutznik Group),” June 15, 1975,
p. 170.
31. Ibid.
32. Quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, “The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-
doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00073.
33. Message from Kosygin to President Lyndon Johnson, June 10, 1967, 8:48 a.m., FRUS, 1964–
lead not only to another war between Israel and its neighbors, but also to a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{34}

This situation was very alarming to the Soviets. The Kremlin leaders, one historian observes, feared that if another war broke out, there would be considerable pressure not “to stand on the sidelines,” as they had done in 1967. If those pressures could not be resisted, the “nightmare scenario” of a confrontation with the United States might become unavoidable.\textsuperscript{35} That Israel had by this time acquired nuclear weapons only heightened the level of risk.\textsuperscript{36} The situation, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev therefore emphasized, was “extremely dangerous,” involved a strong element of “explosiveness,” and could lead to “unpredictable consequences.” A political solution, he believed, was needed to “remove a source of dangerous tension.”\textsuperscript{37}

Nixon administration officials shared Brezhnev’s concerns. Nixon, one historian writes, “seemed obsessed” with the possibility that the Arab-Israeli dispute could drag the superpowers into a war.\textsuperscript{38} The possibility that the Soviets might intervene in the Middle East, Kissinger said, was a “real nightmare.” “In that event,” he observed, “we might have to intervene in Israel’s defense.”\textsuperscript{39}

Both U.S. and Soviet officials, moreover, expressed anxiety about their lack of control. When Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat chose to expel a large number of Soviet military advisers from Egypt in July 1972, Moscow was not totally dismayed. Sadat’s decision, Anatoly Chernyaev, a senior analyst in the International Department, wrote in his diary, might be “for the best—we will not be liable when he tries to wage war against Israel and gets smacked once

\begin{footnotesize}
38. George Lenczowski, \textit{American Presidents and the Middle East} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 120.
\end{footnotesize}
again.”

Likewise, Nixon and Kissinger believed that the situation in the Middle East bore similarities to the situation in Europe on the eve of World War I. Nixon, William Quandt observes, worried “about the explosive potential of the Arab-Israeli conflict—he repeatedly used the pre–World War I Balkans analogy.”

Both superpowers, the president worried, had “constituents we may not be able to control, and this makes the situation very explosive.” There was, he estimated, “a 50 percent chance” that the United States would “be dragged in” if the Middle East erupted again, and there was no guarantee that the Soviets would “stay out, even if they should.”

If the Israelis felt sufficiently threatened—as they had in 1967—Nixon noted, they might feel compelled to strike preemptively, which would leave the United States “looking down the barrels with the Soviet Union again.” Kissinger also compared the situation to “the nightmare” of World War I. The United States and the Soviet Union, he worried, might be dragged into a war that could prove “very difficult to arrest.”

The United States and the Soviet Union, then, had much to gain from cooperating on the Arab-Israeli issue. If they could agree to respect each other’s core interests in the Middle East, a stable settlement seemed possible. Given the degree to which the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union overlapped in the region, their failure to work together is puzzling.

“The Radical Arab Program”? Soviet Policy in the Middle East

A major theme running through Kissinger’s writings about his involvement in Middle East diplomacy is the Soviet Union’s uncooperative stance on the Arab-Israeli issue. “Soviet diplomacy,” he claims in his memoirs, “gave all-out

41. Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary Entry, August 11, 1972, EBB No. 379, NSA, p. 31.
support to the maximum program of most Arab states.”

The Kremlin leadership, Kissinger writes, could not “step out of [its] philosophical skin and abandon the Leninist postulate that a country’s influence is ultimately determined by the correlation of forces.” The Soviets, in short, had simply refused to abandon “the radical Arab program.”

Many scholars share Kissinger’s assessment. It was perhaps the Kremlin’s “most important consideration,” Alvin Rubinstein wrote in 1977, to prevent Egypt from reaching a settlement with Israel, as a resolution of the conflict would “eliminate from the Middle East the festering problem that helped the Soviet Union intrude itself into the politics of the region.” More recently, one historian has claimed that Moscow’s core objective in the area was “to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist.” The Soviets, he argues, sought “the destruction of the state of Israel in the 1970s or 1980s and with it the expulsion of almost two million Jews from the region.”

One way to assess these arguments is to examine Soviet policy in the Middle East prior to and during the June 1967 crisis. Many scholars argue that, during that period, Moscow took a “very great interest in high-risk superpower competition” and pursued a policy that “was almost reckless.” Others assert that the Soviets sought war in the Middle East to undermine the U.S. position in the Arab world.

Any balanced assessment of the 1967 crisis must conclude that the Soviet Union failed to do its utmost to prevent a conflict. Indeed, Moscow’s transmission of a false intelligence report to its Arab clients, which alleged that Israel

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51. Herf, “‘At War with Israel,’” pp. 129–130.
was concentrating a sizable number of military forces in preparation for an attack against Syria, precipitated the chain of events that ultimately led to war. Even when the Israelis offered to prove to Soviet representatives that no such buildup had been ordered by escorting them to the border, Moscow refused. Discussing the issue with the Soviet ambassador, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban reported, “was like talking to someone from another planet.”\textsuperscript{54}

More important, Moscow did not press the Arabs hard enough to reduce tensions. Even after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to close the Straits of Tiran, making war inevitable, the Soviets did not demand that he reopen the waterway. As one Soviet official subsequently acknowledged, “We could have interfered and told Nasser in no uncertain terms to cancel his decision. But we didn’t care, because we were afraid of antagonising him.”\textsuperscript{55}

The evidence, however, shows that ideological considerations played almost no role in shaping the Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East. By the 1960s, Yevgeny Primakov, then a Middle East correspondent for Pravda (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), recalls, the Soviet leadership had jettisoned an ideological approach in favor of a “more pragmatic” line. Soviet officials even came up with new theoretical precepts to justify support for their Arab clients and to “stop local communist parties from attacking them.” “Ideology,” Primakov writes, “was once again shown to be applied as the ‘servant’ of politics.”\textsuperscript{56}

The Soviets, moreover, seemed intent on preventing Arab-Israeli tensions from boiling over.\textsuperscript{57} “Considering the experience of Vietnam and the Middle East,” Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko wrote in January 1967, “we should take timely measures to relax tension in the ganglions in the three continents where sharp conflicts are possible which, in turn, can combine to lead to an ‘acute situation.’” “In this connection,” Gromyko concluded, “we should, while supporting the Arab countries in their struggle against Israel’s expansionist policy, flexibly dampen the extremist trends in the policy of certain

\textsuperscript{54} Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, May 21, 1967, folder 3, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{55} Quoted in Alexei Vassiliev, \textit{Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism} (Reading, U.K.: Ithaca, 1993), p. 72. Some Soviet officials privately encouraged the Egyptians to seek a compromise on the issue of the Straits of Tiran. Such urgings, however, clearly had not been sufficiently forceful.


Arab states, [for example] Syria, orienting them toward the domestic consolidation.”58 Thus, on the eve of the crisis the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) noted that the Soviets were “wary of Syria’s provocative actions along the Israeli border, and apparently have attempted quietly to discourage moves which could lead to actual hostilities in the area.” Moscow’s “idyll” with Damascus, the agency observed, “is apparently over.”59 Viewed in this context, the argument that the Soviets set out to spark a war in 1967 seems far-fetched. As Galia Golan has written, “A war seemed to be a no-win proposition for the Soviet Union.”60

The Kremlin, in fact, appears to have had good reason to believe that Israel was contemplating an attack against Syria. To be sure, given how wide of the mark the Soviet intelligence estimate was, it is hard to accept the conclusion that Moscow believed the exact substance of the report it passed to Egypt and Syria. The situation along the border had, however, been extremely tense for months. In early May, Israeli leaders had also issued a string of public threats that significant military action was being contemplated. One newspaper report, although exaggerating the sort of strike that Israel was considering, stated that if the Syrians did not cease their support for cross-border raids into Israel, they would “inevitably provoke military action intended to topple the Damascus army regime.”61 Given this context, Soviet leaders might have misunderstood what the Israelis were planning and believed that they had to goad Egypt into taking steps to deter Israel.62 Indeed, U.S. officials later acknowledged that an attack “would have been quite in keeping with normal

62. For a useful discussion of this point, see Shimon Shamir’s comments in Parker, The Six-Day War, pp. 24–35. It is also possible that the Soviets believed that Israel was planning a major attack, because they might have received false intelligence from Israel as part of a disinformation campaign that ultimately backfired. For the fullest explication of this argument, see Guy Laron, The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 43–54.
Moreover, the Soviets had not wanted the situation to escalate. Even as they passed the report to the Arabs about an Israeli military buildup, they advised the Egyptians to “stay calm, and not to be drawn into fighting with Israel,” while telling the Syrians “to remain calm and not give Israel the opportunity for military operations.” Thus, in a speech made soon after the war, Brezhnev characterized Nasser’s decision to close the Straits of Tiran, about which the Kremlin had not been consulted in advance, as “ill-advised.” Moscow, he stressed, had warned the Arabs that their “belligerent statements . . . could become inflammatory material” that would give Israel and the United States a pretext “to kindle a fire in the Middle East.” “Nasir’s policy of stirring up the area as he did,” Communist Party official Mikhail Suslov complained, “was nearsighted and incomprehensible.”

In addition, the basic message given to the delegations headed by Egyptian Minister of War Shams Badran and Syrian President Nur al-Din al-Atassi when they visited Moscow in late May 1967 was to not further inflame the situation. As one scholar observes, “Throughout the consultations, Soviet officials continuously urged Cairo to exercise restraint and voiced concerns over the escalation of regional tensions.” One Iraqi representative was similarly informed, “was not supporting Egypt completely because the USSR would never support the destruction of Israel.”

Likewise, when the June war began, the Soviets exhibited marked caution. Brezhnev, the CIA learned, had emphasized during the conflict that the Soviet Union’s “principal aim” was to prevent the crisis from expanding into a world

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63. Memo by Harold Saunders of the NSC Staff, “The President in the Middle East Crisis,” May 12—June 19, 1967, December 19, 1968, folder 1, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.
68. Telegram from the White House Situation Room to Johnson, May 28, 1967, folder 10, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.
war. He had, indeed, been “taken” with the decision by Washington and Moscow to remain in close touch throughout the fighting and had stressed that each had “a high sense of responsibility” to avoid an escalation.69

Many analysts also claim that Moscow’s postwar policies, especially its decision to intervene in the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition in early 1970, show that the Soviets were supporting its clients’ extremism. “Soviet Middle East diplomacy,” Vladislav Zubok asserts, “became a hostage of Arab radicalism and demands.”70 In moving their forces to the area, another scholar writes, the Soviets had challenged the United States in a way not seen since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.71

Again, some elements of Soviet policy deserve criticism. It was, after all, the Soviets’ client, Egypt, that chose to reinitiate fighting along the Suez Canal in early 1969. And although the Kremlin tried to dissuade Nasser from taking this action, it refused to break with him.72 It was, therefore, somewhat hypocritical for Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to say that U.S. complaints about Moscow’s intervention were “like portraying burglars who systematically rob other people’s homes as the injured parties when the homeowner decides to install a lock to keep the burglars out.”73 Moreover, Moscow was complicit in Egypt’s violations of a cease-fire agreement that the United States helped broker in August 1970, which, in effect, eliminated any possibility that peace negotiations could resume at that time and ultimately made possible the Egyptian attack across the canal in October 1973.

Nevertheless, to say that the Soviet Union backed the radical Arab agenda would be simplistic. True, Moscow might have been planning to increase its military presence in the area even before the War of Attrition began to escalate in the summer of 1969, implying that its intervention in the Middle East cannot be explained entirely by that conflict’s intensification.74 The Soviet Union,

69. CIA Intelligence Information Cable, June 15, 1967.
however, only reluctantly agreed to accept the tremendous risks involved in deploying a significant number of its own military personnel—the first time it had ever carried out such an operation for the defense of a noncommunist country—for the purpose of saving Nasser’s regime from collapse. Egypt, after all, was one of the Soviet Union’s most important clients, and once the Israelis had completely destroyed that country’s air defense system in late 1969, their aim was to overthrow Nasser by bombing deep in the Egyptian interior. As a National Intelligence Estimate observed, the Soviets had likely accepted the Egyptian leader’s point that the “situation was humiliating both to him and to the Russians and that possibly his position, and therefore theirs, would be jeopardized unless means were found to deny the Israelis freedom of the skies over the heart of Egypt.”

Moscow, moreover, likely felt obligated to come to Egypt’s defense, because the United States was backing, or at the very least acquiescing to, Israel’s tough policy. “A man would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to sense how much the [Nixon] administration favors our military operations,” Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, wrote, “and there is a growing likelihood that the United States would be interested in an escalation of our military activity with the aim of undermining Nasser’s standing.” The White House, Kissinger admitted privately, “suffer[ed] no pain (but can’t say we don’t care) when the Israelis hit [Egypt] and Syria.” Nixon, similarly, wanted the Israelis to “kick Nasser [and Egypt] harder.”

In addition, the Soviet intervention should be understood in political terms. Egypt, the Kremlin believed, would not negotiate for a settlement from a completely prostrate position. “Frankly,” Dobrynin told U.S. officials in June 1970, “maybe the situation now is a little more equal in the military sense. Perhaps this provides a good opportunity to advance toward a settlement.”

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considered in this context, the August cease-fire violations were possibly also intended to improve Egypt’s bargaining position.

Likewise, the Soviet Union might have believed that it could use its intervention to pressure the United States to pursue a settlement. The danger posed by the intervention, Dobrynin recognized, “obviously troubled the White House,” because it “might force the Nixon administration to depart from its current very convenient position of not having to worry about Israel’s military situation while it can continue, at the same time, to exert diplomatic pressure on the Arab countries by using the military operations that Israel conducts with virtual impunity, especially the operations of its aircraft.” Using Soviet forces, then, “could perhaps turn out to be the most effective way to compel Nixon to look seriously at the Middle East situation.” Dobrynin was by no means proposing a “direct confrontation,” but rather “playing a new political card with a greater degree of pressure”—the kind of move that any great power might have made in these sorts of circumstances.81

Many analysts were especially critical of Soviet policy prior to and during the October 1973 Middle East war, which did severe—and perhaps even irreparable—damage to the U.S.-Soviet détente. Indeed, many Americans concluded that Soviet behavior during this period had revealed the Kremlin’s basic hostility toward Israel and the United States. Although Eugene Rostow had written just days before the war that détente reflected a “basically hopeful situation,” the conflict altered his view. The Kremlin leadership, he had come to believe, had been trying to “lull” the United States, while it “dangled before the eyes of [the] Arabs the irresistible temptation . . . to drive out the Israelis, as the Crusaders had been driven out before.”82

Rostow’s view was widely shared by U.S. analysts at the time, even though there was little evidence to support it.83 Sadat’s decision in July 1972 to ex-

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pel the Soviet military personnel stationed in Egypt was a result of his frustration with the Kremlin’s opposition to another Middle East war and its refusal to provide the Arabs with weapons for that purpose. Thus, it came as “a violent shock” to the Egyptian leader when the superpowers decided, in effect, to ignore the Arab-Israeli dispute at the Moscow summit in May and, subsequently, when the Soviets nevertheless continued to deny Cairo weapons for war. As Kissinger boasted, “You know that the Russians showed restraint [in the Middle East]; that is why Sadat kicked them out.”

Although Moscow decided to provide Egypt and Syria some military assistance in early 1973, here again, context is crucial. Despite having pledged repeatedly throughout 1972 to begin working on the Arab-Israeli issue after Nixon’s re-election, Nixon and Kissinger declined to launch a major peacemaking effort in 1973. During Kissinger’s meetings with Sadat’s national security adviser, Hafez Ismail, in February, Ismail stated that Cairo was prepared to be more flexible on the question of how an Egyptian settlement with Israel would be connected to a comprehensive agreement that would include Jordan, the Palestinians, and Syria.

In the wake of those talks, however, the United States made essentially no effort to advance Egypt’s proposals. Years later, Ismail expressed bafflement about what had happened, saying he “would love to know what [the Nixon administration was] really up to in 1973.” Thus, Sadat complained bitterly in April that “every door” he had opened had been “slammed in my face by Israel—with American blessings.”

Given the White House’s promises to the Kremlin, the Nixon adminis-
tion’s refusal to undertake a serious effort at Arab-Israeli peacemaking bordered on deceitful. It was therefore unsurprising that the Soviets chose to take a harder line in the spring of 1973 by providing the Arabs additional arms. As early as May 1971, even Nixon had recognized that the United States was essentially leaving the Soviet Union no alternatives. Without diplomatic movement, Nixon noted, the Soviets would “have had no other choice but to build up the armed strength of Israel’s neighbors to the point that another Mideast war will be inevitable.”89 As it was, the Kremlin ultimately gave the Arabs arms that enabled them to pursue only limited military objectives.90

Moreover, the argument, which many analysts made at the time, that the Soviets had urged the Arabs to go to war is unfounded. Upon learning on October 4, 1973—only two days prior to the start of the fighting—that the Arabs would attack Israel, the Kremlin became deeply concerned. Moscow, one former Soviet official writes, “had done everything it could to talk Sadat and [Syrian President Hafez al-Assad] out of launching a military attack.”91 Soviet policy, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov noted, had been “directed at the prevention of the unleashing of a military conflict.”92 The Soviet leadership, Golan notes, wanted to avoid war because it thought that the Arabs would lose, believed a war would damage détente, and feared it would risk a superpower confrontation. Thus, “[the Soviets] pushed for a cease-fire from the very first day of the war.”93

In addition, Soviet officials had repeatedly tried to warn the Nixon administration that without diplomatic progress, there would be a war. At the end of his visit to the United States in June, Brezhnev had even insisted that Nixon be awakened to discuss the matter.94 The Soviets, in fact, had assumed that the administration must have known that war was imminent and had therefore evacuated their dependents from the Middle East, a move that should have alerted U.S. and Israeli officials that an Arab attack was coming.95 Thus,

89. Memo from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 859.
95. Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, pp. 3, 5. As Kissinger later acknowl-
Nixon admitted in the midst of the war that the Soviets had “a pretty good beef” when it came to the Middle East, given that the United States had been “stringing them along.”

“I think it is a total mistake,” Kissinger agreed, “to say the Russians instigated this war.”

During the war, the Soviets once again pursued a moderate policy. Many observers at the time pointed to the Soviet Union’s decision to resupply the Arabs with arms as evidence of its intention to exploit détente and improve its strategic position in the Middle East at the expense of the United States. Moscow, however, was probably using arms to gain influence with its clients so that it could convince them to accept a cease-fire. As one U.S. official later pointed out, this was “precisely the way in which the United States used the supply of arms to the Israelis.”

Nor had Brezhnev’s letter to Nixon on October 24, 1973, which triggered a U.S. military alert, represented the sort of threat that U.S. decisionmakers have claimed it did. The missive, Soviet diplomat Vasily Kuznetsov recalled, had been crafted so as “not to frighten the Americans too much.” Brezhnev’s objective had been to get the United States to prevent Israel from continuing its violation of the October 22 cease-fire agreement—an agreement that both superpowers had sponsored but which Kissinger had nevertheless told the Israelis they could delay putting into effect—with the goal of destroying Sadat’s trapped Third Army. Thus, as late as October 23, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco expressed satisfaction with the policy Moscow had pursued during the crisis: “I knew that the Soviets attached importance to détente, but . . . the strength of that view even surprised me. It just comes out in every possible way.”

Soviet behavior during these crises, then, does not support the notion that Moscow was endorsing the “radical Arab program.” It should therefore not be surprising that the Kremlin took a reasonable position on the substance of a political settlement. Importantly, there can be no question, contrary to what some scholars have claimed, that Moscow recognized Israel’s right to exist. Even before the 1967 war, U.S. officials understood that the Soviets did “not
even give lip service to Arab aspirations to destroy Israel.”

According to Jordanian representatives, Moscow had made clear to Nasser in the aftermath of that conflict that it was willing to press for an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-war lines, “but no further. The Soviets have emphasized they accept Israel’s right to existence and are not in the least interested in Israel’s destruction.”

To the extent that it played any role at all in this area, Soviet ideology appeared to dictate such a policy. The Kremlin, Nasser was told, wanted the Egyptian president to “dissociate himself from the concept of obliterating Israel as a state.” Moscow simply “cannot support this kind of position, which contradicts Marxist-Leninist ideology.”

In the immediate aftermath of the 1967 war, the Soviets had been willing to support a proposal that was acceptable to the United States. Moscow, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, reported in July, considered Israel’s right “to exist as [a] national independent state free from war” as “legitimately . . . on a par with [the] troop withdrawal question.” The Arabs, Brezhnev emphasized, needed to “grasp the situation realistically.” They had no military option, he observed, “and a political solution will not be possible without the participation of [the] Arabs themselves.” “Why,” he asked, “should we stand up to Israel with war? After all, we do not say that we do not recognize Israel as a state.” In July 1967, consequently, Gromyko and Goldberg reached a compromise formula for a Security Council resolution whereby Israel would withdraw from all the territories it had captured in the war in exchange for a promise of non-belligerency.

The Soviets withdrew their support for the compromise when Nasser refused to accept it in the face of opposition from Syria and Algeria. Still, they had expressed deep frustration with their clients’ intransigence. The Arabs, Brezhnev complained, had “not show[n] appropriate realism” and had “overlooked an important political chance prepared by all of us.”


103. Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, “Subject: Conversations with Jordanian Officials,” July 19, 1967, folder 7, box 110, NSF, Country File, LBJL.


106. Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-Bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Budapest (excerpts), July 11, 1967, CWIHP, WCDA, pp. 4, 6, 10.


108. Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-Bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Moscow, November 9, 1967, CWIHP, WCDA, p. 3.
International Department, Boris Ponomarev, similarly “criticized the Arabs ferociously, calling them fanatical and irrational.”

One could rightly blame the Soviets for, in effect, granting the Arabs a veto over their policy at this critical juncture, but they had not abandoned the effort for a Middle East settlement. The Kremlin had been pulled in two directions, not wanting to break with its clients but hoping that it could nevertheless move matters in its preferred direction. Moscow, in a sense, was making an investment by continuing to support the Arabs, with the hope that, in the future, it would be better positioned to bring them along. Consequently, the Soviet Union joined the United States in voting for United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for an Arab-Israeli agreement on the basis of a “land for peace” formula, in November 1967.

One might argue that the Soviet rejection of a December 1969 U.S. peace proposal, known as the Rogers Plan, which called for a full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 border with Egypt, showed that Moscow was uninterested in a reasonable settlement. When Nasser refused the offer, ostensibly because it included no provisions relating to Syria, the Soviets followed suit. Given that Damascus was unwilling even to participate in the peace process at the time, such an objection was ludicrous. Nasser himself had referred to the Syrians as “uncontrollable juveniles.” Moreover, when Secretary of State William Rogers unveiled the plan, he implied that the United States would be willing to help resolve the Syrian aspect of the dispute if Damascus would “accept the Security Council Resolution of November 1967.”

The context in which the Rogers Plan was announced, however, makes the Kremlin’s rebuff somewhat understandable. Given their earlier support for a “land for peace” deal, the Soviets in all likelihood wanted the Arabs to accept it. Egypt’s precarious military position in the War of Attrition, however, probably impeded the ability of the Soviets to persuade Nasser to accept the proposal. More importantly, Nixon never had any intention of pressing the Israelis to accept the plan, a fact that Soviet and Egyptian negotiators recognized. “It was an open book,” one Egyptian official later recalled, “that the White House was not on board.” One can rightly criticize the Kremlin leaders for

110. Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, July 19, 1967.
111. Secretary of State William Rogers, “The War of Attrition: The Rogers Plan,” speech at the Galaxy Conference on Adult Education in Washington, D.C., December 9, 1969, Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase, Maryland, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-rogers-plan-december-1969. Specifically, Rogers stated that the United States was seeking a settlement that involved not only Egypt and Jordan, but also “other States” that accepted Resolution 242.
112. Remarks by Ambassador Ashraf Ghorbal, quoted in Parker, The October War, p. 35. See also
not breaking with Nasser over what was an eminently reasonable proposal, but they might have reasoned that straining their relationship with him over a plan they knew lacked Nixon’s backing made no sense, even if they agreed with it substantively.

Further evidence that Soviet policy was moving in a moderate direction is the Kremlin’s offer to remove its military forces from Egypt once an agreement was reached. During his September 1971 visit to Washington, Gromyko, under orders from Brezhnev, notified Nixon of the Soviet Union’s willingness to withdraw its military personnel from that country as part of a settlement that would closely resemble what the United States had outlined in the Rogers Plan. The offer, Nixon admitted, represented “a hell of a concession.”

By 1973, a comprehensive settlement had become Moscow’s top Middle East priority. The Soviet Union, Brezhnev said during the October War, would help guarantee a settlement and restore diplomatic relations with Israel. If that upset the Arabs, then they could “go to hell!” Moscow had offered them “a sensible way for so many years,” but they had nevertheless chosen war. “We are not going to fight for them,” Brezhnev declared. “And especially we will not start a world war because of them. So that’s that.” At the Geneva conference in December 1973, Gromyko told Eban that the Soviet Union “recognizes that Israel has an undoubted right to exist like any other independent state in the world. If anybody violates this principle, we will oppose that with great force since that would be against our basic policy.”

Thus, even though the Soviets were well positioned after the 1973 war to obstruct progress in the Middle East, they chose instead to encourage direct negotiations between the parties and endorse the disengagement agreements between Israel, Egypt, and Syria. As Kissinger admitted, Moscow had been “not unhelpful.” The Soviets, he observed, had “tried to be fairly reasonable

117. Letter from Kissinger to Eugene Rostow, August 19, 1974, folder “Miscellaneous Correspondence (Current),” box 52, Peter Rosenblatt Papers, LBJL.
all across the board . . . Even in the Middle East where our political strategy put them in an awful bind, they haven’t really tried to screw us.”

In sum, the Soviet Union appeared interested in cooperating with the United States to reach a stable Arab-Israeli agreement. But was the Nixon administration equally interested?

“Taken to the Cleaners”: Kissinger’s Middle East Strategy

The evidence suggests that, under not-too-different circumstances, the United States might have agreed to cooperate with the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Nixon, in particular, was attracted to the idea of working with the Soviets to pressure the Arabs and the Israelis to reach an agreement. From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon maintained that the superpowers would have to wield their combined influence to achieve peace in the Middle East. “Any settlement,” he said, “will have to be imposed—without calling it that. Overhanging this is US-USSR relations.”

“The only solution,” he believed, “would be one imposed by both the United States and the Soviet Union.”

The president appeared willing to launch a major peacemaking effort in 1973. The Arab-Israeli dispute, he wrote, was “getting ready to blow.” The Middle East, he stressed, was his “highest priority in the year of 1973.” The United States, he said, was “not Israel’s lawyer,” nor was it willing to “fight a world war for Israel.” That country, Nixon insisted, needed to “make its deal now . . . before the Arabs engulfed it.” The Israelis, he said, “were totally wrong in their strategy.” Right now,” he told Kissinger, “this is going to be settled . . . We’re going to move.”

The 1973 war reinforced Nixon’s inclination to work with the Soviets in the Middle East. The United States, the president told Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, had not wavered in its support of Israel during the conflict, but a

settlement was now needed because the United States could not do “a repeat performance.”124 “These US-Soviet confrontations,” he said, “are not pleasant.”125 “Only the U.S. and the Soviet Union,” he wrote Brezhnev, “have the power and influence to create the permanent conditions necessary to avoid another war.” The United States and the Soviet Union, therefore, had to “step in, determine the proper course of action to a just settlement, and then bring the necessary pressure on our respective friends for a settlement which will at last bring peace to this troubled area.”126

Ultimately, however, the Nixon administration chose not to pursue U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the Middle East. To be sure, Nixon agreed partially with Kissinger’s view that the region represented a key area of Cold War competition, which dampened, at times considerably, the president’s desire to cooperate with the Soviets.127 In addition, Nixon was initially reluctant to press Israel to withdraw to the 1967 lines, especially on the Syrian front, a position the Soviets could not accept.

Fundamentally, however, Nixon disagreed with Kissinger’s view that reducing Soviet influence in the Middle East should be the top U.S. priority in the region. Kissinger, he remarked, was “wrong on the Mideast.”128 The president’s views in this area were “very different from Henry’s. It’s the one thing he’s blind on.”129 In part, Nixon’s remarks reflected his belief that Kissinger’s Jewish background rendered him unable to pursue an unbiased Arab-Israeli policy.130 “I never found a Jew that was rational about Israel—never one,” he said.131

More importantly, however, Nixon, especially after the 1973 war, wanted to cooperate with Moscow to reach a settlement. The Soviets, the president recognized, seemed to “like the condominium business,” an approach he supported. The way to a deal, he said, was for “Brezhnev and Nixon [to] settle this damn thing.”132

124. Remarks by Meir’s aide, Mordechai Gazit, as quoted in Parker, The October War, p. 214.
127. See, for example, Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 563.
129. Ibid., pp. 853–854.
130. Nixon, as one scholar writes, was “a cultural anti-Semite.” See Dallek, Nixon and Kissinger, p. 170. The president’s personal biases likely contributed to his perception of Kissinger’s thinking about the Middle East.
As a matter of principle, Nixon was not committed to extending Israel’s territory beyond the 1967 lines. Kissinger wrote in March 1969 that the United States had “no interest in supporting Israeli expansionism” and “no stake in where the lines are drawn.” The U.S. position, he added, did “not differ greatly from British, Soviet, and French views.” The United States and the Soviet Union were “closer than we might have expected on the substance of a settlement.”

And although Nixon was willing to explore the possibility of obtaining the best deal for Israel, he did not abandon the Rogers Plan as official U.S. policy.

More significantly, by the end of his presidency, Nixon appeared to favor a full Israeli withdrawal on all fronts. As Kissinger noted, during a June 1974 meeting with President Assad, Nixon had “promised the 1967 borders.” The president, a Syrian official later claimed, made a “stark commitment” to that effect. “The United States of America,” Nixon reportedly said, “will never agree to allowing Israel to annex any of the occupied territories. Israel should withdraw from all the occupied territories.”

Some analysts argue, however, that domestic political considerations would have prevented Nixon from pursuing a comprehensive settlement, given the pressure it would have required the administration to put on Israel.

Accounts that claim that Nixon was basically immune to domestic pressure regarding Middle East policy because he had not depended on Jewish votes to win the presidency overlook the ways in which politics at home influenced his policy.

134. On this point, see, for example, Memcon, February 16, 1972, KT00429, DNSA, pp. 3–4.
decisions. It was the president’s view, after all, that the “Jewish lobby,” through its campaign contributions to members of Congress and its media presence, wielded “enormous influence.” Partly as a consequence of that belief, early in his presidency Nixon proved very reluctant to press Israel, fearing that its American supporters would, in response, mobilize opposition to his Vietnam policy. “Unless it is absolutely necessary,” he explained to Dobrynin, “I don’t want to anger the Jews, who hold important positions in the press, radio, and television, from which they can exert a powerful influence on other groups of American voters.” Supporters of Israel, he added, were “the main critics of our Vietnam policy and will undoubtedly step up this criticism if it seems to them I am ‘selling out’ Israel, although I have no intention of doing so.”

Consequently, domestic considerations shaped the White House’s approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking at the tactical level, with important implications for U.S. policy. Although Nixon had wanted to cooperate with the Soviet Union on the Middle East issue, he waited until after he had secured his re-election and concluded the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. The White House, he told Brezhnev during the May 1972 Moscow summit, had a problem with “timing, which is now difficult for us, if we are to affect the Israelis.” Only after the election could the United States and the Soviet Union “try to get to the nutcutting part of the problem.” “Candidly,” he said, “we can’t settle it before the election, but after that we can make progress, in a fair way.”

Likewise, Kissinger felt in the aftermath of the 1973 war that the administration needed time to build a domestic base of support. For Kissinger, this meant pursuing an incremental, rather than a comprehensive, approach. Israel, he recognized, would “scream” as soon as the United States applied pressure. The White House, therefore, would need to “have unity in this country to stand up for it. . . . We have to start working on the Jewish lobby.” Moreover, the shadow of the 1976 presidential election proved to be a critical factor in

139. Memo from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 856.

Ultimately, though, domestic politics did not determine Nixon’s Middle East policy. Nixon had, after all, carried forty-nine states in 1972 and did not have to worry about re-election. Furthermore, the 1973 war seemed to provide a golden opportunity for the president to seize the initiative in conjunction with Moscow.

In principle, Nixon was willing to pressure Israel. The Israelis, he had emphasized soon after taking office in 1969, needed to understand his “determination to go ahead and do what we can for a settlement. Israel cannot count on us to be with it no matter what it does.”\footnote{144. Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 93.} The United States, he and Kissinger agreed, would, after Nixon’s re-election, have “to put it to Israel” and “brutalize [the Israelis]” in 1973.\footnote{145. Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, December 9, 1971, \textit{FRUS}, 1969–1976, Vol. 23, p. 959; and Telecon, March 27, 1972, \textit{FRUS}, 1969–1976, Vol. 14, p. 230.} Immediately after winning re-election, Nixon remarked, “The time has now come that we’ve got to squeeze the old woman [Meir].”\footnote{146. Conversation between Nixon and Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Alexander Haig, January 23, 1973, \textit{FRUS}, 1969–1976, Vol. 25, p. 8.} In the midst of the 1973 war, he emphasized that the White House would have to “squeeze the Israelis when this is over and the Russians have got to know it. We’ve got to squeeze them goddamn hard.”\footnote{147. Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 496.} The administration, he said, had “to get the Israelis to act reasonable . . . I hate to use the word blackmail, but we’ve got to do some things to get them to behave.”\footnote{148. Quoted in Dennis Ross, \textit{Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 132.} “I will deliver the Israelis,” he pledged to Dobrynin.\footnote{149. Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, in the Oval Office, Wednesday, December 26, 1973, 10:35–11:29 a.m.,” December 26, 1973, \textit{FRUS}, 1969–1976, Vol. 25, p. 1197.} In one of his final acts in office, Nixon ordered a complete cutoff of U.S. assistance to Israel.\footnote{150. Memo from Nixon to Kissinger and Schlesinger, undated, folder 13, box 8, Alexander Haig Papers, LOC; and Kissinger, \textit{Years of Upheaval}, p. 1205.}
Watergate Affair.”151 Were it not for the scandal, Kissinger told the Israeli ambassador, “there would be great pressures building up now.”152 The Israelis, Kissinger recognized, no longer felt they had to take the president seriously. Their “assessment of Presidential paralysis,” as he put it, had allowed Meir to brush “off with disdain” Nixon’s attempts to pressure her.153 Given “the present climate in the United States,” Kissinger wrote in May 1974, “we could not force a public confrontation with the Israelis at this time.”154 With Nixon in no position to formulate U.S. policy, Kissinger assumed control, a development that would have profound implications because of their divergent beliefs about the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Kissinger was almost certainly more persuaded than Nixon by the argument that Israel should be allowed to retain some of the territories it had captured in 1967. One historian, who has studied Kissinger’s Middle East diplomacy in great detail, goes so far as to claim that “Kissinger deliberately designed the [incremental peace] process to enable Israel’s indefinite occupation of Arab land.”155 As late as August 1974, the secretary of state informed Israeli officials that he believed that a return to the 1967 lines, at least with respect to the Syrian and Jordanian fronts, was “impossible.”156

Like Nixon, however, Kissinger was not wedded to the notion of changing the 1967 lines in Israel’s favor if a stable agreement could be reached on the basis of those boundaries. His incremental approach, rather than indicating that Kissinger was attempting to help Israel retain territory, must be understood, in large measure, as a tactic for dealing with domestic constraints. Although, he told Assad at one point that he had been “in sympathy with [the Rogers Plan],” it was clear to him “that a comprehensive approach cannot work in America.” Given Watergate, he said, he was “doing the utmost that can be done.”157

More importantly, once Kissinger concluded that an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines was probably necessary to secure a final settlement, he seemed

willing to negotiate such an outcome. Any comprehensive U.S. peace plan, he wrote in a key memorandum to Ford in April 1975, would have to be based on the premise “that Israel should return essentially to 1967 borders, keeping open the possibility that changes of a minor nature might be negotiated.” In practice, that meant that the United States could support altering the 1967 Jordanian-Israeli boundary only “by a kilometer or two.” The idea of substantial border changes, he wrote, was “based on an unfeasible premise.” Peace, then, would be “possible only on the basis of the 1967 boundaries for Syria and Egypt plus some form of Palestinian entity on part of the West Bank.” As Kissinger pointed out, any adjustments to the 1967 lines would “be an inconsequential addition to Israel’s security, particularly in an era of modern weapons.”

In addition, Kissinger appeared to be laying the groundwork for an effort to resolve the Palestinian question. In November 1975, he approved a statement saying that the Palestinian dimension represented “the heart of the conflict.” Kissinger was, in principle, even prepared to involve the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the peace negotiations. “Our optimum course,” he said in January 1976, “is to go to the PLO.” Were it not an election year, he implied, “I would do it.”

Kissinger’s views on the substance of an Arab-Israeli settlement, then, were very similar to the Soviet Union’s. Kissinger was not, however, interested in cooperating with the Soviets to reach an agreement. To the contrary, his main goal was to drive them out of the region. From the beginning of the 1973 war, Kissinger declared that his strategy was “to demonstrate that whoever gets help from the Soviet Union cannot achieve his objective, whatever it is.” His “principal objective,” he stressed, was “to keep the Soviet military presence out of the Middle East and to reduce the Soviet political influence as much as possible.”

Kissinger thus sought to exclude the Soviet Union from the postwar diplomacy. At the formal level, the secretary of state said, the United States would cooperate in the Middle East. “But,” he added, “since the Soviet Union can deliver nothing, we will have our bilateral discussions with the Arabs as well.

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158. Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Discussion of Middle East Strategy,” April 21, 1975, folder “Middle East—General (8),” box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL, pp. 13–16.
161. Memcon, October 6, 1973, NLC-26-9-1-4-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.
You must distinguish appearance from reality. There may be some face-saving things, but we will determine for ourselves what will be done.” The United States, Kissinger told Chinese leaders, would “move matters toward a settlement in the Middle East, but we also want to demonstrate that it was not done by Soviet pressures.” Even “apart from the merits of the dispute,” the U.S. strategy was to resist whenever Moscow pressed for progress. Only after the Soviet Union had been “defeated” would Kissinger alter his approach. “We are not,” he emphasized, “against Arab aspirations; we are against their being achieved with Soviet pressure . . . And that is our strategy right now.” The plan, he said, was “to squeeze the Soviets to the sideline, not to settle it with them.” The administration’s “whole policy,” he said, was designed to “[avoid] settling it cooperatively with the Soviet Union.” Kissinger, one scholar points out, was “jubilant” when that strategy appeared to be working. “We are,” he exulted, “moving the Soviet Union out of the Middle East.”

There is perhaps no better indication of the premium that Kissinger placed on undermining the Soviet Union in the Middle East than when, in 1974–75, his step-by-step approach broke down and, consequently, U.S. strategists considered moving in the direction of a comprehensive plan. Ford and Kissinger had grown furious with the Israelis for jeopardizing the diplomacy through their inflexibility—their attitude, Kissinger said at one point, made him “almost blind with rage”—and they now had compelling reasons to pursue an overall approach.

Yet, Ford and Kissinger remained unalterably opposed to cooperating with Moscow on a settlement. To be sure, the administration chose to back away from a confrontation with Israel at this time primarily because of domestic political considerations. This did not mean, however, that the White House had abandoned its core objective of undermining the Soviet position in the Arab world. Another Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, Ford stressed, would allow the United States to “forestall the Soviets getting back in.” A partial agreement, Kissinger agreed, remained an important option because it

163. Ibid., p. 158.
164. Memcon, November 12, 1973, in Burr, The Kissinger Transcripts, p. 188.
represented “the best way to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East.” In short, Kissinger had all along been “wholeheartedly in agreement” about “the undesirability of an imposed Mideast settlement and of doing anything ‘in tandem’ with the Soviets.”

It had been the United States, then, rather than the Soviet Union, that had not wanted to cooperate on an Arab-Israeli peace agreement. U.S.-Soviet conflict, Kissinger admitted in August 1974, had “mostly been our fault. What have they done that’s so bad?” In the Middle East, Kissinger’s assistant, William Hyland, agreed, the United States had been “screwing them.” The United States, Kissinger emphasized, had “squeezed [the Soviets] in the Middle East in an unbelievable way.” Moscow, he said, had “got nothing” out of détente. Instead, the United States had “pushed [the Soviets] out of the Middle East.” “Brezhnev’s colleagues,” Kissinger concluded, “can say he was taken to the cleaners.”

Conclusion

Scholars frequently argue that détente failed in the 1970s because the Soviet Union, driven by its communist ideology, continued to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. The Soviet leaders, President Reagan declared in his first news conference, “reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat” in order to achieve their goal of a global communist revolution. That sort of argument is especially common with respect to Soviet policy in the Middle East.

These claims are difficult to support. Particularly after the 1973 war, Galia Golan writes, Moscow exuded “optimism, with Soviet-American cooperation portrayed as a major factor in the new favorable conditions for reaching a settlement.” Indeed, it was in large part because Moscow refused to align
itself with the radical Arab agenda that its position in the Middle East eventually declined.

It is true that American domestic politics affected U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute. “Israel’s lobby is so strong,” Nixon complained at one point, “that Congress is not reasonable.” Domestic politics, however, mainly influenced U.S. tactics and timing, more than substance. Had it not been for Watergate, Nixon almost certainly would have moved to pressure the Israelis. Although Ford preferred to wait until 1977 to pursue a comprehensive approach, he still felt he could prevail in a confrontation. Accepting a showdown with Israel over the terms of a settlement, Kissinger believed, might actually “be an asset to [Ford].” There was a possibility, he said, that it would make the president “a national hero.” “[The Israelis],” Ford agreed, “can’t win the confrontation between the Congress and the President.”

Basic U.S. strategic calculations, however, made it impossible for the superpowers to cooperate on the Arab-Israeli issue. “[Eugene] Rostow’s argument that the Soviets started the Middle East war to destroy US influence in the area,” Kissinger complained at one point, “is absolutely preposterous.” People such as Rostow, he grumbled, had gotten the story backward. It was the United States that had been exploiting the Soviets, not the other way around. “Brezhnev,” Kissinger believed, “is a political idiot and has given us all sorts of gains.”

U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union had been extremely tough, though it was masked by a rhetorical strategy that emphasized détente. As Kissinger put it, his goal had been to conduct “the most anti-Soviet [policy] that can be sustained.” That strategy, however, had to be “complex.” “We have,” he said, “the best potential for being tough by seeming to be soft. Where have the Soviets gained anything?” “Our policy to reduce and where possible to eliminate Soviet influence in the Middle East,” Kissinger boasts in his memoirs, “was in fact making progress under the cover of détente.”

These conclusions are at odds with the conventional wisdom about this

180. Telecon, June 15, 1975, document 4-B, EBB No. 526, NSA, p. 3.
181. Memcon, August 1, 1974, p. 5.
184. Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, p. 594.
period of U.S. foreign policy. Kissinger, as one historian writes, is widely regarded as the “most prominent torch-bearer in the modern era” of a realpolitik approach to international politics. Indeed, the standard view is that Kissinger’s whole policy was rooted in the notion that ideological considerations can be ignored and that great powers can cooperate when they have overlapping power political interests.

That interpretation, however, does not fare well in the light of the historical evidence. It hardly made sense from a realpolitik standpoint for the United States to press the Soviet Union so hard that the pro-détente forces in the Kremlin would be weakened. By humiliating the Soviets, Kissinger had helped undermine the very “structure of peace” he had promised to erect. Nor can Kissinger’s determination to sideline the Soviet Union from the Arab-Israeli peace process, despite its desire to cooperate with the United States, be reconciled with a realpolitik approach. Rather than constituting a spectacular success for U.S. diplomacy, as many writers believe, his efforts to undermine the Soviet position in the Middle East might have cost the superpowers a chance for a comprehensive settlement. Kissinger’s rhetoric about erecting a stable foundation for U.S.-Soviet relations, in short, should not be accepted at face value.

The case of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1970s, therefore, suggests that stable détente relationships between great power rivals are possible, but only if both sides are willing to proceed on a realpolitik basis. Had U.S. officials been prepared to take such an approach, the Cold War might have run its course in a very different way.

What does this argument imply for how the United States should conduct its relations with rivals such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia? In the simplest terms, it suggests that if Washington wants to reach an accommodation with these states, it must be willing to set aside concerns about ideology and their internal characteristics, and instead proceed on a more businesslike

basis. Moreover, any chance to develop stable relationships with its rivals will almost certainly be lost if U.S. officials fail to respect what these states regard as their core power political interests. Pursuing such an approach would by no means guarantee a more peaceful world or improved U.S. relations with the countries above. Washington cannot, of course, control how they would respond if it were to adopt a policy more in line with realpolitik principles. But if an opportunity does exist for the United States to develop détente relationships with its rivals, it is likely to be lost if U.S. policymakers choose to pursue the type of approach that they did during the 1970s.

188. Many realist scholars have been critical of post–Cold War U.S. policy toward Russia for precisely this reason. See, for example, Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault”; and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 7–44, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236.