If the significant factors of Soviet-American relations were somewhat mixed in their impact during most of 1970, in December of that year an increasing number of developments began to push both Moscow and Washington in the direction of greater collaboration. Of paramount importance was the decision by China's leaders to convey to the Americans a genuine interest in better relations, a decision that gave the Russians serious cause for alarm and opened up the possibility to Nixon of possessing a substantial new leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Almost simultaneously, rioting broke out in Poland in response to shortages of consumer goods, producing a confrontation that was bound to increase Soviet anxiety and eagerness to improve East bloc economic performance. Meanwhile, the success of West Germany's Ostpolitik and its tie to the continuing four-power negotiations over Berlin meant that Washington and Moscow came under growing pressure from Western Europe to solve the political riddle of the former German capital and clear away one of the continuing sore points of the Cold War.

Other factors also became conducive to the enlargement of superpower détente. The growing noncompetitiveness of the American economy, particularly as it manifested itself in a weakening dollar and an adverse balance of trade, rendered the prospect of a large and technology-starved Russian market enticing to Washington. A renewed congressional assault upon the administration's defense budget, an outgrowth of a reviving antiwar movement, encouraged both Nixon and Kissinger to think in terms of achieving an arms accord with Moscow while they still had assets with which to bargain. Finally, their frustrated efforts to negotiate a conclusion to the Vietnam War led them not only into ill-advised ventures like the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos (February 1971) but also into
substantial political concessions to the enemy in Hanoi. Yet nothing they offered seemed enough to bring the North Vietnamese to an agreement, and as American military withdrawals continued, there seemed less and less chance that the United States would be able to bring the war to a quick end. With the election of 1972 rapidly approaching, and the president falling in the opinion polls, Nixon and Kissinger were driven to obscure their lack of success in Vietnam with a peace policy on other fronts.

In explaining why there was suddenly so much progress in Soviet-American relations, Kissinger suggests that by the end of 1970 America had finally moved into an advantageous situation:

> We were, in fact, in the strongest position since Nixon had come to office. We had [the crises of] Cienfuegos and Jordan behind us; we had demonstrated our determination to resist pressures; Moscow had experienced the brittleness of its East European dominion. And we had a safety valve [in that] we [had] received the first direct communication from the Chinese leadership proposing high level talks.¹

Yet as understandable as it is for statesmen to justify their actions as part of a design or a response to opportunity, the fact is that Nixon and Kissinger were also very much propelled by need in their efforts to establish an understanding with Moscow. In truth, there was an element of near panic in the way they sought out and achieved an arrangement with the Russians that they could later use to their advantage at home and in Vietnam. Indicative of this deep anxiety were the remarks Kissinger made to Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, chief of naval operations, in a private encounter on an afternoon in December 1970:

> K feels that the U.S. has passed its historic high point like so many other civilizations. He believes U.S. is on downhill and cannot be roused by political challenge. He states that his job is to persuade the Russians to give us the best deal we can get, recognizing that the historical forces favor them. He says that he realizes that in the light of history he will be recognized as one of those who negotiated terms favorable to the Soviets, but that the American people have only themselves to blame because they lack the stamina to stay the course. . . . K said “You don’t get re-elected to the Presidency on a platform that admits you got behind. You talk instead about the great partnership for peace achieved in your term.”²

In short, American leaders had some sense of operating from strength, but they also believed that they were in a position of peculiar vulnerability and weakness. The fascinating thing is that the same can be said about their opponents in the Kremlin.
Nixon, and later Kissinger, had worked hard to make clear to the government of Communist China that they were attracted by the possibility of developing a new and more cooperative relation with that country. Even after the Chinese broke off the Warsaw talks in February 1969, the new administration continued to signal its interest by means of messages delivered through intermediaries, a reduction of trade and travel restrictions (July 21), and after rumors of a Soviet attack on China began circulating, a speech by the undersecretary of state expressing concern about the escalation of the Sino-Soviet quarrel (September 5). Subsequently, the Chinese responded to an American overture and met with American representatives in Warsaw in January and February 1970—only to end these sessions in the wake of the Cambodian invasion. Nixon and Kissinger, however, were not to be discouraged and continued to offer “gestures [to China] that could not be rejected and did not need to be acknowledged.” On August 26, 1970, for example, the American government unveiled a further reduction in trade restrictions, and in October Nixon not only referred publicly for the first time to the “People’s Republic of China” but also sent a confidential message to Beijing underlining his flexibility on the issue of Taiwan.

By contrast, it was only with great difficulty that Mao and Jou were able to reorient Chinese foreign policy so as to create a genuinely triangular situation. It was not until the plenum of the Communist Party’s Central Committee in the late summer of 1970 that they and their moderate allies were able to overcome the resistance of the military faction and institute a decisive change. And not until December 9 were the Chinese leaders able to unmistakably convey to the Americans that they were receptive to the idea of high-level negotiations.

Nixon and Kissinger were, of course, immensely pleased and relieved to finally receive this invitation, but from their perspective the Sino-American relation remained extremely complex. Just as in May 1970 the Cambodian intervention had set back efforts to improve Washington’s connection with Beijing, so in February 1971 the invasion of Laos by the South Vietnamese army and its American support groups slowed the move toward rapprochement with China. Still, Nixon’s unwillingness to redeem the failure in Laos with further intervention seems to have reassured the Chinese leadership, and on April 6, Jou En-lai stunned the world by inviting the American table tennis team (then in Japan) to visit China. The White House quickly reciprocated by announcing a substantial dismantling of its twenty-year trade embargo, and on April 27, Jou informed the anxiously waiting Nixon and Kissinger of his government’s readiness to receive in China a “special envoy, or the Secretary of State, or even the
President of the United States himself. Further negotiations, carried on in complete secrecy, and on the American side even in the face of unhelpful public statements by unsuspecting colleagues, resulted in an agreement that Kissinger would fly to Beijing from Pakistan on July 9 to begin arranging a presidential visit.

Thus by mid-1971 a significant change was occurring in the structure of major power relations. Driven by its fear of and hostility toward the Soviet Union and by its realization that the United States no longer constituted a pressing threat, China was inching its way back into a position of genuine strategic freedom. Confronted with this development, Nixon and Kissinger were wise enough (and needy enough) to stimulate, assist, and relate to the process in every way they could. Indeed, they were willing to pay a high price for the prospective advantages that it gave them in dealing with domestic critics and with the Vietnamese and the Russians. In his July meeting with the Chinese, Kissinger went so far as to promise an early withdrawal of American troops from Taiwan and to give the Chinese classified intelligence about the disposition of Soviet forces in Siberia. He also agreed to inform Beijing in detail "of any understanding affecting Chinese interests that we might consider with the Soviets." This extraordinary pledge was honored by Kissinger throughout the summer and fall and during his second trip to China in October, which Nixon and he scheduled knowing full well that it would occur during the opening session of the United Nations and would assist the Chinese Communist government in finally gaining admission to that organization.

As important as China was, however, it was not the only "socialist" country that was creating problems for the Russians and opportunities for the Americans during 1971. The previous December, after Willy Brandt's interest in normalizing relations with Warsaw had resulted in West German recognition of Poland's post-Potsdam boundaries, the regime of Wladislaw Gomulka attempted to use this foreign policy success as a cover for the introduction of price increases designed to ease the economy's chronic food shortages. It was a serious miscalculation, since severe riots, led by the workers themselves, broke out in several Polish cities and within two weeks necessitated the replacement of the veteran Gomulka by Edward Gierek as party secretary. The new Polish leadership acted quickly to suppress the disturbances by rescinding price increases and promising improved distribution of supplies, but given the region's obvious economic weakness, tension in Eastern Europe continued at substantial levels. Meanwhile, the lesson of the food riots was not lost on Russian planners, who stepped up their efforts both to assist the Polish economy and to produce more grain and meat for their own internal market.

What the Polish unrest suggested to Washington, however, according
to the memoirs of both Kissinger and NSC staff member William Hyland, was that the Soviet Union could not continue to pursue détente in Europe without the collaboration of the United States. “[With] détente with Bonn at least temporarily slowed down,” Kissinger wrote to Nixon on December 20, “the Soviet leaders, if they choose to maintain some prospect of détente, may be inclined to show some improvement in their relations with us.”17 In any case, Nixon and Kissinger persuaded themselves to go on the offensive in the days that followed.

Exactly what form this initiative took is still not completely clear; some students of the period conclude that the president actually offered Brezhnev assistance in modernizing the Russian economy in return for concessions on an array of issues.18 But we know from Kissinger’s memoirs that on December 22 and again, more directly, on January 9, 1971, he proposed to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin that they utilize their private “channel” to solve “some of the outstanding issues,” specifically, the matters of Berlin and SALT. Kissinger says he told the ambassador that the United States wanted just two things from the Soviet Union concerning Berlin: (1) improved access to the city, and (2) a Soviet guarantee of the new arrangements. On SALT, he writes, “I told Dobrynin we would accept the Soviet proposal to negotiate an ABM treaty provided the Soviets undertook to begin negotiations immediately on offensive limitations; the two negotiations would conclude simultaneously.”19

What Kissinger does not explain clearly is that, in his eagerness to push forward, he was making a significant concession with regard to arms control: he was indicating a willingness to abandon the tight link, which the administration had previously demanded, between a treaty on defensive weapons and one on offensive weapons. He was opening the door to combining an ABM treaty with an interim agreement on offensive weapons that would require no more than a freeze on construction of new ICBMs while negotiations on a permanent treaty continued.20

The truth is that, as much as Americans and Russians may reminisce about negotiating from strength, both were under increasing pressure to compromise their differences. Willy Brandt in particular was growing more and more insistent about moving forward, for he was eager to supplement the West German–Soviet treaty of the previous August with a successful four-power agreement on Berlin and thus clear the way for the treaty’s early ratification.21 Indeed, a six-week recess in the quadripartite talks after December 10 touched off a minor crisis in German-American relations. Brandt’s response was to write personal letters to Nixon, Pompidou, and Heath in which he asked that the Berlin negotiations be put into “continuous conference”; he also hinted that his government saw no reason why discussions with East Germany or ratification of the German-
Polish treaty of December should have to wait for an agreement about Berlin. In January 1971 Brandt backed down on both these threats, but not before they had caused Nixon and Kissinger considerable concern. As Kissinger recalls in his memoirs, “a prolonged stalemate [over Berlin] offering no hope of solution could damage US-German relations severely. We could become the whipping boy, accused by Brandt of blocking his policies. . . . If there were another Berlin crisis, the onus could fall on us.”

When Dobrynin informed Kissinger on January 23 that the Soviet leadership was pleased he was willing to “engage” himself in the Berlin talks (i.e., to circumvent regular channels), Kissinger was quick to notify the West Germans (through Egon Bahr, Brandt’s confidante) that “we were prepared to accept the Chancellor’s suggestions to speed up the Berlin negotiations.” At the end of the month, Bahr visited the United States, and soon thereafter, with the collaboration of Kenneth Rush, the American ambassador to West Germany, Kissinger’s secret “channel” to Bonn became “operational.” It continued to function throughout the spring and summer as the formal negotiations moved toward resolution. In late April, after Bahr flew to Washington once again to urge the Americans to use the Soviet demand for a consulate in West Berlin as a bargaining point, Kissinger and Dobrynin decided to enlarge their channel with private talks in Bonn among Bahr, Rush, and Valentin Falin, the Soviet ambassador to West Germany. Two weeks later, the Stalinist Walter Ulbricht, a longtime critic of Brandt’s Ostpolitik, was forced out as party boss in East Germany. It seemed clear that major changes were about to occur with regard to Berlin.

Other major pressures on Nixon and Kissinger, in addition to that from Germany, derived from Congress and the domestic political situation. “We were again about to face the now annual ritualistic assault by Congress on our defense budget,” Kissinger writes concerning the winter of 1970–71, adding sarcastically that the legislature seemed driven by a “myth assiduously fostered by various peace groups: that only if the Congress emasculated our military establishment would our government behave responsibly and end the war in Vietnam.” Yet Kissinger admits that that very congressional impatience was a factor in causing him to expedite the negotiations on arms control. “If we failed [to achieve a deal with the Russians],” he writes, “Congressional pressures might cause us to lose any leverage on the Soviet strategic buildup.”

The Ninety-second Congress and the American public were very critical of the apparent lack of progress in arms control and in ending the war in Vietnam. On January 17, 1971, the New York Times, eager for an
identifiable success, condemned the president's insistence on linking offensive and defensive weapons; on February 3, Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho) called for "an ABM-only agreement as a first step" toward later agreements; and in March this suggestion was endorsed by Senators Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), Harold Hughes (D-Iowa), and George McGovern (D-S.Dak.). Meanwhile, serious efforts were being made to cut military appropriations. Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine, the Democratic presidential front-runner in the polls, proposed that the United States abandon both Poseidon and Minuteman III missiles and agree to a mutual suspension of ABM deployment, and Senator William Proxmire (D-Wis.) campaigned vigorously against funding for the B-1 bomber and other aircraft. Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) revived his perennial resolution to withdraw half of the 300,000 American troops from Europe and saw it garner thirty-six votes in the Senate on May 19. In the summer, Congress cut more than $3 billion from the president's $73 billion defense request and substantially reduced the budget for weapons from that of the previous year.

This widespread dissatisfaction was compounded by the administration's decision to sponsor an incursion by South Vietnamese forces into Laos during February in an attempt to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail. Though the response of the antiwar movement to this unexpected attack was nowhere near as emotional as its reaction to the Cambodian invasion, there were impressive demonstrations during February and April. Congress, also, was extremely disturbed, particularly after the Laotian operation collapsed into a demoralizing withdrawal. During February and March no fewer than five resolutions were introduced aimed at restricting the president's war-making authority, prohibiting expenditures for combat, and fixing a date for American withdrawal from Vietnam. Between April 1 and July 1 there were seventeen House or Senate votes on resolutions of this nature.

Overall, the political prospects of the president were bleak. The Gallup poll reported in early spring that Nixon's popularity had sunk to the lowest level of any president since Harry Truman. The Harris poll showed him running barely even with, and even behind, Senator Muskie. Nixon speaks of the winter of 1970-71 as the "lowest point of my first term," but he was not the only one who had a sense of impending disaster. As Jeb Magruder of the Committee for the Reelection of the President remembered it two years afterward, "All of us who were later in the campaign were still on the White House staff [in January 1971], and there was a considerable degree of concern that the President would have a very difficult time being re-elected. . . . We felt it was going to be a very difficult
race." It was in this situation, then, that Nixon came face to face with his most significant foreign policy decisions—decisions regarding China, Russia, SALT, and Vietnam.

One further pressure on the president must not be overlooked, although it remained somewhat in the background until the summer of 1971: that of the economy. We have observed that the United States was suffering economically both from creeping noncompetitiveness and from the aftereffects of the Vietnam War inflation. At the beginning of 1971 a number of unhappy trends came together: inflation was more than 5.5 percent (despite vigorous efforts to dampen it); unemployment was at 6 percent; balance-of-payment deficits were the most severe in U.S. history; and speculation against the dollar had become almost constant. Nixon, not unconcerned, responded to the situation in three ways: first, by appointing one of the strongest personalities he could find (also a Democrat and an ardent nationalist)—John Connally of Texas—to be secretary of the treasury; second, by creating a new economic coordinating agency within the administration, the Council on International Economic Policy, chaired by Peter Peterson, a well-known banker; and third, by casting about for a new “game plan” (his phrase) that would at one and the same time stimulate the economy, control inflation, and improve the balance of trade.

The final result, of course, was the Camp David “summit” of August 1971, where Nixon and his advisers decided upon a package of surprising innovations, including tax credits for business, controls on prices and wages, an import surcharge, and the closure of the “gold window” (i.e., suspension of the dollar’s convertibility into gold). While all of this was going on, more voices continued to be raised on behalf of liberalizing trade with the Communist world. Secretary of Commerce Stans was bolder than ever, predicting to the press a worsening of America’s trade position during 1971 and calling for expanded commerce with Russia and its European allies. Stans contended that the United States, which now accounted for only 4 percent of East-West trade, could do much better. “This is a market where American goods are needed and wanted, and one that we are ideally suited to satisfy.” In April 1971, Peter Peterson submitted a 132-page report to the president entitled “The United States in a Changing World Economy,” which asked pointedly, “Are we advocating our own economic interests as forcefully as we should?” Three months later, Peterson wrote to Nixon privately, “You know, I’m sure, that [pressure from] the U.S. business community and the Hill is growing daily to liberalize East-West trade, and our second successive month of trade deficit is being used as another reason [to do this].” He added that he nevertheless understood “the primacy of demonstrated progress on the other negotiations.”
Nixon and Kissinger felt the economic pressure intensely, but it was only one of many reasons to make arrangements with the Russians, and they never gave way completely on their demand that they should get something for American trade. “We sat on a scheme to sell . . . machinery for a Soviet civilian truck plant on the Kama River for two years in the face of massive pressures from our economic agencies and the Congress,” Kissinger admits, not approving it until “after the Soviets had agreed to the May 20 compromise on SALT.” Similarly, he says, a number of commercial projects related to the Kama River plant were held up in Washington “until there was a breakthrough on Berlin.”

What Kissinger does not mention is that there were more transactions going on than these. Nixon, for example, found it mutually advantageous to promise the Soviets a lifting of the American grain embargo as part of the SALT “bargain” in May. With the U.S. corn supply near an all-time record and its balance of trade never more anemic, it must have seemed time to bring this factor into play. The arrangement was kept secret at the time, partly to make the agreement regarding SALT appear fairer but also because the administration needed the permission of the maritime unions to ship grain in Soviet bottoms, and it believed it could more easily gain this without the glare of publicity. Thus, it simply included a reduction of legal restrictions on grain shipments in a general relaxation of controls covering the export of nonstrategic items to the Communist world, announced on June 10 and presented to the public primarily in terms of American relations with China.

The key negotiation of these months—and as it turned out, the one in which the major concessions were made—was that involving arms control. The reader will recall that, in January 1971, following an autumn of deadlock on SALT (due largely to instructions from Washington that required the American delegation to stand firm) as well as important developments regarding China, Poland, and Germany, Kissinger worked out an arrangement with Dobrynin that these negotiations would be conducted through their own private channel as well as by the national delegations in Vienna and Helsinki.

These back-channel negotiations (the existence of which would not be known to the American SALT delegation until May) were to be difficult and controversial—and are to this day somewhat clouded in mystery. The issues included (1) whether or not an ABM treaty would be “tied” to an agreement on offensive weaponry, (2) what level of completeness a “ban” on ABMs would entail, and (3) what degree of comprehensiveness and reduction would be achieved in an understanding on offensive arms. Pressure on the American side (not to speak of the Russian) mounted as the talks went on. Originally, this derived primarily from the need to head off
the proponents of “first, an ABM-ban” approach and from the related necessity of doing something about the unsatisfactory political situation. But as time passed such pressure was supplemented by the concerns of the Department of Defense, where analysts worried that limitations on Safeguard (as defined by the NCA proposal of the previous April) would leave Minuteman vulnerable to a Soviet first strike.49 In February the Russians increased American anxiety by ending the moratorium on silo construction established at the start of SALT and by beginning to add new silos in SS-9 and SS-11 complexes at the rate of more than a dozen a month.50

As Kissinger and Dobrynin struggled in secret throughout winter and spring, both had multiple objectives. Nixon and Kissinger had been trying for almost a year to disengage themselves from their own ABM-NCA proposal (offered originally when Nixon was desperate for a summit conference in 1970). In doing this, they were driven first by the realization that such a proposal could not be made truly symmetrical (since Congress would not pay to build an ABM around Washington) and later by concern about its adequacy in protecting Minuteman.51 (It is in this light that one can understand their perplexing proposals of August 1970 [zero ABMs] and April 1971 [four ABM sites for the United States to protect ICBMs and one for the Soviet Union to defend Moscow].)52 Dobrynin and his government, on the other hand, were attempting to avoid having to pay for an ABM ban with a weapons freeze by putting off negotiations on offensive arms until after an ABM treaty was signed or, failing that, restricting any freeze to specified weapons.53 Kissinger, of course, hoped to exclude from the discussions what the Russians called forward-based systems (aircraft deployed by the United States in Continental Europe and on carriers in the Mediterranean and the northwest Pacific).54 Dobrynin wished to avoid any mention of SLBMs, which the Russians were building at a rapid rate (though their force did not yet equal that of the Americans), and of weapon modernization, since the Soviet Union was unwilling to accept constraints on its right to MIRV.55

In the end, a deal was struck that involved concessions on the part of the Soviet Union but that cost the United States substantially more. As Kissinger tells it, on March 15 Dobrynin abandoned the Soviet demand that ABM be confined to the capitals (NCA) but remained insistent that an agreement on ABM precede discussions on offensive weapons. On April 23 the Soviets conceded the point that offensive limits could be discussed (and a freeze on deployment established) before an ABM treaty was completed but made this dependent on the United States accepting an NCA arrangement. Finally, on May 15, the Soviet ambassador accepted the “simultaneity of [offensive/defensive] negotiation” and abandoned his
insistence on the NCA system, thus clearing the path for an agreement between the two countries.  

However, there is more to the story than Kissinger tells us. In the process, he paid for what he got from the Russians in a number of significant ways: (1) by allowing the weapons freeze to be tentatively defined without reference to SLBMs, (2) by accepting language that permitted the Soviets to continue modernizing and replacing missiles without restraint, and (3) by secretly promising the Soviet Union access to the American corn and grain market. Furthermore, in return for the exclusion of FBS from the strategic balance (and negotiations), the Americans implied that they would accept unequal ratios of missiles between the two countries in the final interim agreement on offensive weaponry.  

On May 20, 1971, Nixon and Brezhnev simultaneously and proudly announced that a procedural “breakthrough” had been achieved in SALT, a development that pointed to the desirability of a summit meeting the following year. At the time, this breakthrough was received with great enthusiasm, but in retrospect it does not seem as exhilarating. It did provide a valuable lift to American morale at a difficult point, and it did in all likelihood provide the key to the Soviet-American summit that would usher in détente. Nevertheless, it was negotiated from weakness as well as strength, and as a result, Kissinger would have to spend much of the next year secretly attempting to recapture part of what he had given away to get it. Moreover, in another sense the breakthrough obscured what was a largely lost opportunity. In terms of the arms race, an ABM ban was a genuine accomplishment, but with regard to offensive weapons, the probability now was that over the long haul the Soviet Union would be limited only a little and the United States not at all.  

Contributing to the situation that made these agreements possible, of course, were the political developments occurring within the Soviet Union. We shall examine the causes and consequences of internal Soviet change later, but it suffices at this point to note that March and April 1971 were the months of the Twenty-fourth Communist Party Congress, the congress at which Leonid Brezhnev established his leadership of the Politburo in foreign affairs and enunciated his “peace program,” with its attendant opening to the West. Having attacked Kosygin’s stewardship of the sluggish Russian economy and openly identified himself with the Soviet response to Brandt’s Ostpolitik, Brezhnev had put himself in a position where he could plausibly argue that American capital and technology were the answers to the economic problems plaguing the U.S.S.R. When the threat of a Chinese-American rapprochement was added to the equation, his case for reaching out to the United States became truly persuasive. In any event, possessed of increased power and faced with the concessions
Nixon and Kissinger were willing to offer, Brezhnev moved quickly. In the space of one month (May 1971) he not only arranged to displace Walter Ulbricht as leader of East Germany and to endorse the breakthrough in SALT but also announced his willingness to sign a treaty outlawing biological weapons and to talk about reducing conventional forces in Europe (mutual and balanced force reductions, or MBFR).61

Yet where Brezhnev's new flexibility became most apparent was in the continuing negotiations regarding Berlin. The first hint of this came on May 25, when the Soviet ambassador, in the twentieth round of the four-power talks, indicated the readiness of his government to draft a common text of an agreement on Berlin in lieu of the separate Allied and Russian drafts of February 5 and March 26. Then, on June 7, moving sharply toward the Western position, the ambassador agreed both to abandon his refusal to guarantee West German access to Berlin and to accept the continuation of Bonn's "official presence" in the former capital.62 In mid-June, Brezhnev himself, speaking in Berlin, emphasized that the Soviet Union was prepared "to make efforts to bring this matter to a successful conclusion."63 In June and July the ambassadors met more and more frequently and narrowed their differences substantially.

The motivations of the principal actors are not as easy to track as their actions, however. Nixon in his memoirs, for example, strongly implies that real progress on the Berlin settlement did not occur until after the July 15 announcement that he would go to China.64 Similarly, Kissinger asserts that "after the announcement of the President's trip to Peking, the unsettled issues on Berlin were resolved in one week to our satisfaction."65 But both contentions tend to exaggerate Nixon's and Kissinger's (if not China's) roles in this, as does Kissinger's claim that he and Dobrynin, through their secret channel, arrived at answers to a number of deadlocks regarding Berlin.66

Kenneth Rush is probably closer to the truth when he asserts that China was not an appreciable factor in the bargaining and that perhaps Kissinger's discussions with Dobrynin on Berlin were "never important."67 The sequence of events indicates that Brezhnev wanted a Berlin agreement primarily because he wanted the Soviet-West German treaty of August 1970 ratified. Deteriorating Soviet ties with China made friendship with Bonn more attractive, especially after a gratuitous intervention by Beijing in Balkan affairs during the summer of 1971, but one should not underestimate Moscow's desire for trade and for "normalizing" European affairs in its push for accommodation.68

So was a solution in Berlin the key to unraveling the East-West conundrum? Nixon seems to have felt that it was and said so on several occasions. On the margin of a briefing book in March 1971 he noted, "progress
on Berlin can be the breakthrough to progress on normalization of East-West relations generally.” Subsequently, in his press conference of October 12, 1971, he asserted: “We have had an agreement coming out of the SALT talks with regard to the hot line and accidental war and, of course, most important of all—and I think this is the item that, for both us and for them, led us to conclude that now was the time for a summit meeting—we have had an agreement on Berlin.” Still later, in his memoirs, Nixon put it this way: “Before 1971 it was common to consider Berlin and the Middle East as the greatest stumbling blocks in US-USSR relations. By removing at least one of these obstacles we were able to clear the way for a summit meeting.”

Nevertheless, with due regard for Nixon’s acumen in reading the images and realities of the Cold War, it seems more accurate to consider the Berlin settlement a symptom rather than a cause of the change occurring in major power relations. The strategic bargain of May, the West German concessions of the previous August, the prospect of trade and technology for faltering economies, and the need to distract the American electorate from the unending war—these factors were more basic than the Berlin agreement in moving the participants toward a new relation. Indeed, though Moscow had made the holding of a Soviet-American summit conditional on a Berlin settlement since April 1971, it is instructive that the Kremlin’s invitation to the summit was actually extended on August 10, a month before the final Berlin agreement (and a week before the American concession regarding a Soviet consulate in West Berlin). One could argue, certainly, that there had been very significant progress by that point in the Berlin negotiations (Nixon himself said this on August 4), but if Berlin was so central, why did the Russians not wait to invite the president until after the agreement was complete?

In any case, by the autumn of 1971 the administration could take some pleasure in its achievements. Not only had a breakthrough to China occurred and two international summits been arranged for an election year, but East and West had compromised long-standing differences on Berlin, and Soviet-American agreements on weapons and trade seemed to be taking shape. Moreover, Nixon and Kissinger fortified the trend, offering consolation to Moscow for the American rapprochement with China by signing two understandings negotiated in SALT that Washington originally intended to save for the Moscow summit. The first of these was an agreement designed to upgrade the hot line by switching to satellite communications; the second was an agreement on measures to reduce the risk of “accidental war” in cases of technical malfunction. The hot line understanding had been ready to sign since May, the accidental war protocol since August, and in each case the Soviets were eager to render the
agreement effective as soon as possible. The formal signing of both took place in Washington on September 30, 1971, the occasion of Foreign Minister Gromyko's annual trip to the United States.\(^7\) Two weeks later President Nixon announced to the public that he would be visiting the U.S.S.R. the following spring, after he returned from China.\(^7\)

Another important way in which Nixon and Kissinger pacified the Russians (while also helping the economy) was to approve long-pending Soviet-American commercial transactions and to send Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans on an exploratory visit to Moscow. Two weeks before Stans set out, on November 5, administration officials revealed that they had reached an understanding with the maritime unions that would allow the Soviet Union to purchase $136 million in American grain for use as livestock feed.\(^7\) Then, immediately before Stan's departure, the Commerce Department announced that it had approved the leasing of $528 million worth of equipment for the construction of the Kama River project.\(^7\) Stans's stay in the U.S.S.R. was itself quite successful and featured extended talks with Premier Kosygin and other officials about the prospects for increased trade.\(^8\) Later, in December, Soviet Agricultural Minister Vladimir Matskevich was also hosted royally when he visited the United States at the invitation of the American Department of Agriculture.\(^8\) During these same weeks Secretary of the Treasury John Connally was meeting with Allied finance ministers in Rome and bludgeoning them into agreements that effectively devaluated the dollar.\(^8\) Russian purchases and a cheaper dollar would work together to improve the badly weakened American balance of trade.

The one real setback to Soviet-American relations during the winter grew out of events in a surprisingly distant area: the Indian subcontinent. Long-smouldering ethnic and political tension in Pakistan had given rise to brutal repression by Yahya Kahn in East Pakistan, to a massive flight of Bengalis (largely Hindu) from that area into India, and finally, in December, to war between India and Pakistan.\(^8\) Further complicating the matter from the perspective of Washington was the long-standing dislike that Nixon felt toward Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister, and the fact that, in Kissinger's words, Pakistan "was our crucial link to Peking; and Pakistan was one of China's closest allies."\(^8\) Indeed, the evidence indicates that the determining consideration for Nixon throughout this entire episode was his desire to preserve the forthcoming Chinese-American summit.

Nixon and Kissinger persuaded themselves, largely on the basis of secret and highly suspect intelligence, that Gandhi's government was waging and prolonging the war not only to assist East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in obtaining a decent (and probably independent) status but also in order to
attack and dismember West Pakistan itself. Moreover, completely apart from the issue of Pakistan’s usefulness as a message carrier to and from China, Nixon and Kissinger saw these events hierarchically, that is, as part of a struggle among the superpowers. Thus, if the United States were unable to prevent India and its “ally,” the Soviet Union, from humiliating (and injuring) Pakistan and its “ally,” China, the result would be doubly negative. The balance of power would be weakened, and the United States would lose credibility with China, perhaps even to the point of forfeiting the scheduled summit. It was to avoid these eventualities that the president insisted on maintaining a “tilt” toward Pakistan, despite explicit opposition from his own officials in the field, area specialists in Washington, and the secretary of state—none of whom were as impressed as he was with Pakistan’s moral position or with India’s threat to Pakistan.

The confrontations with Moscow developed suddenly in December 1971. The Soviets had urged restraint on Mrs. Gandhi ever since (and even before) she signed a treaty of friendship with them the previous August, but this did not prevent Kissinger from calling in Dobrynin’s deputy on December 5 and demanding that the U.S.S.R. stop encouraging India. Subsequently, the same official was handed a letter written by Nixon to Brezhnev urging the Soviet leader, “in the spirit” of the forthcoming summit, to persuade the Indians to moderate their demands (the implication being that the demands involved the dismemberment of Pakistan).

What is more, on December 10, after the Indian ambassador refused to give assurances that India would not attack West Pakistan, the president dispatched an American naval force from the Pacific toward the Bay of Bengal. Two days later, according to Nixon’s and Kissinger’s memoirs, the two men decided in a meeting at the White House that if China entered the war and the Soviet Union threatened China, “we would not stand idly by.” Whether this threat was actually conveyed to the Russians is still not completely clear, although Kissinger did make a point of telling a group of journalists on December 14 that, if the Soviet Union did not restrain India, the president might have to reconsider his plans for attending a summit. Neither is it clear to what extent those threats that were transmitted to Moscow were taken seriously. On December 15, after Gandhi offered Pakistan an unconditional cease-fire, Nixon and Kissinger were quick to conclude that India had responded to Soviet pressure, and the Soviet Union to U.S. pressure; but Gandhi herself later openly expressed amazement at the Americans’ beliefs.

What is clear, aside from the impressive hierarchical quality of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s thinking, is that they were willing to run risks with the Soviet summit in order to be sure they could count on a meeting with the Chinese leadership. This order of priorities would show up again the
following April, when they were confronted (after the Chinese summit) with the need to do something about a serious military challenge from Moscow's "client" in Hanoi.

An interesting side effect of the events of this winter (1971–72) was an increase in tension between Nixon and Kissinger. A number of factors were involved, including the anxiety of the president at the possibility of losing the opening to China and his irritation at the opposition within his own government. "I've been catching unshirted hell every half-hour from the President, who says we're not tough enough [on India]," Kissinger is reported to have told the administration's crisis management team, the Washington Special Action Group, on December 3. Ten days later, the rift deepened considerably when classified documents revealing the administration's tilt toward Pakistan reached the press and Nixon quickly concluded (as he had on earlier occasions) that the "liberals" on Kissinger's staff must be "leaking" information to reporters. An added factor in Nixon's displeasure was the celebrity status that Kissinger had acquired as a result of his two trips to China. Nixon had long complained to his staff about Kissinger's penchant for giving "backgronders" to the press, but he was particularly infuriated when (as happened twice in December) Kissinger was quoted extensively by name. In January 1972 he told H. R. Haldeman and Alexander Haig that he "wanted to take a very hard line with Kissinger," even to the point of replacing him if necessary. Yet, for all his anger and jealousy, Nixon was much too dependent on Kissinger to fire him.

The Vietnam War, of course, remained the main problem for the administration and one of the paramount factors in maintaining the momentum toward Soviet-American détente. (Nixon was willing to gamble with the Russian summit, if necessary, to head off a severe loss of face, but he was still persuaded that the route to peace in Southeast Asia lay largely through Moscow.) Neither public nor private negotiations with the Vietnamese had produced much agreement during 1970, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the United States continued to withdraw its troops from the war zone at a substantial rate. The administration's position, as outlined by Nixon in his speech of October 7, 1970, was that peace could be achieved only through a cease-fire in place, linked with mutual (American and North Vietnamese) withdrawal from South Vietnam, the release of American prisoners of war, and an Indochina peace conference. The North Vietnamese position required unconditional American withdrawal combined with the removal of President Nguyen Van Thieu. A significant reduction in American demands occurred at the end of May 1971, however, immediately following the administration's understandings with China regarding Kissinger's first visit and with the Soviet
Union regarding SALT. It was almost as if Nixon and Kissinger were attempting to test the potency of their new connections, although they must also have been concerned that the number of American troops in South Vietnam had already declined from 540,000 to 270,000 and was scheduled to be cut another 100,000 by December (the beginning of the presidential election year). In any event, Nixon now chose to make an important concession, fully of a piece with, and not unrelated to, the concessions that had just been made to the Soviet Union on SALT. In a secret proposal in Paris on May 31, not revealed to the public for almost eight months (and even then incompletely), Washington offered to accept a deadline for the withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam in return for a cease-fire and the release of American POWs. In other words, Kissinger was no longer making mutual withdrawal a major issue in the negotiations and was even hinting at a more explicit American concession if Hanoi dropped its insistence on removal of the Thieu regime. Obviously, the American leaders were going some distance to make a bargain possible.

Even so, when North Vietnam responded on June 26 with a nine-point plan that would have required the United States to support free elections in South Vietnam during the fall, Nixon and Kissinger refused to take the final step in abandoning Thieu. Apparently, they continued to hope that his government could put down the insurgency, and their own desperation diminished with their diplomatic successes of the summer. They now developed variations of their May 31 proposal, on August 16 offering to withdraw all American troops nine months after the completion of a peace treaty and on October 11, eight days after Thieu was reelected in “uncontested” balloting, suggesting that a multiparty electoral commission hold a new presidential election six months after a final agreement was signed.

Nixon and Kissinger seemed content to build a record of secret negotiations that they could reveal to the American public at a politically advantageous moment. Hanoi, on the other hand, felt compelled to undertake preparations for another major military offensive. Finally, in December, after three months in which the secret Paris sessions were repeatedly canceled by the North Vietnamese, the Americans carried out bombing raids over North Vietnam, warning both Moscow and Beijing that “an offensive would evoke the most serious retaliation.” On January 25, 1972, alarmed at the continued North Vietnamese buildup and silence (as well as slippage in his reviving popularity), Nixon “went public” with his October peace proposal (freshly presented and now stipulating mutual withdrawal of forces) and the fact that Kissinger had been holding private meetings with Hanoi’s representatives since August 1969. The domestic political impact was immediate. By early February the presi-
dent had recaptured the lead in the polls that he had established during the previous summer and autumn.\footnote{102}

A few days later, Nixon, Kissinger, Rogers, their immediate staffs, and over 150 representatives of the television and press embarked for China on what the president described as his “historic mission for peace.”\footnote{103} The phrase was apt, of course, to the extent that the trip was intended to mend a long-damaged relation, but the venture was also designed to bolster the two nations and to create leverage against their enemies. Nixon and Kissinger were euphoric at being able to bring the Chinese into a new and more favorable international balance of power. It had been their dream, and especially Nixon’s, to be able to play the “China card” against the Vietnamese, the Russians, and (as a result) even the Democrats at home. Mao and Jou had analogous aspirations. They saw the American connection as a way to reduce the Soviet danger, constrain Japan, and not least important, weaken the Nationalists on Taiwan.

Both sides to the bargain got much of what they wanted from it, but both paid substantially for the advantages gained. In terms of American politics, Nixon’s pilgrimage to China, with its comprehensive television coverage and dramatic encounters, was an almost unqualified success. None of the Democratic candidates, in the weeks following the summit, could mount a serious challenge to his popularity in the polls.\footnote{104} Moreover, the president’s hand was undoubtedly strengthened vis-à-vis Hanoi and Moscow. Even before February, Mao and Jou had begun to urge the North Vietnamese to compromise with the Americans,\footnote{105} while Soviet leaders displayed increasing nervousness about Chinese and American intentions.\footnote{106} On the other hand, there was also a downside for the Americans. As much as they tried to obscure the fact in the summit’s final (Shanghai) communique, Nixon and Kissinger found it necessary to virtually abandon the alliance with Taiwan and to commit themselves to the removal of American troops from that island.\footnote{107} Such a change, despite Beijing’s promises of good behavior, was bound to make conservatives in the United States unhappy.

From the Chinese point of view, the obvious advantage of a rapprochement with the Americans lay in its impact on the Soviet Union and Japan; the other advantages as well as the disadvantages were more subtle. The crucial object, clearly, at a time when the superpowers were edging toward greater cooperation, was to ensure that they would not collaborate against China. (This is why Kissinger’s willingness to share military intelligence and to brief the Chinese leadership on Soviet-American negotiations was impressive.) This objective the Chinese-American reconciliation accomplished, just as it understandably strengthened Washington’s resolve to maintain its nuclear umbrella over Japan (despite Japanese “shock”
at Nixon's overture to China). Beyond this, the new détente took the United States out of the Chinese civil war and also promised China a relaxation in American trade restrictions and greater access to Western capital and technology. Even so, the cost of such gains was high: China's long-standing identification with, and reputation as a champion of, Third World revolutions was inevitably weakened when Beijing treated with the leading capitalist nation and muted its support of the North Vietnamese Communists.

The immediate result, however, was that Hanoi's leaders disregarded Mao's direct advice and embarked upon a vast military offensive in South Vietnam. On March 30, 1972, three North Vietnamese divisions crossed the demilitarized zone and began an aggressive advance down the coast. Within a week a second front was opened northwest of Saigon. And within three weeks a third operation was initiated in the Central Highlands. In the north the North Vietnamese attacked the provincial capital of Quang Tri, which fell on May 2. In the south they laid siege to An Loc, near Saigon, and seized control of the delta region as the South Vietnamese sent their reserve units north to protect important cities in the Highlands.

The military onslaught was highly traumatic to Washington, altering American policy and seriously straining relations within the government. Nixon, experiencing visions of what the Tet offensive had done to his predecessor, took the North Vietnamese attack personally and found himself increasingly angry not only at the Russians, whom he held ultimately responsible, but also at Melvin Laird and Henry Kissinger, whom he suspected of faintheartedness.

Henry, with all his many virtues, does seem too often to be concerned about preparing the way for negotiations with the Soviets. However, when he faces the facts, he realizes that no negotiation in Moscow is possible unless we come out all right in Vietnam . . . . Both Haldeman and Henry seem to have an idea—which I think is mistaken—that even if we fail in Vietnam we can survive politically.

In the president's view the proper response to the situation was two-fold: to bomb the North Vietnamese as never before and to press the Russians as vigorously as possible to use their influence in Hanoi to bring the offensive to a halt. These weeks therefore were witness to an unprecedented and savage air war. At Nixon's direction more than 700 B-52 raids were flown over North Vietnam during April, while the number of comparable missions carried out in the South often reached 75 a day. This was in addition to the more than 500 sorties flown daily by American and South Vietnamese aircraft in conjunction with battlefield operations. While this was going on, the president made it very clear to Dobrynin and others
that he held Moscow accountable (and punishable) for supplying the sinews of war that supported the Vietnamese attack.114

Kissinger minimizes the extent to which he disagreed with Nixon about the wisdom of the president's actions, but the fact is that his and Nixon's attitudes were diverging with regard to the necessity for violence (too much of which, Kissinger feared, might alienate the Soviets) and also with regard to specific dealings with the Russians and the North Vietnamese.115 This became clear after April 20, when Kissinger journeyed to Moscow on a secret mission to negotiate with Brezhnev about a number of items that needed to be settled before the summit could occur. Nixon flirted with the idea of not letting him go at all but relented after insisting that Vietnam be the first subject on the agenda and that Kissinger break off the talks if the Soviets did not produce immediate progress toward a settlement of that war.116 Once in the Soviet capital, however, Kissinger proceeded to make significant concessions on several fronts—concessions of which we are still not certain Nixon was fully apprised.117 Kissinger was taking considerable risks to try to end the war, or at least to prevent it from torpedoing the summit.

In his talks with the Russian leader regarding Vietnam, Kissinger for the first time made explicit to the Communist side what had been implicit in the secret proposal of May 31, 1971—namely, that the United States would not insist on the North Vietnamese withdrawing their military forces from South Vietnam in a final negotiated settlement. He did this indirectly by demanding the withdrawal of only the three divisions that had crossed the demilitarized zone in late March to attack Quang Tri, though even this requirement, he has admitted, was a throwaway, later to be quietly dropped.118 Moreover, Kissinger hinted that those North Vietnamese troops that did remain in the South could consider the area they occupied the territory of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.119 In short, Kissinger was making an all-out effort to persuade the Soviets of American reasonableness even as he emphasized to them that a continuing North Vietnamese offensive would quickly lead to devastating American air attacks. Brezhnev seemed to understand this, encouraging Kissinger considerably by agreeing to convey his newest proposals to Hanoi.120

At this point, the president's representative, despite Nixon's instructions, was ready to turn to other matters, specifically SALT. Kissinger would like us to believe that Brezhnev now offered a reasonable compromise on the remaining ABM issues and "major concessions" regarding the interim agreement on offensive weapons.121 The truth, however, is much more intricate, since Brezhnev was actually adopting suggestions that Kissinger himself had made earlier (almost certainly unbeknownst to Nixon) via Dobrynin.
With regard to SLBMs, for example, Kissinger had long since resolved to finesse the issue (and to silence those in the Pentagon and the SALT delegation who had criticized him for not including SLBMs in the “breakthrough” understanding of May 1971) by proposing an arrangement the Russians simply could not refuse. Thus in March he indicated to Dobrynin ("thinking out loud," he says) that a limit of 950 SLBMs (and 62 submarines) would be acceptable in a SALT agreement even though this number was at the upper end of what the CIA estimated the Soviets could conceivably build within the next five years. Small wonder, then, that Kissinger was ready to accept this proposal when Brezhnev offered it, particularly when the latter also endorsed Melvin Laird’s idea (passed on to Dobrynin by Kissinger) that Russia could “trade in” older SLBMs and ICBMs in order to stay under 950.

Brezhnev did accede to a five-year term for the offensive freeze, as the Americans had been demanding, but his “new plan” to resolve the ABM dispute by permitting each side to protect its capital and one site was hardly a concession. This had been the position of the Russian SALT delegation for some time, and the American delegation in Helsinki had requested, and received, permission to agree to it before Kissinger reached Moscow.

There were other areas as well in which Kissinger was extremely accommodating, obviously with the intention of stimulating Russian interest in the forthcoming summit. He made it clear that he had no serious difficulties with the Soviet revision of his earlier draft of the Declaration of Basic Principles to be issued at the summit, a declaration the Russians had suggested and to which they attached considerable significance. Indeed, working from the Soviet version, he and his assistant, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, were able, without consulting Washington, to produce a statement that Gromyko and Kissinger agreed upon before the Americans left Moscow. Meanwhile, with regard to trade and economic relations in general, Kissinger appears to have made important oral commitments to Brezhnev. Official White House policy was to defer economic programs until there was political progress, but the Russians were pressing hard for assurances that satisfactory economic arrangements could be achieved, if not at the summit, then within a few weeks.

In subsequent years Kissinger attempted to minimize both his awareness of Russian eagerness (particularly with regard to grain) and his involvement in the economic negotiations, but the evidence indicates that he was deeply involved and may even have promised Brezhnev financial credits with which to make grain purchases. A columnist with access to Kissinger disclosed in May 1972 that, in reporting to the president three weeks before, Kissinger told Nixon of his “perfect astonishment” at the
vast importance Soviet leaders placed on concluding a comprehensive trade agreement. Not only was this one of their highest priorities, he concluded, but so also was an arrangement guaranteeing access to American grain.127

The president, after some vacillation, was able to convince himself that his adviser had actually obtained significant concessions from Brezhnev in Moscow. At least Kissinger had not made the concession that Nixon apparently was least willing to grant, namely, a promise to call off the American bombing of North Vietnam.128 And in fact, for a moment in late April it looked as if the Russians might vigorously press Hanoi to be cooperative.129 In this hope, and as a sweetener for the newly scheduled secret session in Paris on May 2, Nixon quickly announced on television that he was ordering the withdrawal of yet another 20,000 men from Vietnam within sixty days.130

Unfortunately, Kissinger’s meeting with Le Duc Tho in early May turned out to be surprisingly unproductive, driving the president back to his earlier plans to cripple North Vietnam and its continuing offensive by means of air strikes.131 At this point, Kissinger, fearing an extremely negative Soviet reaction, tried to convince Nixon to cancel or postpone the summit, but the president could not bring himself to do this. Kissinger could only hold his breath as Nixon, encouraged by John Connally and Alexander Haig (Kissinger’s less-than-loyal deputy), ordered an intensive bombing north of the seventeenth parallel as well as the mining of North Vietnamese harbors. Connally was convinced that the Russians wanted the upcoming summit so badly, primarily because of their eagerness for American grain and Western trade, that nothing could compel them to call it off. Kissinger was not so sure, suspecting that the United States needed the summit as much as the Soviet Union and concerned that the bombing and mining of a Soviet ally would be too humiliating for Moscow to accept.132

As it turned out, Connally and Nixon were right: as painful as the situation was, Brezhnev simply had too much invested in the success of the summit to give it up. Evidence of this appeared very quickly, despite the uproar of criticism concerning the president’s actions that erupted in Congress and the nation’s press.133 On May 10, in delivering a protest regarding the damage done by American bombers to Soviet ships in Haiphong harbor, Dobrynin also expressed the hope that the president would personally receive Soviet Minister of Trade Nikolai Patolichev, who was currently in Washington. The next day, after presenting a more comprehensive complaint from Brezhnev concerning the blockade and bombing, Dobrynin declared his readiness to resume discussions with Kissinger regarding preparations for the president’s visit to Russia.134
Thus the Moscow summit, only the fifth meeting of Soviet and American leaders since World War II, would take place as scheduled. Nixon had gambled and won. Faced with an apparent choice between building accord with the Soviet Union and avoiding defeat in Vietnam, he had opted for the latter, hoping against hope that it would not jeopardize the creation of a politically useful understanding between the superpowers. That it did not was due in no small measure to his and especially Kissinger's willingness to offer the other side much of what it needed and wanted.

On May 22 the president and his party arrived in the Soviet capital for what was to be a busy week. The opening plenary session on the 23d—involving Nixon, Kissinger, Rogers, and Ambassador Jacob Beam, on the American side, and Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny, Gromyko, and Dobrynin, on the Russian side—was essentially a general discussion and an assignment of subject responsibilities. The agreed procedure was to reserve the big items—SALT and Vietnam—for the meetings of Nixon, Kissinger, Brezhnev, Kosygin, and on occasion, Podgorny. Gromyko and Rogers were assigned to deal with European security issues; Kissinger and Gromyko were asked to serve as a backup on SALT and “give some thought to general principles that should govern relations” (this subterfuge was necessary because Rogers was still unaware of the Kissinger-Brezhnev negotiations in April). When economic matters were discussed, Kosygin, Gromyko, and Trade Minister Patolichev represented the Soviet side, while Rogers and Peter Flanigan, the White House coordinator on foreign economic policy, negotiated for the United States.135

Because both sides recognized that major agreements would not quickly be accomplished, it was decided to exploit the attention of the world press during the first few days by staging the signing of recent understandings on a number of technical subjects. “These accords were not politically significant,” according to Kissinger, who remarked that many of them had “lain dormant” in the bureaucracies for years, but in his view they did “demonstrate that the United States and the Soviet Union . . . had common interests in a variety of fields.”136 Four protocols featured commitments regarding medical research, environmental cooperation, scientific-technological collaboration, and a joint program for orbital missions in space. Soviet and American representatives also endorsed rules designed to avoid accidents between their navies at sea.137

While this was occurring, the principal conferees plunged with some energy into the resolution of the remaining issues with regard to SALT. Fortunately, what remained to be worked out was only marginal to the essence of the agreements. Unfortunately, however, the negotiations at the summit were seriously hampered by the complexity of the matters in dispute and by Nixon's earlier decision to leave the American SALT dele-
gation in Helsinki (and thus largely inaccessible), a decision that Kissinger in retrospect regretted and attributed to his own and Nixon’s desire to maintain “control.” The result was a good deal of confusion and several unsatisfactory compromises that Kissinger later tried to portray as more advantageous to the United States than they actually were.

There were essentially three areas of disagreement regarding SALT, all of which derived in some way from Kissinger’s negotiations in the secret channel. First, there was the question of which Soviet submarines would be counted as contributing to 740 operational SLBMs, the baseline at which the Russians would have to begin trading in old missiles if they wished to expand their force to 950. The Soviets accepted the figure of 740 but insisted on excluding the approximately 90 SLBMs on older H-class nuclear and G-class diesel submarines, vessels they claimed were of limited utility. The Pentagon and Gerard Smith in Helsinki opposed such an exclusion because it would enable Moscow to build a greater number of more modern submarines.

The second and third matters of disagreement had to do with the efforts of the Nixon administration (now attempting to be less permissive than Kissinger had been in the spring of 1971) to place limits on the modernization of the Russian ICBM force. One dispute grew out of Kissinger’s attempt to develop a rule that changes in the size of existing missile silos could not exceed 15 percent. Strangely enough, the Soviets were willing to accept a more stringent stipulation than this with regard to the diameter of silos—though not with regard to their depth, since they knew that their successor missiles were longer but not wider than existing weapons. But they had not made this clear to the Americans in Moscow, who believed that the alternative to their suggested rule was no constraint at all. The other disagreement regarding modernization was related to the first and derived from the failure of the two sides to agree upon a definition of light and heavy missiles. The problem went back to the fact that, from the American point of view, the replacements for the “light” SS-11 (the larger and potentially MIRVable SS-17 and SS-19) would increase the number of heavy ICBM launchers beyond the 305 stipulated in the overall freeze.

Kissinger and Nixon’s resolution of these points was, if not brilliant, at least not disastrous. After considerable wrangling by cable with both Smith and the Pentagon, Kissinger was able to persuade the president (if not Smith, who remembered well Kissinger’s April dealings) to accept a Russian “compromise” that excluded only the sixty G-class submarines from “baseline” calculations as long as the Soviets did not put “modern” missiles on these boats without counting them. Regarding changes in silo size, Kissinger and Nixon rejected the advice of the American SALT delegation (which preferred the text of the Russian proposal) and opted
for a ban on “significant” increases in dimension—*significant* being defined as more than 15 percent. They did not realize, apparently, that when the Russians construed the measurement in depth as well as width, which they did, such limits actually allowed a volumetric increase of 32 percent.\(^{142}\) Concerning missile definition, they contented themselves in the end with a unilateral statement stipulating that the United States regarded any missile larger than the SS-11 as a heavy missile.\(^{143}\) Having accomplished these “solutions,” the Americans were prepared to endorse the entire SALT accord; the signing ceremonies for both the ABM Treaty and the Interim (five-year) Agreement on Offensive Weapons took place in the Kremlin on May 26.\(^{144}\) The president and his party were delighted at having negotiated the first arms control agreement of our era—largely forgetting, it would seem, the substantial price they had paid for it in inflated limits and domestic commitments.

If SALT was the centerpiece of the summit for the Americans, it only shared that role with the Declaration of Basic Principles for the Russians. Though this agreement on U.S.-Soviet relations, signed on May 27, was not accorded much attention during the conference (due to its prior negotiation and the peculiar way in which the Americans required that it “surface”), Soviet leaders were quick to emphasize that they took the document with utmost seriousness.\(^{145}\) Indeed, Brezhnev in his first (private) meeting with Nixon told the president that he considered the declaration “even more important” than the SALT agreement.\(^{146}\) Unlike Nixon and Kissinger, who largely neglect this understanding in their memoirs and referred to it at the time almost slightly as a “road map” and the symbol of “an aspiration and an attitude,” Soviet commentators have consistently attributed great international significance to the Declaration of Basic Principles.\(^{147}\)

The explanation for this puzzling contrast in attitudes toward what has been called “a charter for détente” is both ironic and revealing.\(^{148}\) We can perhaps understand Nixon’s and Kissinger’s disregard for the declaration (despite the continuing power of liberal idealism in American history), knowing what we do about the inclinations of the president and his adviser toward classic conservative beliefs and their emphasis on human frailty, the need for hierarchy, and the centrality of power. But why would a set of principles be so important to the tough-minded elite of the Soviet Union? The answer apparently lies in Nixon and Kissinger’s willingness to include the old Communist concept of “peaceful coexistence” among the principles and in what that willingness implied about American recognition of Soviet equality.\(^{149}\) The principles became, in effect, the long-sought American acknowledgment that the “correlation of forces” had shifted to the point of making Soviet parity inevitable. In a similar way, American will-
ingness to attend a European "security" conference designed largely to ratify existing borders (a concession at the summit that was hardly noticed) was seen as a recognition of Soviet permanence, well worth the cost of having to participate in future talks on the reduction of conventional forces (MBFR).\textsuperscript{150}

The major hidden question of the summit, of course, was what to do about Vietnam. Nixon opened the discussion of that subject early in the conference by emphasizing that, unless Hanoi developed a more cooperative negotiating stance, he would have no choice but to continue the bombing and mining of the North. Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny responded with extensive criticism of American policy, the thrust of Brezhnev's remarks being that it was a mistake to destroy North Vietnam when Hanoi was eager to negotiate and had a "reasonable" political program.\textsuperscript{151}

It was left to Kissinger to indicate in a subsequent session with Gromyko that the administration had not yet exhausted the store of concessions it was willing to make to preserve the image, if not the reality, of success in Southeast Asia. After explicitly abandoning an earlier stipulation that the bombing could not end until all American prisoners of war were released, Kissinger announced that the United States was prepared to see an electoral commission in South Vietnam that included elements from the Vietcong and the neutralists as well as the Saigon regime. The Americans were edging closer and closer to Hanoi's position, revealing such flexibility that it is not surprising that Brezhnev later asked Nixon if it would be useful for a high Soviet official (Podgorny was mentioned) to go to Vietnam "in the interest of peace." Nixon was pleased to assent. Kissinger was encouraged too, though in his memoirs he is less than candid about the meaning of the Soviet offer.\textsuperscript{152}

Another aspect of the summit that was largely hidden from public notice was the economic. Here again there is a rather misleading treatment of the subject in the participants' memoirs and their postconference statements, a treatment that suggests that Nixon and Kissinger were using economic factors as leverage on the Soviets (and to "civilize" them) and did not even expect to achieve a trade arrangement at the summit.\textsuperscript{153} The records show, however, that the American leaders were every bit as eager for an understanding as their opposites and had been planning at least since March to have an interlocking package of economic agreements ready for signature in Moscow.\textsuperscript{154} In fact, as late as May 23 Flanigan still hoped to finalize a long-term grain sale to the Soviets at the summit and to announce it before leaving Russia.\textsuperscript{155} (At Moscow, Nixon not only offered Brezhnev a three-year grain deal with \$750 million in credit—essentially the same terms the U.S.S.R. agreed to in July—but also vigorously pressed the Soviet leader to accept it.)\textsuperscript{156}
In any event, the original intention was to have, in addition to the grain sale, a "balanced" assortment of economic understandings for approval, involving a settlement of Soviet lend-lease debts to the United States, the extension of most-favored-nation (MFN) status to the Soviet Union, the establishment of commercial facilities in each other's country, and the creation of a joint U.S.-U.S.S.R. trade commission. What blocked final agreement on this package apparently came down to three things: (1) Soviet refusal to pay market-level interest (6 percent) on the loan granted for the purchase of American grain (they offered 2 percent), (2) Soviet refusal to pay the high (union) shipping rates on the 50 percent of mutual trade that would be carried in American ships, and (3) continuing disagreement as to the sum the Russians would pay in settling their lend-lease debt to the United States. (The United States had asked for $800 million on an $11 billion debt; the Soviets were offering $300 million.)

The result was that the summit ended with only one important economic agreement: a protocol establishing a Joint Commercial Commission charged with working out new credit and trade arrangements as well as a lend-lease settlement.

In the weeks and months immediately following the Moscow conference, the Soviet and American governments maintained the momentum of cooperation on many different fronts. At the beginning of July, a Soviet deputy minister of agriculture visited Washington and accepted terms for the purchase of wheat that were close to those Nixon had offered in May. Later that month Secretary of Commerce Peterson went to Moscow for the first meeting of the Joint Commercial Commission and achieved enough success at negotiating outstanding economic issues that a draft agreement was drawn up. In September Kissinger returned to Moscow to review the general situation and worked out a compromise on the lend-lease debt with Brezhnev, accepting a figure of $722 million. This cleared the way for Minister Patolichev's appearance in Washington in October for the signing of a maritime accord (ratifying shipping allocations and opening up Soviet and American ports), a lend-lease agreement, and a three-year trade pact that included a promise to ask Congress for MFN treatment for Soviet imports. In the meantime, the two countries entered into a miscellany of noneconomic understandings, including agreements on the sharing of anticancer drugs (June), the pursuit of joint scientific research (July), the exchange of technological processes (August), and the selection of projects for environmental cooperation (September).

To be sure, there were clouds on the horizon. The Soviets decided to buy a surprisingly large quantity of American grain in July and August, and these purchases, combined with the Department of Agriculture's slow-
ness in withdrawing export subsidies to grain companies, resulted in higher bread prices in the United States and strong feelings of resentment against the Russians on the part of the American public. A new Soviet exit tax on Jewish emigration, announced in August with no explanation, provoked considerable outrage in Congress and led in October to the first of the congressional efforts that would ultimately tie the issue to the granting of MFN status. In employing an exit tax, the Soviets were apparently attempting to strengthen their relations with the Arabs after the decision by Premier Anwar Sadat in July to expel Soviet military advisers from Egypt. In any case, since Sadat's action reflected deep Arab dissatisfaction with Soviet passivity, it seemed obvious that Moscow would reassess its willingness to play a cautious role in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, though Russian and Chinese influence certainly contributed to North Vietnam's decision to reopen negotiations with the Americans in July 1972, the war in Asia dragged on until after Nixon's reelection and was settled only after a bloody military climax and on the basis of a fragile compromise. A vivid reminder of the lingering suspicion on both sides of the East-West divide was an article in Izvestiya on September 4, 1972, charging that the efforts by the American Department of Defense to secure funds for new weapons systems like the Trident submarine and B-1 bomber were in violation of the "spirit" of the U.S.-Soviet arms agreements.

Nevertheless, when President Nixon left Moscow at the end of his first summit conference on May 30, 1972, he could justifiably feel that his policies were helping to alter international relations and to launch a major détente with both the Russians and the Chinese. Nixon's hand had been forced by his inability to end the Vietnam War to his own satisfaction and by the erosion of the Cold War consensus and American economic power, but he had responded to this situation with creativity, working to reduce the power of his nation's adversaries in order to redress the decline in American capacities. In the process, he benefited politically, but the world at large benefited as well, not only from a substantial growth of trust and cooperation but, in particular, from the easing of the German problem, the achievement of certain controls on weaponry, the strengthening of economic interdependence, and the development of plans for further international collaboration. Though the agreement was so conservative as to contain the seeds of its own undoing, it was also a meaningful point of transition on the way to a more relaxed and less deadly world.