Were Richard M. Nixon’s and Henry Kissinger’s approaches to foreign policy unified?

Viewpoint: Yes. The foreign policy of Nixon and Kissinger consistently applied the theories of multipolarity and balance of power.

Viewpoint: No. Nixon and Kissinger disagreed significantly on foreign policy. Their unlikely pairing was primarily a result of internal Republican Party politics.

In the administration of President Richard M. Nixon, the formulation of foreign policy was dominated by two individuals—the president himself and his national security adviser (and later secretary of state) Henry Kissinger. The two statesmen came from much different backgrounds. Nixon had made his political career largely by means of his vociferous opposition to communism. At the time of his election to the presidency in 1968, Nixon’s credentials as a cold warrior were well established. Kissinger, on the other hand, took a much more subtle approach to statecraft and international affairs. Having argued that the careful management of diplomacy among the major powers of nineteenth-century Europe had kept the peace for a considerable time, he sincerely believed that well-managed relations between the superpowers and other emerging centers of power in the world was crucial to peace in the modern world.

The foreign policy of the Nixon administration employed elements of both approaches to strategy. While it decidedly escalated the war in Vietnam to check communist expansion in Asia and tried hard to bring China into the American camp, it also engaged in arms control and summit talks with the Soviet Union. Did these events represent a harmonization of foreign policy between the two leaders, or were they merely pursuing disparate goals in isolation from each other?

Viewpoint: Yes. The foreign policy of Nixon and Kissinger consistently applied the theories of multipolarity and balance of power.

It is not easy to maintain a consistent and steady foreign policy in a democracy, susceptible as it is to the shifting moods and preferences of public opinion. The American system of government, with its separation of powers and checks and balances, makes it more difficult still. There are also the complications that the pluralistic nature of American society adds. This is a country of immigrants whose groups ably use opportunities the political system affords them to press for policies that address their views; businesses and industries hire lobbyists to persuade elected officials to vote in favor of interests that concern them. It is little wonder that a prominent analyst of American foreign policy, Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington, writing in Foreign Affairs, chose the title “The Erosion of American
National Interest" to describe this system.

Henry Kissinger himself wrote on the difficulties of maintaining steadiness and coherence in U.S. foreign policy by pointing to the nature of the policy-making bureaucracy and the professions from which presidents usually recruited secretaries of state and defense. Since most individuals in charge of foreign-policy making came from law or business backgrounds, they brought with them the attitudes and experiences of these professions. The presence of legally trained officials in policy making circles tended to give U.S. policy its formalistic and legalistic coloration, with a strong belief in the power of contracts and agreements and the tendency for an ad hoc, case-by-case approach to solving problems. Many successful businessmen brought with them an optimistic, can-do approach, undergirded by the assumption that there were no intractable problems, that even the most difficult situation could be resolved by throwing enough money and energy into solving it, and that people were mostly motivated by rational, cost-benefit calculations. Kissinger argued that the legalistic and business approaches were not suitable training for navigation in a complex and tragic world in which people are driven by all kinds of motives, agreements do not have the same force as contracts, and the competition for power and resources is fierce and largely unregulated.

When Richard M. Nixon and Kissinger assumed the responsibility for American foreign policy in 1969, they faced all these difficulties—plus one more: the Vietnam War, which they had inherited from the departing Johnson administration. They inherited not only the war but also an agitated, edgy, and deeply divided public, suspicious of government and mistrustful of its leaders. To have maintained a consistent and steady foreign policy under these circumstances was a remarkable achievement.

The Nixon and the Ford administrations owed this consistency to the conceptual framework that Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, provided. Kissinger developed this framework while he was a Harvard academic, studying nineteenth-century diplomacy, and a Council of Foreign Relations scholar, writing about the nuclear policies of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He argued that for an international order to be stable it must be "legitimate." By legitimate Kissinger did not mean that world order must necessarily be just. He only meant that the leading powers in the system accepted that order and abided by its norms. Making an international order legitimate required that all the leading countries were status quo powers and that there were no revolutionary powers bent on subverting the system.

To achieve a legitimate order, there was a need to "de-ideologize" the foreign policies of countries and make the powers concentrate on interests rather than philosophical or ideological goals. Pursuing philosophical preferences and a sense of justice might lead to ideological crusades and prevent the establishment of a legitimate order. Ideological crusades were especially dangerous in the nuclear age, in which a total victory over a nuclear-armed adversary was no longer possible. Concentration on interests, on the other hand, would make it easier to reach necessary compromises. A legitimate order would limit not only the goals states would pursue in their foreign policies but also the means they would employ. Kissinger believed that states should be more circumspect in how they went about achieving their goals.

Kissinger also believed that a multipolar world would be more stable than a bipolar one: the main advantage was that in the former it was more difficult for any one country to become hegemonic. With a few powers of roughly equal strength, a multipolar world offered powers the option of creating an alliance to check the rise of a potential hegemon. Multipolarity was especially appealing to Kissinger in the late 1960s. American public opinion was more and more critical not only of the costly Vietnam War but of U.S. global involvement generally. Kissinger feared that under the continuing pressure of a disaffected public, American leaders would begin to pull back from the high level of international engagement that characterized U.S. policies in the 1950s and 1960s. In the bipolar world then in place, if the United States were to retrench, there would be no power to contain the spread of Soviet influence. There was thus a need to encourage the rise of other powers—for instance, China or a united Europe—that would be in a position to help the United States continue its containment policies, even as the U.S. contribution to such an effort diminished somewhat as a result of domestic political pressures.

Kissinger believed in the possibility of creating a legitimate international order, but he was not naive or sentimental. Competition and conflict were still at the core of the relations among states, and there was a need for credible military capabilities as bases for any foreign-policy initiatives. Thus, recognizing both the impatience of a restive public opinion with foreign entanglements and the need to make sure Western interests were not sacrificed as a result of reduced American involvement, Nixon announced in July 1969 the Nixon Doctrine,
also known as the Guam Doctrine, when he made the speech highlighting the new approach. He declared that the United States would help regional powers economically and militarily so they could not only defend themselves more effectively against Soviet threats but also become regional policemen, making sure that U.S. interests were not victimized even if it became less involved.

Kissinger was not confident that a democracy, because of its open, pluralistic nature, could sustain a steady foreign policy. He thus wanted to create a policy-making apparatus that would shield it, to a degree, from the vagaries of shifting public opinion. An examination of Nixon-Kissinger policies shows that these principles guided and informed administration policies, lending them coherence and legibility.

The first and most important effort by the new administration was to turn the Soviet Union from a revolutionary to a status-quo power by launching broad détente policies to try to bring the U.S.S.R. into the family of nations. The United States opened credit and technology markets in the West to the communist regime, conferred political legitimacy on it, and negotiated a series of agreements to regulate better the relationship between the two countries. As part of this process the administration toned down its criticism of human-rights violations in the Soviet Union and was careful not to be associated with dissenters such as Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn. This does not mean that behind the scenes the administration was not pressing for greater openness and tolerance in the U.S.S.R. and for greater freedom for Soviet citizens to emigrate (for example, allowing Jews to immigrate to Israel). During the Ford administration Kissinger also oversaw the Helsinki Accords (1 August 1975), which addressed human-rights issues in the Soviet Union. The purpose, however, was to work to advance U.S.-supported norms and principles in a less confrontational way—more quietly, behind the scenes, and in an agreed-upon fashion. This approach was derived directly from Kissinger’s belief in the need to de-ideologize U.S. foreign policy: one could not expect the U.S.S.R. to support an international system in which the leading powers constantly criticized it.
That Nixon and Kissinger placed less importance on ideology and more on power calculations also led them to the "opening" of the People's Republic of China. After more than twenty years of estrangement between China and the United States, Nixon and Kissinger made the historical visit to Beijing in February 1972, ushering in a new era in international relations. The opening to China was inspired by three of Kissinger's guidelines: first, as was the case with the Soviet Union, there was a need to engage major powers in the system if a legitimate international order were to be established. The isolation of China had to end. Second, as the United States was retreating under the pressure of domestic public opinion, there was a need to find another power that would help contain the potential expansion of Soviet power, especially in Asia. China was an ideal "balancer," especially as its own relations with the U.S.S.R. had been steadily deteriorating since the early 1960s. Third, even beyond the immediate need to find a balancing partner in Asia, Kissinger wanted to replace the bipolar with a multipolar structure to allow for future flexibility in American foreign policy. Allowing China to assume its rightful place in the world was a step in this direction.

The Nixon administration also increased military and economic aid to selected friendly countries—for example, Israel, Iran, and Pakistan—in order to make them more capable not only of defending themselves, but also of helping America secure its interests in their regions. A perfect example was the crisis in Jordan in September 1970, when Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) guerrillas hijacked and blew up several airplanes. When Syria, upset with King Hussein's campaign against the PLO, began to move its troops in preparation for an invasion of Jordan, the United States encouraged Israel, a strong U.S. ally, to place its forces on alert and warn Syria not to intervene. The United States, deeply enmeshed in Vietnam at the time, did not have the capability or will to aid Jordan. Of course, preventing a Syrian invasion of Jordan was also in Israeli interests.

Even the manner in which the administration pursued the war it inherited in Vietnam was in keeping with the principles Kissinger developed. The war was continued not because Nixon or Kissinger believed that there was a way to "win" it in any meaningful sense. Rather, it was pursued because Kissinger believed that U.S. reputation for determination and resolve was important, and since it had undertaken the commitment to South Vietnam the United States had to see it through. Second, Kissinger initiated secret talks with the North Vietnamese. Kissinger believed in talks and negotiations, but he was not naive—he would later criticize Carter administration cuts of defense programs by saying that perhaps military power no longer bought one as much influence as it once did, "but weakness still gets you nothing." There was a need to convince the North Vietnamese that they would lose if they just sat and waited for domestic public opinion in America to force the United States to leave Vietnam without North Vietnamese concessions. Nixon and Kissinger also relied heavily on "back channels" to advance their goals, trying to shield U.S. policymaking from the emotions that were engulfing America in reactions to the Vietnam War.

To say that the policies Nixon and Kissinger pursued were consistent and part of a larger, well-thought-out framework, is not to say that these policies were always right. The two misunderstood the degree to which the American public and its representatives would resent the excessive secretiveness of the policy process they had established; they also misjudged the degree to which a policy—any policy—had to be shown to adhere to deeply held American values and principles. Talk of balance of power, multipolarity, and legitimacy are not the most inspiring in the American political lexicon, especially not during passionate, contentious times. The Nixon and Kissinger policies were consistent, however, and well-grounded in an explicit and well-articulated view of history and the world.

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**Viewpoint:**

**No. Nixon and Kissinger disagreed significantly on foreign policy. Their unlikely pairing was primarily a result of internal Republican Party politics.**

When Lyndon B. Johnson left office in January 1969, the new administration of Richard M. Nixon had to contend with an unenviable legacy. The containment structure around the periphery of the communist world had begun to show signs of weakening. Crucial allies in Western Europe, especially France and West Germany, were departing from their previously strong pro-American positions to establish economic and diplomatic ties with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Both implicitly and explicitly, this meant the emergence of a gap between them and the United States. At
President Richard M. Nixon, during a 25 February 1971 address to Congress, revealed his views on détente.

The cruel and unnatural division of Europe is no longer accepted as inevitable or permanent. Today there is a growing impatience with confrontation. We and our allies seek a European détente. But we know that we cannot achieve it if we let slip away the close friendships in the West and the basic conditions of stability which have set the stage for it. This obligates our allies and ourselves to conduct our diplomacy in harmony as we jointly and severally seek concrete negotiations on the range of issues in order to make détente a reality.

In our view, détente means negotiating the concrete conditions of mutual security that will allow for expanded intra-European contact and cooperation without jeopardizing the security of any country. Soviet policies and doctrine, however, too often interpret détente in terms of Western ratification of the status quo and acknowledgment of continuing Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe. Beyond this, Soviet policy has been tempted to offer a relaxation of tension selectively to some allies but not to others, and only on limited issues of primary interest to the U.S.S.R. In view of this fundamental difference, a major question for the alliance to face is whether we can overcome the East-West stalemate while maintaining unity among ourselves and avoiding internal divisions in our countries.

Obviously, the Western countries do not have identical national concerns and cannot be expected to agree automatically on priorities or solutions. Each ally is the best judge of its own national interest. But our principle objective should be to harmonize our policies and insure that our efforts for détente are complimentary. A differentiated détente, limited to the U.S.S.R. and certain Western allies but not to others, would be illusory.

The U.S.S.R. has frequently proposed a general conference on European security. But such a conference, in the Soviet formulation, would not address the main security issues—the German question, Berlin, mutual force reductions—but only very general themes. We and our allies are prepared to negotiate with the East in any forum. But we see little value in a conference whose agenda would be unlikely to yield progress on concrete issues but would only deflect our energies to drafting statements and declarations the interpretation of which would inevitably be a continuing source of disagreements. Once a political basis for improving relations is created through specific negotiations already in process, a general conference might build on it to discuss other intra-European issues and forms of cooperation.

Any lasting relaxation of tension in Europe must include progress in resolving the issues related to the division of Germany.

conscious of the more moderate element, led by New York governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, in order to unify it behind him in the 1968 election and to maintain its support for his reelection in 1972. Rockefeller had twice campaigned unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination—against the outspokenly conservative Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona in 1964 and Nixon in 1968—but, despite his losses, he nevertheless retained great influence in the party. Largely in order to accommodate the moderates, upon his election to the presidency Nixon was compelled to share power in foreign-policy making with Rockefeller's intellectual protégé Henry Kissinger, who became national security adviser.

There was no other logical reason to ask Kissinger to join the administration. Nixon had met him only once, briefly, at a cocktail party in 1967. Kissinger was a bona fide member of the Eastern establishment and its leading institutions—Harvard University and the Council on Foreign Relations. He thus fit the description of the Ivy League intellectual that Nixon viscerally resented and, some would say, pathologically distrusted. Having risen to prominence under Rockefeller, furthermore, Kissinger was estranged by association from Nixon and his firm commitment to reenergizing containment. Indeed, Kissinger's approach to global politics was firmly rooted in the notion that the best hope for stability was a managed peace based on shared understanding of the rules of the international game, commercial ties, and high-level diplomatic cooperation with the Soviet Union. He had elaborated this view in his Harvard dissertation, a study of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, a diplomatic order that held the peace for several decades on the foundations of the same sort of managed peace that Kissinger now advocated. In addition to what came to be called détente with the Soviet Union, Kissinger's strategy also involved the promotion of a multipolar world in which the major pitfall of bipolarity—the fact that a gain for one power was always a loss for the other—would be avoided.

Nixon's own strategy was the absolute opposite. With a background rooted in firm antimcommunism and distrust of the Soviet Union, Nixon placed little faith in the concept of a managed peace. It was the Eisenhower administration, in which he had served as vice president, that had expanded the boundaries of containment to a global scale. In sharp contrast to Kissinger, who favored reaching out to Moscow with diplomatic and economic ties, Nixon's approach was based on the predication of negotiations on American strategic superiority.

To achieve that end Nixon determined to reinforce containment as a viable policy. Even before his election he had made clear that he wanted to establish diplomatic relations with China. Although Nixon had called Mao Tse-tung a "monster" in the 1950s, and Beijing's commitment to communism had not changed since then, the future president presciently believed that the geopolitical and ideological factors that had led to Mao's estrangement from Moscow could work strongly in America's strategic favor. By bringing China into the containment structure, Nixon believed that the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union would be dramatically improved; the largest and most powerful ally of the U.S.S.R. would be jumping ship to join its largest and most powerful adversary.

Vietnam played a crucial role in this approach. Historically, China had tried to establish hegemony over Southeast Asia. Its conversion to communism had brought with it no desire to see Vietnam unified. This conviction was actually reinforced in Chinese strategic thought as the Cold War developed, because Ho Chi Minh's regime in North Vietnam was pro-Soviet at a time when China and the Soviet Union were not friends. Ho's domination of Southeast Asia could only turn it into the other side of a geopolitical vice for Beijing: an unattractive prospect for Mao. In addition to their mutual antipathy to the Soviets, the preservation of a divided Indochina was another coincidence of interests upon which Sino-American rapprochement could be based. It ensured a part of the containment structure—the security of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia being guaranteed by the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), established in 1954—and extricated China from the prospect of its own "containment" by the Soviet Union. Cooperation over Indochina was to be the cement of the Sino-American strategic relationship.

The near-war situation that existed between China and the Soviet Union in the first half of 1969, and the virtual closing of the supply route to Hanoi through Chinese territory, unequivocally illustrated the extent of their estrangement. It was an opportunity Nixon did not miss. By trying to stabilize the South Vietnamese regime, eliminate the communist positions in Cambodia and Laos, block the supply ports through which most Soviet support for the North Vietnamese arrived, and achieve a peace settlement that reestablished the antebellum status quo, Nixon moved to resolve the conflict on terms favorable to both the United States and China.
Kissinger’s approach was radically different. Since his strategy involved drawing Moscow into friendly relations, it made no sense for him to support policies that made an ally of one of the Soviet’s most bitter antagonists. Working with Nixon to reach a settlement in Indochina that was favorable to both the United States and China, and to use that settlement as the basis for making China an integral part of the containment structure, could not have any logical appeal for the national security adviser. As Kissinger’s power in the foreign-policy making establishment of the administration grew, stimulated by Nixon’s personal and professional entanglement in the tremendous intricacies of the Watergate scandal, his goals diverged ever more widely from Nixon’s aspirations.

The final peace settlement that was signed in January 1973 was a farce as far as South Vietnamese independence was concerned. Although Kissinger had been instructed by Nixon to achieve a peace agreement according to which all communist and American forces would be withdrawn from South Vietnamese territory, he instead agreed to a plan that required the withdrawal of all American forces but only those communist forces that had crossed the seventeenth parallel directly. This concession left more than one hundred thousand communist troops, who had entered South Vietnam circuitously through Laos and Cambodia, on South Vietnamese soil after America withdrew. The disastrous results, culminating with the final conquest of the South by the North in April 1975 and Hanoi’s partially successful attempts to dominate its much smaller neighbors around the same time, are known only too well.

In the broader strategic context China perceived the American activity that led to this turn of events to represent precisely the unified approach to foreign policy that did not exist within the administration. The resulting alienation soured the initially positive opening in Sino-American relations that began with Nixon’s February 1972 visit. Kissinger’s growing control over foreign policy (he was appointed secretary of state in September 1973 and still held the post of national security adviser until he stepped down in November 1975—significantly, he was the only person in American history to hold the two major foreign-policy posts) did nothing to help. By April 1974 the “tripolarity” that Kissinger had advocated as an element of his strategy, and that was manifested implicitly in his Vietnam peace negotiations, became a reality when Deng Xiaoping, a leading opponent of Mao’s strategy of aligning closely with the United States, elaborated a similar “three worlds” strategy in a speech at the United Nations. The apparent failure of the United States in South Vietnam, together with the progressive decline of Mao’s health (he died in September 1976), gave Deng’s faction significant ground in the Chinese strategic debate.

Another major point of divergence between the president and Kissinger was the question of détente with the Soviet Union and the future role of U.S. allies in international politics. In his first term Nixon had tried to reestablish American primacy in the West. The drift of West Germany (and, centrifugally, Western Europe) and Japan away from containment policies and toward favorable relations with the Soviet Union was a function of their tremendous export-led economic growth. As their economic power grew, increasingly wealthy U.S. allies began to assert their geopolitical independence. By definition this implied a movement toward a middle position in the superpower conflict. The Bretton Woods system of international finance had been designed in 1944 to keep these developments in check, but by the time Nixon entered office, the economic problems caused by the fiscal policies of the Johnson administration had led to the collapse of the system. Rather than allow economic dislocation to cause the unraveling of containment, Nixon abandoned the Bretton Woods system by removing the dollar from the gold standard in August 1971 and adjusting its value (now based on faith in the government of the United States) to equilibrate foreign-economic growth. This measure worked for a while and was helped by the rise in oil prices after the Yom Kippur War (October 1973, when Israel defeated Egypt and Syria). Despite weak attempts to continue their movement toward a middle position thereafter, both West Germany and Japan continued to be firmly in the American orbit at least until the late 1980s.

Kissinger’s strategic thought differed radically. Just as he introduced the concept of tripartism into the U.S. relationship with China, so did he also advocate “trilateralism” with regard to Western Europe. The movement toward the Soviet Union that was obviously present in West German “Eastern policy,” or Ostpolitik, was encouraged by Kissinger. His ideas about the suitability of a multipolar world could lead him to no other conclusion but to support the drift of American allies toward the geopolitical center even while Nixon manipulated financial policy to try to prevent it.

It is clear that Nixon and Kissinger were influenced by different worldviews and that their otherwise unlikely coexistence in power was the result of Republican Party politics. Their competing strategies of containment and détente could not have been more opposite in their approaches to world politics. Interestingly, the same differentiation existed within other admin-
istrations, both before and after. At the beginning of the Cold War, the succession of President Franklin D. Roosevelt by Vice President Harry S Truman illustrated doubtlessly that a broad divergence of opinion on foreign affairs could exist within a political party, and even within an administration as entrenched as Roosevelt’s was by its fourth term. At the end of the Cold War, the same basic difference on strategy emerged when Republican vice president George Bush, who was closely associated with Kissinger’s approach to foreign policy, succeeded Ronald Reagan, who certainly was not. Nixon’s relationship with Kissinger was not unique.

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