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Introduction to *Richard Nixon and Europe : The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World*

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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