

The Dwindling of Détente

“Going from total anonymity to being president of the United States in less than twelve months is unprecedented,” recalled Carter’s pollster Pat Caddell. “If it weren’t for the country looking for something in 1976, Carter could never have gotten elected. He would never have been allowed out of the box. No one would have paid attention to him.”¹ Caddell was not being flattering, but it is true that Jimmy Carter’s ascent owed much to timing. Disenchantment with the Washington establishment was rife. Mishandling of the Vietnam War, rising unemployment, poverty, inflation, and Watergate all fostered distrust in the political elite.

Carter was assuredly not part of this category. Raised during the Great Depression in Plains, Georgia, his rise to power was a testament to hard graft. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1946 and spent the next seven years in the navy, working as an engineer on the nuclear submarine program. When his father died of cancer in 1953, Carter returned to Plains to work on the family-owned peanut farm. Thereafter, he decided to enter politics. Carter served in the Georgia senate during the 1960s, before a successful run for governor in 1970. A tireless campaigner for civil rights, he built a record of social reforms through the legislature, irking officials by resisting attempts at compromise and coalition building.² Carter’s message was grounded in his born-again Christian beliefs, and values such as honesty, integrity, and compassion. He was free of the lies and corruption that had sullied the reputation of those in government. In late 1972, when Nixon had coasted to reelection, Carter’s adviser Hamilton Jordan urged him to look toward the top political prize. “Perhaps the strongest feeling in this country today is the general distrust of government and politicians at all levels,” Jordan

explained. “The desire and thrust for strong moral leadership was not satisfied with the election of Richard Nixon.”³

The Watergate scandal forced Nixon’s resignation in August 1974. With the support of a tightly knit group of advisers (dubbed the “Peanut Brigade”), Carter embarked on an unlikely bid for the presidency. He cultivated the role of outsider, campaigning without major sponsors and sleeping in the homes of volunteers. After Ted Kennedy declined to enter the 1976 race, Carter seized his moment to win the Democratic nomination. Promising to push through reform and restore trust in government, he received 40.2 percent of the primary vote, defeating California governor Jerry Brown and veterans such as Frank Church, Henry Jackson, and George Wallace.

Carter leaned heavily on moral principles in the presidential campaign. He used his obscurity to rail against the Watergate and CIA scandals, and spoke of his sincerity and faith. “I’ll never tell a lie,” he promised, in a television advert.⁴ Carter’s prospects were boosted by the problems besetting Gerald Ford. The Republican Party began distancing itself from the administration’s foreign policies—particularly détente. Ronald Reagan (Ford’s rival for the nomination) criticized the president for conceding too much ground in arms talks. Ford stopped using the term “détente” from March 1976 and began to harden his national security approach. But although he edged Reagan to win the party nomination, Ford’s foreign policy remained a liability. The crowd jeered at Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when he appeared in the presidential box at the Republican national convention in Kansas City. Carter joined in the criticism. He rebuked Kissinger “for giving up too much and asking for too little” in negotiations with Moscow and promised to achieve deeper cuts in arms control—positions designed to appeal to the hawkish wing in his own party.⁵

But Carter’s foreign policy agenda traversed both sides of the spectrum. He sought to placate liberals by targeting a defense budget cut of at least \$5 billion and promising to reduce military commitments overseas. Invoking Wilsonian language and a sense of mission, he spoke of the need for a moral compass to guide America’s outlook. Carter began to grasp the political utility of foreign affairs. By aligning a values-based platform with a vision for human rights abroad, he could attack the Ford administration for its support of dictatorial regimes (a grievance of liberals), while applying pressure on the Soviets to undertake internal reform (a stance favored by conservatives). Here was a strategy that appealed to both sides of the Democratic Party and a wider political audience. “It was

seen politically as a no-lose issue,” recalled Carter’s speechwriter, Patrick Anderson. “Liberals liked human rights because it involved political freedom and getting liberals out of jail in dictatorships. Conservatives liked it because it involved criticisms of Russia.”⁶

Though it would emerge as the centerpiece of his presidential (and postpresidential) legacy, Carter was a latecomer to global human rights.⁷ He opposed the Helsinki Accords in 1975, excoriating the Final Act for facilitating “the Russian takeover of Europe.”⁸ Neither in his campaign memoir *Why Not the Best?* nor prior to the Democratic National Convention of July 1976 did Carter address the subject. Only in the final two months of the campaign did he champion the cause.⁹ In the second presidential debate, Ford asserted that “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe”—a blunder that allowed Carter to present himself as the candidate best equipped to confront the communist threat.¹⁰ The promise of a humanitarian vision helped nudge Carter to victory: 50.1 percent of the popular vote and 297 electoral votes to Ford’s 240. “Human rights was an issue with which you could bracket Kissinger and Ford on both sides,” wrote Elizabeth Drew in the *New Yorker*. “It was a beautiful campaign issue, on which there was a real degree of public opinion hostile to the administration.”¹¹ But addressing human rights on the global stage was a more complex task—one that would undermine Carter’s efforts to reach agreements with Moscow.

THE BACKGROUND

Carter arrived in the White House against a background of worsening U.S.–Soviet relations. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 saw both powers back opposing sides in a Third World conflict, marking the most serious clash between Washington and Moscow since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Soviet military incursions into Africa and Southeast Asia were on the rise. And talks over a successor agreement to SALT I (on which so much of the relationship rested) had stalled as a powerful anti-détente faction mobilized on Capitol Hill.

The foundations for the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) were laid during the 1960s. Fears evoked by the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Soviet nuclear arsenal prompted demands for arms control negotiations. The signing of the Test Ban Treaty (1963) provided the impetus for a summit between Lyndon Johnson and Alexei Kosygin in 1967. But the “spirit of Glassboro” was punctured by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia a year later. The task of securing an arms control agreement

was passed to Nixon and Kissinger, who sought to transform the relationship through a policy of détente. They established a secret backchannel of communications with the Soviet leadership (via Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin), bypassing the State Department in the process. The primary goals remained the same: checking Soviet expansion and limiting Moscow's arms buildup. But Kissinger hoped to achieve this through diplomacy and mutual concessions, taking the ideological sting out of bilateral relations.¹²

The Nixinger approach was known as "linkage." They aimed to build a structure of relations in which the Soviets—should they cooperate on certain issues (e.g., strategic arms, regional problems)—would be offered economic rewards in return.¹³ One aim was to secure Soviet assistance in confronting crises in the Third World. A second goal was to engage Moscow in economic ties that would make it difficult for Soviet leaders to adopt policies detrimental to Western interests.¹⁴ It would also open new markets for American industries, manufacturers, and farmers. Having made the opening to China, the prospect of securing deals on arms control and trade were used as "a device to maximise Soviet dilemmas and reduce Soviet influence."¹⁵ Although Kissinger invoked the "morality" of détente, his strategy did not apply to Soviet domestic affairs. The Nixon administration would come under attack for downplaying human rights violations in the USSR. For their part, Soviet leaders had a vested interest in securing agreements. General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev was anxious to boost the struggling Soviet economy, drained by years of disproportionate military spending. Support for détente in the Kremlin reflected an expectation that a U.S.–Soviet deal would reopen access to Western markets.¹⁶

The Moscow summit in May 1972 saw Nixon and Brezhnev finalize the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) and SALT I treaties. The former restricted both sides to building two ABM fields of a hundred missiles each. Under the SALT I Treaty (which would last for five years), Washington and Moscow agreed to freeze the number of strategic weapons on each side.¹⁷ But SALT I was not without problems. The treaty did not limit MIRVs (missiles with several warheads, capable of hitting multiple and dispersed targets), in which the United States held a 2:1 advantage. This negated the Soviet superiority in ICBMs, for a single U.S. submarine equipped with MIRVs could inflict 160 blasts on the scale of the Hiroshima bomb.¹⁸ It was not long before the Soviets began testing their own MIRVs. The treaty also failed to control the Soviet deployment of new "heavy missiles" such as the SS-19 (the United States

duly sought to develop the MX program). Although SALT I marked a new chapter in U.S.–Soviet relations, it did little to halt the arms race. In 1972, these problems mattered less to Brezhnev, eager to secure a deal, and to Nixon, focused on his reelection. Indeed, the Moscow summit had been carefully timed. In the words of Nixon’s speechwriter William Safire: “Close enough to the 1972 election campaign to be effective, far enough away not to be blatantly political.”¹⁹

Brezhnev and Nixon reveled in the agreement. In pursuing détente first with Western Europe and then the United States, the Soviet leader shored up his domestic support. The Kremlin used new economic and technological agreements as a way of circumventing the need for domestic reform.²⁰ Nixon’s political stock also rose. His public approval rating soared to 61 percent after the successful visit to Moscow (the first ever by a U.S. president). Two foreign policy initiatives—détente with the Soviets, and the winding down of the Vietnam War—became the centerpieces of his bid for a second term.

The Moscow summit marked the high point of détente and, perhaps, the leaderships of Brezhnev and Nixon. The rapprochement declined amid U.S.–Soviet confrontation in the Yom Kippur War and over parts of Africa. But the role of domestic politics was also pivotal. The Vietnam War had shattered the Cold War consensus and provoked major questions about the conduct of foreign policy. Just how severe was the level of the communist threat? Was there political utility in applying military force overseas? If so, in what circumstances should it be used? The answers became sources of partisan and intraparty disagreement. Détente was subject to a barrage of criticism from Republicans and neoconservatives.

The neoconservatives emerged in the late 1960s when the liberal movement began to split. Conservative Democrats grew dismayed by radical politics (which followed protests over civil rights and Vietnam) and the failure of social reforms, believing the party had veered too far to the left. Foreign policy was a particular grievance. As liberals called for an end to the focus on anti-communism, neoconservatives warned of a Soviet arms buildup and expansion in the Third World. They urged U.S. policymakers to project military strength, denouncing SALT as “weakness” and “appeasement.” Public intellectuals such as Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol took to the pages of *Commentary* to promote their views. They were joined by politicians such as Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Washington), who compared Soviet foreign policy to a burglar who walked down hotel corridors trying every lock.²¹ In 1972, Jackson formed the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), a group

of neoconservative politicians, bureaucrats, and intellectuals who campaigned for new military programs and a tougher stance against Moscow. While the “neocons” retained liberal views on many domestic issues, their views on foreign affairs closely aligned with Republicans. They criticized détente, warned of Soviet advances, and rejected the idea of negotiating verifiable arms agreements.²²

On Capitol Hill the hawks were ahead of the game. With Nixon defenestrated, neoconservatives worked with Republicans to unravel his East–West policies. The anti-détente coalition grew as the imperial presidency gave way to a more assertive Congress. The War Powers Act (1973) was followed by the Jackson–Vanik amendment to the Trade Reform Act, which imposed conditions on the recent U.S.–Soviet trade agreement. The Soviet Union was required to relax its policies on Jewish emigration and guarantee the right of citizens to free movement in order to receive normal trade relations. Though Jackson championed human rights, his motives were as much political as ideological. Defeated in the Democratic primaries in 1972, he had identified Jewish voters as a key constituency in his bid for the 1976 presidential nomination. The connecting of U.S.–Soviet trade to the fate of Soviet Jews was a political winner for Jackson whatever the outcome. If the Kremlin acceded, the Jews would have their freedom. If they balked, détente would be further dented.²³

The Jackson–Vanik bill was signed into law within weeks of the Ford–Brezhnev agreement at Vladivostok (November 1974), which set new (but moderate) limits on nuclear arms and a framework for SALT II. The Kremlin resented the anti-détente maneuvering, having sought new trade deals to ease their economic problems. For Soviet leaders, acceptance of the terms would mean acquiescing to U.S. interference in its internal affairs. “Perhaps no single question did more to sour the atmosphere of détente than the question of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union,” Dobrynin recalled.²⁴ U.S. credits to Moscow were limited to just \$300 million over four years, while credits for developing oil and gas pipelines were prohibited—forcing the Soviets to turn to Western Europe. Soviet leaders responded by curtailing the number of Jews permitted to leave the USSR. They abandoned the pursuit of MFN status and stalled on repayments of the Lend–Lease debt, none of which helped the Ford–Kissinger efforts to engage with Moscow. “Jackson was about to launch his presidential campaign and was playing politics to the hilt,” Ford complained. “He behaved like a swine.”²⁵

By 1976, “détente” had become a dirty word in conservative circles. The new legislative powers emboldened politicians to seize on foreign

affairs, as the rise of special interest groups deepened the ideological wedge between the left and the right. As Ford and Kissinger had discovered, this complicated life for decision-makers. Within days of Carter's election, the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) was formed—a coalition of Republicans, neoconservatives, and Democratic hawks with a similar foreign policy view. Carter would be as much a target of their criticism as Ford and Nixon before him.

CARTER: FORMING AN ADMINISTRATION

Aged 52, Carter entered office conscious of his inexperience in foreign affairs. His campaign pronouncements had seen contradictions and about-turns. In 1975, Carter declared his opposition to the Helsinki Accords and the Jackson–Vanik amendment (a cause adopted by human rights activists) on the grounds that it meant interfering in Soviet internal affairs. By late 1976, Carter had promoted global human rights to the front of his agenda, alongside the reduction of nuclear weapons. But there was a tension between these two goals. Carter's criticism of human rights suppressions in the USSR and its client states would hinder attempts to secure a SALT II Treaty. It raised questions for the new administration. To what extent should Carter apply pressure on the Soviets to undertake internal reform? Could he reconcile this goal with the effort to achieve agreements on deeper cuts in nuclear arms? And how would he manage relations with a more assertive, polarized Congress?

Carter's foreign policy appointees would reach diverging conclusions on these issues. For secretary of state, the president selected Cyrus Vance. Born into a politically connected family, Vance had served in the Navy during the Second World War, before emerging as a successful Wall Street lawyer. He operated in the Department of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, resigning from the latter amid the escalation of the Vietnam War. Harold Brown, another veteran from the Johnson–McNamara years, took the reins as secretary of defense. But more controversial was the appointment of Zbigniew Brzezinski as national security adviser. Brzezinski was born in Warsaw but raised in Canada, where his father was posted as a diplomat in 1938. It was a period in which Polish fears of a Soviet invasion were palpable, and helped shape Brzezinski's lifelong antipathy toward Soviet communism. In 1958, he became a U.S. citizen. Brzezinski served as an adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and as a professor of government at Columbia University. He developed a reputation as a staunch anti-communist and foreign policy hardliner.

Brzezinski had cofounded the Trilateral Commission—a think tank comprising academics, businessmen, and lawyers, designed to promote cooperation between industrialized nations. Carter met Brzezinski in 1973, soon after becoming a member, and the latter served as an adviser during his presidential campaign. Impressed by Brzezinski's grasp of geopolitics, Carter selected him for the key national security post. He did so despite warnings that "Zbig" was "aggressive" and "ambitious," someone who "might not be deferential to a secretary of state."²⁶ Campaign adviser Clark Clifford told Carter that Brzezinski's traits made him ill-suited for the position and incompatible with Vance.²⁷ But the president saw these as strengths, not deficiencies. "They were in accord with what I wanted," Carter argued. "The final decisions on basic foreign policy would be made by me in the Oval Office."²⁸

Yet from the outset, it was Brzezinski to whom Carter looked to organize foreign policy. Power would lie not in the State Department but in the National Security Council. Presidential Directives (PDs) would be submitted by Brzezinski to Carter without being viewed by participants in the other committees: the SCC (Special Coordinating Committee) and the PRC (Policy Review Committee). Brzezinski was both "initiator" and "coordinator" of policy, not an intermediary. What emerged was a lopsided structure that did not facilitate a diversity of views. "The President often has to tell Brzezinski to shut up at meetings so he can listen to what others have to say," noted a Pentagon aide.²⁹ Vance resented the arrangement. He believed that the secretary of state should be the public spokesman on foreign affairs, with responsibility for policy coordination. But he did not issue Carter with an ultimatum.³⁰

In style and substance, Brzezinski and Vance were not simpatico. Where Brzezinski was outspoken and abrupt, Vance was cool and mild-mannered. Brzezinski believed in the utility of military power to further U.S. diplomacy, whereas Vance felt it should be used sparingly or as a last resort. And while Brzezinski thought in geostrategic terms, Vance preferred to take an incremental, case-by-case approach. They also disagreed on Soviet policy. Brzezinski saw the USSR as a military power that would use every opportunity to expand its influence. He favored a more confrontational policy—if necessary, using American military might to restrain Soviet actions. Only from a position of strength, he reasoned, could the administration extract agreements from Moscow.³¹ By contrast, Vance was an advocate of quiet diplomacy. He held less faith in the effectiveness of "linkage" and the idea of making agreements contingent on Soviet behavior. Vance rejected the notion that every crisis in the developing

world was being orchestrated by the Kremlin. He cautioned against casting overseas conflicts in Cold War terms—arguing that political instability in newly emerging countries was often the result of indigenous nationalist movements that were independent of Moscow.³²

Both men sought a better arrangement than SALT I and a reduction in tensions. But they disagreed on the aims and means. For Brzezinski, a SALT II accord would need to reverse the momentum of the Soviet military buildup. He feared that the Kremlin would “exploit Third World turbulence or impose its will in some political contest with the United States.”³³ Vance’s chief goals were more modest: to stabilize relations with Moscow and lower the prospect of nuclear war, while avoiding the sort of dangerous entanglements that had plagued past administrations. He preferred to focus on areas of mutual interest and cooperation, calling for patience in the pursuit of U.S. objectives. Unlike Brzezinski, Vance saw no Soviet design for global expansion, but rather the jostling for advantage to further its national interests. It was not long before the feuding began.³⁴

Carter selected Paul Warnke (a senior Pentagon official in the Johnson administration) as director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and his chief SALT negotiator. He too was a contentious appointment. The national security establishment had been divided post-Vietnam. On one side lay analysts such as Warnke, who criticized the quest for military power as a cynical formula for escalations in defense budgets and foreign interventions.³⁵ But others argued that the USSR could only be contained through a vast military buildup. Paul Nitze, Warnke’s rival for the post, fell into this category.³⁶ Nitze warned that without increased defense spending, Soviet numerical superiority and advantage in missile throw-weight would make U.S. land-based missiles vulnerable to a first strike.³⁷ The notion of a “window of vulnerability” would become a key line of attack from conservatives.

If Carter’s foreign policy selections were “establishment” figures, his domestic choices were anything but. The exception was his vice president, Minnesota senator Walter Mondale, who had withdrawn early from the 1976 race. A protégé of Hubert Humphrey, Mondale was well respected within Democratic ranks and shared Carter’s commitment to civil rights. But other choices raised eyebrows. Aged 32, Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s political adviser since 1970, would continue to serve as his chief aide. Jody Powell, 33, had met Carter as a student volunteer during his gubernatorial campaign in 1969, and was appointed press secretary. Jordan and Powell were so close to Carter, noted Brzezinski, “that they could have been his

sons and had that kind of relationship with him.”³⁸ They were but two of a string of appointees with connections to Carter during his stint as Georgia governor. Stuart Eizenstat was made domestic policy adviser; Griffin Bell became attorney general; Robert Lipshutz was appointed as White House counsel; Frank Moore headed the Office of Congressional Liaison; Jack Watson became cabinet secretary; and Bert Lance would serve as Carter’s budget director. Andrew Young, the first black representative to serve Georgia in a century, was made ambassador to the United Nations. The “Georgia mafia” was largely unknown in Washington circles—an indication of Carter’s intention to continue casting himself as a political outsider.

Perhaps his most fateful staffing decision, however, was the one left unfilled. The president did not appoint a chief of staff. Jordan was approached for the role but, aware of his inexperience, resisted the idea. Once he declined, Carter judged it “improper and inconsistent to bring an outsider in as a leader of all these people who had been with me since I was a young politician.”³⁹ But the political reasoning was as important as the moral. Carter felt bound by a campaign mantra—made against the legacy of Watergate—which rejected the notion of an all-powerful chief of staff roaming around the White House. “I’m going to be the President and I’m going to take decisions and run things’ [...] that was a political reaction to the excesses of the Nixon administration,” Jordan explained.⁴⁰ Carter opted for a spokes-in-the-wheel system, with cabinet members being granted equal access. But without a central figure overseeing the control of operations, prioritizing issues, and delegating responsibilities, it was a formula destined for problems. Bereft of such a presence, and with a cabinet lacking in diversity and executive experience, it was little wonder that the administration at times seemed incoherent. Not until mid-1979, after his “crisis of confidence” speech, did the president appoint Jordan as his chief of staff. By then, Carter was fighting for political survival.⁴¹

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

As a new broom arrived in Washington, a familiar one reigned in Moscow. In 1977 the Soviet Union was still led by Leonid Brezhnev. Now 70, Brezhnev was a shadow of the man who had succeeded Nikita Khrushchev in 1964. His health deteriorated following heart attacks in late 1974 and early 1976. Soviet doctors pronounced Brezhnev “clinically dead” after the second stroke, and his various illnesses (brain

atherosclerosis, emphysema) worsened as the year progressed. Brezhnev was addicted to painkillers and sedatives, and frequently suffered from overdoses. He worked about two hours a day, with some Politburo meetings lasting just twenty minutes.⁴² Public appearances became increasingly rare, and Brezhnev relied on the expertise of his troika of foreign policy advisers: KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov, and above all Andrei Gromyko, who had served as foreign minister since 1957.

The son of Byelorussian peasants, Gromyko began his career at the Soviet embassy in Washington, where he was posted as chargé d'affaires in 1939. Since then he had witnessed most of the key diplomatic events firsthand. Gromyko accompanied Stalin to the Yalta Conference in 1945; sat next to Khrushchev when the Soviet leader banged his shoe on a desk in the UN; told John F. Kennedy that the Soviets had not stationed offensive missiles in Cuba (despite evidence to the contrary); and played an active role in Moscow's push for détente. Yet he remained inscrutable to most Americans. The stern brow and pouting lip betrayed a sense of humor so dry that it was rarely understood. At the UN, a diplomat once tried to break the ice by asking Gromyko if he had enjoyed breakfast. "Perhaps," answered Gromyko. Outwardly, he remained "Mr. *Nyet*," the dour, poker-faced statesman. "He was quite funny. It was the way he did things," Warnke recalled. "He looked like a Borscht Belt comic, a lot of funny faces and broad gestures." If his humor was lost on the public, however, Gromyko's reputation as a tough negotiator was well known. "Normally, Gromyko knew every shade of a subject," Kissinger noted. "It was suicidal to negotiate with him without mastering the record or the issues."⁴³

Soviet leaders had failed to abide by the Helsinki Accords. Thousands of activists were jailed or exiled for expressing "unorthodox" views during the Brezhnev era. Some achieved international recognition. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who won the 1970 Nobel Prize for literature, was allowed leave for West Germany after publishing the *The Gulag Archipelago*, a story about Stalinist terror. While several dissidents were allowed to move west, others were forced to remain in the USSR. They included large numbers of Soviet Jews, who were refused the right to emigrate. Among the most prominent was nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov, whose crusade for civil liberties earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975. In May 1976, the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group was formed to monitor human rights violations and report their findings to the foreign media. Similar watch groups were founded in Soviet republics

such as Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania, and Armenia. Human rights movements also gathered pace outside of the USSR. In January 1977, a group of dissident Czechoslovak intellectuals published a manifesto titled “Charter 77,” which demanded that the Helsinki Accords be put into practice. As Carter took office, Soviet dissidents (relatively few in number) were calling for similar action.⁴⁴

For Brezhnev, bilateral relations (e.g., trade, arms control) were more important than squabbles over human rights. The Soviet leader delivered a goodwill speech in Tula two days before Carter’s inauguration. Its purpose was to publicly convey the Soviet foreign policy approach. He renounced the pursuit of military superiority, endorsed efforts to achieve a new SALT Treaty, and explained his views on détente. “Détente is above all an overcoming of the ‘cold war,’ a transition to normal, equal relations between states,” Brezhnev declared. “Détente is a readiness to resolve differences and conflicts not by force, not by threats and saber-rattling, but by peaceful means, at the negotiating table. Détente is a certain trust and ability to take into account the legitimate interests of one another.”⁴⁵

But détente had not dissuaded Moscow from amassing larger stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Soviet leaders were pursuing two diverging policies at once: détente on the one hand; and a military buildup on the other. “During those years we were arming ourselves like addicts, without any apparent political need,” recalled Georgy Arbatov, the Kremlin’s chief adviser on American affairs.⁴⁶ In 1976 the Soviet Union began deploying a new intermediate-range missile system, known as the SS-20. Soviet officials argued that their missile forces required modernization—an explanation that was rejected on both sides of the Atlantic. NATO allies viewed the SS-20 deployment as a cynical attempt to decouple European security from America by presenting the former with a new nuclear threat. It was met with grave concern in West Germany, which (unlike Britain and France) had no “independent” nuclear deterrent. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt feared that the Carter administration might use U.S. cruise missiles as a bargaining chip in the SALT negotiations, whereby the Soviets would remove missiles targeting America but not those aimed at Europe.⁴⁷

Brezhnev also faced internal opposition. The Secretariat of the Communist Party’s central committee were elderly conservatives (the average age was 64) whose outlook had been shaped by the events of the Second World War.⁴⁸ Some Politburo hardliners felt that Brezhnev had conceded too much at Vladivostok and was overly eager to preserve détente. Yet the Vladivostok understanding suited most Soviet leaders. It

targeted only a modest number of cuts, allowing Moscow to retain the vast majority of its heavy missile forces. Brezhnev also had a personal stake in the agreement, having suffered a heart seizure during the talks. To consolidate his position, Brezhnev would remove Politburo dissenter Nikolai Podgorny and replace him as president of the Supreme Soviet. With the arms race straining the Soviet economy and the SS-20 now in place, Brezhnev was ready for a SALT II deal.⁴⁹

APPROACHING THE SOVIETS: SALT II

Rather than pursuing one or two foreign goals in the early months, Carter directed his administration to attack on all fronts. A range of difficult issues were confronted simultaneously. Mondale traveled to Europe to help revive transatlantic relations; Vance visited the Middle East to mediate in the Arab–Israeli dispute; Young toured southern Africa, a region torn with civil strife; Sol Linowitz worked on negotiating the transfer of the Panama Canal to Panama; and Patricia Derian (who led the newly formed Bureau of Human Rights) campaigned to use U.S. foreign aid as a lever for human rights across the globe.

But the most pressing matter was the Cold War. The administration had two issues to address ahead of Vance's trip to Moscow in late March 1977. One was the nature of the arms agreement to be negotiated. Should Carter make a deal along the lines of the Vladivostok accord reached by Ford and Brezhnev? Or should he seek a more ambitious agreement which could lead to deeper arms cuts? The former option was strongly favored by the Kremlin, but was denounced by conservatives at home for failing to remove the threat of a Soviet first strike. Conversely, the "deep cuts" formula was championed by Republicans and conservative Democrats, whose support Carter would need to ratify a SALT agreement. But deep cuts deviated sharply from Vladivostok, requiring the USSR to remove many of its land-based ICBMs, the backbone of its nuclear arsenal. The second issue concerned human rights. With the SALT I Treaty due to expire in October, Carter had to decide whether to marry his aim of achieving a SALT II accord with the goal of promoting civil liberties in Eastern Europe.

Carter was unknown to Soviet leaders, who expected to reach a deal along the lines of the Vladivostok understanding. In September 1976, Averell Harriman (a former U.S. ambassador in Moscow) was authorized to tell Brezhnev that Carter would sign a SALT II agreement based on Vladivostok if he were elected president. But Soviet doubts were raised

toward the end of the election campaign, when Carter accused Ford of “giving too much up to the Russians.”⁵⁰ As president-elect, Carter told Brezhnev (via Harriman) that he would act quickly to secure a SALT II agreement, but would not be bound by previous negotiations. Harriman indicated that Carter would seek deeper cuts, perhaps up to three hundred missiles. “Moscow was put on guard,” recalled Anatoly Dobrynin, the long-serving Soviet ambassador in Washington.⁵¹

Once in office, Carter dithered over his SALT position. It did not help that his chief advisers were divided. Vance and Warnke (whose nomination was being contested) favored a pragmatic, gradual approach to arms control. In their view, the Vladivostok framework offered the best way of securing a SALT II Treaty and a stable basis for relations.⁵² Brzezinski and Brown, who held less benign views of the Soviets, advocated a deep cuts formula. Their aim was to publicly test Soviet intentions: if Moscow responded favorably, a more comprehensive arms agreement would seek to “halt the momentum of the Soviet military buildup.”⁵³

Carter leaned toward Vance’s logic early on. He indicated that the solution might be to work on the basis of Vladivostok, while deferring the two issues on which both sides were divided—the Soviet Backfire bomber and U.S. cruise missiles. Later, a SALT III deal could yield greater reductions and resolve the remaining differences. In his first press conference, Carter said he was willing to defer the contentious issues and reach “a quick agreement.” He envisioned a two-stage process: the first would establish “firm limits”; the second would target “substantive reductions [...] to show the world that we are sincere.” In a letter to Brezhnev on January 26, Carter called for “a SALT II agreement without delay.”⁵⁴ The statements were well received in Moscow.⁵⁵

But Carter (and some key advisers) did not feel obliged to abide by the Vladivostok terms. Before long, Carter was telling Dobrynin that he wanted “much deeper cuts” than those agreed at Vladivostok. He sought major reductions in strategic forces, cutting the number of missiles to perhaps several hundred (notably the Soviet heavy missiles). “There’s no practical way to do it,” Dobrynin responded. “We have just, with great difficulty, finished the Vladivostok agreement. It’s better to finish what we have, and then go to these drastic reductions later.” Dobrynin warned Carter that a deviation from Vladivostok would spell “serious problems” for the arms talks. “I think it’s not enough,” Carter replied. “We need to go further.”⁵⁶

Brzezinski urged Carter to pursue meaningful cuts in nuclear weapons. He warned that a “quick-fire” compromise would “not be politically

desirable,” fueling criticism from conservatives that the agreement was too narrow in scope.⁵⁷ Henry Jackson was publicly attacking Warnke, calling his support for Vladivostok “disturbing” and accusing him of targeting “irresponsible cuts” in the defense budget.⁵⁸ Aware of Jackson’s political sway, Carter began soliciting his views on SALT. On February 4, Jackson arrived at the White House to tell Carter that he would insist on much deeper cuts in the Soviets’ ICBM and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. To propitiate him, Carter designated General Ed Rowny (Jackson’s loyal confidant) as a “military observer” to the arms talks. In so doing, Jackson would receive a regular flow of information about the course of negotiations.⁵⁹ Carter wrote to Brezhnev the following week, explaining that he wanted to look at “drastic limitations on nuclear weapons.” Vladivostok was not mentioned. In his reply, Brezhnev warned Carter against submitting “deliberately unacceptable” proposals that departed from the 1974 agreement. The correspondence continued into March, when Carter complained about Brezhnev’s “harsh tone” and lack of positive response. “The fact is that no final agreement was ever reached at Vladivostok or in the subsequent negotiations,” he told the Soviet leader.⁶⁰

Jackson pressed Carter to harden his position. On February 15, he sent the president a twenty-three-page memo (co-written by Richard Perle, his military aide), which set the criteria for an acceptable SALT deal. The memo attacked the “Nixinger” approach, called for large cuts in Soviet heavy missiles, and warned of the “vulnerability” of U.S. strategic forces. Jackson likened the danger facing America to that faced by European allies in the 1930s, with the nation “sliding into a series of improvident risks [...] the cumulative result of which could be irreversible.” He told Carter that a “doubtful” agreement would be “bad politics.”⁶¹ Carter took the advice seriously. The Jackson memo was circulated to Vance, Brown, and other top advisers. Brzezinski and Jackson met privately to help narrow the gap between their respective positions.⁶² “Your SALT memorandum is excellent, and of great help to me,” Carter assured Jackson.⁶³ Carter kept the memo in his private safe near the Oval Office, referring back to it “to see if there were ways that I could accommodate Scoop’s very ambitious demands.”⁶⁴ The irony was inescapable. Just as Carter was defending Warnke in the Senate confirmation vote—lobbying senators on his behalf—he was forming an arms control approach based on the advice of Warnke’s chief opponent in Congress. Warnke dismissed Jackson’s memo as “a first class polemic.”⁶⁵

Warnke's nomination was supported by liberal senators such as Hubert Humphrey (D-Minnesota), who deemed him "an excellent choice." It was opposed by hardliners in the Armed Services Committee, who felt that the dovish Warnke would offer too many concessions to Moscow. They included conservative Democrats such as Jackson, who said that he would "weaken Warnke as an international negotiator to the point of uselessness by holding the vote in his favor to 60 or less." CPD co-founder Paul Nitze testified against Warnke, charging him with disregarding the "clear and present danger" posed by the Soviet Union. The hawks got their wish. On March 9, Warnke was approved for the post, but only by a vote of 58–40. It was a margin well short of the two-thirds threshold needed to ratify any SALT Treaty that Carter might reach with the Soviets. The message was clear: Carter would have to toughen his SALT position in order to avoid a major defeat in the Senate.⁶⁶

*

The politicking pushed Carter toward the "comprehensive" option. In the weeks following Jackson's memo, the proposals being discussed targeted deeper arms cuts. On February 25, two new formulas sought greater reductions in the permitted number of launchers: one called for cuts from 2,400 (the Vladivostok level) to 2,000; another proposed reductions to 1,500.⁶⁷ At a meeting on March 10, Brzezinski and Brown agreed on a compromise of 2,000 launchers. Warnke was skeptical about presenting the Soviets with a proposal that so differed from Vladivostok.⁶⁸ But his arguments were rejected. At a further meeting two days later, Carter expressed his desire for "real arms control." Brzezinski, Brown, and Mondale supported his decision. Vance did not, but reluctantly acquiesced. The secretary of state agreed to bring the deep cuts formula to Moscow, after being assured that he could also take a more modest proposal ("Vladivostok minus") as a fallback position.⁶⁹

The proposal that Vance brought to Moscow aimed to change the SALT framework by lowering the strategic arms ceiling that was fixed at Vladivostok: ICBMs would be reduced from 2,400 to a level between 2,000 and 1,800; MIRVed ICBMs would be cut from 1,200 to 1,100; and Soviet heavy missile forces would be roughly halved from 308 to 150. The cuts excluded the U.S. cruise missiles, while the Soviet Backfire would not be counted as a strategic bomber—provided that Moscow adhered to a list of measures designed to inhibit its range. Although some U.S. programs would be affected (such as the MX), most were not yet under development. As author Strobe Talbott noted, "the U.S. was seeking substantial

reductions in existing Soviet systems in exchange for marginal cuts in future American ones.” In sum, the deep cuts formula targeted major cutbacks in land-based missiles (where the Soviets held an advantage), while containing few limits on submarines or air-launched weapons, areas in which the United States was superior.⁷⁰

On March 18, Carter invited Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Vance for supper to discuss his SALT decision. The president asked Kissinger whether he thought the Soviets would accept his “ambitious” proposal. Kissinger rolled his eyes skyward and sighed. After a long pause, he replied, “Yes, I think they might accept it.”⁷¹ The Soviet ambassador was less bullish about the U.S. proposal after being briefed by Vance. Dobrynin warned that the deep cuts gambit would be rejected. He was baffled that the administration was publicizing its approach ahead of the meeting. As Vance departed for Moscow, Soviet leaders had already surmised that Carter’s intentions were “not serious.”⁷²

HUMAN RIGHTS

The subplot to the arms debates was the humanitarian situation in Eastern Europe. Carter’s dealings with the Soviets on human rights reflected a mixture of motives. His feelings on the subject mirrored his passion for civil rights in America. A deeply religious man, Carter was determined to project those same values overseas.⁷³ But the reasoning was not just morality. Brzezinski persuaded Carter to use human rights as an instrument to weaken Moscow ideologically and encourage opposition within Soviet society.⁷⁴ It was also an issue which had proved a domestic political winner, attracting the support of liberals, neoconservatives, and Republicans. “Of our numerous foreign policy initiatives, [human rights] is the only one that has a broad base of support among the American people and is not considered ‘liberal’,” Jordan explained to Carter.⁷⁵ The president was “convinced” that there was no contradiction between the pursuit of Soviet human rights and his quest for arms control. “He thought human rights was the general historical tendency in our time, and that the Soviet Union could not be immune to that process,” recalled Brzezinski.⁷⁶ The national security adviser pressed Carter to pursue both goals at once. But the objectives were inconsistent. Simultaneously, Brzezinski sought to place the Kremlin “ideologically on the defensive” over human rights; promote a more “comprehensive and reciprocal” détente; and “move away from [...] our excessive preoccupation with the U.S.–Soviet relationship.” As historian John Lewis Gaddis noted, the

premise seemed to be that one could reform, negotiate with, and ignore the USSR all at the same time.⁷⁷

Carter served early notice of his intentions. He raised human rights in his first letter to Brezhnev on January 26. At the same time, the State Department charged Czechoslovakia with human rights violations and of harassing those who campaigned for Charter 77. The next day the department praised Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov and issued a warning against threats to intimidate him. But the KGB continued to clamp down on activists. The arrest of fellow dissidents Aleksandr Ginzburg and Yuri Orlov (founder of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group) prompted more criticism from the administration.⁷⁸ On February 17, Carter sent Sakharov a letter of support, expressing his “firm commitment to promote respect for human rights.”⁷⁹ Twelve days later Carter welcomed Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky to the White House, and repeated his stance. “Our commitment to the concept of human rights is permanent,” Carter declared. “I don’t intend to be timid in my public statements and positions.”⁸⁰

Soviet leaders were furious. The new administration was not only “toppling the structure” built in Vladivostok, it was elevating human rights to the top of U.S.–Soviet relations. For Brezhnev, who had seen Kissinger downplay the subject for eight years, this was a personal affront.⁸¹ Brezhnev told Carter that he would not brook “interference in our internal affairs, whatever pseudo-humanitarian slogans are used to present it.” He rebuked Carter for corresponding with a “renegade [Sakharov] who proclaimed himself an enemy of the Soviet state.”⁸² Brzezinski tried to rationalize Brezhnev’s response. Since the Soviets had issued “no direct public criticism” or “explicit threats,” Carter’s statements, he argued, were viewed as “non-events” by Moscow. He suggested that any Soviet concerns would be assuaged if Carter couched his human rights posture “more broadly [...] applicable to all nations—in other words, that this is not a matter of anti-Soviet tactics.”⁸³

Carter appeared similarly blasé. On March 22, he told a congressional group that his criticism of Soviet human rights violations would not destabilize relations. There was, Carter said, “no need to worry every time Brezhnev sneezes.”⁸⁴ He did so despite a report from U.S. Ambassador Malcolm Toon, who described an “unusually tough” speech from Brezhnev to the trade unions. The Soviet leader charged the United States with a “campaign of slander,” warning that “under no circumstances would interference in our internal affairs be tolerated.” It was a reversal of the tone adopted by Brezhnev in Tula back in January.⁸⁵

However well-intended, the administration had badly miscalculated. “Carter failed to realize that Soviet leaders would regard his position as a direct challenge to their internal political authority and even as an attempt to change their regime,” recalled Dobrynin. “The telegram from the White House to Sakharov was very offensive. We considered this a departure from the normal diplomatic relations between two countries. Those were people Brezhnev very sincerely considered enemies. At that time, it stirred very strong emotions.”⁸⁶

WET RUG IN MOSCOW

What ensued in Moscow was a debacle. On March 28, Vance received a chilly welcome at the Kremlin. Brezhnev launched into a tirade against Carter’s human rights campaign. It was followed by a long tribute to the Vladivostok accord, deemed by the Soviets as the only acceptable basis for a SALT II deal. Brezhnev called the U.S. proposal “unconstructive and one-sided,” halving the number of Soviet heavy missiles in exchange for the deferral of some future American programs. He also raised the question of European-based nuclear missiles, which remained a threat to Moscow. Carter’s position, he said, was “utterly unacceptable.”⁸⁷ Gromyko told Vance: “The chief demand being made by the USA, namely that we destroy half our land-based ICBMs, is absurd. We are wholly opposed to tampering with the Vladivostok accords.”⁸⁸ Vance arrived for the final day of talks expecting a Soviet counterproposal, with the aim of reaching some compromise. Instead, he found the opposition more irritable than before. Brezhnev noted the omission of U.S. cruise missiles, remarking that the Soviet SS-20 “can’t hit [America] from anywhere, but you can drop thousands of missiles on us from Europe. It’s my people who will be killed.”⁸⁹

Vance was whisked away without a Soviet counteroffer. “The problem that really arose was that when we put our proposals on the table, nobody would listen to them,” he recalled. “Contrary to usual practice, nobody said, ‘Well, let’s sit down and talk about that and see if we can find a way to get around this thing.’ We got a wet rug in the face, and were told to go home.”⁹⁰ Vance defended the U.S. proposal before the press, euphemistically describing the talks as “businesslike.” He refused to be drawn on the prospects for a SALT agreement.⁹¹ Carter was less diplomatic: “Obviously, if we feel [. . .] that the Soviets are not acting in good faith, then I would be forced to consider a much more deep commitment to the development and deployment of additional weapons.”⁹² The statement

was taken as an ultimatum by the Kremlin. Gromyko accused Carter of “seeking a public victory” and pursuing “deliberately unacceptable proposals.” One Soviet official complained that Henry Jackson had so much influence in shaping the U.S. position that he possessed an “invisible chair” at the talks.⁹³

Carter’s attempts to engage Moscow had failed miserably. The bid to accommodate conservatives (to help carry a SALT deal) overrode concerns about Soviet sensibilities, already strained by the human rights issue. The basis of the anti-Warnke campaign had been to feed Carter’s perceptions and preempt efforts to set a more modest course.⁹⁴ Already it had proved successful. The comprehensive proposal granted the anti-détente faction in Congress a valuable political tool. Carter’s “deep cuts” stance now became the yardstick against which hardliners gauged the merits of a SALT II agreement.⁹⁵ Anything less would be attacked as weakness. Equally, the president’s credibility would be undermined were he to retreat from his tough position. As the tactical errors dawned on the administration, new political actors mobilized in Washington.

THE COMMITTEE ON THE PRESENT DANGER

Carter was not alone in benefiting from the political disorientation of the Vietnam–Watergate era. A more decentralized power structure allowed other actors (e.g., interest groups, lobbyists, public intellectuals) to capitalize on the new landscape. Few did so with as much success as the Committee on the Present Danger, a foreign policy interest group revived when neoconservatives joined forces with Republicans. Comprising establishment politicians, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, the CPD’s *raison d’être* was to rail against détente while campaigning for a vast U.S. military buildup. The committee was a reincarnation of the group formed back in 1950 to promote the policies of NSC-68. It, too, owed its ascent to election-year politics.

During the Republican primaries in 1976, Ford’s foreign policy approach was derided by rival candidate Ronald Reagan, who accused intelligence agencies of underestimating Soviet military strength. Pressured by hawks to produce a new analysis of Soviet capabilities, Ford authorized CIA director George Bush to commission an external group of “experts” (Team B) to appraise the intelligence data available. But Team B proved less than objective. Four of the seven members were future CPD founders, including historian Richard Pipes and the veteran diplomat, Paul Nitze. The result was an alarmist report that attacked

U.S. intelligence for underestimating the Soviet military buildup. It warned of a Soviet Union outproducing the United States in strategic and conventional weaponry, and developing a superior first-strike capability. Team B's aim was to reinstate containment militarism as the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy—a return to the pre-Vietnam, early Cold War doctrine of NSC-68.⁹⁶ Their claims about Soviet capabilities were later debunked. But at the time Team B's views went unchallenged.⁹⁷

Nitze detected a “public complacency” about the Soviet threat. He called on a vast network of establishment friends to form the CPD, one of the most effective citizen-lobbying groups of the Cold War.⁹⁸ Created three days after Carter's election, the committee lived up to its name. “Soviet expansionism threatens to destroy the world balance of forces on which the survival of freedom depends,” read its founding statement. “If we continue to drift, we shall become second best to the Soviet Union in overall military strength. Our national survival itself would be in peril.”⁹⁹

Nitze had served as an adviser and diplomat for five presidents dating back to Franklin Roosevelt. White-haired and deeply lined, he was approaching 70 and in the twilight of his career. He resigned, disillusioned, as Ford's SALT negotiator in 1974, and began attacking the Vladivostok agreement. He appeared on television and in Congress, articulating his views on the “Vietnam Syndrome” or the Soviet threat. As a conservative Democrat, Nitze sided with Carter in the presidential race only after Jackson was out of contention. But when invited by Carter to brief him on national security, Nitze made a poor impression, haranguing the candidate instead of engaging in a friendly exchange of views. His “arrogant” style irritated Carter. “Nitze was a typical know-it-all,” Carter recalled. “He didn't seem to listen to others and he had a doomsday approach.”¹⁰⁰ Nitze was duly shunned in favor of Warnke—his rival and one-time colleague—with whom he held opposite views on arms control.

Bitter at being overlooked for the position of SALT negotiator, Nitze did everything to block Warnke's appointment. He telephoned friends in Congress and sent a letter to John Sparkman, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, explaining that Warnke “may not be a qualified student or competent judge of military affairs.” “I cannot bring myself to believe that the Senate would be well advised to give its consent,” he wrote.¹⁰¹ After being invited to testify at the confirmation hearings, Nitze got personal. He called Warnke's views “absolutely asinine [...] screwball, arbitrary, and fictitious.” And when asked by liberal New Hampshire senator Thomas McIntyre if he thought he was a “better

American” than Warnke, Nitze replied, “I really do.” Even Jackson, who endorsed Nitze’s views, watched uneasily.¹⁰²

Warnke’s appointment did not discourage Nitze’s CPD. Of the 141 founding members, many were influential, establishment figures. They included Douglas Dillon and Henry Fowler (former secretaries of the treasury); William Casey (president of the Import-Export Bank); General Andrew Goodpaster (former NATO Supreme Allied Commander); Lane Kirkland (secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO); Norman Podhoretz (editor of *Commentary*); and Dean Rusk (former secretary of state).¹⁰³ The board was bipartisan: 60 percent of the members were Democrats and 40 percent were Republicans.¹⁰⁴ The committee was incorporated as a nonprofit, research, and educational organization. It received exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service, and was mainly financed by voluntary donations from individuals.¹⁰⁵ While the CPD seized on numerous issues, it was arms control and the Soviet Union that generated the most political capital. Alliances were formed with military-industrial lobbyists, members of Congress, and interest groups such as the Coalition for a Democratic Majority. Disillusioned with the direction of the Democratic Party, many of the CDM’s leading lights would join the CPD. Among them were Richard Pipes, Eugene Rostow, Norman Podhoretz, and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Over the next four years, this panoply of forces strove to mould public opinion about the threat posed by the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁶

The administration’s setback in Moscow had been a useful start for the CPD. It allowed Nitze and others to cast the Soviets as intransigent and untrustworthy. Within days the committee published its first pamphlet, “What is the Soviet Union up to?” which was distributed to politicians, newspapers, and editorialists.¹⁰⁷ It portrayed a militarily superior power, whose designs were “global,” “expansionist,” and “uniquely dangerous.”¹⁰⁸ Of the Soviet deficiencies—qualitatively inferior stockpiles, economic and technological decline, social problems, and ethnic unrest—there was no mention.

MAKING A COMPROMISE

The failure of the Vance mission prompted a rethink. In a bid to revive the arms talks, the Carter administration implemented two key changes. One was the conduct of U.S. diplomacy; the other was the nature of the SALT proposal. Humiliated in Moscow, Vance insisted that the negotiations could no longer take place in public. He called for a return to secret diplomacy via Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet ambassador since 1962. In April,

Dobrynin met privately with Carter's top advisers, warning that the state of relations was the "most unsatisfactory in the last ten years." Carter and Brezhnev traded words in public, expressing their desire to revive talks. The president said he was "very eager to change" any terms that the Soviets could prove were inequitable. Moscow took the statement as a sign of flexibility.¹⁰⁹ Dobrynin recalled: "It looked like the administration was looking for a way out of a blind alley into which it had driven—at least that was how Vance saw it."¹¹⁰

Carter knew he had overreached by pushing the deep cuts proposal.¹¹¹ Liberals in Congress complained of inadequate consultation, and the president was urged to widen his base of support. "Everyone agrees that we should not allow Senator Jackson to monopolize Senate commentary on our SALT positions," wrote political aide Landon Butler, after speaking with Brzezinski. "By broadening the base of support, the President can help ensure that he has the trust of the public and the Senate when he presents the agreement for ratification." The State Department began holding SALT briefings for senators selected by Democratic Party whip Alan Cranston (D-California).¹¹² Conscious of the degree to which he had placated the Jackson wing, Carter told his SALT team to "repackage" the deal offered to the Soviets. Vance and Warnke began synthesizing the three arms control formulas (the deep cuts proposal; Vladivostok-minus; and Kissinger's compromise).¹¹³ To avoid antagonizing the Soviets, Carter ordered his negotiators not to raise the issue of human rights.¹¹⁴

The changes had the desired effect. In late April, Vance struck an agreement with Dobrynin for a new three-part SALT framework which would run until 1985. The first part would reduce the Vladivostok weapons ceilings; the second was an interim agreement for three years on issues such as cruise missiles; and the third was a commitment to negotiate deeper cuts in a future SALT III deal.¹¹⁵ The revised package was approved by Vance and Gromyko in Geneva on May 21. It targeted a modest reduction from the Vladivostok ceiling of 2,400 ICBMs, while the United States agreed to ban the deployment of its long-range land and sea-based cruise missiles for a period of three years. Although the gap had been narrowed, the finer details remained unresolved. Gromyko was still rejecting the U.S. efforts to reduce Soviet heavy missiles (the U.S. proposal this time was to cut the number from 308 to 190).¹¹⁶

Neoconservatives were furious with the decision to jettison the deep cuts proposal. On May 12, Jackson's CDM had written to Carter, urging him to "hang tough" and ignore liberal critics: "You have set off on a long, challenging course. But it is the right course. We promise to do all we can to

rally the public support that will enable you to pursue it.”¹¹⁷ However, the Jackson–Carter rapprochement ended after details of the new SALT proposal became public. The senator sent Carter a private letter, expressing his anger at the concessions.¹¹⁸ But the Committee on the Present Danger were more open in their criticism. Unlike the CDM, it opposed the deep cuts formula back in March, and found the new position even less palatable. Brzezinski was besieged by letters from founding member Eugene Rostow, who sent copies of Team B reports.¹¹⁹ On July 6, the committee published a paper titled “Where We Stand on SALT.” It attacked the administration for a “prompt and substantial retreat.” “The Soviets evidently believe [...] that the United States is so eager to achieve an agreement, that they merely have to say ‘no’ to our proposals, and we will come forward with modifications more advantageous to their side.”¹²⁰

Brzezinski accepted some of the criticism. He told Jordan: “There is a tendency on our side to want an agreement so badly that we begin changing our proposals until the point is reached that the Russians are prepared to consider it.” To shore up the domestic side, both agreed on the need for a “tougher position.”¹²¹ Brzezinski pointed out that the geopolitics favored America. The Soviets faced hostility on two fronts—from the West and China—while a CIA report pointed to growing economic concerns in Moscow. Hard currency debt was already \$14 billion, and the expected decline in Soviet oil production would exacerbate their problem. (Oil exports to the West accounted for 40 percent of Soviet hard currency.) The power of the United States to “greatly aggravate the Soviet dilemma,” Brzezinski wrote, “will bring Brezhnev back to a foreign policy of moderation.”¹²²

Brzezinski was therefore uneasy with Carter’s repeated efforts to arrange a meeting with the Soviet leader. On four occasions in mid-1977, the administration made proposals for a summit. All were rejected by Moscow. In one letter Carter suggested hosting a summit in Alaska, reasoning that its remoteness was similar to that of Vladivostok. Brezhnev declined, stating that the differences on SALT had to be settled before a summit could take place.¹²³ After further Carter enquiries, Brzezinski insisted that efforts to arrange a meeting be drafted as proposals by Harriman rather than the president. ‘I told Carter that he ought to stop proposing the meeting,’ Brzezinski recalled. ‘I developed the sense that at their end it was becoming bargaining leverage against us.’¹²⁴

*

As Carter approached Brezhnev, he was also making efforts to contain the CPD. Harold Brown told the committee of Carter’s displeasure with their

statements. But in a tacit admission of their influence, Brown invited a committee delegation to the White House. Carter's aim was to persuade the CPD to establish a line of private communication, rather than going public. The invitation was not official. A White House press release announced only that the president was to meet "a group of leaders from a private industry."¹²⁵ Nitze, Rostow, and six other CPD members (Democrats and Republicans) arrived on August 4. The meeting was torturous. After patiently listening to their arguments, Carter defended his SALT position. He said that "defense spending cannot go up because public opinion is against it." "No, no, no!" Nitze interrupted, as Carter was speaking. "Paul," he complained, "would you please let me finish?" The mood was one of "exasperation" according to a *Washington Post* report, and the meeting lasted for two hours—twice its allotted time. Carter vented anger at their attacks. "I am the President trying to do his best and achieve goals we all agree on. Why don't you support me instead of picking on me?" Pointing to their bipartisan committee, Henry Fowler asked Carter not to be so touchy.¹²⁶ Rostow described the meeting as "a farce," which signaled the point of departure between the administration and neoconservatives. "We listened to Carter, but did not know what to make of it. The President was so disconnected. We suddenly realized that he was not really interested in our views but was asking us to support him."¹²⁷

CARTER MEETS GROMYKO

In September 1977, Carter held his first meeting with a top-ranking Soviet official, when Andrei Gromyko arrived in Washington. The aim was to build on the SALT II framework agreed in May. Gromyko momentarily shed his dour image, telling stories about the Second World War and lavishing praise on Averell Harriman. But he soon reverted to type. The foreign minister showed no flexibility, and refused to compromise over the Soviet heavy missiles.¹²⁸ His mood was not improved when Carter raised the issue of human rights. The president cited the imprisonment of Soviet Jews, including the dissident Anatoly Shcharansky. Gromyko played dumb. "Who is Shcharansky?" he asked. Carter was baffled. "Haven't you heard about Shcharansky?" "No," said Gromyko. After an awkward silence, he added: "Nobody knows him. These questions have minute significance [...] The question of emigration from the Soviet Union of any nationality is our domestic problem, to be resolved internally."¹²⁹

Despite the altercation, progress was made on arms control. Vance and Gromyko agreed on a basic framework which would form the outline of a new SALT Treaty. Gromyko accepted an overall limit of 2,250 missile launchers (down from 2,400 at Vladivostok), of which 1,250 could contain multiple warheads, with a ceiling of 820 for MIRVed ICBMs. Since the SALT I Treaty was due to expire in October, both sides agreed to honor the terms until SALT II could take effect. Carter also spoke of new possibilities for U.S.–Soviet trade. “I inherited the [Jackson–Vanik] law, which links trade with other questions,” he told Gromyko. “I would like to see this problem solved. I hope that together we can influence our common ‘friend’, Senator Jackson, to annul the trade limitations adopted on his initiative.”¹³⁰

There was little warmth between the two men. Gromyko thought that Carter was “not overburdened with foreign policy expertise.”¹³¹ Carter considered Gromyko “obstinate” and “uncooperative [...] much more charming to my wife than he was to the rest of us.” In a bid to lighten the mood, Carter said that while Gromyko had the greater diplomatic experience (“maybe 500 more months”), both knew that peace was what the American and Soviet people wanted most.¹³² Before they parted, Carter left Gromyko with a surprise gift; a wooden model set displaying all Soviet and American missiles lined up side by side. The Soviet missiles, painted black, outnumbered the pristine white U.S. ICBMs. Placing the set on the table, Carter drew Gromyko’s attention to the largest Soviet missiles. “These are the ones we are most afraid of,” he explained. Gromyko was unimpressed. When Carter left, he handed the set to Dobrynin, saying that he did not “play with toys.” The Soviet ambassador kept the gift.¹³³

On Capitol Hill, Henry Jackson was on the warpath. He attacked Carter for having abandoned the proposals made in March, and for continuing the provisions of SALT I after its expiry.¹³⁴ Jackson said that the existing formula gave the Soviets enough heavy weaponry to destroy the entire U.S. ICBM fleet. Moscow’s military “superiority,” he claimed, would inhibit America’s ability to launch retaliatory attacks on Soviet cities in the event of a first strike. “It’s high time that we stopped the dangerous practice of entering into unequal deals with Moscow in the misguided notion that Soviet leaders would reward our generosity with restraint in international affairs.”¹³⁵ Vance was summoned to appear before the Senate Armed Services Committee on October 15, to explain the compromises that were made. Carter wrote to Jackson five days later, explaining that his requests would be met “as well as possible.” He provided the senator with a copy of the SALT draft text, but

rejected Jackson's demand to view the instructions given to the U.S. delegation.¹³⁶

Yet Jackson remained the key figure in the battles over SALT ratification and U.S.–Soviet trade legislation. In another effort to woo the senator, Carter asked Dobrynin to invite Jackson to Moscow for a meeting with Brezhnev. Dobrynin obliged in mid-November, arriving for dinner at Jackson's home to discuss the details. But the Jackson–Brezhnev meeting (projected for March 1978) never materialized. Jackson's adviser, Richard Perle, insisted that the Kremlin permit the senator to meet with leading dissidents (including Sakharov) as a condition of his visit. Jackson knew that it would annoy Brezhnev, but refused to relent on the demand. The Soviets responded by canceling his visit.¹³⁷

SALT II was back on track after the Carter–Gromyko meeting. But there were various obstacles to a final agreement. Technical issues such as the Backfire bomber, verification procedures, and the use of encryption meant that talks dragged on for more than a year. Carter's launch of a new diplomatic opening with China in 1978 would further delay the completion of a treaty until mid-1979.

DEFENSE DECISIONS

Carter's problems with the neoconservatives were aggravated by his decision to cancel the B-1 bomber program in June. Anti-SALT hardliners accused the president of being "soft" on defense. It was a refrain that continued until November 1980. Vance agreed in principle with Carter's decision (based on ideological and economic grounds), but regretted the lack of political consideration. The seeking of some Soviet concession in return for canceling the B-1 might have assuaged conservative fears. But Carter deemed the program "a gross waste of money."¹³⁸ The cancellation angered figures on both sides of the political aisle, including Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Georgia) – described by Brzezinski as "the most crucial senator in the SALT ratification battle."¹³⁹ The opposition to Carter's decision would linger when the SALT II Treaty came up for consideration in Congress. Vance recalled that the B-1 cancellation "became a millstone around the administration's neck."¹⁴⁰

It was a measure of the partisan divisions that the B-1 debates took place before an almost empty chamber: senators merely delivered prepared remarks before departing. Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker (R-Tennessee) said that it had ceased to be a forum for meaningful debate.¹⁴¹ Carter's decision to spurn the B-1 reignited interest in a new

missile system called MX (or Missile Experimental). It was originally conceived as a weapon which could be used in a “limited” nuclear war against Soviet strategic forces. For example, 300 MXs (each equipped with ten or more warheads) would be capable of targeting the Soviets’ 300 newly deployed SS-18 ballistic missiles.¹⁴² Critics of Carter’s defense posture now argued for the deployment of such a weapon. But with the Pentagon estimating costs of some \$33 billion, Carter resisted their pleas.¹⁴³

Carter’s decision to halt production of the ERW (or neutron bomb) brought him further political grief. The initial plan was to equip U.S. artillery units in Europe with an enhanced radiation weapon (ERW). The ERW was so called because it killed enemy forces with a surge of radiation, while reducing damage to property by suppressing the heat and damage from the blast. (The Soviets called it the “capitalist bomb.”) Its purpose was to reassure allies of the U.S. commitment to deter Soviet aggression, following Moscow’s production of the SS-20 missiles. In the event of a Soviet invasion the bomb could be used against tanks and troops, while lessening the danger of “collateral damage.” West Germany, home to most of America’s nuclear weapons in Europe, was the intended location.¹⁴⁴ The secret plan predated Carter’s arrival, but became headline news after it was reported by the *Washington Post* in June 1977.¹⁴⁵ Most Republicans and conservative Democrats (e.g., senators John Stennis and Sam Nunn) urged Carter to press ahead with the ERW. So did Brown and Brzezinski, who saw it as a way of deterring Soviet force and a bargaining chip: Carter could offer to defer deployment of the neutron bomb in return for the Soviet non-deployment of the SS-20s.¹⁴⁶ But liberals argued that the ERW was morally repugnant, and increased the chance of war by implying the ability to fight, win, and recover from a nuclear attack. Opposed to the ERW on these grounds, Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) and moderate Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield (Oregon) tried to veto the funding, but lost both votes.¹⁴⁷

Carter vacillated in the face of pressure from the left and right. An NSC memo in November warned: “If we decide to go ahead, we will be heavily criticized for opening a new round of the arms race in a horrible way. No amount of public education will mute this criticism. On the other hand, a decision to forego production will be criticized as a sign of weakness in the face of political pressure. Following the B-1 and recent SALT furore, a negative decision would reinforce the President’s problems with the hawks, which could well be greatest on the Hill.”¹⁴⁸ Morally and politically Carter was uncomfortable with the neutron bomb. He told

Vance and Brzezinski that he would “press the Europeans to show greater interest in having the bomb and therefore a willingness to absorb some of the political flak.” Carter pledged to move ahead only if the Western Europeans demanded it.¹⁴⁹ But there were no takers. Public protests against neutron warheads took place in various European capitals, and West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had his own domestic concerns. Many in the SPD were opposed to the bomb, with his party forming part of a coalition government that supported *détente* with the Soviets and closer relations with East Germany. Schmidt favored the ERW deployment to help counter the Soviet SS-20s. But since his political base was weak, the chancellor had no intention of publicly taking a position.¹⁵⁰

A NATO statement was cobbled together in early 1978, pledging to support the ERW deployment. But before it was finalized, Carter balked. The terms of the agreement linked the ERW to arms control talks, and left Carter complaining that the European commitment was “too vague,” placing all of the political responsibility on him. “I wish I’d never heard of this weapon,” he told advisers.¹⁵¹ Despite Brzezinski’s protests, Carter agreed only to “defer,” rather than cancel, a final decision.¹⁵² The ERW deferral angered some European leaders and damaged Carter’s public image. Schmidt, already frustrated by Carter’s handling of SALT and human rights, accused him of “disengaging from Europe.”¹⁵³ Domestic criticism was no less intense. Carter’s opponents charged him with pursuing unilateral disarmament. “First we give away the B-1 bomber, and now we’re giving away the neutron bomb,” bemoaned Howard Baker, calling it “another in a long line of national defense mistakes by the President.”¹⁵⁴

*

Carter’s rejection of the B-1, MX, and neutron bomb conformed to his early agenda, outlined in a major speech in May 1977. At the University of Notre Dame, Carter reaffirmed the commitment to human rights as a “fundamental tenet” of American foreign policy. He pledged to reduce the volume of arms sales to foreign states and restrict the transfer of advanced weapons. He also stressed the need to reduce the nuclear threat: “The arms race is not only dangerous, it’s morally deplorable. We must put an end to it. We desire a freeze on further modernization and production of weapons, and a continuing, substantial reduction of strategic nuclear weapons.” In a jibe at Cold War alarmists, Carter declared that America was “now free of that inordinate fear of communism.” The “unifying threat” from Moscow had become “less intensive.” It was

time, he said, to move beyond the outdated policy of containment and embrace a new approach. While expressing his support for détente, Carter added: "We hope to persuade the Soviet Union that one country cannot impose its system of society upon another, either through direct military intervention or through the use of a client state's military force."¹⁵⁵

But Carter's bold approach had already hit stumbling blocks. As Leslie Gelb (assistant secretary of state) recalled, the administration was caught between "two rising conservative tides: one in the United States; the other in the Soviet Union."¹⁵⁶ Both were becoming more entrenched in their position, and concessions to one party adversely affected Carter's relations with the other. The consensus in Washington was that the Soviets were now "more muscular." Over the summer, Brzezinski and his military assistant, William Odom, convinced Carter to toughen up the U.S. posture.¹⁵⁷ On August 24, Presidential Directive 18 was issued. It called for enhanced U.S. military capabilities and a more assertive, flexible posture overseas. PD-18 committed the United States to increase defense spending by three percent each year in real terms (contradicting Carter's campaign pledge); to improve the combat ability of American forces in Europe and the Middle East; and to review the "targeting policy" for a hypothetical nuclear war with the Soviet Union. It was a reflection of Carter's efforts to strike a balance between the hawks and doves, and of Brzezinski's ascendancy. The directive stated: "It is clear that in the foreseeable future, U.S.–Soviet relations will continue to be characterized by both competition and cooperation, with the attendant risk of conflict as well as the opportunity for stabilizing relations."¹⁵⁸

THE HORN OF AFRICA

Cooperation gave way to competition in early 1978. Brzezinski urged Carter to "convey toughness" following Soviet military support for Ethiopia against Somalia. The two Soviet client states were at war over the Ogaden, a desert in eastern Ethiopia largely populated by ethnic Somalis. The region had strategic importance: Somalia bordered the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. Although traditionally a U.S. ally, Ethiopia was led by the ruthless Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had pledged allegiance to the USSR. The Kremlin tried to dissuade the Somali president, Mohamed Siad Barre, from pursuing his territorial claims on the Ogaden. But Siad Barre refused to negotiate a settlement. A Somali offensive in July 1977 (via 40,000 troops) prompted the Soviets increase their military aid to Ethiopia. The Somalis responded by

renouncing their treaty arrangements with Moscow, expelling Soviet diplomats and military advisers. By September 1977, Somali forces controlled almost all of the Ogaden. In November, the Soviet Union and Cuba began a military buildup in a bid to remove the invading troops. By January 1978, 12,000 Cuban soldiers had been airlifted into Ethiopia, joined by Soviet advisers, tanks, and ammunition.¹⁵⁹

At an SCC meeting, Brzezinski proposed sending a naval task force to the Red Sea as a show of U.S. military might. The regional powers, he said, had to see that America was not “passive in the face of Soviet and Cuban intervention.” Brzezinski told Carter that failing to act would make the administration look “weak,” and would be “exploited by political opponents with considerable effect.” Vance viewed the situation differently. He argued that the Ogaden War was a local conflict which had to be dealt with regionally—not as a Cold War struggle between Washington and Moscow. The Soviets had moved to preserve their influence, and little else. “We are getting sucked in,” Vance protested. “The Somalis brought this on themselves. They are no great friends of ours.”¹⁶⁰ Since Somalia was the prime aggressor, Brown and the Joint Chiefs also rejected the idea of sending a task force. Carter decided against taking military action. But on March 2 he publicly criticized the Soviet actions, warning that interference in the Horn of Africa would affect the SALT process.¹⁶¹

By March 15 the Ogaden War was over. Soviet–Cuban efforts had forced the withdrawal of Somali troops from the region. But détente continued to weaken. In one report after another, Brzezinski pressed Carter to toughen his rhetoric. He warned that “the state of public opinion” did not give the president the luxury of confining U.S.–Soviet talks to “a bargaining exercise on the specifics of SALT.”¹⁶² “Once concluded SALT II will be a target for attack,” Brzezinski wrote. “That attack will be sustained, and I have reason to believe that Ford, Kissinger, Baker, and Scoop [Jackson] will oppose the likely agreement.” To ease the domestic hurdles, he advised Carter to “take some decision that conveys your toughness in dealing with the Russians.”¹⁶³ In set-piece speeches, Carter began denouncing the Soviet behavior in Africa, their “excessive” military buildup, and the “totalitarian and repressive” Soviet system. During an address at his alma mater in June, Carter declared: “The Soviet Union can choose either confrontation or cooperation. The United States is adequately prepared to meet either choice.”¹⁶⁴ His decision to up the rhetorical ante did nothing to improve domestic perceptions of the Soviets. By casting the Ogaden War in Cold War terms and riling public opinion against Moscow, the administration was undermining

support needed to ratify a SALT Treaty. “We were shooting ourselves in the foot,” Vance recalled.¹⁶⁵

PLAYING THE CHINA CARD

A sign of the tougher U.S. posture in 1978 was the decision to pursue full diplomatic relations with China. The Sino–American rapprochement had been initiated in 1972, when Nixon visited China to sign the Shanghai Communique (paralleling the push for détente with the Soviets). For Beijing and Washington, the aim was to enhance their political leverage over Moscow. But subsequent events curtailed progress. Vietnam and Watergate consumed the remainder of Nixon’s presidency, while his successor Gerald Ford refused to support normalization. Ford’s reluctance was twofold. He was under pressure from a strong Taiwan lobby in Congress—which opposed the Beijing government’s legitimacy—and wary that an approach to China might impair the SALT process with Moscow.

Sino–Soviet relations had been deteriorating since the 1960s. Mao Zedong’s “Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution” fueled nationalist sentiment and opposition to Soviet “revisionism.” The relationship worsened in 1969, when a long-simmering territorial dispute escalated into armed clashes along the Sino–Soviet border. By then, the economic effects of isolationism led Mao to reorient Chinese foreign policy and cast aside ideological constraints. He sought an opening with the United States, with potential access to Western technology and new opportunities for trade. Although Sino–American normalization did not result, relations between Moscow and Beijing remained tense, with border disputes continuing to emerge. After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping moved to consolidate power by pursuing economic reform, modernization, and closer ties to the West. Soviet leaders grew suspicious of Deng’s motives, concerned about the implications of a new Sino–American rapprochement.¹⁶⁶

The opening of diplomatic relations with China had been a goal from the start of Carter’s presidency. The main question was the timing. In early 1977, the administration exercised caution. Chinese Ambassador Huang Zhen told Carter that under the Shanghai Communique, normalization would require the abrogation of the U.S.–Taiwan defense treaty.¹⁶⁷ China’s stance posed political difficulties. Since Carter had prioritized the Panama Canal treaties, an early approach to Beijing would scupper his chances of securing congressional ratification. “I didn’t want to make a public move on China until after the Panama Canal issue was resolved,”

Carter recalled. "Senator Barry Goldwater and other members of the Taiwan lobby were undecided about the Panama treaties, and any move away from Taiwan would have driven them against us on the treaty votes."¹⁶⁸ China was placed "on the back burner" until early 1978, when Brzezinski pressed Carter to begin the normalization process. Brzezinski saw the issue through the lens of the Cold War: closer U.S.–China security cooperation would give the administration geopolitical leverage over the Soviets, which could be used to pressure Moscow into making concessions on SALT. Brzezinski asked Carter to send him to China "to engage in quiet consultations [. . .] thereby sending a signal to the Soviets which might prove helpful on the African Horn and SALT." "Domestically," he added, "it would be viewed as a hard-nosed act," softening the Senate opposition to a SALT II Treaty.¹⁶⁹

Carter relented in March 1978. He told Mondale and Vance (who opposed Brzezinski's trip) that an opening with China could be used to apply pressure on the Soviets. It would strengthen the administration's credibility at home, helping to win support from reluctant senators in the SALT ratification bid.¹⁷⁰ The economic, strategic, and political benefits outweighed concerns over human rights. China's dismal record was noted by the U.S. ambassador to Hong Kong, Thomas Shoemith, who reported that the number of executions in 1977 was as high as 20,000.¹⁷¹ In spite of this, Carter sent Brzezinski to Beijing in May to advance diplomatic relations and brief Chinese leaders on SALT. "The strong consensus was that we ought to move ahead as quickly as possible to normalize relations with China," Gelb recalled. "While this would cause complications in concluding the SALT II agreement, it would substantially improve our position domestically. It would show doubters in Congress that this was an administration that could play hardball and do power politics, and when the time came to ratify the SALT II Treaty, we would be in a better position to do so."¹⁷²

Brzezinski relished the chance to emulate Kissinger. "Last one to get the top gets to fight the Russians in Ethiopia," he joked on a visit to the Great Wall. Brzezinski struck up a rapport with Chinese Vice Premier (and de facto leader) Deng Xiaoping, giving him a list of suggestions on how China could improve the attitude of the U.S. public toward Beijing. He spoke publicly of "aggressive" Soviet designs and called for "more tangible cooperation between China and the U.S." A path for normalization was put in place. The administration agreed to meet the Chinese conditions: diplomatic and military relations with Taiwan would be terminated, and U.S. personnel would be withdrawn. The United States would

retain the right to export defensive arms to Taiwan, a measure which Carter hoped would placate the Taiwan lobby on Capitol Hill.¹⁷³ Liberals and conservatives expressed unease about the change to U.S.–Taiwanese relations. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) accused Carter of threatening to “sell Taiwan down the river.” As a compromise, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, with the United States continuing to supply arms to Taiwan to defend itself from the mainland. Although unhappy about the bill, Chinese leaders did not allow it to undermine normalization.¹⁷⁴

U.S. and Chinese officials finalized terms over the next six months. On December 15, Carter and Hua Guofeng (the Chinese Communist Party leader) issued a joint statement announcing the normalization of diplomatic relations. A visit by Deng Xiaoping to Washington was scheduled for January. The news broke just days before Vance was to meet Gromyko for a “final” round of SALT talks. Carter wrote to Brezhnev, explaining that the U.S.–China agreement had “no other purpose but to promote the cause of world peace.”¹⁷⁵ In the circumstances, the Soviet reaction was restrained. Brezhnev raised no public objections, and would wait to see how the process was carried out.¹⁷⁶ But the completion of SALT II was now delayed. Brezhnev wanted to avoid a scenario whereby a U.S.–Soviet summit was directly preceded by one between Carter and Deng. Dobrynin recalled that the U.S.–China declaration produced “more irritation than fear” in Moscow, creating “a situation which spoiled our negotiations.” Soviet leaders were frustrated that China had been given priority at the expense of arms control.¹⁷⁷ The Vance–Gromyko meeting in December had been expected to lead to a Carter–Brezhnev summit at which a SALT II Treaty would be signed. The politically vulnerable document would not be finalized until June 1979—six months closer to election season. The venue: Vienna, scene of the Kennedy–Khrushchev encounter eighteen years earlier.

CARTER, CONGRESS, AND THE PANAMA CANAL

Carter’s difficulties were not confined to the Soviet Union. Just as worrying was the administration’s sour relationship with Congress and the Democratic Party. To be sure, the changed power structure of the 1970s would have posed challenges for any new president. Congress was more assertive, partisan, and fragmented—a climate exacerbated by the proliferation of subcommittees (many of which were themselves divided) and interest groups. Carter later admitted to being surprised by the sheer number of committees and subcommittees which had to be navigated to achieve legislative packages.¹⁷⁸ Despite boasting a majority in both

chambers, the Democratic Party remained splintered. There was, recalled Butler, “no unifying consensus, no program, no set of principles on which a majority of Democrats agreed.”¹⁷⁹

But the administration was also culpable. The quest to build support and bridge divides on Capitol Hill required organization, leadership, and persuasion. For reasons of principle and inexperience, the team assembled by Carter struggled in these areas. Carter was an antiestablishment politician, an evangelical Christian, whose moral compass helped to guide his convictions (though not always his decisions). He secured the Democratic nomination in 1976 without the help of most of the party hierarchy, and disliked the extravagant aspects of the presidency. Carter told the Marine Corps to stop playing “Hail to the Chief” whenever he entered a room; sold the presidential yacht, *The Sequoia*; and held town meetings around the country.¹⁸⁰ He hosted dinners with senators and lawmakers to outline his initiatives. But often there was as much confrontation as compromise. Carter loathed the give-and-take of politics and had little time for convention. He was forthright and disinclined to stroke egos. “It has never been my nature to be a hail fellow well met, or to be a part of a societal, cocktail party circuit,” he explained. “It’s just not me.”¹⁸¹ Carter clashed with congressional Democrats over a string of legislative issues, from federal water projects to public works packages. He endured a difficult relationship with Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, who complained of Carter’s tendency to vacillate, for the “leadership vacuum” that existed, and about having to lecture him on how Congress functioned. Byrd warned that the administration’s “them against us” approach was damaging relations between the White House and Capitol Hill.¹⁸²

The young figures entrusted with managing this task, Frank Moore and Hamilton Jordan, incurred the wrath of senators and representatives. Both earned a reputation for not responding to phone calls. Tip O’Neill became so exasperated by Jordan that he began referring to him as “Hannibal Jerkin” to friends on the Hill.¹⁸³ Moore (congressional liaison) was “just plain dumb,” according to the House Speaker. While their appointments were meant to signal the end of White House pandering to special interests, many in Congress interpreted it as Carter’s contempt for political Washington.¹⁸⁴ O’Neill believed there was a divide between Democrats from the north-east and those in the south. Carter’s Georgian team, O’Neill said, “just didn’t understand Irish or Jewish politicians, or the nuances of city politics.”¹⁸⁵

Congressional complaints were manifold: a poor organizational structure, communication problems (such as the lack of advance consultation

on decisions), and a failure to devise a coherent legislative program. Jordan suggested that Carter appoint a “staff coordinator,” responsible for convening bi-weekly meetings of domestic and foreign policy officials. Jordan fancied the job. “This person should be me,” he wrote. “Not only am I the best person to do this, but I am also the only person on the staff with the flexibility and perspective to perform such a function.” Carter approved him for the role.¹⁸⁶ Moore acknowledged that the administration had “not paid enough attention to the needs of individual members of Congress.”¹⁸⁷ Recognition of the need for more effective coordination was put into focus by the Panama Canal treaties—one of Carter’s major international goals.

*

The United States had exercised control of the Panama Canal Zone since the Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty of 1903. For decades, Panamanians viewed the arrangement as an affront to their national sovereignty. Protests were held against the American zone which divided their country. Following an outbreak of violence in 1964, Lyndon Johnson agreed to begin talks that would lead to the return of the canal to Panama. But the issue became bound up in domestic politics. In the 1976 Republican primaries, Ronald Reagan attacked President Ford for his willingness to cede the canal. “When it comes to the canal, we bought it, we paid for it—it’s ours,” Reagan declared.¹⁸⁸ Carter treaded carefully, saying that he would continue the negotiations, but would not give up possession of the canal.¹⁸⁹ But once elected he changed tack. Eager to project a moral approach to foreign affairs, Carter placed the Panama Canal near the top of his agenda. In September 1977, he and General Omar Torrijos signed a treaty that would abrogate the 1903 agreement and transfer control of the canal to Panama by 2000. Meanwhile, a neutrality treaty was signed to keep the canal open and neutral once Panama assumed sovereignty.

What followed the agreement was a bitter, partisan struggle. Liberals supported the canal transfer, while the majority of conservatives opposed it. The Panama saga became entwined with SALT II and the congressional elections. Brzezinski told Carter that ratification of the Panama treaties “will clear the way for SALT [. . .] Failure, on the other hand, will severely undermine your ability to ratify future agreements.”¹⁹⁰ Conservatives viewed the Panama Canal Treaty as a “dry run for SALT,” giving anti-disarmament forces the opportunity to link the two issues and label the administration “soft” on national security.¹⁹¹ With a host of senators standing in the midterm elections, the Panama issue provided Republicans

with added incentive to embarrass a Democratic president. "There's no basic constituency in favor of the treaty," Jordan lamented. "The only people who give a damn are the ones who oppose it."¹⁹² Early public opinion polls ran two to one against the treaties.¹⁹³

As with SALT, conservatives went on the public offensive. A coalition of twenty interest groups mobilized, including the American Conservative Union, the Conservative Caucus, and the Council for National Defense.¹⁹⁴ An umbrella group, "The Emergency Committee to Save the Panama Canal," organized a "Truth Squad." Leading conservatives such as Reagan and Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-Nevada) toured the states represented by undecided senators. They argued that foreign powers would view the ceding of the canal as an "act of weakness" by the United States.¹⁹⁵ "This is the best political issue that could be handed to a party in recent years," Laxalt beamed. "It's a natural issue to galvanize our people for fundraising and to gear up the troops." Howard Philips, chairman of the Conservative Caucus, added: "I can't think of any other issue that better unites grassroots conservatives than the canal."¹⁹⁶ A multimillion dollar campaign was unleashed by lobbyists, using direct mail, paid television adverts, and grassroots activism. Early initiatives proved effective. Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisconsin) told Mondale that he was inundated with mail campaigning against the U.S.–Panama talks. The Senate minority leader, Howard Baker (R-Tennessee), had received 22,000 anti-treaty letters, with only 500 in support.¹⁹⁷

But the Carter administration responded well. Jordan devised a plan for a public outreach effort and a focused political campaign. A Citizens Committee was formed to counter the "Truth Squad," with high-profile conservatives solicited to express support for the Panama treaties. They included Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller, Dean Rusk, George Shultz, Maxwell Taylor, John Wayne, Elmo Zumwalt, and William F. Buckley, who debated Reagan in a live national broadcast. Carter met with a range of interest groups, organizations, and individuals: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers, AFL-CIO, NAACP, multinational executives, religious leaders, governors, mayors, and party chairmen.¹⁹⁸ The political campaign targeted undecided senators in ten key states. With midterm elections looming, Carter's task was to create an atmosphere that would enable the senators to vote for the canal treaties.¹⁹⁹ He invited Torrijos to Washington to make a joint statement clarifying the neutrality agreement. It stated that the United States retained the right to defend the canal against any threat to its continued neutral service, but did not have the right to interfere in Panamanian

internal affairs. Carter urged members of Congress to visit Panama and meet with U.S. military officials stationed there to help sway their votes. By the spring of 1978, some forty-five senators had made the trip.²⁰⁰

The lobbying yielded results, including the endorsement of both Senate leaders, Robert Byrd and Howard Baker, in January 1978. By the time the floor debates began in February, a Gallup poll showed that Americans favored the treaty by 45–42 percent.²⁰¹ Many Republicans remained fiercely opposed. Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) suggested that America was “going the way of Rome,” with the Panama treaties reflecting “that pattern of surrender and appeasement that has cost us so much all over the world.”²⁰² But the administration secured the clinching Senate votes by agreeing to a reservation, which asserted the U.S. right to station troops in Panama after 2000. The canal transfer treaty—as with the neutrality treaty—passed by 68–32 on April 18, narrowly meeting the two-thirds majority threshold. For months thereafter, House members bickered over the implementation details. Carter recalled hosting representatives “ad nauseum” in an effort to garner support, an experience he described as “horrible.”²⁰³

The Panama treaties rank among Carter’s finest achievements in foreign affairs. But the political price was high. Officials had erred in assuming that a victory would provide “a momentum useful to SALT.” In fact, the quest to secure the treaties would hurt Carter for the rest of his presidency. In asking reluctant senators to risk office for an unpopular cause, the administration had expended enormous political goodwill. The 1978 midterm election results bore this out. Of the twenty senators who had voted to ratify the Panama treaties and were up for reelection, six decided not to run and a further seven lost their seats. And by pointing to Panama as an example of their bipartisan support, moderate Republicans such as Howard Baker would now find it easier to oppose SALT II on its merits.

A second consequence of the treaties was that the canal “giveaway” was viewed by the political right as more evidence that Carter was weak on national security. Notwithstanding his rethink over military spending, the result of decisions made in 1977–78 was a perception that the administration was soft on defense: the ditching of the deep cuts proposal; the cancellation of the B-1 bomber; the deferral of the neutron bomb deployment. By mid-1978, Carter’s advisers were concerned at the administration’s lack of credibility on national security. “Each of these [policies] can be justified, but together they contribute to an impression that we are “retreating” from a position of strength around the world, and that we

are not being ‘tough’ with the communists,” warned Richard Moe (Mondale’s chief of staff). “I can think of nothing more damaging to the President, both domestically and internationally, than to suffer a Senate defeat on SALT. It would be an unmitigated disaster.”²⁰⁴

Carter was under no illusions about his opposition. “When I was approaching the end of the Panama Canal vote, the Republican leaders were telling me very frankly that they would never support SALT II, no matter what was in it,” he recalled. “I was told this by Ford, Kissinger, and Baker. They said they had gone as far as they could as a Republican Party in supporting my positions, as they had endorsed Panama.”²⁰⁵ It was but one of several foreign policies entailing domestic costs. SALT II, the normalization of relations with China, and the Camp David accords drew criticism from hawks, anti-communists, and Taiwanese and Jewish lobby groups, respectively. “All of these things that we engaged were political losers,” Jordan admitted.²⁰⁶

*

In his speech at Annapolis (June 1978), Carter posed the essential issue: America and the Soviet Union had to choose between détente and confrontation.²⁰⁷ By the end of the year the latter course appeared more likely. U.S.–Soviet relations—affected by disputes over strategic arms, human rights, and Third World competition—now rested almost entirely on SALT. Carter’s decision to prioritize closer ties with China over the completion of a major agreement with the USSR was symptomatic of the tensions between Washington and Moscow.

But there was more to the dwindling of détente than geostrategy or ideology. Political considerations affected every major issue with which Carter grappled—from SALT and the neutron bomb to China and the Panama Canal. On arms control, Carter adjusted policy to straddle the demands of his conservative critics (who called for a tougher posture toward Moscow) and the need to maintain a functional relationship with the Kremlin. The efforts to strike a balance between international goals and domestic needs were at times mishandled, with the administration appearing indecisive, contradictory, or both. “The political realities in the United States started to impose a linkage on our freedom to make compromises and concessions,” Brzezinski recalled. “We had to start asking ourselves, ‘What will happen in the ratification process?’ And I think it did start constraining our SALT negotiating position—or, alternatively, getting us to do things which otherwise we might not have done in regards to the strategic equation: for example, the MX decision [June 1979].”²⁰⁸

Carter tried to resist the political intrusions. He rejected calls for a withdrawal from SALT. He refused to succumb to demands for a more aggressive military posture—canceling the B-1 bomber program, halting production of the neutron bomb, and defying requests to develop the MX. In August 1978, Carter vetoed a defense authorization bill (sponsored by Jackson and Nunn) that included \$2 billion in funding for a nuclear aircraft carrier, deeming it an unnecessary expense.²⁰⁹ Moreover, some of his most acclaimed achievements—the Panama Canal treaties, the Camp David accords, and the opening to China—had aroused as much political flak as support. But the cracks were appearing. Carter had reneged on his campaign pledge to reduce defense spending. He began to toughen his rhetoric, denouncing Soviet behavior domestically and overseas. He sanctioned an approach to Beijing despite the Chinese record on human rights—giving the United States strategic leverage over the USSR and boosting the prospects for SALT ratification at home. This firmer posture was adopted to meet political pressures as much as concerns over Soviet expansionism, reflecting the mutual give-and-take process that Carter so disliked. Yet the greatest challenges lay ahead. Problems at home and abroad were brought sharply into focus in 1979.