

# **Kissinger's triangular diplomacy**

**Veronika Lukacsova**

**2009**

**Kissinger's triangular diplomacy**

**BAKALÁRSKA PRÁCA**

Veronika Lukacsova

**Bratislavská medzinárodná škola liberálnych štúdií v Bratislave**

Bakalársky študijný program: Liberálne štúdiá

Študijný odbor 3.1.6 Politológia

Vedúci/školiteľ bakalárskej práce

Samuel Abrahám, PhD

BRATISLAVA 2009

Prehlásenie:

Prehlasujem, že som bakalársku prácu vypracovala samostatne a použila uvedené  
pramene a literatúru.

V Bratislave, dňa 30.4. 2009

Poďakovanie:

Na tomto mieste by som rada poďakoval svojmu konzultantovi Samuelovi Abrahámovi, PhD za cenné rady a pripomienky pri písaní tejto práce.

## Abstract:

The main idea of this bachelor's thesis is to point out the phenomena of policy of triangular diplomacy as developed by Henry Kissinger, first Security Advisor and later the Secretary of State in Richard Nixon Administration. The aim of this thesis is to describe the main principles of Kissinger's policies that included a new element: the policy of détente. After a brief characteristic of the history of balance of power, and comparing the 19th Century Europe to the 20th Century diplomacy, the thesis continues by describing the events which influenced the policy of triangular diplomacy. It also aims to show how Kissinger's policies were influenced by the main protagonist of 19<sup>th</sup> Century balance of power, Count Clemens von Metternich. Finally, the work focuses on the relationship between the United States, Soviet Union and China and the policy of détente in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, the thesis deals with the successes and the failures of triangular diplomacy.

**Content:**

**1.Introduction.....7**

**1. The balance of power.....10**

1.1 Clemens von Metternich as model for Kissinger.....10

1.2.The core of balance of power in the 19th century.....11

1.3 Kissingers beliefs in international relations.....12

1.4 Balanec of power and policy of detente.....14

1.5. Balance of power in Nixon/Kissinger foreign policy.....15

**2. Policy of triangular diplomacy.....16**

2.1The idea of triangular diplomacy.....16

2.2 The three powers relationship.....18

2.3 The potential benefits of detente.....20

2.4. The positive rivalry.....22

2.5. Detente as part of the triangualr diplomacy.....22

2.6. The United States opening to China.....24

**3. The reason for success or failure of triangular diplomacy.....26**

3.1 Short and long term strategic assesement.....26

3.2.The case of Vietnam .....27

3.3 Kissingers legacy-determined by problematic minor policies.....39

**4. Conclusion.....32**

**5. Reference List.....34**

**6. Endnotes.....37**

## **1. Introduction**

Henry Kissinger is an American political scientist, historian, politician and winner of the Nobel peace prize. He served as National Security Advisor and later as Secretary of State in the Richard Nixon administration. Kissinger played an important role in United States foreign policy from 1969 until 1977. After President Richard Nixon's resignation Kissinger stayed on in a similar position under Gerald Ford. During this period the policy of triangular diplomacy became the basis for American foreign policy. He used this policy to restructure the international order and balance international power structure. His main goal was to protect the position of the United States abroad.

In 1968 the Soviet Union achieved nuclear missile parity with the USA. At the same time, relations deteriorated between the two communist countries -- Soviet Union and China. There were even border clashes between the two countries. Both the Soviet Union and China were seeking US support and backing. This was a great opportunity for Nixon and Kissinger to use the idea of triangular diplomacy. They believed that by using the United States as a power broker in conflict between the Soviet Union and China a good strategic position for the USA and secure international peace could be achieved.

To make the triangular diplomacy work, Kissinger and Nixon used the policy of détente. This policy was created in order to reduce the military and political tension between the Soviet Union and United States and create a new international order within the framework of the Cold War. The term détente included the relaxation of tensions,

and creation of a new multipolar balance of power. The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) was the first step in the policy of détente. The negotiations started in 1969 with the aim of reducing the stock of nuclear weapons. Both the Soviet Union and the United States had enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other and the world at large. This SALT agreement was the first success of détente.

Kissinger policy was inspired by the Austrian diplomat Clemens von Metternich who masterminded peace for 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. It was the result of the 1814 Congress of Vienna where the great powers of that time agreed to implement the policy of balance of power. Metternich built a stable order that lasted until 1914. Kissinger used Metternich's tactics and ideas for his own 20<sup>th</sup> century policies to achieve a similar goal. Kissinger believed that balance of power can produce stability and peace between the superpowers even in the nuclear age. Kissinger and Nixon also believed that the world would be a more peaceful place if there were a balance of power between strong states such as the USA, Soviet Union and China.

The first chapter describes the evolution of Kissinger's policies and their inspiration in Metternich design. This chapter provides a basis for understanding Kissinger's policy of triangular diplomacy and analyzes the similarities and differences of the balance of power in Metternich's and in Kissinger's period. The second chapter analyzes the idea of triangular diplomacy between the United States, the Soviet Union and China. Moreover the chapter deals with the policy of détente, because it is also regarded as one of the basis elements of triangular diplomacy. It will be argued that despite the deficiencies of triangular diplomacy, the positive outcomes outweighed the negative ones. The final chapter will deal with the aspects of triangular diplomacy where it can be viewed as a success and where it failed to achieve its goals.



Kissinger's policy of triangular diplomacy tried to contain the Soviet threat and expansion. He established good relations with China and thus forced the Soviets to negotiate about arms reduction. The result was an improved relationship with both communist regimes – a remarkable achievement with two ideological enemies. This seeming success is balanced with some failures. Despite reconciliation between the two superpowers, the tensions between the superpowers prevailed and Soviet influence was spreading. In retrospect we can judge that the policy of balance of power – changed into triangular diplomacy – could not achieve the stability that Metternich achieved after 1814. Fortunately, it was the collapse of the USSR that changed the plans and strategy. To what extent the strategy of Henry Kissinger influenced this collapse is not clear. It is also another topic.<sup>i</sup>

## **1. The balance of power**

### **1.1 Clemens von Metternich as model for Kissinger**

Kissinger's policy and political thought was influenced by Prince Clemens von Metternich – the State Chancellor of the Habsburg Monarchy (1813-1848). The Habsburg monarchy under Metternich was characterized by peace and stability. After the destructive Napoleonic wars, Metternich uses for the first the balance of power in order to prevent the repetition of the wide-European war that raged at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe. Metternich realized the defeat Napoleon was not sufficient to prevent a similar recurrence in the future. The goal was to create a stable world order and the guarantee of stability and peace. What was novel about his design was to prevent the creation of a dominant European power and instead to establish a group of relatively equally strong military powers. Even more, together with other anti-Napoleonic allies, France was restored as a partner in this design-of course, again as a restored bourbon Monarchy and not as a revolutionary republic.

The most important event during Metternich's period that served as an example also for Kissinger was the Congress of Vienna of 1814-1815. Metternich achieved settlement in 1815 together with Castlereagh, Great Britain's Foreign Secretary, Karl Robert Nesselrode, Prussia's Chancellor and foreign minister of France, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord. The European powers- France, Russia, Prussia, Britain, and the Habsburg Monarchy signed the treaty to settle post war Europe and agreed to the balance of power design in order to achieve a long lasting peace. <sup>ii</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century after the Congress of Vienna did not witness a major war and the peace lasted until the beginning of World War I in 1914. The main reason for this

stability can be attributed to Metternich's strategy of the balance of power. „Kissinger frequently criticized the idealistic search for absolute solutions. According to him, the most efficacious means of maintaining stability is a functioning balance of power. For that reason he praised wisdom of Castlereagh and Metternich in seeking stability, not perfection, and the balance of power is the classic expression of the lesson of history that no order is safe without physical safeguards against aggression.“ (Berridge, Sopper & Otte, 2001, p. 193). It was Metternich policies and strategies that Kissinger admired as a historian and later emulated and put into practice as a politician. In fact, Metternich and the outcome of the Congress of Vienna was the topic of Kissinger's first major work.

## **1.2. The core of balance of power in the 19th century**

The core of balance of power in 19th century can be traced to 1815, however more than 160 years there were some substantial changes to this concept. In 19th century diplomacy there was no single hegemonic power. The world was created more on a multipolar system with five major powers. In fact, it was called the balance of five powers. It was despite the fact that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia and Britain were considered as major powers-stronger than the other three powers (Habsburgs, Prussia and France). However, there was not bipolarity as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Russia and Britain never became predominant powers. In addition, the five powers were not ideological rivals and there were links among the ruling classes of all major powers. Hence, whenever the

European peace was at stake, adversaries could become allies in order to maintain the multipolar European balance of power system.<sup>iii</sup>

### **1.3 Kissinger's beliefs in international relations**

Kissinger also admired Metternich as diplomat, whose dominant goal was to create and maintain a stable European order. They both believed that protracted war, economic instability and social disorder might lead not only to material deprivation but also to redrawing of states borders and the change of political system of government- exactly the development after the First World War.

For Kissinger, diplomacy navigates and stabilizes international relations. Through diplomacy state can relate to each other through treaties and agreements instead of using force. Military force- a legitimate element in international relations- should and might be used as a last resort. The fundamentals of international politics in order to prevent major conflict were military balance between states, economic stability and internal legitimacy of regimes.

In the 1950s Kissinger was writing his dissertation at Harvard University and he already had a picture of the balance of power, which was created by Metternich in the 19th century. Kissinger stated that the main point in the making of balance between the states was the way to create a durable stability. To reach this stability there is a need for the statesman to have patience and willingness. Moreover the statesman should manipulate the events and also the nations. Kissinger pointed out that this is a power game and that this power game has to be done through back channel diplomacy. He

was convinced that success can be achieved only behind the scenes. The public statements and negotiations were purely decorative and ineffective in Kissinger's strategy. Metternich was often considered a model for Kissinger yet after writing his dissertation he stated that he felt antipathy towards Metternich. Kissinger apparently admired the policies of the balance of power and the diplomatic skills of the Habsburg Chancellor. Whatever was the truth, whether Metternich was a model or not, the truth remains that there are undeniable similarities in Kissinger's and Metternich's methods and conceptions in the foreign policy.

Kissinger's approach to international relations and also his views about politics can be divided into two parts. The first one is the historical and the second one is the philosophical. For my thesis, the historical one is more applicable. Kissinger claimed that the past has influence on the present political life. "*Kissinger observed in his study of the Vienna system, societies exist in time more than in space. A state achieves identity through the consciousness of a common history. History is the memory of state.*" (Berridge, Sopper, & Otte, 2001, p.184). As an example there is 19<sup>th</sup> century European diplomacy, which was the main model for Kissinger. For Kissinger the present is the application of policies from the past, in other words the current political situations are shaped by the past and hence the history is relevant. The consequences of certain political events in the past can serve as a good example for the future. In the case of triangular diplomacy it is clear, that the concept of 20<sup>th</sup> century diplomacy was shaped by the 19<sup>th</sup> century European diplomatic model. In Kissinger's view, the U.S. was following the Habsburg Monarchy's example, in order to achieve stability while facing the Soviet Union. The Communist regime was considered a revolutionary power, the same as Napoleonic France was considered by Metternich. The strategy of the USA,

like the Habsburg Monarchy's, had to be to force the Soviets to get rid of their revolutionary goals and join the U.S. in a new concert of nations. This aspect will be analyzed in the second chapter.

#### **1.4 Balance of power and policy of detente**

The classical 19<sup>th</sup> Century balance of power was transformed into triangular diplomacy during Kissinger's time. In addition, a new element was added to achieve lasting stability and that is the strategy of détente. According to the Britannica Encyclopedia the balance of power in international relations is: "*...the posture and policy of a nation or group of nations protecting itself against another nation or group of nations by matching its power against the power of the other side. States can pursue a policy of balance of power in two ways: by increasing their own power, as when engaging in an armaments race or in the competitive acquisition of territory; or by adding to their own power that of other states, as when embarking upon a policy of alliances.*" ( Balance of power. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*)

The additional strategy of détente is novel to the condition of the Cold War and the Nuclear Age. The mutual annihilation due to stockpiles of nuclear weapons that the USA and the Soviet Union possessed brought a new policy of détente. It was policy to ease the tensions between the two superpowers between 1967 and 1979. The era was characterized as "*...a time of increased trade and cooperation with the Soviet Union and the signing of the SALT treaties.*" (Détente. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*)

The period of détente ended with increased tension after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

### **1.5. Balance of power in Nixon/Kissinger foreign policy**

In the Nixon/Kissinger period politics was based mainly on the US-Soviet relations and because of this fact, the world was based on bipolarity. The main goals in their policies were to neutralize the power of the Soviet Union and achieve SALT negotiations with them.<sup>iv</sup> After including China in this strategy Kissinger masterminded so-called triangular diplomacy. Nixon's visit to China was a shocking event for the Americans and since then the bipolar world started to change into triangular diplomacy. This policy of triangular diplomacy differed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century balance of power.

It should be stated that the strategy behind Kissinger's policies was to distribute power which could be favorable to the United States. Kissinger hoped that involving the Soviet Union in co-operation and strategic agreements, the Soviets would give up their international expansion and after this the United States would be in a better position in the world. Therefore it can be concluded that Kissinger went beyond the term of balance of power as designed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Policy of triangular diplomacy**

### **2.1 The idea of triangular diplomacy**

When Kissinger took his office in the Nixon Administration in 1969 there was the war in the South East Asia which weakened the position of the United States in the world. This gave him an opportunity to apply all his strategic thoughts and knowledge of history to redraw the US foreign policy. Kissinger had criticized the traditional U.S. approach towards the Communist countries, with its heavy emphasis on the arms race rather than using diplomacy to solve the tensions of the Cold War. He believed that the United States had to rely on combination of diplomacy and military power if it was to advance its national interests effectively in an increasingly complicated international arena. Kissinger made an effort to have the world believe that Nixon was ready to apply anything – force if necessary, diplomacy if effective -- when America's interests were at stake.

Kissinger's primary goal was the creation of a new framework of international relations in which the Soviet Union could participate as a non- revolutionary power and thereby making possible a resolution of the issues which were created during the Cold War. To this end, Kissinger's idea was to offer to the Soviet Union beneficial relationships. He wanted to create a world in which the Soviets behavior would be less aggressive. <sup>v</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger argued that there had to be assurance of stability among the world's most powerful nations. Each state needed a guaranty of peace in order to achieve political and social stability. Even constant threat of war undermined a state's stability because too much resources and energy are devoted to military build up and



strategic planning. Nixon and Kissinger believed that this stability and thus peace could be maintained if strong states, like the USA, Soviet Union, China, France, the UK and Japan were in a sort of military balance where combination of some would overcome any aggressive power. With this balance of power, the world would be more stable.

The new international relations doctrine was as follows: the balance of power can produce peace and stability between the superpowers and the policy of détente can reduce the military and political tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The triangular diplomacy includes in itself the policy of détente and balance of power. Nixon and Kissinger knew well that in international relations there were not friends and adversaries but only the vested interests of each state. Accommodating the interests of each major power would be the best solution to sustain peace. If national interests are the focus of international politics then the balance “...*would emerge from the clash of competing interests.*” (Kissinger ,1994, p. 712)

Kissinger’s and Nixon’s idea of balance of power was different from Metternich’s but the consequences were the same: achieve stability and peace. They believed that negotiations with the Soviet Union could assure international stability which was under constant stress during the Cold War. Hence, the policy of triangular diplomacy would be the best solution to stabilize the international order. It was based on latent and eventually open rivalry between the Communist powers, the Soviet Union and China. What was eventually called triangular diplomacy aimed “...*to exploit that rivalry to win advantages for the United States*” (56g. Triangular Diplomacy: U.S., USSR, and China. *Politics from Camelot to Watergate*)

The first step toward triangular diplomacy was the withdrawal from Vietnam. The US foreign policy had to be free from military entanglement in South East Asia

even if that meant defeat in Vietnam. The matter was urgent because America was starting to lose its economic and nuclear advantage and needed to assure its own national interest through the prospect of economic stability and peace in the future.

## **2.2 The three powers relationship**

It is important to analyze the relationship among the United States, the Soviet Union and China before the emergence of triangular diplomacy. There was tension in Soviet-U.S. relations soon after WW II. During WWII both the United States and Soviet Union were allies in order to defeat Germany and Japan. The United States provided the Soviet Union with weapons, ships, strategic materials and food. However, the USA and the Soviet Union after WW II imposed a bipolar world order. The tensions escalated in what was called the Cold War. Both the USA and the Soviet Union accepted the fact that there was a global distribution of powers and there was a sort of balance of power between the two superpowers. On one side the Soviet Union occupied or controlled the area of Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the United States had a political and economic primacy in Western Europe. The United States promoted liberal democracy and capitalism, while the Soviet Union imposed communism and a centrally planned economy.<sup>vi</sup>

The Soviet Union in the 1960s was considered as a closed society, which meant that it was not influenced from outside. The U.S.-Soviet relationship lacked political, economic and ideological cooperation and improvement came only gradually following Stalin death in 1953 and then the political thaw after 1956. However, with the Cuban

Missile Crisis in 1962 the relationship greatly deteriorated. It started when the Soviet Union decided to build missile installations in Cuba aimed at the United States. The world was on the brink of nuclear war.

It was the threat of nuclear war; arms race and decline of the USA's position that prompted Kissinger start a new strategy in international relations. Kissinger's analysis was based on the assumption that during the Cold War period the position of the United States was not as strong as it had been directly after WW II. Also, a hostile relationship between the two superpowers continued and that made the international arena a very unstable place. America's nuclear advantage was decreasing and its economic advantage was also endangered by the economic development in Europe and Japan. It was urgent to reverse this trend if the USA was again become more powerful. A special role in this strategy was given to the other major Communist power – China.

Part of the triangular diplomacy was the role of China as a balancing power between the Soviets and the USA. After WWII the relations between the USA and China were formally, although not openly hostile. However, China's involvement in Vietnam and cooperation with the USSR made it potentially a powerful enemy. China during the Cold War was a rising military force and had a market for American goods. Although China had experienced military growth, it was not an emerging superpower, and so it was not a military threat for the States or the Soviets. However, both superpowers wanted to have China on its side.<sup>vii</sup>

The basic element of the China-Soviet relationship was the Sino-Soviet Treaty from 1950. China gave certain rights to the Soviets in order to get military support-weapons, and economic help. However, the relationship between the two Communist states worsened after Stalin's death when China assumed that it would take over the

position of leading communist power. The USSR refused to recognize it and the relations deteriorated. When in 1963 China signed with the United States the Test Ban Treaty, China had viewed the Soviet Union as an imperialist power trying to dominate China. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 also increased the fear of China that it is under the threat from the militarily superior Soviet Union. After the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969, the Peoples Republic of China started to fear the Soviets more than the United States. This opened an opportunity for Nixon and Kissinger to offer to China strategic partnership in order to contain the Soviet Union and also expand economic cooperation that backward China needed in order to modernize.

### **2.3 The potential benefits of detente**

Before the idea of *détente*, the Soviet Union, United States and China had different positions in the world and for all of them *détente* could bring different benefits. China had a fear of isolation in the world. There was also the Vietnam case, in which the USA feared China's support for the Vietnamese Communists. In the field of nuclear weapons the USA was initially stronger than the Soviet Union but considering the number of nuclear weapons both countries had, the advantage of numbers of nuclear weapons that no longer made any sense. In 1968 the Soviet Union achieved missile parity with the United States. China's relation with Soviet Union was not gradually deteriorating and further escalation would take too much energy needed for other strategic functions.

It is true that the United States as a democratic country wanted eventually to repress communist regimes as hostile ideological systems. Considering the military parity of the two systems, this was not the option during the Cold War. The United States was conscious of the massive cost of weapon production and maintaining arm forces. A friendly relationship with the Soviet Union would be beneficial to USA especially after the Vietnam War. Despite the ideological difference, cooperation of the superpowers might eventually alter the repressive communist regimes where ordinary people felt oppressed and poor. The Soviet Union also felt that it would benefit from a decrease of tension. Besides the fact that they considered détente as a sign of Western weakness, they also needed to spend less on armament in order to improve economic condition within the Soviet Union. The Soviets also realized that their relationship with China was not very good and the policy of détente could help them. We can say that for all of the three countries détente would be beneficial.<sup>viii 1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kissinger writes in his book called Diplomacy, Chapter 28: „America needed breathing room in order to extricate itself from Vietnam and to construct a new policy for the post-Vietnam era, while the Soviet Union had perhaps even stronger reasons for seeking a respite. The buildup of Soviet divisions on the Chinese border implied that the Soviet Union faced with tensions on two fronts of thousands of miles apart might well be ready to explore political solutions with America, especially if we succeeded in the opening to China-which was a keystone of Nixon’s strategy.“

## **2.4. The positive rivalry**

The idea of triangular diplomacy started with the rivalry between the two communist powers, China and the Soviet Union. Kissinger believed that in order to strengthen the position of the United States in the world, the international order should be based on constructive relationships. This could in some way replace the hostile relationship created by the Cold War. Kissinger realized that improving relations with the Soviets would not come as a result of rational negotiations – the ideological and strategic tensions between the two superpowers were too strong. He realized that allying with China might alarm the Soviets to such an extent that they would realize that cooperation with the USA would be better than to face two enemies: the USA and China. The Soviets and Chinese were seeking American support against each other. Nixon and Kissinger believed that America could be used as a “power broker” in the conflict and that it would benefit US interests. By improving relations with the USSR and China the United States could establish a triangular relationship. It could, in effect, reduce the tensions of the Cold War.<sup>ix</sup>

## **2.5. Detente as part of the triangular diplomacy**

To analyze the policy of détente it is useful to go back to the beginning of the 1960s. One of the big issues in the Cold War was a lack of communication between the US and the Soviet Union. This was clearly demonstrated by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when there was not a way of negotiating possible agreements. It was one of the

biggest clashes between the two powers and, at that point, the world was very close to a military, most possibly nuclear disaster. The Soviet Union was aware of the fact that the United States was much stronger as far as nuclear power was concerned. On the other hand, the Americans wanted to restrict the influence of communist ideology and stop it from spreading into the third world countries. This situation led to both countries feeling threatened and hostile towards each other. Fortunately, they both realized that each country was capable of destroying the other by the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, they were aware of the fact that with the number of nuclear weapons they had, such a conflict would probably mean there would be no survivors. This ultimately became the main reason for the formation of the détente era.

Nixon and Kissinger claimed that they wanted to develop a new relationship with the Soviet Union in order to create a new international order which could replace the Cold War. The term detente included relaxation of tensions, created a new multipolar balance of power and a new international system. The first successful steps towards the policy of detente were arms control agreements, like the SALT I and the ABM agreement. These agreements were intended to guarantee the elements of military balance. Détente became important because both the United States and the Soviet Union realized that the other could be a potential enemy in a nuclear war. It can be said that in order to preserve peace for the United States détente served as a process to manage relations with a potentially adversary country. To achieve peace there was a need for stability and without the Soviet Union there would be no stability. The United States and the Soviet Union wanted to avoid nuclear war. <sup>x</sup>

## **2.6 The United States' Opening to China**

Nixon in 1969 concentrated mainly on how to improve the relations between China and the United States. In the Cold War period the United States put an embargo on trading with China. Moreover the United States was reluctant to accept China as being as one of the Permanent Members of the Security Council at the United Nations. Nixon saw the way to improve the relations following tensions between China and the Soviet Union escalating into the Sino-Soviet border clashes. Especially this event helped China to realize that in order to counterbalance the Soviet threat it would be useful to improve relations with the United States. On the other hand, America's interest was also to have improved relations with China, because it would help to deal with the Vietnam War.

The first step towards the improved relations with China was to eliminate the prohibition against Americans traveling to China and to relax trade restrictions. The two countries did not have diplomatic relations for twenty years and therefore Nixon's idea to improve the relations made him unique among the U.S. presidents in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1970 there was a report which stressed that the United States would not make a secret co-operation with the Soviet Union against China. The United States also announced that they will not allow either China or the Soviet Union to dictate American policy.

The announcement that Nixon was willing to visit China shocked the whole world. First Kissinger travelled to China to arrange the meeting and when in 1972 Nixon visited China, the Shanghai Communiqué was signed. The main aim of this Communiqué was to normalize the U.S.-China diplomatic relations and start dialogue about trade partnership. They both wanted to reduce the military conflict and they



realized that neither of them could achieve military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. They also both wanted to stop the Soviets' effort to expand in the region. The American opening to China came as a shock to the observers of international relations. Once cooperating, the changes started immediately. China was more open towards the United States than towards the Soviet Union.

The Sino-USA cooperation came as a shock to the Soviet Union. The Soviets feared the consequence of the Sino-American alliance. There was no other option for them but to seek relaxation of tensions with the United States. Because of the Sino-Soviet split the relationship between Soviets and China worsened. The two Communist countries began to compete against each other for the leading position among the Communist regimes. Experts warned the United States that opening to China would freeze Soviet-American relations. However the opposite happened. Nixon was invited to Moscow and negotiations began between the Soviets and Americans on the military, economic, cultural levels.

The triangular diplomacy between the USA, USSR and China, where the USA had the role of a power-broker was exactly the condition Kissinger hoped to achieve. Cooperation between rivals started due to mutual fear as well as due to mutual interest. In this respect, Kissinger recreated the similar condition on the world scene that Metternich achieved after 1815 in Europe. However, the comparison is not so simple. Despite certain similarities, there were several differences between the two 'balances of power'.<sup>xi</sup>

### **3. The reason for success or failure of triangular diplomacy**

#### **3.1 Short and long term strategic assessment**

After analyzing the triangular diplomacy, the last chapter considers to what extent in retrospect it was successful and what were its shortcomings or even failures. As a success we can consider the policy of détente, which led to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This Treaty was created and succeeded in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. There are more than 100 signatory countries of the Treaty and only five of them (the United States, Russia, the UK, and France), possess nuclear weapons. However, there are states which are not part of the Treaty and possess nuclear weapons, like North Korea, Pakistan or Israel.

The other important step in the policy of détente was The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT). The negotiations started in 1969 with the aim of reducing the stock of nuclear weapons. Both the Soviet Union and the United States had enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other many times over. Hence, the SALT can be considered a major breakthrough in the Cold War arms race.

Part of détente was improving economic and cultural relations. Hence, during Nixon's trip to Moscow in 1972, the two sides discussed not only strategic issues, but also improved economic relations. These discussions led to signature of several agreements on trade and cooperation. Furthermore, the Soviet Union and the United States made an effort to bring a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. As a result, in November 1973 Israel and Egypt signed a cease-fire agreement. Moreover, the United States and the Soviet Union invited Israel, Syria, Egypt and Jordan to a Peace Conference in Geneva. Kissinger made several efforts in these negotiations

leading to the signature by Egypt and Israel of a “*military disengagement agreement*,” (The Yom Kippur War. *Anti-Defamation League*) in 1974. Thanks to this agreement Israel and Arab forces withdrew their forces from certain areas. In fact, the Camp David Accords of 1978 could not have happened without Kissinger’s diplomacy after the Yom Kippur War. The improved Israel-Egypt relationship was considered as a great achievement because it was the first time that an Arab country recognized the state of Israel.

### **3.2. The case of Vietnam**

The case of Vietnam could be considered the most controversial case in the policy of triangular diplomacy. Both Nixon and Kissinger had to take responsibility for their actions in the case of Vietnam. At the beginning of Nixon’s administration the most important case was the war in Vietnam. In Kissinger’s view it was not enough to have only simple negotiations to end the war. There was a need to reexamine the whole war. Kissinger knew that the United States had already lost the war in Vietnam, because if a half million American soldiers were not enough to defeat the South-Vietnam revolution, then the war could be considered as lost. During the second half of the 1960s Kissinger continually increased the number of American soldiers in Vietnam and he rejected the proposal that the United States should admit their failure and leave Vietnam immediately. Kissinger knew that they had made a mistake but they refused to admit it. In his view the superpowers must preserve their invincible image and no mistake or failure must be openly admitted.

There is another view about the War in Vietnam by a prominent American journalist, Robert Kaplan. At the beginning of the 1960s Kissinger did not pay attention to the Soviet-Chinese ideological conflict and he treated them as allies. According to Robert Kaplan, Vietnam is the case where Kissinger's realism reached a most cynical extreme and it would be the case of the Vietnam War according to which Kissinger's policies will judge. Kaplan and others claimed that Kissinger and Nixon had the opportunity to end the war in 1969 and thus could have prevented further loss of lives of American soldiers. For the Nixon Administration the case of Vietnam was one of the most controversial aspects of foreign policy.

When Nixon and Kissinger were asked about the solutions of the conflict in Vietnam, their answer was that continuing the war was necessary to preserve America's position worldwide. They claimed and believed that what they did was best for the US interests. The fact is that the USA started to withdraw their forces from Vietnam in 1969 and it lasted until 1972. It can be stated that with the 3years long withdrawal they unnecessarily prolonged the war. On the other side it is also true that during this period (1969-1972) America's position improved worldwide "vis a vis" China and the Soviet Union. But this did not happen because of the withdrawal. The main reason for that improvement could be the policy of détente.

Kaplan's main judgment on Kissinger and Nixon is that they were not realistic enough in their policies. They did not realize that even *„...if the public mood should not dictate policy, policy must nevertheless take account of it. By continuing the war after 1969, they badly misjudged the public's appetite for the conflict. Kissinger thus did not live up to the realism of his literary ideal, Metternich”* (Robert Kaplan, June 1999) In other words it can be said that the fact Kissinger and Nixon prolonged the war in

Vietnam because it was in the country's interest it does not balance the other fact, that thousands of American soldiers were killed during the withdrawal process. There are two options. Either they did not take into account the consequences of their act or they didn't want to take into account the consequences. On the other side Kissinger believed that the United States could not pull out of Vietnam without destroying its ability to maintain the global balance of power elsewhere. If we take into account only Kissinger's ideas, the war in Vietnam can be considered as a success in the policy of triangular diplomacy, because the war ended and American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam.

### **3.3 Kissinger's legacy-determined by problematic minor policies**

If we examine in more details the US-Soviet relationship during Nixon-Kissinger era, we find also a great deal of tension between the two superpowers. Kissinger believed that in order to create a stable world order a political leader must be willing to use military power. The rival power must be kept in doubt whether or when such power will be used. Nixon and Kissinger strongly believed in this strategy and they tried to use it even when they were not necessary in an advantageous situation. The priority of détente was to have a stable world order in which the interests of the great states could be satisfied. For Kissinger and Nixon after a while it became clear that this stability demanded prolonging the American presence in Vietnam or overthrow an elected government in Chile.<sup>xii</sup>

It is also true that Nixon and Kissinger never claimed that the policy of détente

would mean the end all the tensions with the Soviet Union. In the Middle East, the US and the Soviets continued to support their client states. Also, during the 1971 Indian-Pakistan conflict, United States stood behind Pakistan. The reason was that Nixon was afraid of an invasion to West Pakistan by India – an ally of the Soviet Union. The invasion could mean a Soviet domination of the whole region and could put the United States in a disadvantageous position. Further, the US asked China to cooperate – a tradition rival of India. The Soviet Union continued to be an ally of India, because they believed that with this support they could weaken the position of the United States and China in the region

If we take a look at the triangular diplomacy from the Soviet point of view, they never intended to abandon their effort to promote revolutionary activities in the Third World. And this was regardless of Kissinger's hopes that the Soviets would abandon their subversive policies in return for the benefits of détente. In the eyes of the Soviets, détente was a temporary accommodation with the West and ultimately the Soviets viewed it as a policy eventually favorable to the spread of communist movements. The Soviets were encouraged by their ability to achieve nuclear parity with the United States and by the increasing difficulty of the United States in maintaining its position in the Third World.<sup>xiii</sup>

In fact, the Soviet Union could have viewed the policy of détente as a sign of US weakness and not as a deliberate strategy. On the surface, the détente meant easing ideological struggle but also offered weakening of NATO that would eventually mean Soviet military superiority over the West. Also, détente assured official recognition by the West of the Soviet Unions domination of Central and Eastern Europe. Eventually, détente could have meant the withdrawal of American forces from Europe.

To sum up, if we take into account the policy of the United States and the Soviet Union after the Cold War, it can be said that the Soviet Union and the United States never gave up their military and economic influence over the other countries and they never stopped competing for the resource-rich countries. Moreover the Soviet Union saw détente as the weakness of the United States and superiority over the West. Nuclear weapons were never destroyed; there was only an attempt to control their growth.

#### 4. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to analyze whether the policy of Kissinger's triangular diplomacy succeeded or failed.

By any account, Kissinger was one of the most influential figures in America's foreign policy in the late 1960s and 1970s. I would argue that triangular diplomacy includes in itself the balance of power and the policy of détente. If we want to decide whether his policy succeeded or not we should consider the time and circumstances he spent in the White House. If we consider the facts that he was the only individual who was responsible for the Opening to China and detente, the SALT agreements, the agreement in Paris in 1973, which ended the presence of the United States in Southeast Asia, we can conclude that his policy was successful. Moreover he was awarded for a Nobel Peace Prize for ending the war in Vietnam.

Kissinger led the policy of the United States to a new and sophisticated level. When Kissinger entered the administration, he found the United States in a state of crisis and on the defensive. The Cold War continued and the United States was still engaged in losing the war in Southeast Asia.

During the Nixon administration there were three radical events, the opening to China and detente, the arms agreements with the Soviet Union and ending the war with Vietnam. These events would not have happened without Kissinger's involvement and his deep knowledge of global affairs.

The use of balance of power in the Nixon administration helped to maintain stability. After the USA had started to improve good relations with China, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the USA also became stable. China helped to



improve the good relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union. The hostile relationship was replaced. For Nixon the main goal was to keep the USA in a leading position in the world. With Kissinger's help he achieved his goal. On the other side it is also true that the United States and the Soviet Union never gave up their diplomatic influence over the countries. Kissinger's policies were by and large very successful but some of them were controversial. As the final chapter analyzed also the negative or controversial aspects of the triangular diplomacy, the Indian-Pakistan conflict and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan showed that the superpowers did not always stand on the same side. But it can be said that even successful policies can have negative aspects, if they fulfill their main goals.

## 5. Reference List

Balance of power. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*. Retrieved April 12, 2009, from

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/473296/balance-of-power>

Berridge, G. R., Sopper M. K., & Otte, T.G. (2001). *Diplomatic Theory From Machiavelli To Kissinger (Studies in Diplomacy)*. Published by Palgrave.

Craig, G. A., George, A. L. (1990). *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic problems of our times*. New York. Oxford University Press

Detente. In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*. Retrieved April 12, 2009, from

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/159484/detente>

Fuller J., (2009.2.2). How the Nuclear Arms race works. *How stuff works*.

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/nuclear-arms-race4.htm>

Gaddis, J. L. (1982). *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. New York. Oxford University Press

Gang GUO, Department of Political Science, University of Rochester. *Comparing Nixon/Kissinger Foreign Policy to European Diplomacy in Early to Mid-19th Century*. Retrieved February 3, 2009 from <http://home.olemiss.edu/~gg/paperhtm/blncpowr.htm>

Hoffmann, S. (1978). *Primacy or World Order: American Foreign Policy since the Cold War*. New York. McGraw-Hill.

Ilpyong, J. K. (1987). *The Strategic Triangle: China, the United States, and the Soviet Union*. New York. Paragon Press.

Kaplan, R. D. (1999 June). Kissinger, Metternich, and Realism: Henry Kissinger's First Book (A World Restored Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace). *The Atlantic Monthly*. Retrieved March 10, 2009 from:  
<http://www.questia.com/read/5002308582>

Kissinger, H. A. (1954). *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822*. Boston. Harvard University Press

Kissinger, H. A. (1994). *Diplomacy*. New York. New York 10020

Powaski, R. E. (1998). *The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1991*. New York. Oxford University Press

Rodman, P. W. (1996, January 29) Kissinger and Nixon. *National Review*, vol. 48.  
Retrieved from: <http://www.questia.com/read/5002249472>

Stoessinger, J. G. (1976). *Henry Kissinger-The Anguish of Power*. New York. Norton

The Soviet Union and the United States. In *Ibiblio, the public's library and digital archive online*. Retrieved December 4, 2008 from <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet.exhibit/intro2.html>

U.S Department of States. Diplomacy in action. *Treaty between the United States of America and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the limitation of anti-ballistic missile system*, Retrieved February 12, 2009, from <http://www.state.gov/www/global/arms/treaties/abm/abm2.html>

U.S. History. Pre Columbian to the New Millennium. *56g. Triangular Diplomacy: U.S., USSR, and China*, Retrieved March 2, 2009, from <http://www.ushistory.org/us/>

Worden R. L., Savada A., M., & Dolan R. E., editors. *China: A Country Study. Sino American relations*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987, Retrieved December 7, 2008 from <http://countrystudies.us/china/129.htm>

---

## 6. Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> See Kissinger (1994), especially Chapter 28

<sup>ii</sup> See Kissinger (1954)

<sup>iii</sup> See Gang GUO, Department of Political Science, University of Rochester.

*Comparing Nixon/Kissinger Foreign Policy to European Diplomacy in Early to Mid-19th Century.*

<sup>iv</sup> Kissinger writes in his book *Diplomacy*, Chapter 28: „ The real issue was not, whether Nixon placed too much reliance on Soviet leaders, as the criticism had it at the time- which was absurd given Nixon’s emphasis on concreteness and his pessimistic view of human nature-but on the strategy best suited to stopping Soviet expansionism. Nixon believed that, amidst the turmoil of Vietnam, the national interest provided the best criterion for resisting communist expansionism and retaining public support. „

<sup>v</sup> Kissinger (1994) especially Chapter 28

<sup>vi</sup> Powaski (1998)

<sup>vii</sup> Savada & Dolan (1987)

<sup>viii</sup> Kissinger writes in his book *Diplomacy*, Chapter 28: „America needed breathing room in order to extricate itself from Vietnam and to construct a new policy for the post-Vietnam era, while the Soviet Union had perhaps even stronger reasons for seeking a respite. The buildup of Soviet divisions on the Chinese border implied that the Soviet Union faced with tensions on two fronts of thousands of miles apart might well be ready to explore political solutions with America, especially if we succeeded in the opening to China-which was a keystone of Nixon’s strategy.“

<sup>ix</sup> Ilpyong (1987)

<sup>x</sup> See Craig & George (1990), especially Chapter 10

<sup>xi</sup> Ilpyong (1987)

<sup>xii</sup> Stoessinger (1976)

<sup>xiii</sup> See Craig & George (1990), especially Chapter 10