**Historical inquiry-task 8 research essay**

**Detente**

**Question: Evaluate the proposition that Detente was seen as a way to come to terms with each other’s existence but it did not bring an end to the Cold War.**

For the majority of the Cold War time period; after the end of World War 2 in 1947 up until 1991, tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union were high as they engaged in the nuclear arms race and space race as they aimed for supremacy in the new world order. As the threat of nuclear war became closer and closer so did the concept of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) which meant that if nuclear war broke out both superpowers would annihilate and destroy each other, possibly even other parts of Europe and the world. This outcome was unwanted not only by the whole population but by the leaders of the USA and USSR. This led to the temporary instalment of detente; a french word meaning relaxation. During this period tensions took a much needed relaxation as the two superpowers came to terms with each other’s existence. However, detente would not bring an end to the Cold War and was more ‘the eye before the storm’; the quiet before the Cold War would break out again. The USA and the USSR still were major rivals and wanted to out-do each other, detente was just a method of assuring nuclear destruction wouldn’t break out. Reagan’s election in 1980 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 would lead to the end of detente and the start of “Cold War 2”.

Detente lasted from 1968 to 1980. Detente came about as the USA and USSR improved their relations with each other through several different agreements and meetings. SALT 1 and 2, the Four Power agreement over Berlin, the Helsinki Accords and the Apollo-Soyuz Project were the integral events which led to detente.

The signing of SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) 1 in 1972 kicked off the detente period for the superpowers. This was an arms limitation treaty, the first of which to be signed by the superpowers to finally limit their ever-growing number of nuclear missiles. President Nixon flew to Moscow to meet Brezhnev to sign this treaty,which forced each other to have only two anti-ballistic missile sites, one defending the capital city and the other defending the intercontinental ballistic missiles, at each site only 100 missiles were permitted. Two days later, another agreement was signed which in effect formalised detente on paper; they agreed to ‘avoid military confrontations and to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war’. These agreements were vital in slowing the Cold War, and there was a sense of improved relations as the leaders had met face to face. Additionally, they had significant follow ups.

SALT 2 would then be signed, at Vienna in 1979 by President Carter and Brezhnev. The treaty restricted each other to a maximum of 2250 strategic nuclear missiles by 1981, this meant that for the first time each side had the same number of missiles. Four years earlier, 1975, the Helsinki Conference took place. 35 nations were represented at Helsinki, the conference was more a declaration of good will, as its achievements included the permanent borders of post-war Europe to be recognised and the members agreed not to disrupt them by force, and to co-operate and consult on questions of security. Additionally Soviet-bloc countries promised to respect the ‘human rights’ of its citizens. Helsinki was significant in prompting continued attempts by East and West to understand each other’s point of view.

Furthermore, the Four Power Agreement over Germany finally settled the long unanswered “German Question”. The USSR, Britain, France and USA signed this agreement over Berlin in 1971- the agreement confirmed the right of each of these countries to control part of Berlin, and the transport links between West Germany and West Berlin would remain permanently open. Disagreement and conflict over Germany had been a major cause of tension between US and USSR since end of WW2. This agreement meant the Soviets finally accepted the continuing presence of the major Western powers in Berlin, and additionally Berlin ceased to be a cause of conflict between the super powers resulting significantly in improved US-Soviet relations.

Finally,the Apollo-Soyuz space project in 1975 was literally (and satirically) the ‘high point’ of detente. 3 years of planning and cooperation had culminated in the success of this project- an American Apollo space capsule docked with a Soviet Soyuz craft in orbit around Earth. Previously, with the development of more sophisticated rockets and missiles in the 1950s, space was an area of competition between the superpowers, just like the arms race. This project marked the first time the superpowers had worked together. It’d also be the last time they’d cooperate, for a while.

Even though relations had improved, it was short lived. The final years of the 1970s saw detente break down as the world entered “Cold War 2”. The major cause of the return in tension was in 1979 when 75,000 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan to support a fledgling Marxist revolution that had attempted to cast aside a strong Muslim tradition in favour of communism. The new Afghani communist leaders required Soviet assistance if they were to survive. The Soviets would become embattled in a decade long conflict with a new guerrilla force; the Mujahidin, which had the support of Pakistan, Iran, and more importantly, the US. This led to the fear of Soviet expansionism once again, and was the final nail in detente’s coffin.

In response to the invasion, the US responded by halting technology and grain shipments to USSR, refused to ratify SALT 1 and 2 leading to their abandonment, and increased defence spending from$196 billion to $226 billion. Furthermore, Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party being elected in 1980 increased tensions to an even higher level. Reagan was tough-talking and strongly anti-communist and in 1983 would even refer to the Soviets as ‘The Evil Empire’. In 1983 also he’d implement the ‘Star Wars’ defence program. Hence his election in 1980 led to the end of detente and renewal of high tensions.

The period of Detente between 1968 and 1980 was therefore a temporary period of relaxation and peace between the two superpowers, as they attempted to come to terms with each other’s existence. It was brought about by SALT 1 and 2, Four Power Agreement over Berlin, Apollo-Soyuz Project, and the Helsinki Accord. As the threat of nuclear war became likely the world was frightened and neither superpower wanted this to breakout as MAD would occur, so they signed arms limitations agreements and tried to understand each other’s policies more in order to prevent this happening. However as the USSR and USA were still major rivals and wanted to out-do each other, this led to Cold War 2 beginning as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Reagan’s election sprung up the return of tensions.

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