

Twelve months after Helsinki a debate rages over détente

By Stanislav J. Kirschbaum

In his opening address to the twenty-fifth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on February 24, 1976, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev expressed his satisfaction with the success of Soviet foreign policy, the key word of which had been *détente*. A few days later, on March 1, the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn stated in front of British Broadcasting Corporation cameras that, while the strengthening of *détente* meant a warmer political climate for the West, for the Soviet people it indicated a tightening of totalitarianism. He went on to say that he feared the West was on the verge of collapse. President Ford, in a campaign speech the same day, announced that the word *détente* was no longer part of the vocabulary of American foreign policy.

Contradictory statements about détente

Thus, in the space of a week, the world heard contradictory statements about the use, the meaning and the consequences of the policy of *détente*. There was no noticeable deterioration in the international atmosphere as a result, nor did relations between the two super-powers take any new turn. Nonetheless, the situation demonstrates the existence of a dilemma concerning the meaning of *détente*, especially in the West, where for years a debate has been raging that could influence the future direction of international relations. At the heart of the debate is the very definition of the notion of *détente*.

Soviet definition

Curious as it may seem, the Soviets have not changed their definition of *détente* since this conception replaced that of the Cold War. Their version first began to

emerge at the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchov introduced the policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the principal goal of at least minimizing, not avoiding, actions on either side that might provoke an armed conflict between the two super-powers. In addition, while he believed firmly in the inevitable victory of socialism, Khrushchov recognized the utility of contacts with the West, especially cultural and economic ones. The Communist world could only benefit, since history must follow its inevitable course. The Cuban crisis of 1962 not only confirmed the validity of this policy but made it unavoidable; in signing the Final Act resulting from the Helsinki conference in 1973-75, Khrushchov's successors made it official.

Brezhnev and Kosygin added a few nuances to the peaceful-coexistence policy, however, and for this reason changed its name to *détente*. Like their predecessors they accepted the necessity of avoiding any direct confrontation, and therefore emphasized the need for settling all differences or conflicts by peaceful means, except that, whereas Khrushchov had insisted on a climate of competition between the two systems, especially in economic matters, with victory by the Communist world inevitable, Brezhnev and his colleagues preached the continuation and even the intensification of the struggle between the two systems by all means short of war. Thus Brezhnev could declare at the twenty-fifth Congress that *détente* "in no way eliminated and could not abolish or change the rules of class warfare". In fact, the era of *détente* should "create increasingly favourable conditions for peaceful socialist and Communist construction".

It is this conception of *détente* that has dominated Communist writing since the publication in 1967 of the revised edition of V. I. Lenin on Peaceful Coexistence. In contrast to the 1963 edition published under Khrushchov, which

Stanislav J. Kirschbaum is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science, Glendon College, York University. A specialist in international relations, he has written many articles on Eastern Europe and has contributed previously to International Perspectives. The views expressed are those of the author.