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*Knut Heidar, University of Oslo*

Mike Bowker & Phil Williams: *Superpower Detente: A Reappraisal*. London: Sage, 1988, 267 pp.

Since timing is undoubtedly one of the secrets of successful scholarly authorship, one has to congratulate Mike Bowker and Phil Williams on publishing a volume with the title *Superpower Detente: A Reappraisal* at precisely the time when most signs seem to herald the demise of ‘the New Cold War’ and the rise of yet another era of superpower understanding.

The current situation inevitably brings up the question whether and to what extent the experience of the 1970s is any guide in assessing the prospects of superpower relations in the 1990s. Bearing in mind the trivial truth that no two historical settings are identical and that, therefore, all comparisons between allegedly analogous situations must be undertaken with due caution, it seems as if an evaluation of the concept of detente as such and of the particular stage of US–Soviet relations which has become known as *the* era of detente, is definitely called for.

In their well-written and enlightening book of some 270 pages, Bowker and Williams have attempted to provide us with this important re-examination. Thus, *Superpower Detente* is not only intended as a hindsight analysis of a particular stage in the relations between the superpowers, but also purports to convey knowledge of a more general nature. The book should, in the words of the authors, be seen ‘. . . as part of an effort to provide greater insight into the dynamics of the Soviet–American relationship’ (p. 5) and ‘. . . suggests that the detente experience of the 1970s contains a number of lessons and insights which are relevant to the future of the Soviet–American relationship and the way in which it is handled’ (p. 10).

Obviously, conclusions such as these have to be based on a thorough analysis of the historical record, and accordingly the main purpose of the study is to explain why the superpowers came to develop a relationship in the early 1970s which was considerably less antagonistic than before, and why this new relationship eventually went awry. In order to describe the evolution of detente, the authors focus on themes such as the *origins, substance, duration, and demise* of detente, but also a couple of not so obvious sets of questions. Thus, Bowker and Williams address the

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problem of *symmetry*, i.e. what did the parties want and expect from detente and to what extent were Soviet and US perceptions of detente compatible. Furthermore, some fifty pages of the book are devoted to investigating the link between the policies of detente and the *domestic* settings of each superpower.

The considerable qualities of Bowker and Williams's work, in my opinion, rest with the comprehensive historical perspective which unfolds in the main section of the study, i.e. chapters 2–10 of in all eleven chapters. The disposition of the analysis is largely systematic, as outlined by the aforesaid themes. But there is also an overarching chronology which allows the reader to follow the entire evolution of detente from its roots in tentative efforts toward cooperation during the Cold War, over the peak marked by the Moscow and Washington summits in 1972 and 1973, through the challenges posed by the October War, regional conflicts and arms control negotiations, to the final collapse in the aftermath of Afghanistan.

On the basis of a skilful analysis of this exceedingly complex chain of developments, Bowker and Williams are indeed able to offer plausible explanations of the rise and eventual demise of detente in the 1970s as well as some advice for the future. It is impossible to give full justice to the authors' reasoning in a short review, but the main argument seems to be based on the premise that the superpower relationship always has been one of discord *and* collaboration, even during the Cold War years. What happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s was that several factors interacted to produce an environment which induced cooperative efforts on a much grander scale than ever before. The problem was that Moscow and Washington set out on the trail of detente for different reasons, carrying partly diverging ideas of what the new relationship ought to entail and of what it might yield. Moscow's interest in establishing a more amiable relationship with the US was based on pressing economic needs, concern about the Sino-Soviet split, and the sentiment that the Soviet Union, after having attained a rough parity with the US in strategic terms, should be entitled to equal status as a superpower. It is also important to note that the Soviet Union viewed detente as an opportunity both for cooperation and competition, a conception which later transformed into interventionist, and from Washington's viewpoint provocative, policies in Third World conflicts.

The American interest in detente, on the other hand, was to a large extent based on a general need in the late 1960s and early 1970s to find new ways of asserting the global role of the US in a world where military might alone, as demonstrated by the Vietnam debacle, no longer could do the job. Henry Kissinger's idea was to establish an international order, based on certain norms of conduct which were acceptable to both superpowers. An essential part of this strategy was the notion that Soviet restraint could be induced through positive measures. This conception of detente as a positive variant on the theme of containment was clearly at odds with Soviet expectations. Hence, the central conclusion of the study that detente actually was doomed from the start; it was impossible in the long run to reconcile the fundamentally conflicting images of detente which Moscow and Washington entertained.

What this implies for the future prospects of US-Soviet relations is the need for a greater awareness among the superpowers that their adversity is defined both by ideological differences and the basic structure of the international system itself. Drawing the parallel with Athens and Sparta, Bowker and Williams point out that the superpowers are locked in an inherently antagonistic relationship, even if the ideological conflict could somehow be settled. A successful management of US-Soviet relations thus requires less self-righteousness and that the parties resist the temptation to gloss over the existence of fundamentally diverging interests and

expectations. The tendency, particularly in the US, to 'oversell' detente is closely related to the latter issue. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of a comprehensive strategy for detente. Detente cannot be built on agreement in isolated issue-areas; it has to be broadly based.

Thus, by offering a convincing analysis of the rise and fall of detente in the 1970s, Bowker and Williams also manage to say something essential about the general conditions for controlling the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between the superpowers. The problem is, however, that the notion of detente still remains a highly ambiguous one. From one point of view it feels refreshing to read a study such as the present one, which focuses on the empirical matter itself instead of getting mired in fruitless conceptual discussions. Still, it may be objected that the authors, on the whole, fail to address a whole set of important theoretical issues, which all revolve around one crucial question: what *is* detente in a general sense? Is detente a type of relationship which is qualitatively different from other forms of interaction between international adversaries? Can we define detente in other and more general terms than the specific features which characterized the US-Soviet relationship for a few years in the 1970s?

In the first chapter of the book Bowker and Williams devote a mere page to conceptual problems. Here the authors note that detente, apart from signifying a particular historical period, can be understood as a process, a condition or a set of policies. Instead of discussing these distinctions further, Bowker and Williams assert that all usages of the term 'detente' have one feature in common; they describe a relationship between adversaries. It is also possible to discern a minimum and a maximum concept of detente where the minimum alternative simply implies a reduction of tension, and the maximum conception 'adds more positive attempts at cooperation' such as the establishment of codes of conduct (p. 7). As pointed out by the authors, this distinction between a minimum and a maximum conception facilitates the comparison of Soviet and US ideas of detente, but it does not define the concept itself in other than rather vague terms.

To conclude, Bowker and Williams's study provides a succinct and persuasive analysis of why detente in the 1970s came to be and why it went wrong. It seems, however, that some work remains to be done at the theoretical level if detente is to be conceived as something more than a label assigned to superpower relations in this specific period, or just a rhetorical formula.

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Steven B. Wolinetz: *Parties and Party Systems in Liberal Democracies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.

Books dealing with political parties from the standpoint of a party system perspective are without exception about *change* and *durability*. This is the classical focus of the party system problem, particularly with regard to the West European countries. There are *two* basic questions involved here: one is how to describe whether a party system is characterized by continuity or transformation, the other is how to account for a certain level of stability or instability in terms of a set of explanatory factors. This volume, edited by Wolinetz, is no exception to this standard perspective, although it is different in that it also covers North America.

The first step in the typical party system research programme is to classify party systems longitudinally, preferably by means of a number of case studies of the major European democracies. The second step is to model the relation between