Gerald Ford: Foreign Affairs

Gerald Ford inherited Richard Nixon's foreign policies and his foreign policy advisers. While Ford had not developed an expertise in American foreign relations as a congressman or as vice president, he was generally familiar with the major international issues facing the country. Thus, Ford was certainly more prepared to direct the nation's affairs with the rest of the world than his critics would have admitted.

Ford asked Nixon's chief foreign policy advisers to stay on in his administration. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (who also served as National Security Adviser) and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger agreed. But in late 1975, Ford undertook a major shake-up of his foreign policy team. The President reduced Kissinger's portfolio by naming Brent Scowcroft head of the National Security Council. As important, Ford fired Secretary Schlesinger and Director of Central Intelligence William Colby, replacing them, respectively, with his chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld, and the American envoy to China, George H. W. Bush.

Given Ford's ultimate decision to retain Kissinger, it came as little surprise that the new administration continued the foreign policies pursued by Nixon and Kissinger during the previous five years. Ford generally supported Nixon's goals of détente with the Soviet Union, of improved relations with China, and of American support for the government of South Vietnam. Nevertheless, circumstances—some beyond Ford's control—led Ford's policy prescriptions to evolve.

Détente with the Soviet Union

Ford and Kissinger made it clear to the Soviets that despite Nixon's resignation, the United States still hoped to pursue détente. Détente was an effort to lessen tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States that had existed since the end of World War II. It did not imply complete trust, nor was it a formal alliance; it was a period where the two nations began to explore ways in which they could work together for both national security and economic goals.

Ford entered the presidency with U.S.-Soviet relations on very shaky ground, however. The 1973 Yom Kippur War in the Middle East had nearly led to the massive military involvement of the superpowers. Moreover, throughout 1973 and 1974, the Soviets grew increasingly frustrated with several U.S. politicians—mainly Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA)—who had successfully tied American trade with the Soviets to the relaxation of Soviet emigration policies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, American relations with the Soviets during the Ford years witnessed notable failures as well as successes.

The President furthered détente in August 1975 when he joined with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and the heads of other European nations to sign the Helsinki Accords, which recognized the existing boundaries of European countries established at the end of World War II. The accords also included statements in support of human rights, to which the Soviets reluctantly acquiesced. Ford and the Soviets agreed in November 1974 to the Vladivostok Accords, which provided a general outline for a successor treaty to SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty), negotiated by Nixon and Kissinger in 1972. But for the remainder of the Ford administration, discussions among American and Soviet negotiators about the exact details of a new treaty failed, largely because of differences over limits on Soviet bombers and American cruise missiles.

Breakdowns occurred in other areas of the Soviet-American relationship as well, most notably in Africa. In Angola, three factions vied for control of the government in the wake of that nation's independence from Portugal in 1975. A civil war soon broke out between these groups, with the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as China, providing financial and military support to different factions; the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) became deeply involved in Angola, much to the consternation of a number of Democrats in Congress. The entrance into the conflict of large numbers of Cuban troops in the spring of 1975 only raised the stakes—and exacerbated tensions between the superpowers.

Ford also had to manage the domestic politics of the Cold War. In short, the criticism of détente that had begun during the Nixon administration only grew louder during the Ford years. Restive conservatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties—and sometimes members of Ford's own cabinet, such as Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger—continuously attacked détente. These critics, who included California's Republican governor Ronald Reagan, believed that Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger had underestimated the Soviet threat and had proven too willing to deal with the Soviets rather than confront them from a position of strength. Moreover, they charged that détente was a morally bankrupt policy; the Soviet Union, according to this view, was a state with evil and illegitimate goals, one that the United States should criticize rather than accommodate. In sum, détente, according to this view, was both a moral and strategic failure.

The End of the Vietnam War

The Paris Peace Agreement of January 1973 established a ceasefire between North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Communist insurgents in the South. Nevertheless, the war between North Vietnam (with its allies in the South) and South Vietnam resumed in 1973. By 1974, American experts on Vietnam, both inside and outside the government, understood that the military, political, and economic positions of South Vietnam were deteriorating rapidly. The American public and Congress, consumed by Watergate and a desire to move beyond the Vietnam War, paid little attention and had absolutely no interest in re-introducing American troops. High-level Nixon officials understood this dynamic, but wanted to continue economic, political, and military aid to South Vietnam.

Address on U.S. Foreign Policy (April 10, 1975)

Presidential Speech Archive

Ford confronted this difficult situation when he assumed the presidency. In late 1974, he reiterated Nixon's request for a fresh infusion of aid; Congress responded by granting South Vietnam $700 million in military and humanitarian assistance, an amount that was far less than Nixon's original request. A renewed assault by Communist forces in the first months of 1975, however, brought South Vietnam to the brink of defeat. Ford made the case for more military aid, but Congress offered only humanitarian assistance.

The end came in late April as Communist forces overran Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. At virtually the same time, America's allies in neighboring Cambodia and Laos were also falling from power. Ford ordered the evacuation of all U.S. personnel and South Vietnamese citizens with connections to the United States. Americans watched on television as U.S. helicopters, some with South Vietnamese civilians clinging to their landing gear, departed from the roofs of various buildings, including the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. These scenes stood as an ignominious ending to America's disastrous involvement in Indochina. For his part, Ford managed to avoid being tarred by the final defeat. His administration also oversaw the admission to the United States of tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Ford had one more crisis to confront in Southeast Asia. In May 1975, Cambodian Communists, known as the Khmer Rouge, seized an American cargo ship—the *Mayaguez*—and its thirty-eight American crew members. The President and his advisers, determined to demonstrate American toughness to both the world and the U.S. public, ordered a commando raid to free the crew. More than forty Americans died in the complicated operation, but the Khmer Rouge released the crew and abandoned the *Mayaguez* in the middle of the U.S. attack.

Ford and Kissinger portrayed the return of ship and crew as a great American military victory, and the American public seemed to agree: Ford's public-approval rating soared eleven points. Looking back on the incident, historian John Robert Greene has raised questions about whether the Ford administration's rescue operation was unduly risky and focused more on punishing the Khmer Rouge than retrieving the American sailors.

Reforming the CIA

The conduct of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) came under increased scrutiny during Ford's presidency. The Watergate scandal revealed that the CIA had conducted domestic operations, a violation of its mandate. When the press learned that the CIA had conducted an internal study of its activities—nicknamed the "Family Jewels"—and that the report acknowledged CIA spying on American citizens and attempted assassinations of foreign leaders, a public fury erupted.

Ford, who claimed he had not known about the "Family Jewels" while in Congress, established a blue-ribbon commission headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller to investigate the CIA. The Senate and the House, however, also created their own investigatory bodies; the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, known as the "Church Committee" after its chairman, Senator Frank Church of Idaho, quickly emerged as the most prominent in the public eye. While the Rockefeller commission issued findings generally sympathetic to the CIA, the Church committee, which Ford worried might turn into a politically motivated search for scapegoats, castigated the agency for its missteps and illegal activities.

Church's findings—and their public fall-out—cost CIA director William Colby his job in late 1975. More important, Congress adopted Church's recommendation for greater congressional oversight of the CIA, altering the practices of this important arm of American foreign policy. In fact, the Ford administration sparred repeatedly with Congress over the CIA's role in Angola.

The Cold War and President Gerald Ford	
Continuation of Nixon's Policies	Breaking from Nixon