Conclusion

The domestic controversy in the United States, which ended with the defeat of Kissinger's vision, was one of the key factors in the crisis of détente, although not the only one and not necessarily the most important. It was relevant, however, because it intersected with other processes that embittered the relationship between the two superpowers and made dialogue more difficult. The Middle East, the third world, and the Soviet Union's policies in its sphere of influence represented other theaters and issues in which the crisis of détente and, along with it, Kissingerism matured and then exploded.

Between 1974 and 1975, Kissinger promoted a brilliant and unscrupulous diplomatic initiative in the Middle East that would determine a profound geopolitical realignment in the region. Egypt, the leader of the Pan-Arabic front and one of the main allies of the USSR throughout the Cold War, switched sides and became a close U.S. partner (as well as one of the main beneficiaries of American military aid). This change drastically altered the regional equilibria. Soviet influence in the Middle East was severely...
reduced. Despite détente, the battle for global hegemony was not fading, and the two superpowers had not abandoned the competition of the previous phase of the Cold War.

In the Middle East, Kissinger acted with audacity, ability, and cynicism. The same impudence and unscrupulousness was also displayed—albeit with less ability—by the USSR in the third world, where renewed Soviet activism aroused U.S. and Western European diffidence and provided further ammunition to those who opposed détente and presented it as a new form of appeasement. Particularly in Africa, the Soviet Union saw the possibility of extending its influence and altering the global balance of power to its advantage. The Angolan civil war and, later, the clash between Ethiopia and Somalia seemed to offer new opportunities. In Angola, in particular, Moscow offered economic and military aid to the Marxists in the three factions involved in the bloody power struggle that followed the implosion of the Portuguese empire. Kissinger had frequently presented the Soviet Union as a status quo power, prone to respect the tacit rules of détente. He considered the new Soviet activism as a betrayal of détente, although he once again attributed the main responsibility for U.S. difficulties to domestic opponents, both liberal and conservative, who were unwilling to support friendly forces in Angola (the former) and were committed to a new anti-Soviet crusade that rendered mediation with the USSR impossible (the latter).¹

Just like Kissinger’s policy in the Middle East, unscrupulous Soviet dynamism in theaters that were, until then, peripheral in the bipolar competition contributed to the crisis of détente. Soviet activism questioned the implicit assumptions of the U.S.-USSR dialogue, fueled and exacerbated regional crises that détente was supposed to prevent or consensually settle, and, finally, offered further arguments to those—Jackson, Reagan, and the neoconservatives—who opposed Kissinger’s strategy and denounced inherent Soviet expansionism. It is still difficult to reconstruct the discussions that took place within the Muscovite leadership and the real motivation behind actions that were, almost inevitably, destined to damage détente.² What is clear is that the USSR once again proved itself unable to promote a farsighted foreign policy and understand—culturally as much as politically—how to relate to the United States.
This deficit was even more manifest regarding the issue of human rights, which by the mid-1970s had fully entered international relations and world politics discourse. The repression of political dissent in the USSR and the Communist bloc caused genuine revulsion in the United States and Western Europe. Moreover, it offered an extraordinary propagandistic tool to opponents of détente. Moscow showed little or no awareness of this dynamic, as was evident by its reaction to Jackson-Vanik and the campaign promoted by Jackson and others in defense of Soviet dissidents. It is still debated whether the Soviet regime could have survived and preserved practices that were evident, however, and disdain the impact of the United States. As facilitated the years, than including of the previous advantages, Moscow showed little or no awareness of this dynamic, as was evident by its reaction to Jackson-Vanik and the campaign promoted by Jackson and others in defense of Soviet dissidents. It is still debated whether the Soviet regime could have survived and preserved its sphere of influence if it had abandoned those practices that were characteristic of its relations with the satellite countries. It is evident, however, that in regard to human rights, Moscow behaved crudely and disdainfully, misjudging the political consequences of its behavior and the impact such behavior would have on its relationship with the United States. As a result of this misjudgment, the Soviet Union inadvertently facilitated the crisis of détente it had assiduously pursued in the previous years, thanks to which the USSR had gained several important advantages, including recognition of strategic parity, the settlement of European borders, and various trade and financial benefits.

Détente had been sought and promoted by the United States and Soviet Union together, and so its crisis and final implosion were in turn caused by the choices, mistakes, and thoughtlessness of both sides. The neoconservatives were not the only ones responsible for the collapse of détente, although they certainly contributed to it and were among the main political beneficiaries of the new deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations. The crisis of détente was catalyzed not just by the choices and actions of either side, however. The intrinsic and structural limits of détente itself—of how it had been conceived and then managed by the two superpowers—also played a role. Paradoxically, one could claim that the end of détente was inevitable given its successes and the attainment of its original objectives. By the mid-1970s most of these objectives had, in fact, been accomplished: strategic interdependence had known a first, fundamental regulation with the SALT accords; dialogue and negotiations on arms control—the basic matrix of the commonality of interests between the United States and Soviet Union—had been institutionalized; and the European status quo had been stabilized and, after the Helsinki conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, legitimised. By 1975 this first phase of détente had reached...
the end of the line. At that point, the continuation of détente depended on the transformation of its nature and the consequent redefinition of its goals in more ambitious terms. A structuralist and systemic explanation of détente’s end can also be advanced by reversing what has been said about its origins: just as a Hubert Humphrey administration would have probably undertaken a policy of détente, its difficulties and, possibly, implosion would have happened even without Kissinger and the neoconservatives.

Nevertheless, the crisis of détente was also the failure of Kissinger and the end of Kissingerism. It was the failure of Kissinger’s strategic vision, foreign policy, and consensus around a viewpoint of bipolarism. It was the failure of Kissinger’s strategic vision, foreign policy, and deliberate attempts to forge a new domestic consensus around a redefined U.S. internationalism—which is the basic argument of this book. Kissinger’s awareness of the strength and solidity of bipolarism induced him to adopt a rigidly bipolar strategy: in the categories he used to read and decrypt the international system; in the kind of diplomatic initiatives he promoted; and in the objectives he set and intended to achieve.

Kissinger’s approach was simultaneously within and beyond the traditional boundaries of the Cold War. It rejected their ideological and discursive character, replacing them with realist, relativistic, and anti-universalistic principles. But it also exasperated such logic, adopting a “maniacally bipolar” perspective that reduced the capacity to understand the nuances and intricacies of a complex international system in which power was undergoing dramatic transformations. In spite of predictions and third-force utopias, particularly in Western Europe, two subjects—the United States and the Soviet Union—remained superior and unchallengeable during the 1970s. The attempt to systematically impose a bipolar “cage” on the international system, however, particularly through linkage, accentuated a series of problems instead of solving them. It simplified complex realities and problems, impeding their comprehension and solution. Kissinger’s bipolarism thus tended to amplify and aggravate regional and local tensions, which were automatically placed within the binary scheme of the now de-ideologized competition with Moscow. Kissinger the pragmatic realist thus overestimated Soviet influence on North Vietnam, not unlike the liberals who had initially supported the intervention in Indochina. He favored and helped the Chilean coup in 1973, just as twenty years earlier a coup in Guatemala had been endorsed and facilitated by the Eisenhower administration. He also adopted a rigid and intransigent position with regard to the evolution of the political system of various U.S. allies, opposing their
“opening to the Left” and assuming the same position of those conservative and neoconservative groups that were hostile to his détente.3

The entirely bipolar horizon of Kissinger’s thought and policies reflected, paradoxically, a deficit of realism. This discrepancy impeded him from dealing effectively with the “particular,” which was instead automatically inscribed under the “universal” of bipolarism and competition with the Soviet Union. In addition, this analytical and prescriptive bipolarism nourished tensions and misunderstandings with Washington’s allies—the same tensions and misunderstandings Kissinger-the-scholar had often denounced in his works on the transatlantic relationship, attributing paternity to the Unit and satisfying ipolarity produced a sensually the most U.S. lead-détente—JSSR and helped the domestic design was the desire to discourse was placed the well as a statesman, Kissinger had paid a lot of attention to the domestic dimension: an effective foreign policy, he frequently claimed, had to rely on broad domestic support. Domestic legitimization of foreign policy choices was thus the “acid test” that every statesman—be it Metternich, Bismarck, or Kissinger himself—had to face.5 Along with the bipolar rigidity of his geopolitical vision, it is on this terrain that we can measure the effective limits of the actions of Kissinger-the-statesman and the thought of Kissinger-the-scholar.
Most scholarly works on Kissinger and détente tend to overlook or minimize this aspect. Historians have invariably preferred to concentrate on Kissinger's diplomacy and considered the domestic dimension as a disturbing, and often irrational, factor in an otherwise coherent, solid, and often agreeable strategy.

Some of the best and most critically incisive analyses of Kissinger and his foreign policy have instead emphasized his lack of attention and interest in the domestic factor, his inability to understand the changes determined by Vietnam and the national trauma it produced, and his scant sensibility for U.S. democratic procedures and the challenge to them, détente as erandi. All these, it has been argued, rendered Kissinger unprepared to deal with the irreparable damage to his foreign policy. This interpretation presents Kissinger as disrespectful of U.S. democratic procedures and unaware of their importance—an argument I do not find persuasive and contest in this book. Kissinger's attention to the domestic dimension—the media, public opinion, and Congress—was obsessive and almost maniacal. Such attention influenced his choices, actions, and rhetoric during his years at the White House. His foreign policy was always conditioned by the objective of shaping a new national consensus and awareness that it was necessary to find a surrogate to the hegemonic liberal and centrist discourse of the previous twenty years. Initially, Kissinger's geopolitical and quasi-realist discourse seemed to be appreciated and endorsed by a majority of Americans, disillusioned as they were with the Cold War, anxious to abandon the perennial tensions of containment, and convinced that the time had come to reduce U.S. international exposure. In the debate opened by the crisis of containment, Kissinger's realpolitik—whether real or imagined—seemed to offer categories and discursive formulas more in tune with the mood of a nation that was simultaneously seeking to reduce military expenditures, assign greater responsibilities to allies, and abandon naively the idea of crusades, which corrupted U.S. society by militarizing and "Prussianizing" it. Containment was founded on (and justified by) a claim of innocence that had solid roots in the history and culture of the United States. The crisis of containment was also the crisis of this presumption and of its proudly exceptionalist foundations. Beginning in the 1960s the presumption of
innocence turned into its opposite: for the New Left, of course, but also for liberals who began to denounce the “arrogance of American power” and the “imperial” degeneration of the U.S. presidency.9

Through a clever and subtle message, Kissinger succeeded in reversing this denunciation. He transformed the crisis into an opportunity, the loss of innocence into the acquisition of maturity, and the end of diversity and exceptionality into the overcoming of naïveté and the attainment of awareness. He did so by drawing on his scholarly work and the fame he had derived from it. To a frightened and preoccupied America, Kissinger offered a v

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Kissinger revealed itself to be a short resister the ir Reagan an changed ci transforme European inept in the face of the Soviet challenge just as it had been in the face of Nazism. Cautiousness became passivity; negotiations were presented as capitulation; détente became synonymous with appeasement. Intoxicated with his initial success, Kissinger did not comprehend the strength of his opponents. Neoconservatism and the New Right, soon to unite, re-launched a highly ideological foreign policy discourse. They reaffirmed, without complexity or sense of guilt, the greatness and uniqueness of the United States and the necessity to henceforth reacquire and strengthen the
basic prerogatives of American exceptionality, beginning with power preponderance and invulnerability. By doing so, they once more presented the United States and its democracy as a unique model and source of inspiration to the rest of the world. They reasoned, in other words, with ideology and hegemony—categories that Kissinger, entirely concentrated on the geopolitical dimension, had neglected and disregarded. Reagan’s discourse would reveal an extraordinary capacity to generate hegemony domestically and, at least in part, internationally. Kissinger’s approach, strategy, and vision suffered from several deficits. Among them was the scant hegemonic capacity of a discourse that instead aimed at constructing consensus and underestimated the resilience of a foreign policy tradition—moral, ideological, and messianic—that the crisis of containment had weakened but not destroyed.

These were the limits of Kissinger’s realism and some of the causes behind the rise of neoconservatism. When this short book was first conceived and written a few years ago, neoconservatives seemed to have a strong and unassailable hold on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. According to many, the dramatic failures of George W. Bush’s foreign policy, in Iraq and elsewhere, have probably decreed “the end of the neoconservative moment.” Time will tell whether this “end” will last or be reversed. History, however, remains more in tune with U.S. foreign policy tradition and history than Kissinger’s eccentric realism.