

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION ON THE WAY TO STOCKHOLM 1972.
THE DIPLOMATIC SIDE

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ABSTRACT

For US foreign policy, the Stockholm conference represented a significant stage, which American diplomacy reached after months of specific, intense work. In particular, the convergence of the environmental interest shown by the Nixon Administration with the international path sponsored by the United Nations since the end of the 1960s produced on this occasion direct effects on the definition of an adequate US environmental diplomacy, which so far had been rhapsodic and occasional. By virtue of an increase in the number and professionalization of officials, but also the creation of *ad hoc* bodies, the action now planned at the Department of State was able to carry out a wide-ranging activity with defined objectives, which centered on the UN General Assembly but in a coordinated manner with other multilateral fora. Along with the political needs imposed by the Cold War, it was an action that had to be constantly homogenized with the strategic posture related to the Soviet Union, but not only: the path to Stockholm is also rich in correlations with development issues and the new actors which embodied their claims, the Vietnamese and Chinese variables, the echoes of an in-depth internal debate: this essay aims to retrace in a unified manner various inspiring motives of the American conduct, based on a historical-diplomatic perspective.

Keywords: US Foreign Policy, US Environmental Diplomacy, Nixon Administration.

1. INTRODUCTION. ENVIRONMENTAL NIXON AND THE GLOBAL SCENARIO

The United States (US) delegation for the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm from June 5 to 16, 1972, was made up of 35 people – including twelve members of Congress, the Secretary of the Interior, the Council on Environmental Quality Chair, the En-

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vironment Protection Agency Administrator¹ – accompanied by 25 technical consultants. The number and qualification of the delegates show the level of attention that the Nixon government attached to the Swedish meeting. It was the final moment of a broader political path, whose elaboration had required a commitment which went beyond the conference itself, marking an essential stage for US environmental diplomacy. From now on it would be more coherently inserted into a legal and structured organization, in line with the increased level of ecological awareness in the American society.

Since the day after winning the elections of November 5, 1968, Richard Nixon gave signs of attention for the issue and established a specific Task Force on Resources and Environment, whose direction was entrusted to Russell E. Train, the president of the Conservation Foundation based in Washington.² A month later, that working group produced a report which, in its four main recommendations, argued that the nascent Administration should make the environment a central element of its action, with a primary emphasis attributed to the urban ecosystem. Pollution, crowdedness and loss of open space, the “declining biological health”: “We suggest no panaceas, no mammoth new programs”, but an effective allocation of resources as part of a coordinated yet centralized action in the presidential staff.³ The president-elect was inclined to accept these suggestions, at least in the first part of his experience at the White House. “He saw the tide of history and swam with the stream”, Jonathan Aitken wrote on Richard Nixon’s environmental approach;⁴ his willingness to leave a mark in an area that had quickly entered the US public debate was certainly convinced. The domestic drives militating in this direction have been studied and Stephen Hopgood has been clear in reaffirming the role of the “institutional dimension”,⁵ while more recently Simone Turchetti highlighted the sensitiveness to environmental issues coming from US public apparatus.⁶ Regarding external conditioning, the relevance of ‘new rights’ and the globality of socio-environmental problems has been underlined as well, starting with Akira Iriye’s works.⁷ It was within such a context that Nixon’s political flair was capable to further develop these suggestions, also on the

¹ *The New York Times*, May 14, 1972.

² On Russell Train’s role and activity, FLIPPEN 2008: 617-623; EPA, *Russell E. Train: Oral History Interview*.

³ National Archives [NA], *Report of the Task Force on Environment and Resources*, December 5, 1968.

⁴ AITKEN 1993: 398.

⁵ HOPGOOD 1998: 56.

⁶ TURCHETTI 2019: 79 ff.

⁷ IRIYE 2002: 57 ff.

basis of the recent experience of an electoral campaign which, although successful, had experienced a more effective democratic coverage on the environment, especially by virtue of the role of Hubert Humphrey's running-mate entrusted to Edmund Muskie, recognized Congressional leader on the matter. And notoriously Nixon was particularly sensitive to parliamentary balances, so much so as to confirm even in this context the happy expression of "Disraeli Redux" coined by Melvin Small.⁸ Tragically, events proved him right. In his inaugural speech of January 20, 1969, the president openly expressed his commitment "in protecting our environment and enhancing the quality of life"; eight days later, the outbreak of the Santa Barbara oil spill would show how urgent wide-ranging interventions were⁹ and under his leadership a political season of activism added to the results already achieved at the time of the Johnson presidency, as pointed out by Michael Kraft and others:¹⁰ a series of significant acts of law were thus passed – as those regarding the protection of endangered species or the water and air quality – although a real quantum leap was achieved only on New Year's Day 1970, with the signature of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): in its Section 101, indeed, it positively stated that "it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and local governments, [...] to use all practicable means and measures [...] to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans".¹¹ Subsequently, on February 10 the President's Special Message to the Congress on Environmental Quality called for "a total mobilization [to go] beyond conservation to embrace restoration", giving shape to an operational program with conspicuous financial allocations. Throughout the country, the social mobilization was in the meantime reaching a highly remarkable level, culminating in the great demonstration of April 22, 1970, when 20 million of American citizens took part in the first historic Earth Day.¹² However, there was also a diplomatic side of this environmental emphasis, which is less well-known and realistically had to proceed along with the Administration's need to recover a political

⁸ SMALL 1999: 185.

⁹ *First Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1969. On the Santa Barbara oil spill, see coeval EASTON 1972, still a remarkable reading.

¹⁰ KRAFT 2000: 21 ff. Very interesting considerations also by MELOSI 1987: 113 ff., and 2000: 58.

¹¹ *US Public Law 91-190*, January 1, 1970.

¹² Respectively: *Special Message to the Congress on Environmental Quality*, February 10, 1970; and *Annual Budget Message to the Congress*, February 2, 1970. For a retrospective on the Earth Day, NELSON, CAMPBELL and WOZNIAK 2002: *passim*.

initiative within a problematic overall framework, with the Vietnamese variable looming over as the tip of an iceberg made up of thorny dossiers and unresolved issues. Based on this approach, the following pages aim to add some further pieces of knowledge regarding these scenarios.

As a matter of fact, from a diplomatic point of view the increased weight of the environmental problem had recently converged into US specific lines of action, especially within the most relevant multilateral fora,¹³ including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where the issue had joined to the strategic aspects of the bipolar conflict, as highlighted under different angles by Turchetti and Hatzivassiliou.¹⁴ During the spring of 1969, the allies had greeted with a “generally positive, though cautious” response the presidential project of giving life to a Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS),¹⁵ aimed at expanding the collaboration in the Atlantic community to new areas. In Linda Risso’s words, in this envisaged “third dimension” for NATO, the environmental element had a special significance for its ability to involve the public and the underlying idea that an updated concept of defense – to be founded on “populations and their well-being” – was possible. Thus the Committee became “Nixon’s pet project”.¹⁶ It was the beginning of thematic insights with a technical-scientific slant,¹⁷ with respect to which the Alliance member countries could have assumed different roles, starting with “pilot” or “co-pilot” ones. In this regard, from mid-1969 the United States played a leading action, as pilot-country on the chapters “Air pollution”, “Road safety”, “Disaster relief”. Regarding the tasks to be performed, a pilot country would be “fully responsible for the study and, together with the co-pilot, would normally provide most of the expertise required”. The pilot country should also inform the Chairman of the CCMS on the progress of the work carried out and, once individual studies had been completed, it would prepare a final comprehensive report to the Committee.¹⁸ The NATO Council would then decide which projects to proceed further, if deemed priority or strategic for the Alliance. Based on this procedure, in the early 1970s the projects coordinated by the US delegation were approved.¹⁹

¹³ BOROWY 2019a: 87-106.

¹⁴ TURCHETTI 2019: chapters 1-4; HATZIVASSILIOU 2017: chapters 1-2.

¹⁵ FRUS 2005, June 2, 1969, D. 287; KISSINGER 1979: 386.

¹⁶ RISSO 2016: 507, 515; see also HATZIVASSILIOU 2017: 33, 48.

¹⁷ NATO, AC 274-R: *Summary Record of a Meeting Held at the NATO HQ*, January 20, 1970.

¹⁸ NATO, AC 274-WP/1: *Note by the Assistant Secretary-General for Scientific Affairs (Randers)*, November 17, 1969.

¹⁹ NATO, AC 274-D/3: *Report by the US and Italian delegations*, March 18, 1970 and *Report by the US delegation*, April 7, 1970; AC 274-D/4: *Report by the US and Turkish delegations*, April 10, 1970.

As might be expected, though, the main forum where deploying the new line would be the United Nations. To American eyes, the UN galaxy (particularly the General Assembly (GA)) was at that moment the most relevant stage for anti-US attacks, mostly focused on socio-economic growth in the developing countries. Compared to the objectives formalized at the proclamation of the Development Decade in 1961, the very meager results so far achieved had therefore welded, on the one hand, to the quest for a new political and productive paradigm on an international scale – which had found in the Group of 77 its own pugnacious megaphone²⁰ – but on the other hand to the open criticism addressed to the industrialized countries’ (namely US’s) substantial inaction. The acceptance of this challenge by Washington also passed through a new willingness to carry out a propulsive function in relevant sectors (not prejudicial to national interests) of international cooperation. From this point of view, the environment displayed interesting political prospects, by virtue of a lively debate, within which the need to move to a more structured level of co-operation had already been formalized. Notably, this position had been made explicit by Sweden within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since the end of May 1968. Having noted “the importance, indeed the urgency” of the problem, the need was underlined to proceed beyond impromptu moments of attention, to give life to a unitary process of confrontation, through the convocation of a specific ‘environmental’ meeting under UN auspices, “to be most carefully prepared”. The submission of this proposal to the General Assembly had led in early December to the adoption of Resolution 2398, which formalized the convening of a UN Conference on the Human Environment for 1972, also requiring the Secretary-General to submit to the GA a specific report concerning nature, scope and progress of the work done in the field, with a focus on the problems facing developed and developing countries.²¹ Before the end of the month, in the press conference in which he announced his replacement with Charles Yost, Permanent Representative James Wiggins called the GA choice “the most momentous of all decisions of this Assembly”, and added enthusiastically:

It was historically important in itself, and in addition, it illuminated that continuing contribution which the United Nations was making to the betterment of mankind by its handling of the relatively non-controversial and non-political issues that had to do with the world’s social and economic problems.²²

²⁰ GELDART and LYON 1980: 89-92.

²¹ UN, *GA RES 2398 (XXIII)*, December 3, 1968.

²² UN Archives, *Notes on Press Conference by Amb. J.R. Wiggins, December 20, 1968*.

Accordingly, in the late summer of 1969 – within a framework that, thanks to President Nixon’s “policy of moving from confrontation to negotiation”, the State Department considered “somewhat better than last year” – the US Administration tried to take stock of the situation. “Our view is that the [Second Development Decade] should be primarily a vehicle for better coordination of UN efforts, more effective and sophisticated use of available and prospective resources [...] and generating public backing”. In this context, one of the “newest and most hopeful areas” for cooperation was human environment:²³ for this reason, at the following 24th session of the Assembly, a visible action on the part of US diplomacy should have developed, to start with the preparatory committee for the Stockholm conference, which would be then established in mid-December;²⁴ it was the beginning of a commitment deemed important but also expensive, the net costs of which fueled an internal debate within the departments involved.²⁵

2. THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC TERMS OF THE PROBLEM

In this regard, some of the feedbacks received by Russell Train should not have seemed too reassuring, if in a letter to the undersecretary of State Richardson he came to say himself worried “about our Government’s attitude and response” toward the conference, particularly as far as the budget was concerned”. Certainly, a meeting of this size and complexity involved an onerous commitment but, in his opinion, there was no doubt that “it would be most unfortunate if our concern over the budget should result in the United States being cast in an essentially negative role, in a field where we should be exercising positive international leadership”.²⁶ This time the answer helped to reassure Train: the government would not in any case deviate from the commitment made personally by President Nixon at the General Assembly to guarantee “our strongest support for the conference”; this would not change, even if the reasons for requesting a modulation and a cutoff of costs appeared justified, as Nixon himself noted.²⁷ Between the end of the year and the first weeks of 1970, this had been the line of the State Department, which subsequently undertook to define a more com-

²³ FRUS 2004, undated, D. 83.

²⁴ UN, *GA RES 2581 (XXIV)*, December 15, 1969.

²⁵ On the effects of the “stringent U.S. budgetary policies” in relation to UN commitments: FRUS 2004, October 20, 1970, D. 161.

²⁶ FRUS 2005, November 17, 1969, D. 288.

²⁷ FRUS 2005, December 10, 1969, D. 289.

plete “rationale” on environmental issues, in order to make the external initiatives of the Administration coherent, especially regarding multilateral fora. As a result, at the end of February a broad telegram of instruction was sent, recalling the political need that in the following months the US government play “a more vigorous leadership role in efforts to enhance East-West cooperation in environmental matters”. Here, the Economic Commission for Europe was identified as a suitable first place for negotiation, as it had already been active for more than a decade, particularly through the permanent groups concerned with water and air pollution and the urban environment. Plus, it was politically pleasing to Moscow and its European allies. On a general level:

Our basic rationale is simply that all industrially advanced societies, regardless of their social systems, share increasingly urgent environmental problems, many of which cross national boundaries and can only be solved in international context. Moreover, serious and practical joint endeavours of this kind could, in the long run, help to allay the suspicions and reduce the tensions that impede progress on resolution of fundamental East-West political issues.²⁸

At the same time, a series of specific bodies were beginning to operate in key government sectors, with a numerous and qualified patrol of officials involved in the environmental field.²⁹ In particular, under the National Environmental Policy Act, the task of coordinating environmental policies was entrusted to the Council on Environmental Quality, headed by Russell Train and placed in the President’s Executive Office.³⁰ Organizational innovations also involved the State Department, which equipped itself with its own tools, such as the Office of Environmental Affairs within the Bureau of International Scientific and Technological Affairs; these developments further strengthened the Department’s role in interacting with other bodies, while the personal role played by the Secretary of State within the Cabinet Committee on the Environment and its Standing Committee appeared pivotal.³¹ It was a change of pace for the State Department which – in the words of one of its senior officials – “even prior to the present intense concern with environmental matters had been involved with activities concerning the human environment”, but now intended to amplify the new emphasis given by the White House.³²

²⁸ *Ibid.*, February 24, 1970, D. 291.

²⁹ DAYNES and SUSSMAN 2010: 78-80.

³⁰ CONANT and BALINT 2016: 7.

³¹ FRUS 2005, March 9, 1970, D. 293.

³² *Ibid.*, July 14, 1970, D. 298.

Regarding the concrete actions to be carried out internationally, on March 17 the first meeting of the Standing Committee was the occasion for the Secretary of State to formalize the target date of 1972 for the production of tangible results, confirming – so commented Undersecretary Herter, also Special Assistant for Environmental Affairs – the leading role assumed.³³ On the other hand, the multilateral commitments were numerous and complex, with actual risks of overlapping, as the case of the CCMS was demonstrating: considered also as a support on the way to Stockholm and other parallel initiatives within the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE),³⁴ the Committee had so far clashed with the general belief that NATO was not “the appropriate forum for an international effort in the environment field”, paving the way for the USSR and its Eastern allies “to tag the CCMS as just another NATO vehicle and therefore to refuse to cooperate”.³⁵ This perception would change profoundly, so that at the beginning of summer presidential counselor Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote to the president: “CCMS is probably now the most active and productive international activity of its kind. Our thesis that NATO was a forum in which you could get action has, in the short run and at all events, proved correct”. Significant results had been indeed achieved in the past few months.³⁶ In the second week of March, the working group on air pollution coordinated by the United States held a conference in Ankara – Turkey was co-pilot of the project, together with the Federal Republic of Germany – whose work was organized into thematic subcommittees. A few days after, the participants in the Disaster Assistance Project also had a meeting in Rome, the forerunner of a busy schedule of other events and symposiums on Flood mitigation, Reduction of earthquake hazards and cooperation in disaster situations. Finally, technical-scientific work relating to road safety was done in Brussels at the end of the month.³⁷ Under the leadership first of Mohynian, then again of Russell Train – who in January 1971 replaced the former at the head of the US delegation to the CCMS³⁸ – the Committee confirmed itself as a negotiating ‘place’ where science and more traditional diplomacy could interact.

In the meantime, other international bodies such as the Organization for European Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the ECE itself

³³ *Ibid.*, March 9, 1970, D. 293.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, April 3, 1970, D. 295.

³⁵ FRUS 2012, July 1, 1970, D. 44.

³⁶ HATZIVASSILIOU 2017: 119 ff.

³⁷ NATO, AC 274-N, *Note by the Secretary*, March 5, 1970.

³⁸ HATZIVASSILIOU 2017: 14.

had also been very active and concern also grew that “undesirable rivalry for leadership [...] would arise”.³⁹ For this reason, following widespread interlocations between several of the protagonists involved – such as Train, Herter and counselor Moynihan⁴⁰ – during the summer a sort of “guide-line” for officials at home and abroad was defined. It confirmed the priority role attributed to the UN “proper as well as the regional [ECE] and the specialized agencies”, the OECD and NATO’s CCMS: each of them had “special and unique attributes, experience and potential”. The United States would then provide assistance in making technology available while “learn[ing] from other nations” in interrelated areas such as land use, population distribution and urban planning: in these sectors the UN galaxy had in fact recorded an “impressive records of achievement”, thanks to the work carried out at FAO (on land use and conservation of natural resources), WMO (atmospheric monitoring, disaster prediction or weather forecasting information), WHO, IMO, ICAO and IAEA. Beyond specific results, the Stockholm conference would now provide a most significant contribution of perspective, as the only event which could lead to one or more conventions or establish an organization “of a new kind”, with the participation of the Less Developed Countries (LDC). For this reason, its final success would be necessary not only for the reputation of the UN itself, but for the entire international cooperation in this field over the following decade.

In addition, a common work to be conducted in the ECE would guarantee adequate confrontation with the Sovietized world, in the belief that environmental issues “can often transcend political differences”.⁴¹ Also in this case, an important appointment would be held shortly thereafter: the ECE conference on the environment had indeed been convened in Prague for May 1971, with respect to which the US had already “pushed hard” to bring the meeting to the ministerial level, in consideration of the fact that it would have been a kind of political precursor for Stockholm, as previously said. Finally, it should be added that also the OECD had recently reorganized its structure to deal more effectively with environmental problems, and a specific Environment Committee would concentrate on the economic aspects of environmental control and developing indicators to appraise how the commitment to “combating environmental degradation might affect economic growth and production”: as a major trading nation, the US had the strongest interest in these OECD activities in fields such as pol-

³⁹ FRUS 2005, April 14, 1970, D. 296.

⁴⁰ KATZMANN 2004: 32 ff.

⁴¹ FRUS 2005, August 24, 1970, D. 299.

lution, water management, occurrence of pesticides in the environment or urban and transport development.⁴² Hence the support shown in the following months by the representative at the organization, Joseph A. Grenwald, both to the refinement of studies on high-priority economic issues (for example, on the domestic and international implications of alternative techniques of pollution control) and to the hypotheses of “early warning system” agreed between OECD partner countries, preferable to unilateral actions.⁴³ In conclusion, argued Acting Secretary of State Johnson with the President, there was no better choice than to exert an effective diplomatic effort in all the forums involved, ensuring “affirmative leadership” also under the political and technical profile.⁴⁴

For his part, Nixon did not fail to give his consent, and specific instructions to provide adequate support to this line – “which promises to have a genuine impact in solving environmental issues” – were sent by the State Department to the diplomatic missions concerned. A plethora of technical documents was therefore produced to complement this impulse, pointing out the meetings in Prague and Stockholm as the main objectives of the next two years. If the former promised to be relevant for the emphasis attributed to the problems of industrialized nations (with specific reference to cities and urbanized areas), the latter would be “more comprehensive in scope”, providing “both a challenge and an opportunity to come to grips with the issues posed by the potentially adverse impact on the environment that might result from rapid economic development in the Less Developed Countries”.⁴⁵ During the autumn, this work continued to be accompanied by occasional stances by the president, who, in celebrating the twenty-fifth working session of the General Assembly, singled out the eight problem areas in which it was essential for the UN to make substantial progress, including the cooperation in preserving and restoring the natural environment, as “pollution knows no national or ideological boundaries”.⁴⁶ Shortly thereafter the Environmental Protection Agency definition process would be completed,⁴⁷ followed by the announcement of a new set of initiatives – “not only to meet today’s needs but to anticipate those of tomorrow” – contained in the State of the Union Address of January 22, 1971, announcing the presidential reorganization plan

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, October 29, 1970, D. 302.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, August 24, 1970, D. 299.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, October 8, 1970, D. 300.

⁴⁶ *Address by President Richard Nixon to the UN General Assembly*, October 23, 1970; Frus 2004, December 21, 1970, D. 30.

⁴⁷ BARNES, GRAHAM and KONISKY 2021: 6-8.

of the federal government.⁴⁸ At the UN, meanwhile, the replacement of permanent representative Yost with George H.W. Bush was underway: a more loyal Republican official through whom a more direct relationship between the White House and the UN would develop. Moreover, “[w]hether promoting a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, engaging in peace-keeping operations in critical areas around the world, or grappling with the problems of development, the environment, population and human rights, there is no substitute for the important work being done by the United Nations”.⁴⁹ Still on the multilateral level, these developments were also linked to the expected progress in the technical working groups of CCMS. The Road safety project, in particular, was scheduled for completion by December 1972, but meanwhile six individual sub-projects had been initiated, with the US leading the “Experimental safety vehicle” working group.⁵⁰ From a technical point of view, the growing emphasis on the problems of disaster preparedness and disaster relief led to the convening of a remarkable meeting of scientists and experts (to be held in S. Francisco in the following May) and to the launch of further actions, among which the important sub-projects on advanced health care delivery systems and wastewater treatments.⁵¹ Above all, the attention to these issues led some NATO members to assume a more active role in the path to Stockholm, for example in what would become Resolution 18.⁵² As far as the United States was concerned, science and environmental protection were thus coming to characterize some relevant political processes, so much so as to speak of a “new approach in American diplomacy” by virtue of the conference.⁵³

Regarding national interest, however, the environmental contents of US foreign action had to proceed in accordance with the fundamental interests of the Administration, starting with the relationship with the USSR. It was Washington’s belief that, within the United Nations, along with the priority of disarmament there were other relevant issues to be negotiated with Moscow, including narcotics control, the law of the sea and the Stockholm conference: in dealing with the Soviets on these matters, the State Department stated, “we must reconcile the conflicting objectives of

⁴⁸ *State of the Union Address*, January 22, 1971.

⁴⁹ *UN Secretariat*, Nixon to Thant, February 27, 1971.

⁵⁰ NATO, AC 274-D/9: *Note prepared by the National Highway Traffic Safety*, March 2, 1971.

⁵¹ NATO, AC 274-D/17: *Report by the US delegation*, October 27, 1971; NATO, AC 274-D/18: *Note by the Secretary*, October 28, 1971.

⁵² NATO, AC 274-D/28: *Report by the US – pilot country*, November 13, 1972.

⁵³ WHITESIDES 2019: 157. The relationship between science (and scientists) and environmentalism is discussed in CALDWELL 1990: 3 ff.

accomplishing our purposes and avoiding the appearance of collusion”.⁵⁴ Regarding the environment, Moscow would likely continue “to play down the importance of international action”, limiting it to pollution control and nature protection, thus excluding “any social, urban, or related topics”. When needed, the Soviets would keep emphasizing national action or stressing sectoral rather than overall approach in the formulation of guidelines. It was the ECE – as a forum with “opportunities for expanding East/West cooperation in technical, non-political fields starting with the environment” – that made this reality evident, especially as soon as the preparatory work for the planned environmental conference in Prague intensified. In Czechoslovakia, the technical work would be conducted “in two ways: (1) via selected case studies on environmental problems; and (2) by a review of governmental actions [...] based on individual government submissions” and the establishment of a group of advisors with a mandate for an environmental work program. From a political point of view, however, it was a question of publicly “flushing out” the Soviets with respect to their real goals and particularly the long-time-coveted objective of a Conference on European Security (CES). “Perhaps Moscow’s desire to have environmental matters on a CES agenda – this was the State Department’s comment – stems mainly from an attempt to make such a conference as attractive as possible to the West, which has shown greater interest in ecology”. At the same time, it was underlined how Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania had expressed a real attention for East-West cooperative efforts, particularly within the ECE.⁵⁵

All these political issues exploded when, at the 26th ECE plenary session in Geneva, the USSR and its allies – having failed to obtain the entry of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the Commission – demanded that East Germans be nonetheless invited to Prague. This attempt also failed but, after intense diplomatic skirmishes, a compromise was worked out, based on a reorganization of the meeting as a symposium “with the sole purpose of providing an opportunity for an exchange of views on selected problems in this [environmental] field”. It was a *de facto* position acceptable to Washington, which admitted the participation of East German individuals, in order to accommodate the interest of working together on non-political subjects, with no reference of their remarks in official documents. This solution, however, brought the conference to a political downgrading, so that ministerial and senatorial members of the proposed US delegation “withdrew at the last minute” and the decision

⁵⁴ FRUS 2006a, undated, D. 34.

⁵⁵ FRUS 2005, May 20, 1971, D. 307.

was taken that undersecretary Herter would head the team. During the works, which took place from May 3 to 10, East German experts sat “at a table apart from other ECE participants behind a sign stating they were from the GDR”, as guests of the host Government.⁵⁶ Despite these limitations, the Prague meeting achieved some of the target results – namely, the establishment of a group of Senior Environmental Advisers as a subsidiary body to ECE governments on environmental problems⁵⁷ – while pushing industrialized countries “to face the environmental costs of their development without being shielded by considerations of the developmental needs of low-income countries. In the perspective of the US delegation – which from May 11 to 15 also took part in the final field trip to heavily polluted industrial areas in Ostrava and Katowice (Poland) – the symposium started in “an atmosphere of tension” but, in the end, it “added momentum for environmental control and reform [...] and produced a valuable body of literature” for future common work, while providing “rare face-to-face contact and exchange [for] both sides of Europe”. Moreover, it would also produce “both a pattern for accomplishment and a warning of some dangers for Stockholm”.⁵⁸ The reference was all the more timely since, a few days after the closure in Prague, in Washington the related preparatory work intensified. At the State Department, a special Advisory Committee on the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment also began to meet, with Senator Howard Baker as its Chairman: “with its help”, so commented Secretary Rogers, “we are determined to do all we can to make the Stockholm Conference a success”.⁵⁹ The experience of the Committee – full of prominent personalities, including Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter and Permanent Representative to the UN Bush – would prove significant “to involve the interested public in our government’s preparations for Stockholm”, thanks to the release by the State Department of position papers and convention drafts (such as Ocean Dumping, Endangered Species, Islands for Science and World Heritage Trust) for public scrutiny through hearings held across the country, from Miami to Washington, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Denver, Houston.⁶⁰

In terms of general content, the conference would concentrate on three main subjects: the environmental problems arising from population

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1971, D. 308.

⁵⁷ STEIN 1972: 118-119.

⁵⁸ *Report of the US Group of Experts*, cit., which contains an accurate brief of US position.

⁵⁹ The reference is to the speech delivered by Secretary Rogers at the luncheon in honor of the “1970 Medal of Science recipients” at the Smithsonian Institution on May 21, 1971; *Bulletin* 1971: 767; FRUS 2018, May 21, 1971, D. 134.

⁶⁰ *Stockholm and Beyond* 1972: vii.

growth and resource distribution; the use of natural resources and the related need to minimize environmental degradation; the concrete identification of polluted areas where international action could be implemented, based on shared “criteria, standards and monitoring”. According to the State Department, in all these areas it was necessary to carry out a strong action, starting with the establishment of a UN voluntary fund for the environment; as stated by Secretary Rogers in his recommendation to the president, that “would serve as the keystone of US participation” and, as such, it would have required the Administration with a “substantial financial support” of 100 million dollars.⁶¹ On all the issues, a broad diplomatic action was then carried out, especially within the Intergovernmental Working Group (IWG), established at the second session of the Preparatory Committee to elaborate a draft of the final declaration to be presented in Stockholm: of specific US interest were particularly the contents of the preamble, the national and international duties in favour of the environment, the contested right to a healthy environment, the support for the voluntary principle against the obligatory nature of the provisions concerning industrialized countries (a central question, which had also inspired the proposed Environmental Fund), the “adequate international controls”, the legal issue of the environmental damage and the compensation for victims, the problem of weapon testing (especially nuclear ones).⁶² These issues, in turn, did not fail to feed the discussion between the various souls of the Administration even after the closure of the preparatory work – as in the case of military aspects, debated between the departments of State and Defense, or the critical hints from Commerce regarding future restrictions being defined⁶³ – while the Council on Environmental Quality focused on technical problems, such as the implementation of a monitoring global system for priority areas (i.e., atmosphere and oceans), but also on internal issues like the coordination of national research programs, or the education and the public information. On the eve of the conference opening, a program was eventually licensed, which resulted from discussions between 21 Federal agencies, enriched by the aforementioned participation of citizens, and condensed into a hundred proposals for international action. Russell Train defined it as “a remarkable example of productive interagency cooperation”, such that “I feel that we are well prepared and in an excellent position to press

⁶¹ FRUS 2005, January 12, 1972, D. 312.

⁶² A reconstruction of the preparatory work is in the still valid SOHN 1973: 425 ff.

⁶³ References to this debate between the Department of State and Defense are in FRUS 2005, March 1, 1972, D. 316. On Commerce’s criticism: BARKDULL 2001: 145.

clearly and forcefully for those Conference items of major interest to the United States".⁶⁴ The task of advocating these interests would evidently have been entrusted to the US official delegation, whose direction would also be a subject of debate; or, in Nixon's own words, the motivation for "a considerable battle".⁶⁵ About this, Russell Train wrote on April 6, 1972, to the Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, Ehrlichman: "Reference is made to an informal indication of the Secretary of State's possible interest in heading the Stockholm delegation". Although the head of the CEQ had previously indicated that the Secretary of State was "the one member of the Cabinet who could chair the delegation without creating jurisdictional problems" among agencies, after a "more careful study" it was stated that substantial reasons militated against this solution; in particular, no foreign minister had been designated as head of any delegation, preferring "chief environmental guy[s]" (and Sweden itself would chair the conference with its minister of Agriculture): "at this late hour", therefore, to designate Secretary Rogers would "throw all these other countries into a quandary". Moreover, that would be a signal of a US will "to shift the conference from a substantive environmental orientation to a political orientation", right at a moment when East-West relations had again been exacerbated by the East Germany issue. Not to mention that Stockholm would apparently be the scene of radical meetings, charging the United States "with allegations of 'ecocide', especially in Southeast Asia". Ultimately, while it would be "perfectly appropriate and even desirable" to have the Secretary of State attending any part of the conference at his choice, chairing on these occasions the delegation *de facto*, in Train's view he should not be designated in advance as head of the delegation. The acceptance of this point would be the prelude to the appointment of the CEQ chairman as head of the US delegation.⁶⁶

Having resolved the problem, Train's further references to political-diplomatic issues deserve some specific considerations. In the first place there was the USSR attitude which, as anticipated, had returned to the fore in the summer of 1971 when – in the course of informal contacts with Italian delegates to the UN and then during the summer session of the ECOSOC in Geneva – a confirmation had been given that the Soviets were "deadly serious" about including the GDR into the Stockholm conference, making clear that its exclusion would cause "a serious problem". The repeated threat had had some effect, especially on Swedish Premier Olaf Palme,

⁶⁴ FRUS 2005, June 1, 1972, D. 323, Tab A.

⁶⁵ FRUS 2006a, March 20, 1972, D. 64.

⁶⁶ FRUS 2005, April 6, 1972, D. 319.

who probed with West German officials “the necessity” of inviting East Germans. In Washington, however, the belief continued that “the USSR is using the environment issue as a political football” for other goals, so that the UN new work session to begin in mid-September would be a sort of an all-around diplomatic battlefield.⁶⁷ Punctually, at the 26th General Assembly – along with other relevant questions such as the Secretary-General’s succession, Chinese representation to the UN, Middle East and Africa (mainly Namibia and Portuguese territories) – the conference invitation became indeed a “sticky issue”.⁶⁸ From a procedural point of view the Western alignment within the Preparatory Committee had already sided in favour of the application of the so-called “Vienna Formula”, according to which only members of the UN (including specialized agencies, International Court of Justice and IAEA) could be invited as full participants to UN meetings, though a US proposal to have East Germans as technical advisers would then be presented, meeting however with a strong opposition from the Soviets. All this resulted in a deadlock, so that the question was referred back to the General Assembly, which on December 20 confirmed with an overwhelming majority the application of the “formula” in Resolution 2850. “Even before the final vote” – it was found – Soviets, Czechs and Hungarians warned that this would oblige them to reconsider their participation, with the Yugoslav delegate making a similar announcement. Their subsequent absence at the January 1972 session of the IWG, thus, would have been the first moment of departure, which then turned into a boycott, as a protest against the attitude of the “imperialist forces” regarding Stockholm.⁶⁹

In addition to the consequences on the environmental path, the story assumed relevance also in the communist world – particularly in the light of the Sino-Soviet competition – since the detachment of the USSR added to the novelty of the participation in the conference by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), pushing Moscow to make “a difficult choice” between supporting the East Germans or leaving Peking with “a free field” in Sweden. An effect of the more general question of the accession of the PRC to the UN, it was also a sensitive issue for the United States, in the aftermath of Kissinger’s secret summer mission in China. The tangle of problems involved had begun to be unraveled after October 25, 1971, when the adoption of Resolution 2758 by the General Assembly paved the way for the PRC to join the UN, replacing the Republic of Taiwan in what appeared to

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, August 12, 1971, D. 310.

⁶⁸ FRUS 2004, August 12, 1971, D. 96.

⁶⁹ FRUS 2005, January 14, 1972, D. 314.

be a notable defeat for Washington, then scaled down in the light of subsequent bilateral developments.

The entry to the UN also opened the door to Peking's participation in the Stockholm conference. Albeit in the context of a choice not to attend all the meetings of UN committees of which they were part of – with the relevant exception of the Security Council and its sub-committees – from the following March a Chinese observer indeed attended the Preparatory Committee.⁷⁰ What did the US Administration think about the PRC's posture in the environmental field? It is significant that in the early days of 1972, when the issue of Nixon's trip to China was at the center of the foreign policy agenda, Russell Train wrote to Kissinger that, while it was premature to consider broad bilateral environmental cooperation, "opportunities may now exist to promote informal cooperative projects", especially between scientific groups or universities. No signals of Chinese interest had been shown so far, but "we feel certain avenues should be explored", also given the fact that – as analysts had noticed – the Maoist ethic of frugality had already speeded Chinese further in environmental interest. "Of course", he concluded, it was a "do-it-yourself pollution clean-up", but technical cooperation was possible in areas "not intrusive into Chinese society", such as earthquake predictions, industrial waste recycling, arid land use or water management.⁷¹ For the time being, Kissinger replied that there was little evidence of Chinese interest in environmental cooperation, to be thus verified over time.⁷² Starting with Stockholm.

3. AFTERMATH: A DECLINING PATH

"Man is both creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth", so reads the first point of the Declaration on the Human Environment.⁷³ For the most part, the results and limitations arising from the Stockholm conference were evident in the eyes of participants and commentators: the formalization of the 26 principles of the Declaration as pillars of high ethical and programmatic value for a shared future path, the 109 recommendations contained in the more operational Action Plan, the concrete decisions on the institutional and financial

⁷⁰ FRUS 2004, May 22, 1972, D. 451.

⁷¹ FRUS 2005, January 4, 1972, D. 311.

⁷² *Ibid.*, January 14, 1972, D. 313.

⁷³ *Report on the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.*

level marked an incontrovertible stage; but ‘la quadrature du globe’ – it was also understood – was still away, while auspices ran the risk of remaining so.⁷⁴

After eleven days of common work, the feelings of the US delegation seemed however largely positive. In his report for Nixon, Train wrote: “It is my personal assessment that the Conference was a success. The United States played a strong role and gained practically all of its objectives”: the voluntary fund and the small secretariat to manage it, but also the support received for the ocean dumping convention and the 10-year whaling moratorium (to be verified at the International Whaling Commission meeting opening soon in London), the consensus on the World Heritage Trust and the global environmental monitoring program were all undeniable results.⁷⁵ The final declaration itself, although “less balanced” than the Working Group draft and “less clearly focused on environmental concerns”, had at least succeeded in preserving a number of important principles of conduct for member states, especially principles 2 on the safeguard of the natural resources of the earth; principle 16 on demographic policies; principle 21 concerning States’ sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies, without prejudice to the environment of others; and principle 25 on the need for a “co-ordinated, efficient and dynamic role for the protection and improvement of the environment” by international organizations.⁷⁶ In figures, out of the 109 final recommendations, 107 had received US approval although, as expected, as regards institutional arrangements a strong opposition had come from the specialized agencies, which “fought us every inch of the way”.⁷⁷ Politically, the head of US delegation believed that the further objective of opposing to the politicization of the conference “with war and similar issues” had been achieved, also resisting new “development add-ons”. However, it remained clear that “it is not possible to discuss environmental protection with the LDC’s completely outside the context of development objectives”; it was a logical observation, especially in the light of the absence of the Eastern bloc, but rather reductive with respect to the debate held between Founex 1971 and Stockholm, and the same outcomes of the Swedish conference.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ The expression is from DROUIN 1972.

⁷⁵ FRUS 2005, June 19, 1972, D. 324.

⁷⁶ This was the opinion of the State Department Office of Environmental Affairs already by the end of the preparatory work; SOHN 1973: 513.

⁷⁷ It is interesting that the US delegation cast a lone negative vote on Kenya’s bid for the environment secretariat but then went along with the consensus in the plenary. References are from FRUS 2008, January 5, 1973, D. 1; and FRUS 2005, July 28, 1972, D. 325.

⁷⁸ CLAPP and DAUVERGNE 2005: 55-56.

On several points of debate, the Chinese variable had represented a sensitive factor. According to Train, “China [...] played a very visible role in the Conference”, while in Herter’s assessment it was actually “a strange one”: both concurred however that its contribution to the debate had been technically marginal though politically active, especially in the plenary sessions, as in the cases of the creation of the *ad hoc* committee for the final declaration (which resulted as disheartening for the Americans, after eight months of specific negotiations) or in dealing with the Third Committee’s report in charge of the agenda items of “Identification and control of pollutants” and “International organizational implications of action proposals”.⁷⁹ PRC’s objective to identify itself “strongly with the ‘Third World’ and to establish [its] leadership in that regard” was evident, something which explained the open attacks against the United States: since it was an expected attitude, it had been faced with replies in a moderate tone, in the belief that “the Chinese blast” was motivated by the desire not to “appear less militant than the Swedish Foreign Minister”⁸⁰ and to “set the record straight” for all parties concerned.⁸¹

The results achieved, however, required a maximization of the diplomatic profit. From this point of view, the main opportunities for a promising follow-up activity should be identified in those key-sectors, such as the regulation of ocean dumping or the control of toxic substances, which had direct repercussions on the “domestic legislative program”.⁸² Hence, in the short term, the US commitment at the General Assembly and the satisfaction expressed when the approval on the conference declaration finally came and the plans of action containing the recommendations for global and regional activities and the institutional arrangements (with the provisions on the Fund, the Secretariat to be eventually located in Nairobi, the Governing Council and the Environmental Board responsible for inter-secretariat coordination) were approved.⁸³ On closer inspection, interesting developments were possible even as far as the relations with Moscow were concerned. There had obviously been no lack of critical references both to the conference – emphasizing, in particular, the USSR’s “unhappiness regarding [the] institutional arrangements” – and to the destruction of the natural environment as a result of the war in Vietnam. Nevertheless, since

⁷⁹ *Report on the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*: 49, 62, 60.

⁸⁰ HILL 1972.

⁸¹ Quotations from FRUS 2005, June 19, 1972, D. 324; and *ibid.*, July 28, 1972, D. 325; FRUS 2006b, June 12, 1972, D. 230.

⁸² FRUS 2005, June 19, 1972, D. 324.

⁸³ UN, GA RES 2997 (XXVII), December 15, 1972; FRUS 2008, January 5, 1973, D. 1.

summer, informal contacts had shown no substantial objections to Moscow participation in the follow-up process. Rather, the Soviets appeared worried about the rumors that they were no longer involved in the environmental protection “and took pains to point out evidence of [their] continued interest”. So – this was the conclusion – while they would probably have kept on regarding environmental questions “as subordinate to more general political considerations”, they would also show an “increasing public concern” with their domestic ecological problems, to be preferably handled “in a bilateral or perhaps regional context”.⁸⁴ After the remarkable results achieved in Moscow in May, there were therefore wide margins for a political recovery that would overcome the boycott, on specific, well-identified issues. On the other hand, although obscured by the relevance of the agreements on the limitation of strategic arms, the protocols on science, health, space and environmental protection formalized during Nixon’s visit had already represented an area of encounter rather than division: coherently with the paths of the nascent Détente, these were areas to be explored in the context of a direct relationship between Washington and Moscow, as spring negotiations had shown.⁸⁵

Contrary to expectations, however, starting from the same autumn of 1972 the dynamism of the US Administration in environmental matters would begin to slow down, effectively opening a new phase. It was not a complete rejection of the previous political line, and the outlined points of the scheduled agenda remained, to start with the ocean dumping and the commitment in favour of the related convention, then signed in London at the end of December,⁸⁶ but also the complex negotiation concerning the Law of the Sea:⁸⁷ these remained important areas of action and authors as Walter Rosenbaum extended the duration of the first ‘environmental era’ to most of the 1980s, while Paul Harris spoke of a US environmental action “on the defensive”, starting with Ronald Reagan’s first presidential term.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, in parallel with the unfolding of the events that would have led to Nixon’s impeachment – the break-in at the Watergate Hotel symbolically took place on the day after the closing of the conference⁸⁹ – the feeling of a change in the political wind

⁸⁴ FRUS 2005, August 11, 1972, D. 328.

⁸⁵ Briefly in RUFFINI 2017: 86.

⁸⁶ *Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter*, London December 29, 1972; BARKDULL 2001: 146.

⁸⁷ HOLLICK 1981: 239 ff.

⁸⁸ ROSENBAUM 2023: 11 ff.; HARRIS 2001: 5.

⁸⁹ SHEPARD 2015: 4 ff.

so far favourable to the environmental issue emerged, and Russell Train himself would speak retrospectively of “a comprehensive effort that stretched from 1969 through 1973, probably peaking in 1972”.⁹⁰ As far as Nixon was concerned, it was not so much the final emergence of a pre-existing prejudice – testified by John Whitaker’s famous joke, in which the president downplayed the relevance of the environmental streak in his public policies⁹¹ – but rather the misleading emphasis on the lesser relevance of the problem for the future, in the face of the good results so far achieved.

In this framework, the combination of diplomatic dynamics and “domestic and electoral concerns” demonstrate the instrumentality of Nixon’s action in the environmental field, as pointed out by Stephen Macekura, who recalls the will of the Administration of both “using the environment as a means” and revising its priority downwards in the context of an overall reassessment of global problems, starting from 1973.⁹² The re-emergence of criticisms regarding excesses in terms of financial exposure – mostly silenced during the first year of the presidential mandate, as we have seen⁹³ – is indeed not accidental, as developments of the economic contingency would have shown soon. At the dawn of a crisis with a strong impact on Western economies, in the difficult “striking balance between the dreams of the environmentalists and the realities of job-producing industry” that Nixon said he was pursuing,⁹⁴ the second element came thus to weigh more than the first and it was necessary to prepare for a reorientation, starting with the parliamentary sphere.

It is also not coincidence, therefore, if in his State of the Union Message on Natural Resources and the Environment of February 15, the president had already stated that “today in 1973, I can report [...] that we are well on the way to winning the war against environmental degradation – well on the way to making our peace with nature”.⁹⁵ Compared to the commitment formalized in Sweden only eight months earlier, to make every effort “at every level” in the belief that “governments will bear the greatest

⁹⁰ TRAIN 1996: 185.

⁹¹ Several years after resignation, in response to Whitaker’s remark that “it would not be Vietnam or foreign policy that people remembered [...], but rather its tremendous successes in domestic policy, most notably with regard to the environment [...], Nixon replied ‘For God’s sake, John, I hope that’s not true’”; FLIPPEN 2000: Epilogue.

⁹² MACEKURA 2011: 492, 498.

⁹³ See Introduction, *supra*.

⁹⁴ NIXON 1992: 1201.

⁹⁵ *State of the Union Message to the Congress on Natural Resources and the Environment*, February 15, 1973.

burden for large-scale environmental policy and action within their jurisdictions”,⁹⁶ it was a rather unconvincing dialectical contortion.

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⁹⁶ *Report on the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*: 3-4.

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