5 The Nixon Administration and Europe, 1969–73

Until 1973, the Nixon administration’s foreign policy priorities centred on disengagement from the Vietnam war and cultivation of what was labeled a new ‘structure of peace’ based on movement toward normalising relations with the Peoples Republic of China and building a détente relationship with the Soviet Union, the latter premised on the emergence of strategic parity and acceptance of mutual restraint in bilateral relations and in global policy. Given the depth of Soviet–Chinese estrangement at the time, the incipient warming of US–Chinese relations constituted a not too subtle form of pressure against Moscow to move toward improving relations with Washington so as to avoid a more direct US–Chinese alignment against the Soviet Union. While the immediate focus was on achieving a new triangular equilibrium, President Nixon and his assistant for national security affairs, Henry Kissinger were occasionally given to longer range speculation about an emerging pentagonal global order including a unifying Western Europe and Japan. Whether conceived in triangular or pentagonal terms, however, the administration was groping toward a revised global framework of international relations adapted to the circumstances of the relative decline of American power, a more retrenched US global role after Vietnam as sketched in the Nixon Doctrine, and the rise of other power centres.

Yet the place of Europe in the administration’s structure of peace design was ambiguous, not surprisingly so given the inchoate nature of Europe’s political personality and misgivings engendered by US–EC trade disputes, rooted partly in the experience of the EC as a tough negotiator during the Kennedy round of tariff negotiations concluded in 1968. As then US Ambassador to the EC Robert Schaetzel recalled, ‘in a subtle way general American attitudes toward the Community were conditioned by them. For five years America’s awareness of the Community was tied to the drama
of crises arising out of trade bargaining. The friction of these negotiations became the core of the new American view of the Community as a hard bargainer, an adversary.2

During Nixon's visit to Paris in early 1969, a major effort was exerted to bury past differences with de Gaulle and to stress that the means of building European unity were for the Europeans themselves to determine. Indeed, after pouring effusive praise on de Gaulle as 'the greatest leader of our time', Nixon appears to have embraced a Gaullist view of European political unity and of an independent European role in world affairs. During a press conference in March, Nixon remarked:

He [de Gaulle] believes that Europe should have an independent position in its own right. And, frankly, I believe that too . . . the world will be a much safer place and, from our standpoint, a much healthier place economically, militarily, and politically, if there were a strong European community to be a balance, basically a balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, rather than to have this polarization of forces in one part of the world or another.3

The curious innovation in this passage is Nixon's seeming endorsement of the idea of an independent West European community that would play a balancing role between the United States and the Soviet Union, in sharp contrast to the traditional bipolar concept of Western Europe as part of an East-West balance. However, subsequent clarifications by administration officials denied that this had been Nixon's intent.4 Thus the remark probably represented a gesture to de Gaulle, whom Nixon much admired, and an effort to find some common ground for improving US-French relations, or perhaps it was simply an ill-considered lapse of thought at the end of a lengthy press conference. Nevertheless later, while speculating on a pentagonal conception of power relationships, Nixon returned to the theme of Europe playing a balancing role in a global context. Equating prolonged periods of peace with the existence of a balance of power, he observed: 'I think it will be a safer world and a better world if we have a strong, healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan, each balancing the other, not playing one against the other, an even balance'.5

In any case, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, the notion of a Europe between the superpowers was flatly contradicted by the