

The Role of NATO in German Reunification

Natalie Bartmes, University of Winnipeg

When Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to the reunification of Germany it was to be under the control of NATO in order to guard against the threat of a strengthened Germany rising up in Europe.¹ The roots of America's role as a direct opponent of the Soviet Union and ally of Western Europe, traces back to the end of the Second World War.² The war had left Europe divided between the Soviet and European powers and America emerged as an international superpower ready to provide aid and contain the spread of communism.³ Fifty years later America's strategy continued to focus on strengthening relations with Europe while rejecting alternatives to unification under NATO. The reasons behind these narrowly focused politics will be the focus of this paper in order to explore how America used NATO to guide the process of reunification toward an outcome that would keep the Soviet Union out of Europe while maintaining an American presence in the continent after the Cold War was over.

After the end of World War II the Soviet Union was quickly gaining power as communism spread throughout the continent, complicating America's agenda of global activism and economic trade with Europe.⁴ In the "Iron Curtain" speech in March of 1946 Winston Churchill caused an international reaction by speaking on the threats of the growing communist power.⁵ The formidable figure of a conservative and nationalist Josef Stalin served as the focused threat to American notions of democracy and free-trade with Europe at this time.⁶ America as protector of the free world accompanied the realistic danger of a dictatorial Stalin, and the two powers squared off in a mutual striving to constrain one another's influence, a dynamic that would define the character of the Cold War.⁷

¹ Mary Elise Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and Move NATO In," *International Security* 35 (Summer 2010), 112-3.

² Andrew Grossman, "Potsdam and Its Legends", *International Affairs* 46 (July 1970):473.

³ Condoleezza Rice and Phillip Zelikow, *Germany, Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (USA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1998): 6.

⁴ According to Lawrence Wittner, Stalin originally wanted to create a united front against Germany through establishing non-communist governments in Eastern Europe. Through a secret agreement made in October of 1945, Stalin was allotted 50% in Yugoslavia, 90% in Rumania, 80% in Bulgaria and Hungary, and 10% in Greece. Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974): 9. Grossman, 473.

⁵ Fraser Harbutt, *Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1986): 3. Jeremy Ward, "Winston Churchill and the 'Iron Curtain' Speech", *The History Teacher* 1 (January 1968), 3.

⁶ Wittner, 9.

⁷ Thomas Paterson, "The Origins of the Cold War," *OAH Magazine of History* 2 (Summer 1986): 9.

To begin exploring how NATO was utilized in order to ensure reunification had beneficial results for the American strategy, the replacement of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) by NATO will serve as a starting point. Formed in 1973, the CSCE preceded NATO as the preliminary vehicle through which a stable situation could be maintained in Eastern Europe. It has been argued that the CSCE was created by the Soviet Union to provide a forum through which issues could be solved and Soviet control of Eastern Europe could be maintained.⁸ Karl Birnbaum and Ingo Peters propose that the Soviet Union was unsuccessful in using the conference to consolidate power in Eastern Europe, especially once the United States and Canada were allowed to participate in the conference.⁹ The shift away from the Soviet goals for the conference towards a focus on human rights and better relations between East and West was apparent in the Helsinki Final Act which created a link between European security and the human-rights obligations of the CSCE.¹⁰

When the conference changed shape the differing opinions between the Eastern and Western powers became a problem as the Soviet Union opposed the weaving in of human rights into east-west relations. As Lucas notes, the issue of human rights presented an ideological barrier as the USSR considered human rights an internal affair and not an international issue.¹¹ The American administration was clear about the intention of establishing human rights and freedoms outside their own borders and the Soviet Union maintained closed political and economic structures. This made harmonious negotiations harder to establish on account of differing ideologies.

The conference provided a veto that allowed objections to be put forward, something that would obstruct the ease of the decision-making process.¹² As Holsti argues, the CSCE and the veto it provided exacerbated issues and ended with more confused discussions.¹³ One such occasion was 18 September 1973 when upwards of 600 delegates from thirty-five participating countries met in

⁸Adam Bromke, "The CSCE and Eastern Europe," *The World Today* 29 (May 1973): 197. Karl Birnbaum and Ingo Peters, "The CSCE: A Reassessment of its Role in the 1980s," *Review of International Studies* 16 (October 1990):3 07,

⁹ Birnbaum and Peters, 306.

¹⁰Michael Lucas, "Creative Tension: The United States and the Federal Republic in the CSCE," *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1968-1990*, ed. Christof Mauch (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Carle Francoise, "Les Pourplers Exploratoires d'Helsinki," *Etudes Internationales* 4 (December 1973), 502-504, quoted in K.J. Holsti, "Bargaining Theory and Diplomatic Reality The CSCE Negotiations," *Review of International Studies* (1982):161.

¹³ Holsti, 159.

Helsinki for the largest pan-European diplomatic conference in history.¹⁴ Many countries had not formulated clear objectives for the conference and consequently the meeting was incoherent and unfocused.¹⁵ These structural flaws, along with the ideological divisions, barred the CSCE from making significant progress. While the CSCE had been created as a European forum where such issues could be sorted out, the hopes of a “Europeanization” of security policies was complicated by differing goals regarding the future of the continent.¹⁶ Regardless of the setbacks the CSCE helped to establish open dialogue between the many nations involved.

When it was time to discuss reunification the US government steered away from the use of the CSCE forum.¹⁷ One reason for this was that America did not have influence within the CSCE, with only one of thirty-five seats.¹⁸ As was apparent in the Helsinki and Madrid conferences, it had been difficult for America to negotiate their interest in Europe in the forum of the CSCE. Meanwhile, America's main goal was to bring about reunification while safeguarding American interests, preventing a separate Soviet-German understanding.¹⁹ The Americans strove to maintain a strong presence in deciding the fate of Europe and the CSCE showed too much potential for American exclusion from European negotiations.²⁰ In contrast NATO was already under the leadership of the Americans and showed less potential for negotiations to slip out of control.

Reaching unification did not look promising in the beginning of the 1980s. While the 1970s had been relatively peaceful and progress had been made towards a more relaxed situation the events of the 1980s, namely the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, raised tensions once again.²¹ Ronald Reagan increased military spending by ten percent in 1981. Greenstein notes that by 1983 the fear of an impending nuclear disaster was so real that the KGB prepared for a nuclear attack in reaction to a simple weapons testing routine led by NATO.²²

The entrance of Mikhail Gorbachev into the role of General Secretary of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Martin Saeter, “The CSCE Process: Problems and Prospects,” *Current Research on Peace and Violence* (1985): 133.

¹⁷ Alexander von Plato, *Die Vereinigung Deutschland: Bush, Kohl, Gorbatschow und die internen Gesprächsprotokolle*, (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag GmbH, 2009), 413.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Stephen Szabo, “The United States and German Unification,” *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1968-1990* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 105.

²⁰ von Plato, 413.

²¹ Keith Dunn, “Soviet Challenges for the 1980s: Implications for the United States,” *World Affairs* 145 (Fall 1982): 123.

²² Fred Greenstein, “The Impact of Personality on the End of the Cold War: A Counterfactual Analysis,” *Political Psychology* 19 (March 1998): 5.

the Communist Party in 1985 brought reforms in the economics and politics of the Soviet Union.²³ Reliant on brother socialists for economic and political support, the Soviet Union was isolated and weakening while the American economy flourished from international trading partnerships.²⁴ In contrast, a string of dying leaders had left the Soviet Union's policy apparatus immobilized and ineffective.²⁵ Gorbachev came into office with a forward-looking policy that was meant to mend the economic wounds that had come to characterize the isolated and centralized empire.²⁶ Central to the new policy was reintegrating the Soviet Union into the international community, a strategy that would be beneficial to America due to Gorbachev's willingness to cooperate with the West. Gorbachev sought to adapt and work with the Americans, a last resort meant to salvage what remained of Soviet power.²⁷

The question of disarmament was raised in regards to creating a less stressful situation.²⁸ In a summit held in Geneva in 1985 both sides had pledged a temporary Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement while supporting a fifty percent decrease in strategic offensive arsenals. The treaties secured on-site inspection of arms control in the USSR, and elsewhere, in order to verify the state of global nuclear situation.²⁹ The meeting had demonstrated that the two parties were again willing to discuss negotiations though the results, according to Pond, were not remarkable.³⁰ Raja Mohan proposes that the agreements reached during the negotiations were evidence that the height of tension in the 1980s had peaked and was again deescalating.³¹

More progress was made a year later in Reykjavik. The negotiations progressed to the goal of eliminating euro missiles in the 1000 to 5500 kilometer range.³² Gorbachev was willing to dismantle the SS-20 and Reagan was eager to conclude the arms-control agreement after budgetary and foreign policy

²³ Shiping Hua, "The Deng Reforms (1978-1992) and the Gorbachev Reforms (1985-1991) Revisited: A Political Discourse Analysis," *Problems of Post-Communism* (May 2006): 3.

²⁴ Stephen Redding and Daniel Strum, "The Costs of Remoteness: Evidence from German Division to Reunification," *American Economic Review* (December 2008): 1767.

²⁵ Elizabeth Pond, *Beyond the Wall: Germany's Road to Unification* (Washington, D.C.: The Twentieth Century Fund, Inc., 1993): 43-44.

²⁶ Hua, 7.

²⁷ Rice and Zelkiow, 5-6.

²⁸ Broer, "The NATO Double-Track Decision," *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1990*, ed. by Christof Mauch (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 148.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁰ Pond, 48.

³¹ Raja Mohan, "The Peace Scenario After the INF Treaty," *India International Centre Quarterly* 14 (Winter 1987): 1.

³² Pond, 48.

setbacks.³³ But the issue of ideology remained during the presidency of Reagan and there was little progress towards reunification at this time.³⁴ However, the policies of the subsequent president – George Bush – prioritized German reunification under NATO.³⁵ As James Baker illustrates, the appearance of Gorbachev in the milieu provided a “window of opportunity” for the American administration to push for German unification under NATO.⁴¹

Ensuring American interests in Europe and excluding the Soviet Union from the security structures in Europe remained part of Bush’s foreign policy at this time.⁴³ Baker notes that the actions of the American government were in the interest of democracy, free enterprise and freedom for the individual.³⁶ From the perspective of the American administration Soviet communism was in direct opposition to these values.³⁷ The Americans emphasized “That people ought to be free to choose their alliances,” a main argument in negotiations.³⁸ These differences were not put aside but were enforced through the ongoing insistence of unification under the control of NATO. As Gorbachev was willing to compromise America was given more opportunity to assert Western objectives, thus guiding the process in a way that drew Germany into the West. Rice illustrates the benefits of the American approach in an interview with Alexander von Plato:

That the Soviet Union would not be isolated, that NATO would not consider the Soviet Union an enemy and that Germany was no longer a threat. I think the Soviets began to see that they could tolerate, they never learned to like, but they could tolerate a unified Germany within NATO.³⁹

Rice concludes her comment by acknowledging that regardless of whether or not the Soviets felt that their interests were being put at risk there was little they could do to avoid the insuring of American interests in the event of unification.⁴⁰ America continued to enforce democracy and free trade while quietly reminding the Soviets that compromise was necessary in order to reach an agreement.

The use of NATO for unification was the American solution to decreasing the threat of a consolidated Germany. The plan was to maintain it as a democracy

³³ Broer, 151.

³⁴ Rice and Zelikow, 5-6.

³⁵ James Baker, in an interview with Alexander von Plato.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Rosenberg, 735.

³⁸ Baker interview.

³⁹ Condoleeza Rice, in an interview with Alexander von Plato, Stanford University, 17 September 1999.

⁴⁰ Rice interview.

that was nevertheless subordinate to and respectful of global security interests.⁴¹ Lewis Deninger envisions this relationship as one in which Germany and America remain close trading partners, a “business relationship” rather than a “love affair”, where Germany nonetheless remained subordinate to America.⁴² As Stephen Redding and Daniel Sturm illustrate in their study of German economics before reunification, the division between the FRG and GDR not only closed off trade across the border but also decreased trade accessibility for cities located near the dividing border.⁴³ Reunification was hoped to revitalize Germany’s economy and benefit trading relations with the West.⁴⁴

America promoted certain political ideologies that presented NATO as a safe and positive change from the stale aggression of the Cold War. This message became stronger in Europe following the NATO summit that took place on 29 and 30 May 1989. At the summit Bush expressed his goals to see Germany reunified upon western values such as democracy and peace.⁴⁵ Furthermore Bush was adamant that NATO be the one and only tie Germany had internationally.⁴⁶

While the alternatives were present and possible, unification under NATO was a unification achieved on Western terms. On one hand NATO was seen as vital to incorporating Germany into the West and ending the divisions created by the Warsaw Pact. According to Mary Sarotte, the enlargement of NATO would have been difficult if another institution had replaced it in safeguarding Europe, making NATO’s movement eastward would be nearly impossible. Thus ensuring the stable growth of NATO was of extreme importance to the Americans, and Sarotte credits this as the motivation behind strongly promoting NATO while

⁴¹ Jessica Theresa Dias, “The German Reunification,” *Pakistan Horizon* 44 (April 1991): 92. M. Blacksell, “Reunification and the Political Geography of the Federal Republic of Germany,” *Geography* 67 (October 1982): 310.

⁴² Lewis Edinger, “The German-American Connection in the 1980s,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (Winter 1980-81): 590.

⁴³ Stephen Redding and Daniel Sturm, “The Costs of Remoteness: Evidence from German Division to Reunification,” *American Economic Review* (December 2008): 1767.

⁴⁴ Welfens is quick to point out that although the Western powers were optimistic that reunification would result in substantial economic growth, the integration of East into West was a long process that might weaken the stronger partner in the process. P.J.J. Welfens, “German Unification and Systemic Transition: Towards a New German Economic Miracle,” *Acta Oeconomica* 44 (1992): 115.

⁴⁵ Costigliola, “An ‘Arm Around the Shoulder’,” 88.

⁴⁶ According to von Plato, creating a new security system in place of NATO was never seriously opened for discussion. von Plato, 413. In 1990 Gorbachev had called for an alternative post-Cold War pan-European security structure that would exist from the Soviet Union to the Atlantic and that would be anchored in NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Sarotte, 111; Strobe Talbot, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 219.

limiting the entrance of alternative institutions.⁴⁷ An alternative to NATO would confound the administration's goal of bringing a unified Germany close to the American sphere of regional control, Soviet Union exclusion and NATO extension.⁴⁸

On the other hand NATO was an established and long-standing alliance that promised to maintain peace in Europe in the instance of reunification. Canadian Ambassador to Germany Paul Heinbecker recalls Margaret Thatcher stating, "I love Germany so much, there should be two of them."⁴⁹ Both Thatcher and the French President Francois Mitterrand were clear that they did not want to see Germany unified.⁵⁰ This fear was based in the notion that history might repeat itself with Germany rising up against Europe.⁵¹ As Sarotte examines the American government did not want Germany to be free to negotiate with the Soviet Union without an external anchor and NATO membership would protect against this possibility.⁵²

Such unpredictability was reason to safeguard NATO's authority in Europe and the Americans worked hard to guard against the development of alternatives. As the Canadian politician Lloyd Axworthy reflects, "There was just no constituency or even serious debate about [alternatives]. NATO was the cornerstone, and had been, would, was to be the vehicle."⁵³ A new pan-European structure might allow the Soviet Union more influence while decreasing America's presence in Europe.⁵⁴

Germany also acted as an access point for America into the European continent. According to Costogliola, Germany had at times ensured American interest in the Europe Community, helping to maintain the predominance of America in NATO and NATO in Europe, as was evidenced in the support of Kohl

⁴⁷ Sarotte, 110.

⁴⁸ Szabo, 105.

⁴⁹ Paul Heinbecker, in an interview with Alexander von Plato.

⁵⁰ Josef Joffe, "Putting Germany Back Together: The Fabulous Bush and Baker Boys," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (January 1996): 160.

⁵¹ According to Saied Ahmed, Germany had held the key to the balance of power in Europe since unification under Otto von Bismarck. Saied Ahmed, "From Division to Reunification," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 (Oct. 6, 1990): 2242.

⁵² Sarotte, 110; von Plato, 413; Joffe, 160; Rice and Zelikow, 214.

⁵³ Lloyd Axworthy in an interview with Alexander von Plato, 2 November 2012, University of Winnipeg. von Plato's personal camera.

⁵⁴ According to Michael Cox America legitimized its 'free world' ideology through strictly opposing the Soviet Union while strengthening the unity of the Western capitalist system and legitimizing the free-enterprise system. Michael Cox, "From Détente to the 'New Cold War': The Crisis of the Cold War System," *Millennium-The Journal of International Studies* (December 1984): 265.

for reunification under NATO and in his opposition to a neutral Germany.⁵⁵ The effectiveness of implementing NATO as the tool for reunification was reflected in the 'Ten Point Plan' introduced by Chancellor Helmut Kohl on 28 November 1989. This plan re-established strong links between reunification and NATO.⁵⁶ In the ten points was the insistence that a democratic government be established as a precursor to developing a confederation between the two Germanies.⁵⁷ The extension of a democratic government into the FRG was the Kohl's solution for unification: "We can envisage the following institutions being created after early, free elections: an intergovernmental committee [...]; a joint parliamentary body; and many others in light of new developments."⁵⁸ The American strategy for open borders and a united Germany was coming to fruition.

A point of confusion in negotiations was the extension of NATO Eastwards beyond Germany. The Soviets claim that in February Genscher, Kohl and Baker had stated that NATO would not expand to the borders of the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ As Mary Sarotte points out, this would have an influence on Gorbachev's decision to agree to German unification under NATO.⁶⁰

In the end NATO did extend past Germany to include countries in Eastern Europe. According to Axworthy, the extension of NATO into Eastern Europe sent "the wrong set of signals", damaging the trust relationship between Putin and the Americans.⁶¹ Axworthy credits some of the confusion due to lack of clear parameters and of limitations on borders.⁶²

When the Social Democrats won the elections on 18 March 1990 Kohl was free to advance unification even faster than before.⁶³ While these developments were beyond the reach of the American government they were integral in furthering German unification, thus benefitting the American NATO strategy.

Two main points can be drawn from the role of America in the reunification of Germany. American policy was often narrow and dismissive of any alternatives security structures beyond NATO. The ability of America to dominate the situation with the Soviet Union, Germany, Britain and France was consistent until the end. The foreign policy of Soviet containment and exclusion

⁵⁵ Kohl insisted on democratic elections to decide the outcome of Germany. Dias, 90; Costigliola, 88; Rice and Zelikow, 215.

⁵⁶ Konrad Jarausch and Volker Gransow, *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1993* (Berghen Books: Oxford UK, 1997): 86; von Plato, 418.

⁵⁷ Jarausch and Gransow, 87.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Sarotte, 118.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Lloyd Axworthy in an interview with Alexander von Plato.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Gerhard Wettig, "Moscow's Acceptance of NATO," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45 (1993): 956.

was limiting but successful in ensuring American interests during the process of reunification.