

Some Aspects About “Sealing the Deal” on Unification of Germany

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Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, Editors**

Dear Kristina, dear Dan,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Why are we talking about history thirty years ago? For young people it is sometimes quite boring being told by their parents that in former times children behaved better than today.

A Bavarian poet once said: “In former times even the future was better than today.”

To be more serious, I fully agree with August Bebel, who once has said:

“You have to know history in order to understand the present and to shape the future.”

Let me just enumerate the main and most important political results of the years 1988 to 1992:

1. In 1989 the first Warsaw Pact countries such as Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR started opening up their borders, destroying the ‘Iron Curtain.’ The Soviet troops deployed in their countries didn’t intervene.
2. In summer 1989 Poland was the first communist country carrying out free elections and establishing a democratic government. Hungary was the second communist country in January 1990; GDR the third in March 1990.

Again, the Soviet Union didn’t intervene militarily as it did several times in the past, 1953 in the GDR, 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Prague.

Mikhail Gorbachev kept his promise during a Warsaw Pact summit not to intervene anymore in the domestic matters of his allies. Further on they would be responsible for themselves.

3. On October 3, 1990 Germany was peacefully united in agreement with all Four Victorious Powers in just 329 days. The Soviet Union gave up Stalin’s most important spoils of the war -- the GDR and East-Berlin – without firing a shot.
4. The USSR accepted a united Germany being a member of the EU and NATO.
5. The USSR peacefully withdrew – as agreed - within four years 500,000 troops and more than 200,000 thousand family members and 680,000 tons of munitions from

Central Europe, from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and 370,000 from the GDR alone, including nuclear missiles, as the Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Németh told me years later. That was indeed an impressive military performance.

Last week Miklós Németh received a golden medal in Berlin honored by the Christian Democrats in memory of opening the Hungarian border for more than 200,000 refugees from the GDR, facing heavy protests from the GDR.

6. From 1988 until 1992, the most far-reaching disarmaments and arms control agreements were signed, limiting or eliminating conventional, nuclear and chemical weapons. Eighty percent of all nuclear systems were eliminated. The credit for these historically unique decisions belongs to President Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev.

The last Soviet Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov publicly said: “Today we have reached the point that we no longer are talking about an arms race but about a disarmament race.”

7. On July 1, 1991 the Warsaw Pact peacefully dissolved, nearly silently.
8. And at the end of 1991 even the USSR was peacefully disbanded into 15 sovereign republics.

Nearly all those events were ground-breaking, historically sensational processes. Each of them could have provoked a war. I am reminding my audience about these spectacular events all the time, wherever I am, even today in Washington D.C.

Why? Because of my impression that we all in the Western world took it for granted and didn't acknowledge the results in a sufficient way.

How did it start?

What were the **prerequisites of that success story?**

1. Mutual trust between Chancellor Helmut Kohl, George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev once told me that if he hadn't had confidence in Bush and Kohl, he might have taken different decisions.

Mutual trust was developed by

- meeting all commitments on all sides;
- supporting Gorbachev's reform policy bilaterally and multilaterally via the European Community, the G-7, and NATO; Germany signed in 1990 about 20 treaties and agreements with Moscow. For example:

In 1989/90 the USSR was suffering from a dramatic lack of supplies. Our government immediately decided to help in 1990. We spent about two billion Deutschmark supplying meat, butter, even underwear etc. to the USSR.

In early May 1990 the CEO of Deutsche Bank, Alfred Herrhausen, the CEO of Dresdner Bank, Wolfgang Röllner and I were confidentially negotiating a credit line of 5 billion Deutschmark to prevent an insolvency of the Soviet world power.

- Nobody in the Western world publicly triumphed over the Soviet Union to be the ‘winner of the Cold War.’
 - Everybody, first of all President George Bush and all the European Presidents and Heads of government, treated Gorbachev and his team from the very beginning at the same eye level, avoiding any humiliation.
2. The most important topic for the success in 1990 was **security** and that is valid still today.
- President George Bush gave an important promise to the Soviet leadership: *“And so, let the Soviets know that our goal is not to undermine their legitimate security interests”*.
 - Helmut Kohl achieved the final breakthrough in the negotiations with Moscow after an April 1990 proposal. He offered to negotiate a treaty under international law between a united Germany and the USSR. It was to be negotiated before unification and would be signed and ratified afterwards. The key offer was unequivocal German security guarantees vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev and his Foreign Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze responded almost euphorically. In November 1990 after unification, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Mikhail Gorbachev signed this so-called “Major Treaty.”
 - German security guarantees were flanked and supported by a NATO Special Summit in July 1990 in London. In the London Declaration, all NATO member states reinforced a message given days earlier stating that NATO no longer saw the Warsaw Pact countries as enemies and extended a “hand of friendship” to Eastern European nations. Since Mikhail Gorbachev was facing a CPSU Party Congress in July 1990, this was very helpful to him – as he later confirmed.

Common security has always been the key issue in finding agreement and cooperating with the Soviet Union and now with Russia. In 1989/90 the German government, the U.S. government and their European partners cooperated very closely at the highest levels, at the 2 + 4 negotiations and within multinational organizations such as NATO, the EC and the World Economic Summit.

NATO membership of a united Germany was a key issue. From the very beginning Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President George Bush had agreed that a united Germany should be a member of NATO.

President Mikhail Gorbachev gave at the very end in July 1990 quite a simple but a very true answer to that. He said: ‘An united Germany will get back its full sovereignty and a sovereign country decides on its own whether it will join an alliance and which one.’ There was only one restriction. As long as Soviet troops remained on the former GDR territory, no NATO troops besides the German armed forces, and no NATO installations, should be deployed.

There was no other discussion on NATO extension to the east. There was no promise of any Western politician that NATO would not extend to the east. President Mikhail Gorbachev has just confirmed that. In his newly published book in Germany, “What is now at stake? My appeal to peace and freedom” he wrote:

“Some of my critics accuse me that I didn’t persist in a contractual agreement, that NATO should not be allowed to extend in the future to Eastern Europe. Such a demand would have been absurd, even ridiculous, because the Warsaw Pact still existed. We immediately would have been accused of relinquishing the Pact.”

In 1990 nobody foresaw that in July 1991 the Warsaw Pact would be peacefully and quietly dissolved and nobody foresaw that in December 1991 even the USSR would be peacefully disbanded into fifteen independent republics. There was no prophet available.

Nevertheless, in 1990, a number of uncertainties and risks could have derailed the process of German unification. In early January 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev surprised everyone with a press statement cancelling all meetings with his Western counterparts. Chancellor Helmut Kohl was also affected. He was waiting for his first personal conversation with Gorbachev after the opening of the Wall. According to Soviet Foreign Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze, there were intense struggles within the Soviet leadership about whether to use Soviet troops in the GDR. Fortunately the Soviet soldiers stayed in their barracks.

Gorbachev and Kohl personally met for the first time on February 10, 1990. Almost immediately, Gorbachev agreed that it was ‘a matter for the two German states to decide if, when and how they were to unite.’

All the same, Mikhail Gorbachev was facing tough arguments within the CPSU. In July 1990, he was the first Secretary General to face more than 1,000 dissenting votes in the Central Committee – a historic precedent. At this point, he could have been overthrown, but he managed to remove his main opponent, Yegor Ligachev, from the Politburo. When Gorbachev met Kohl a few days later in the Caucasus, he was visibly relieved to have successfully weathered the Party Congress.

In addition, other flash points started to develop that could have interfered with or even slowed down the process of German unification. On August 2, 1990, the Iraqi army annexed Kuwait. From this point on, the U.S. administration was focusing almost entirely on this new crisis.

Fortunately, the most important decisions concerning German unification had already been taken. When Secretary of State Jim Baker visited Chancellor Helmut Kohl on September 15, 1990 in his private home in Ludwigshafen, they almost entirely talked about Germany’s contributions to the war against Saddam Hussein and the development of the region. Jim Baker was very satisfied with Germany’s overall contribution of about 3.3 billion Deutschmark. This was more than his government had asked for.

The second crisis in the summer of 1990 was brewing in the Balkans. The multiethnic state of Yugoslavia was beginning to break up. From 1991 until 1999, this led to a series of military conflicts. In the final phase of German unification that summer 1990 and considering the run-up to the first Iraq war, nobody saw any urgency in dealing with the rising tensions between the different ethnicities in Yugoslavia. It became clear that administrations have a hard time managing several conflicts at once. In 1991, the first shots were fired in Slovenia and Croatia.

Fortunately, we finished the process of German unification successfully and peacefully on October 3, 1990. The culmination of all those events was the signing of the “Charter of Paris for a New Europe” in November 1990 by all CSCE Presidents and Prime Ministers. Its goal was a pan-European framework for peace and security from Vancouver to Vladivostok – the

“Common European House” that Mikhail Gorbachev had envisioned with the same level of security for all member states. What a Vision! What a dream!
(Martin Luther King: I have a dream...)

The former Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, is supposed to have said, “Who has no vision, is not a realist.” I agree with that.

On May 9, 1991 the French President Francois Mitterrand gave a speech in Aachen, where he said:, “For a long time, Europe did not have as many reasons for hope.”

Today, everyone in East and West should ask the question: What have we done with this vision?