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Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, 'German Reunification: What Would Have to Happen?'

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Summary:

The CIA’s memorandum published on 11 October 1989 brings up the German reunification as an international agenda and assesses its implications for the Soviet Union and the United States.

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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German Reunification: What Would Have to Happen?

Summary

German reunification is, to use Chancellor Kohl's phrase, "back on the international agenda." This is not to say that he thinks reunification is around the corner, but clearly West German leaders--sensing both opportunities and dangers as events unfold in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union--are giving more serious thought to what had been seen as only an academic possibility a few months ago. This memorandum represents an effort to leave aside for the moment the world of probabilities and to think through changes that would have to occur before reunification could take place. It also assesses implications for the United States of the continuing debate.

This memorandum was prepared by Office of European Analysis. Comments may be directed to Chief,

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Discussion

In recent months, Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher as well as leading Social Democrats have proclaimed that reunification[1] is "back on the agenda." Although they clearly made those statements in part to undercut the far-right Republican Party, we believe that the tide of events is moving West German leaders to reconsider whether reunification must remain a back-burner issue. The main stimuli to rethinking the inner-German relationship have been the exodus of refugees from East Germany, which demonstrated anew the failure of that regime to win popular support, and the possibility of change implied by East German leader Honecker's ill health and possible departure from the scene. The impact of these developments has been heightened because they are occurring against a backdrop of growing Soviet tolerance of diversity in Eastern Europe, growing influence of non-Communist political forces in the region, arms control progress, and the ebbing of the East-West conflict. West Germans have long thought reunification might be possible in the long run--in that context, the fact that 88 percent of West Germans favored it comes as no surprise--but the phrase has lost the character of an empty incantation and--as one West German official noted recently--become something that people really expect to happen.

We believe Bonn will try to exploit these trends to forge closer inner-German relations, and because some officials will want Washington's help, this will place the United States in a delicate situation. An active US push for reunification would disconcert the West Germans because they would worry about adverse reactions from their other Western Allies. Perhaps more important, they would be concerned about provoking hostility in Moscow and East Berlin--which they still see as posing the largest obstacles to reunification. On the other hand, West German perceptions that Washington was only paying lipservice to the issue--

--would stir resentment against Bonn's Western partners.

In our view, German reunification depends on formidable conditions--East German liberalization, Moscow's acquiescence, Western acceptance, and West German willingness to accept the at least initially reduced living standards and the left-of-center, Protestant flavor that the former GDR would impart to

[1]This paper refers to "reunification"--even though some believe that the eventual solution to the German problem would be a loose federation or other arrangement--because those debating the issue in West Germany often use the term and it is the stated goal of West German leaders and parties.

a newly reunited country. The following is an analysis of Bonn's perceptions on each of these issues.

East German Liberalization

The Federal Republic's constitution calls for the unity and freedom of all Germans in free self-determination and, in our view, reunification would be impossible without substantial democratization in the GDR. West German leaders believe East Berlin will have an increasingly difficult time holding back pressure for change. The recent mass exodus from the GDR demonstrates that--28 years after construction of the Berlin Wall--the East German regime still has not bridged the gulf separating it from its citizens. Liberalization in the Soviet Union and Hungary and formation of a non-Communist-led government in Poland are highlighting the intransigence of the governing elite in East Germany and are compounding popular frustration there. Open discontent is spilling out of its protected sanctuary in the Evangelical Church into unprecedented, if still small street demonstrations. These developments are unfolding, moreover, at a time when Honecker's longevity is in serious doubt and as his colleagues' grappling with the succession issue raises questions about the regime's future direction.

Although West German leaders do not expect dramatic moves toward reform in East Germany in the near term, their perception that something has to give eventually in East Berlin is a key factor in Bonn's renewing hopes for reunification. Leaders in Bonn would not be surprised to see a crackdown as East Berlin's aging leadership struggles to reassert its authority, but they believe that over the longer term East Germany will have to liberalize in order to revitalize its slowing economy and to combat the alienation of the public. As many West German politicians and journalists have noted recently, even the GDR leadership seems to recognize that each step East Germany takes down the road to reform will diminish down the rationale for its existence--its "socialist" identity--and will make it harder to argue against reunification. Indeed, there is a possibility that the leadership itself may begin to experience the loss of faith in communism already experienced by ruling elites elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and this could greatly stimulate the desire for closer links in both Germany.

Soviet Acquiescence

Although the Soviets have publicly and privately opposed the idea of reunification recently (see box), we believe events in Eastern Europe are leading West German officials to wonder what effect Gorbachev's encouragement of reform will have on East Germany--and with what implications for the inner-German relationship.

the USSR was

no longer wedded to the concept of the GDR as a defense bulwark, and that relations with West Germany are more important to the Soviets because of that country's potential as an economic partner.

Although there is no evidence to indicate a radical shift in Soviet views, Foreign Minister Genscher, in particular, appears to believe that his own efforts are influencing Moscow's policy by reassuring Gorbachev that an evolution in Eastern Europe is possible without threatening Soviet security. He doubtless hopes that his urgings to "help Gorbachev," his vision of Europe (which is sometimes reminiscent of Gorbachev's "Common European Home"), and his resistance to NATO programs that might "raise tensions"--such as nuclear modernization--are playing a constructive role. Certainly West German leaders are aware that Gorbachev wants to ease the East-West conflict so as to reduce the burden of defense expenditures, to facilitate access to Western capital and technology, and ultimately, to enhance Soviet security by persuading NATO to reduce its military strength. We doubt that anyone in Bonn is redrawing the map of Germany based on these trends, but there is a perception now that this is an era where even the implausible can happen and it is best to think ahead. Statements by politicians, editorials in the press, and academic writing all indicate that such thinking is occurring. And if the centrifugal forces in the once monolithic Soviet bloc continue to gain momentum, we believe West Germans will think even more actively about ways to bring the two Germanys closer together.

BOX

Soviet Views

Despite scattered hints--dropped by Moscow to influence West Germany--that Soviet thinking on intra-German relations is evolving, we believe Moscow remains fundamentally opposed to German reunification. Official Soviet spokesmen have consistently denied that changes are being contemplated to the Berlin Quadrapartite Agreement or to the status of German borders, and a Soviet official in Berlin last month told US diplomats that Moscow "would not welcome" any discussion on reunification at this time.

The Soviets still see a united Germany as a threat to European stability and expect to keep a substantial military contingent in East Germany even under a CFE agreement. The memories of Nazi devastation in World War II remain potent within the USSR, and the Soviets share the concerns of their Pact allies that a unified Germany might renew territorial disputes resolved in post World War II agreements and could become a political and economic threat to the USSR and Eastern Europe. We believe that Moscow continues to place a high value on its relationship with East Germany, which is its largest trading partner and a key military ally, and is worried that raising the reunification question would exacerbate anti-regime sentiments in the GDR. Nevertheless--particularly when the crisis over East German refugees subsides--Moscow will continue to hint that some change in the status of the two Germanys is possible in order to cultivate West German support on trade and arms control issues.

We believe that even the Soviets' most visionary spokesmen do not consider German reunification a near-term possibility. Over the long term, however, Moscow might consider reunification acceptable if preceded by major changes in Europe, such as the replacement of NATO and the Warsaw Pact with a new security order and the achievement of a neutral, largely disarmed West Germany.

Western Acceptance

West German leaders probably see several Western impediments to reunification. Bonn realizes that other West European capitals worry about the political and economic strength of a united Germany, and it considers Washington, at best, only a lukewarm supporter of reunification. Bonn also recognizes that the United States, France, and the United Kingdom retain a say on the issue as a result of post-World War II agreements and the Allies' control of West Berlin. Even more important, West Germans are aware that their security and prosperity in the postwar era have depended on their Western ties. Political leaders share the commitment of the voters to maintaining the country's well-being, and they realize that the Federal Republic's participation in the West's economic abundance has been a key factor in its ability to continue to exert a magnetic attraction on East Germany. These considerations suggest that West Germany would not readily exchange its Western economic ties for reunification.

We doubt, however, that such a choice would be necessary. Bonn entered the Alliance in exchange for assurances that NATO would support the goal of eventual peaceful reunification, and it would be very difficult for any West European government to cling to the post-war arrangements and actively oppose reunification without appearing to violate its own commitment to the principle of self-determination. In our view, Western capitals would probably see Bonn as too important to risk offending over the issue, and Western leaders would support reunification as the best way of maximizing a reunited Germany's ties with the West.

West German Support for Reunification

We believe that few West Germans have thought deeply yet about the internal character of a united Germany or about its relationship to either the West or the East. West Germany is currently nearly evenly divided between Protestants and Catholics and between the left and the right. A united Germany incorporating the GDR, however, would have a decidedly Protestant and probably social democratic flavor.[2] The GDR would also bring with it a relatively backward economy and 17

million new citizens accustomed to elaborate social welfare programs. Absorption of the GDR would be a wrenching experience, even though the West Germans view the East Germans far more fraternally than they do the several hundred thousand other ethnic Germans who have poured into the Federal Republic in recent years. Social tensions and pocketbook issues could lead some West Germans--especially in the Catholic, conservative, and westward-looking Rhineland--to oppose reunification. The ideal of a united Germany, however, is so strong and pervasive--extending from the great bulk of the Social Democrats to the radical right--that we doubt these obstacles would dissuade political leaders from pursuing reunification if other obstacles appeared to be fading away.

Security concerns and ties to the West would give greater cause for hesitation. If East-West tension eased, however, and the lights were green in Moscow and East Berlin, we doubt that concern over West Germany's security position would deter Bonn from pursuing reunification. West German leaders would be most concerned with maintaining Bonn's EC relations as a guarantee of a united Germany's prosperity and a repository of shared Western values. If the threat from the East continued to fade and progress toward reunification had proceeded apace, even conservatives would probably be willing to attenuate Germany's security ties with the West.

Implications for the United States

We believe that as long as the East-West warming trend--and particularly the trend toward more Western-style government in Eastern Europe--continues, it will fuel West German aspirations toward reunification and induce Bonn to look actively for ways to promote and shape this outcome. Indeed, a major reformist breakthrough in the GDR probably would convince West German leaders that rapid progress in bringing the two Germanys closer together was possible. In the absence of such a breakthrough, however, Bonn will have difficulty identifying feasible policies that could promote reunification. West Germans are likely to conclude, for example, that trying to compel reform in East Germany by threatening to cut off economic assistance would only cause the regime in East Berlin to dig in its heels and would threaten the travel and immigration accords that are highly

valued in West Germany. Moreover, Bonn is aware of continuing Soviet opposition to the reunification debate, and fears Moscow's ability to slam the rapprochement into reverse. On the other hand, West German leaders probably are already offering increased aid to East Germany in return for steps toward liberalization, hoping that the GDR leadership will loosen up sufficiently to see the attractiveness of such an incentive.

Partly because of its interest in ever-closer relations with East Germany, Bonn will remain disinclined to perceive risks in East-West detente, and will push especially hard for conciliatory Western arms control and trade policies. West German leaders are not likely to seek significant reductions in US forces and influence in Europe any time soon--they would see that as squandering potential bargaining chips with Moscow. But West Germany will have more of an interest than any other Western country in seeing that those chips are increasingly expended in return for corresponding reductions in Soviet military strength and political influence in Eastern Europe.

West Germany's rapidly expanding political dialogue with the East is likely to spill over increasingly into security issues--a process already advanced to some extent by Genscher

Bonn will also seek to preserve its privileged economic relationship with the GDR as the EC strives to realize its goal of a fully integrated market by 1992.[3] Its likely success in that effort will help it contain criticism by far-right critics that EC membership is incompatible with reunification.

During this short to medium term, the West Germans will encourage the United States and other Western countries to become more involved in Eastern Europe, partly because many of them believe that Eastern Europe as a whole will have to change before reunification can occur. West Germany's position as the leading Western country in that region is already so pronounced that Bonn has little fear of would-be competitors for commercial advantage or political influence. Indeed, it looks to other Western countries to camouflage its at times embarrassingly high profile there so it can make additional inroads. More fundamentally, West Germans recognize that they cannot achieve detente on their own and that they need to work with other Western countries to bridge the East-West divide and prepare the way for reunification.

[3]Under the terms of a protocol to the Treaty of Rome that established the EC, a wide variety of East German products are allowed duty free access to West Germany.

During this period the West Germans will almost certainly continue to play their diplomatic cards close to their chest. Although they will seek continued US and other Western support for the principle of reunification, they will be aware that a perception of aggressiveness on the issue could spook the East Germans and the Soviets as well as unsettle their Western partners. West Germans are likely to be increasingly sensitive to possible signs that their allies have doubts about reunification and Bonn's commitment to the West. At the same time, because of their concern about sensitivities in the East, they would not welcome efforts by Washington to take the lead in promoting reunification, and some might even suspect an attempt to derail reunification and reinforce Bonn's Western ties by provoking a hardline response from East Berlin and Moscow.

If prospects for reunification move ahead over the next several years, relations among Washington's West European allies could begin to shift. As West Germany became more concerned with maximizing the opportunites for achieving reunification, its attention would be diverted from West European unity and some of the considerable impetus that the Federal Republic has contributed to that movement would be at least temporarily lost.

Over the longer term, the reunification issue could bring US and West German interests into sharper conflict. The division of Germany lies at the heart of the bipolar postwar order, and that order has been a key ingredient in maintaining US influence in Western Europe. If the East-West divide continues to ease and West Germany moves closer to reunification, the US security role on the continent will become steadily less significant. Indeed, at some point in the process, the West Germans may begin to see the Alliance in its present form as an anachronism and as an impediment to their pan-European aspirations.

At the same time, a Germany sufficiently unified to act as a unit in international affairs might seriously alter postwar power balances. Although a growing "European vocation" might act as a check on German pursuit of national interests, it is possible to envision other scenarios with such a strong power located in Central Europe. For example, East European countries might come to resent growing German influence, and competition for influence in that area might grow between Germany and the