ROLES REPORT
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The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Helsinki Final Act

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発行所：　東京大学先端科学技術研究センター
創発戦略研究オープンラボ（ROLES）
〒153-8904　東京都目黒区駒場 4-6-1

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Introduction

In the 1970s, Europe witnessed a change in international order through diplomacy. The Helsinki Final Act, signed in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), symbolized détente and served as a driving force for creating changes in the international environment that were a prerequisite for the end of the Cold War. This conference originated from the Soviet initiative for pan-European security, but how did it evolve into the CSCE of 1975? How did the Kremlin perceive the presence of NATO and the United States in shaping the post-war Europe it desired? This paper re-examines post-war European international relations, focusing on the Soviet pan-European security initiative.

In addition, this paper does not intend to address the negotiation process itself concerning the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Numerous scholars have already produced findings related to the topic, including on the Soviet motivations and the negotiation process in Helsinki (Bange and Niedhart 2008; Kosaka 2025; Morgan 2018; Nuti 2010; Romano 2009). This paper focuses instead on the Soviet Union's pan-European security initiative, which formed the premise for the negotiations on the Helsinki Final Act. The initiative is closely linked to how the Soviet Union responded to the post-war "German question" and how it perceived the existence of NATO. In the end, the setback of Soviet diplomacy created the preconditions for the Helsinki negotiations.

1. Origins of the Pan-European Security Initiative

World War II reminded the Kremlin of the significance of ensuring its own national security along its European borders. From the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty of December 1943 to the Czechoslovak-Hungarian Treaty of April 1949, the Soviet Union formed a complex network of eleven bilateral treaties (Grzybowski 1964: 172-174). Having established a satellite sphere in Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union succeeded, for the first time since the October Revolution, in creating a buffer zone against the “threat of capitalism” that had long endangered its own security (Onoe 1959).

Amidst the establishment of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, Western European integration underwent complex developments. For both East and West, West German rearmament became the most crucial issue of this period. When the Korean War erupted, the United States decided to send large-scale ground forces. However, the US commitment of military power to East Asia meant it would be difficult to deploy further troops to Europe. The limitation of Washington's

power projection capabilities led to growing support for the idea of re-arming West Germany.

When the idea of rearmament became a reality, France showed significant resistance. Sharing a border with Germany and having experienced three invasions in its past, Paris scrambled to avoid German rearmament. However, not all French officials were blind to the new realities in Europe. French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, for instance, recognised the necessity for Germany to possess its military power (Trachtenberg 1999: 109). On the other hand, most French people, faced with a dilemma, could not agree to the US proposal for West German rearmament and its NATO membership.

The Kremlin also attempted to prevent West Germany's rearmament through its own methods. The Soviet leadership proposed German unification without rearmament, aiming to undermine the Western plans. Its first attempt was a joint declaration by the foreign ministers of Eastern countries in October 1950, almost concurrent with the Pleven plan advocating the establishment of the European Defence Community (EDC). While opposing West German rearmament, the Soviet Union simultaneously advocated for the conclusion of a peace treaty to restore German unification, presenting it as the "conditions for the formation of a peace-loving, democratic, unified Germany" (Wetting 1996: 361). The Eastern bloc repeatedly proposed this unification concept after 1950. Joseph Stalin sought to amplify discord within NATO and thwart West Germany's rearmament by presenting the propaganda of a peaceful German unification plan (Zubok 2007: 81-82).

Amid conflicting speculation about rearmament, the Bonn Treaty, concluded on May 26, 1952, stipulated the end of the occupation of West Germany and the restoration of sovereignty[1]. The following day, the EDC Treaty was signed in Paris under British and American leadership. However, the Bonn Treaty included a clause stating that it would only enter into force once all parties to the EDC Treaty had completed ratification, and the Soviet Union saw an opportunity here.

Following Stalin's death in March 1953 and the armistice in the Korean War, momentum for easing tensions between East and West began to grow. In fact, the Foreign Ministers' Conference of the four great powers was held in Berlin from January to February 1954. With the end of the Stalin regime as a turning point, the four great powers began to attempt to resolve the German problem through negotiations. Although the Conference failed to reach an agreement, the proposal presented by Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov became the origin of the pan-European security

initiative.

The Berlin Conference attempted to resolve the "German problem." Even though a new policy direction emerged within the Kremlin, the conservative Molotov's attendance signified that no major changes would occur in the Soviet approach (Zubok and Pleshakov 1996: 169). At the same time, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had discerned that the Soviet Union's repeated proposals for a unified Germany were not fundamentally aimed at German unification itself. Rather, the Soviet true objectives lay in the disarmament of Germany — specifically, the withdrawal of US forces and the collapse of the EDC — which they repeatedly argued should precede unification (Hosoya 2005: 197-198). US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, like Foreign Secretary Eden, was also concerned about the possibility of Europe becoming subordinate to the Soviet Union's massive military power. Therefore, the American and British officials emphasised that the EDC would prevent the Soviet Union's greatest fear — the return of the German threat — and appealed that the West also desired German unification[2].

In response, Molotov presented the Soviet Union's own peace treaty proposal on 4 February 1954. This proposal contained the following points: (1) the formation of an all-German provisional government comprising parliaments from both East and West Germany; (2) the holding of all-German elections by the provisional government; (3) the establishment of an all-German government based on the election results; (4) the conclusion of a peace treaty with the all-German government; and (5) the withdrawal of all foreign troops from all of Germany before the holding of elections[3]. The following week, Molotov proposed the conclusion of a pan-European collective security treaty[4]. However, this action represented an approach scarcely different from that of the Stalin era and was naturally unacceptable to the Western powers.

Consequently, the foreign ministers' meeting failed to reach an agreement. However, the collapse of the EDC, as the Soviet Union had desired, soon arrived. In August 1954, the French Parliament decided to reject ratification of the EDC Treaty. Immediately, the Soviet Foreign Ministry issued a statement, once again strongly advocating German reunification[5].

The collapse of the EDC was a foreseeable outcome. In October 1954, the Western powers signed the Paris Agreement, deciding on West Germany's NATO membership and its rearmament. The sequence of events following the "death of the EDC" was the result of the skill of British Foreign

Secretary Anthony Eden. His diplomacy achieved West Germany's rearmament, secured the continuation of US military involvement in Europe, integrated West Germany into the Western system, and even enabled the continuation of European integration (Hosoya 2005: 162-164). Conversely, Molotov's proposal for a transformation of the European security order collapsed from its very foundations before discussions could begin, due to West Germany's NATO membership.

The events leading up to this point demonstrate that the Soviet initiative for pan-European security emerged as a response to the post-war "German question." The Kremlin's failed attempt to prevent West German rearmament led to the establishment of the Warsaw Pact as a counterpart to NATO.

2. The Warsaw Pact as an Attempt at Pan-European Security

Approximately a fortnight after West Germany decided to join NATO, the Soviet Union promptly made its next move. On 13 November 1954, the Kremlin proposed to 23 Eastern and Western European nations, as well as the United States and China, that a conference be held either in Moscow or Paris to establish a pan-European collective security system[6]. However, the Western powers summarily dismissed the Soviet proposal. With the Kremlin's initiative, the Conference of European Countries on Safeguarding European Peace and Security was held in Moscow from 29 November to 2 December 1954. The title, at least superficially, suggests that the conference did not merely intend to strengthen ties within the Eastern bloc. Yet the participating states comprised only the Soviet Union and seven Eastern European countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia), plus China as an observer. On the very day the Moscow conference opened, the Western powers had sent a memorandum rejecting the Soviet proposal[7].

Consequently, only the Soviet bloc states participated in the conference on European security, which did not presuppose the East-West divide. The adopted declaration document called for the suspension of the Paris Agreement, while explicitly stating that should the agreement be ratified, the integration of military forces and the unified command structure shall commence, and other measures necessary for the strengthening of defence capabilities shall also be taken[8]. Given the participating states and the declaration's content, it is clear that the Moscow conference on European security marked a precursor to the emergence of the Warsaw Pact. It arose not as an internal matter for the Eastern bloc, but as a response to the Western move of signing the Paris Agreement.

Having failed to convene the international conference as intended, the Soviet Union found itself in a predicament over the "German question." With ratification of the Paris Agreement imminent, the Soviet Foreign Ministry prepared a draft for a multilateral alliance and mutual defence treaty, including East Germany, by 31 December 1954 (Mastny 2002: 63-64). The Kremlin had to respond to reality rather than pursue the goal of a unified, neutral Germany, which it had sought since the Stalin era.

The intention to form an Eastern counterpart to NATO was announced on 21 March 1955[9]. It appears the Soviet Union deliberately timed this announcement to precede the vote on the Paris Agreement in the French Parliament. However, Moscow's move failed to halt the rearmament of West Germany.

With the ratification of the Paris Agreement in France, which had buried the EDC, this development became almost impossible to stop. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided to convene an international conference in Warsaw to conclude a treaty establishing an Eastern bloc alliance (Mastny 2002: 64).

On 5 May 1955, the Paris Agreement finally came into force. Under the agreement, West Germany regained its sovereignty and joined NATO the following day. The post-war "German question" thus became a complete defeat for the Kremlin. The Soviet leadership immediately announced its intention to terminate the mutual assistance treaties with Britain and France, as it had informed them the previous December (Fursenko and Naftali 2006: 34).

From 11 to 14 May 1955, the second Conference of European Countries on Safeguarding European Peace and Security was held in Warsaw. The participating states were the same as those at the previous year's conference in Moscow. On the first day of the conference, Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin delivered a speech, emphasising that this organisation was not intended for war or an arms race, but rather as a countermeasure against the formation of a new military bloc by the West[10]. Thus, on the final day of the conference, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, commonly known as the Warsaw Pact, was signed between eight countries, including the Soviet Union. Based on this treaty, the representatives of each nation signed the Declaration on the Establishment of a Unified Military Command.

The Eastern countries clearly modelled the Warsaw Pact on NATO. Indeed, similarities between these treaties include provisions such as the commitment to refrain from the threat or use of force, mutual consultation to be undertaken in the event of an attack, and the provision of assistance by "all necessary means" in response. Furthermore, both treaties explicitly stated adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and shared a duration of 20 years (Mastny 2002: 65-66).

On the other hand, we can identify several distinctive features of the Warsaw Pact. First, the Warsaw Pact set as its goal the establishment of a collective security system in Europe, with participation open to all European countries regardless of their social and state systems (Preamble). It represented a distinctive character deeply connected to the treaty's formation process. Furthermore, its scope of application was limited to "armed attack against a Contracting Party in Europe" (Article IV), a significant departure from its model, NATO. Furthermore, while the treaty involved the formation of a military alliance, its membership was open even to opposing nations. It also stipulated a 20-year term, after which it would expire on the date of entry into force of a collective security treaty covering all European countries. These aspects also represent distinctive features of this treaty[11].

In concluding the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union sought to minimise its appearance as a military alliance for the Eastern bloc, instead presenting it as the first step towards establishing a collective security system for all of Europe. This demonstrates that the purpose of the Warsaw Pact was not to create a military structure intended for conflict with NATO.

3. Origins of the Helsinki Final Act

Following the failure to resolve the post-war "German question," which led to the establishment of the Warsaw Pact, Khrushchev seized new power in the Soviet Union. He continued efforts beyond 1955 to reach an agreement with Western nations on collective security in Europe. One example was the draft treaty of non-aggression between NATO and the Warsaw Pact submitted by the Soviet Union in May 1958[12]. Amidst the new international atmosphere created by the launch of Sputnik 1, the Kremlin proposed the simultaneous dissolution of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This draft mutual non-aggression treaty stipulated that both NATO and Warsaw Pact member states would not resort to the use or threat of force, either jointly or individually, and would resolve disputes solely through peaceful means based on the principle of non-interference in the internal

affairs of states.

The Soviet Union subsequently repeatedly demanded the conclusion of a NATO-Warsaw Pact non-aggression treaty and the resolution of the German question. However, this tone diminished in the 1960s, with new developments only emerging after Brezhnev assumed power in 1964. In July 1966, the Warsaw Pact issued the Declaration on Strengthening Peace and Security in Europe[13]. The Eastern countries proposed the simultaneous dissolution of the two military blocs, NATO and the Warsaw Pact; recognition of the existence of two German states; the development of disarmament agreements in Germany and Europe; and the convening of a pan-European conference to discuss issues concerning the establishment of European security and cooperation across the continent. The declaration called upon European states to develop good neighbourly relations based on the principles of independence, national sovereignty, equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and mutual benefit, founded upon peaceful coexistence between nations with different social systems.

The Warsaw Pact's appeal for "non-interference in internal affairs" was to be violated in relations between Eastern countries. The Prague Spring of August 1968 served to push the realisation of the Soviet Union's pan-European security further away. Nevertheless, the United States and NATO tacitly accepted Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe, maintaining a restrained response to Moscow's military actions. The Western powers endeavoured to preserve the emerging atmosphere of détente (Bracke 2007).

Against this background, the Warsaw Pact again proposed a pan-European security conference in March 1969, known as the Budapest Appeal and regarded as one of the origins of the CSCE[14]. The most significant feature of the document was the removal of conditions previously included in Eastern proposals — such as the exclusion of the United States and restrictions on West Germany — which were clearly unacceptable to Western powers. The 1969 Budapest Appeal, while reiterating the traditional proposal opposing the division of the world into military blocs, set out only limited objectives: recognition by Western powers of the territorial and political status quo in Europe, and guarantees against attempts to alter the status quo by force.

From March to October 1969, the Eastern bloc's call for a pan-European security conference made significant progress as several Western European states responded favourably. At a Warsaw Pact meeting, the Soviet leadership, noting the favourable reception of the idea among the European

public, proposed two items for future conference agendas: a declaration on the renunciation of force and the general improvement of economic cooperation. However, Poland, Romania, and East Germany maintained ambitious positions that the West found unacceptable, leading to differences of opinion. Within the Eastern bloc after the Prague Spring, the Soviet Union sought to build consensus through persuasion rather than coercion[15].

Regarding a pan-European security conference and its objectives, there were significant differences in perspective not only within the Eastern bloc but also between East and West. While the Kremlin desired the conference to be held as soon as possible, the Western powers preferred first to discuss the agenda and proposed adding various items, including human rights. The Eastern countries wished to limit the agenda to security issues and exclude arms control negotiations[16]. Ultimately, preparatory talks did not commence until the following year, and the conference itself was held in Helsinki in the mid-1970s.

Subsequently, various negotiations took place concerning the realisation of the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) negotiations proposed by NATO and the CSCE proposed by the Warsaw Pact (Haftendorn 2008; Yamamoto 2010). The Western countries ultimately achieved much of what they desired: a broad agenda and a follow-up process continuing after the conference. The concept of pan-European security, a long-standing dream of the Soviet Union, was realised as the Helsinki Final Act, but its substance turned out to be significantly different from the original intentions.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the Soviet Union originally envisaged only a conference to issue a general declaration confirming the territorial and political situation in Europe and did not wish to address specific content. However, over the six years from the 1969 Budapest Appeal to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, the Western countries, particularly those in Western Europe, skilfully guided the Kremlin and succeeded in drawing it into discussions on highly specific issues, including non-military matters such as human rights. At the same time, question remains as to what the Soviet Union can be assessed as having achieved during this period.

Another remaining question concerns the fact that the "German question," which the Soviet Union had sought to resolve since the post-war period, was addressed within a framework distinct from

that of pan-European security. With the 1972 Basic Treaty between East and West Germany, which brought about the normalisation of German-German relations, and the US diplomatic recognition of East Germany in 1974, it can be said that the Soviet initial objectives were largely achieved. Nevertheless, why did the Kremlin persist in insisting on holding a summit in Helsinki? The fundamental logic of Soviet diplomacy remains not fully elucidated. To understand the nature of the European international order that the Kremlin has desired, it is necessary to deepen the discussion from more diverse angles.

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