

# The “German Problem” and the Helsinki Process

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Yoko IWAMA

Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

**2026.4**



**ROLES REPORT No.67**

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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

電話： 03-5452-5462

Web サイト： <https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/>

## **1. Introduction**

When the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975, a lot of people at the time considered it as a recognition of the Post WWII status quo in Europe. This had an especially heavy meaning for the divided Germany. The division of Germany was thought to be the most significant source of instability in Europe, and hence the recognition of the status quo was thought to have a significant effect on the international order. This was especially important from the Soviet Union and East Germany's point of view, which was always fearful of West German "revanchism."

Whereas the East German attitude towards unification changed over time, the West German attitude towards unification remained intact throughout the entire Cold War period. West German foreign policy in the détente period of the 1970s was an acrobatic balancing act between its desire to stabilize the international political situation and the need to keep the possibility of reunification intact. In the end, West Germany managed to keep the balance, which eventually enabled the reunification in 1990.

## **2. Early Years of the German- German Relationship: 1949-1961**

When the fighting stopped between the Allies and Germany in May 1945, nobody had the intention of establishing two different states in Germany. The allies had agreed on the four zones of occupation, and there was an Allied Control Council set up in order to deal with the problems of Germany as a whole. But the difference between the East and the West gradually grew greater and in 1949, first West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany: FRG) and then East Germany (German Democratic Republic: GDR) was created. In the beginning both states claimed to be the sole legitimate successor of the German Reich.

The FRG Basic Law, which was the Constitution of West Germany, claimed in its preamble that "It has also acted on behalf of those Germans to whom participation was denied," and that "The entire German people are called on to achieve by free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany."

Between 1955 and 1970, FRG adhered to what was called "Hallstein Doctrine." It was named after Walter Hallstein, the State Secretary of the Foreign Office at that time. The doctrine was understood to mean that West Germany would not establish or maintain diplomatic relations with those states which recognized East Germany. In reality there were always exceptions like in the case of the Soviet

Union. But in general, FRG under Konrad Adenauer, its first Chancellor, maintained a rigid attitude towards GDR, and tried to avoid things that could be interpreted as meaning a recognition of the GDR as a state. This was in line with Adenauer's strict anti-communist foreign policy and was accepted by the Americans in the early years. 1955 was also the year in which FRG started rearmament, regained sovereignty and joined NATO. This doctrine was continued until the progress of détente between the United States and Soviet Union in the 1970s made it untenable.

East Germany (GDR) had a much more complicated relationship with the USSR. Stalin until his last days could not give up the idea of having a neutral and demilitarized united Germany in his map of Europe. His last attempt was the Stalin Note of 10th March 1952 in which he again proposed a united neutral Germany. As one historian pointed out, GDR was in a way "Stalin's unwanted child" (Loth, 1994). Soviet Union only established diplomatic relations with GDR after the death of Stalin in March 1954. Warsaw Pact was established on 14th May 1955 by Moscow and seven other Eastern European countries after the acceptance of West Germany into NATO was accepted as irreversible.

In a way, GDR had to constantly ask for the "love" of Soviet Union by branding it as a true socialist state dissociated from the past imperialism. For that purpose, it had to delineate itself from the structures of the German Reich. Already in 1953, the GDR abolished the old "states" (Länder) system and in its place established "districts" (Bezirke) These "states" were reestablished on the occasion of German reunification in 1990. The 1949 GDR constitution still portrayed GDR as a German state for all the Germans, but its claim was weakened in the 1968 constitution and described the GDR as a "socialist state of the German Nation."

The building of the Berlin Wall which began on 13th August 1961 was in a way a defensive response by the GDR, which was suffering from the loss of its citizens fleeing to West Germany through still open borders in the occupied Berlin. Berlin after WWII was placed under four power occupation and had no walls at the border between the Western zones of occupation and the Soviet zone of occupation. It was the only remaining part of former German Reich where people could move freely back and forth. GDR's wish was to separate the two States totally and have Berlin recognized as the capital of the GDR, but this was never acknowledged by the Soviets who saw advantage in keeping its occupying power status.

### **3. From Berlin Wall to Brand's Ostpolitik: limited Normalization of Inner German Relationship: 1961-1973**

The building of the Berlin Wall ushered in a new period for the two Germanies. The mayor of the city of West Berlin at the time was the Social Democrat Willy Brandt. His vehement protest vis a vis the Americans are recorded, but the U.S. was unwilling to risk a war with the Soviet Union to tear down the wall. In a way, the building of the wall was the best of the bad solutions on the table at the time, and the Kennedy administration made peace with it. Kennedy is said to have remarked that it was “not a nice solution but a wall was a hell of a lot better than a war” (Smyser, 2009). Mayor Brandt had to learn it in a hard way that the division of Germany was for now irreversible, and the German people had to come to terms with it. Brandt later wrote that “in August 1961 a curtain was drawn aside to reveal an empty stage.” (Brandt, 1978)

This was in fact the origin of his Ostpolitik. He accepted that the situation was unchangeable in the near future, and definitely not by force. War was not a viable option in nuclear age, definitely not for the sake of West Berlin. So, he set out to make the division more stable and tolerable. At first it started off on the level of the two Berlins. On 17th December 1963, Border pass agreement was agreed between the Senate of the city of West Berlin and the GDR. Some 700,000 West Berliners crossed the border over Christmas to see their families and friends. Altogether 5 of these agreements (Passierscheinregelungen) were signed between 1963 and 1967.

Brandt left his office in Berlin to become federal politician in Bonn. First as the Foreign Minister of the Grand Coalition Government (1966-69) and then as the Chancellor of the first Social Democrat led centre-left coalition government of the postwar republic (1969-74). As the leader of the centre-left coalition, Brandt introduced what became to be known as the new Ostpolitik. Below are the main steppingstones of his policy of “Change through Rapprochement” (Wandel durch Annäherung).

1969 FRG joins the NPT

1970 Treaty of Moscow

Treaty of Warsaw

1971 Berlin Four Power Agreement

1972 Basic Treaty between FRG and GDR

1973 FRG and GDR join the United Nations simultaneously

Through this intricate web of treaties and agreements, Brandt attempted to stabilize the postwar situation in Europe, without compromising the ultimate goal of reunification of Germany. His recognition of the status quo was carefully constructed to be *de facto* and not *de jure*. From the very start, on the occasion of the signing of the Treaty of Moscow, West German government delivered the so-called “letter on German Unity” to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in order to state that “this Treaty does not conflict with the political objective of the Federal Republic of Germany to work for a state of peace in Europe in which the German nation will recover its unity in free self-determination.” Nevertheless, many conservative politicians were unhappy with the fact that they almost recognized the GDR. They attempted to topple the Brandt government and eventually went to the constitutional court after voting for the treaty in the Bundestag on 11 May 1973.

The Federal Constitutional Court ruling on 31 July 1973 judged that the Basic Treaty was in conformity with the FRG constitution, but it did not free the FRG from its requirement to continue seeking reunification. The Basic Treaty amounted to a “*de facto* recognition of a special kind” but every constitutional organs were under the constitutional requirement to keep all-German future open. Until the re-unification, the West German Basic Law continued to state that “the entire German people is called upon to achieve by free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany.” “Two States, One Nation” was a delicate balancing act chosen by the Brandt government in order to live with the divided reality and seek stability in an era of possible total nuclear war.

#### **4. East Germany’s Shift towards “Two-State solution”**

On the other hand, GDR took a totally different attitude towards the German problem. As noted above, GDR had already shifted toward prioritizing building socialism within its borders to pursuing reunification during the course of the 1950s. During the negotiation of the Basic Treaty, GDR actively pursued formal and legal recognition of its statehood. This came to suite the USSR position of stabilizing the postwar status quo and borders well in the 1970s. In fact, the two superpowers had already shifted towards *Détente* in the late 1960s. In 1972-3, GDR stopped singing the lyrics of the national anthem which emphasized “Germany unified Fatherland” (Deutschland einig Vaterland). When East German national anthem was played at ceremonies, the lyrics were no longer sung and only the melody was played.

The speeches of the representatives of the two Germanies on the occasion of their acceptance to the United Nations in September 1973 could not have been more different. Whereas the FRG representative expressed his pain to look at the political reality and emphasized that “Our goal is clear: the Federal Republic of Germany will continue to work toward peace in Europe, in which the German people will regain their unity in free self-determination.” On the other hand, the GDR representative celebrated the acceptance of “the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, located in the heart of Europe, as two sovereign states independent of each other with different social order” in the United Nation as “another significant step on the road to improvement of the situation in Europe and internationally.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1974 there was yet another constitutional revision in GDR, where any reference to the “German nation” and suggestion of a mandate for all Germans or commitment to reunification were removed. It was a “socialist state of workers and peasants”, which was “filled with the will to determine its fate free.” It actually stated in Paragraph 1 that Berlin was the capital of GDR.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, by the eve of the Helsinki Conference, the two Germanies had developed a diametrically opposed attitude towards reunification.

## **5. From Brandt to Schmidt: the CSCE Helsinki Final Act 1975**

Helmut Schmidt succeeded Brandt as the Social Democrat Chancellor in May 1974. Both Brandt and Schmidt remain legendary figures in the history of Social democracy in Germany, but of a different kind. Brandt was and remained hugely popular, especially amongst younger people who enthusiastically welcomed Brandt’s totally new attitude towards democracy and society. On the contrary, Helmut Schmidt had already made his name as the Defence specialist of Social Democratic Party of Germany in his younger days. He was always the more mature and intellectual type within the Party with wide knowledge about both economy and defence.

When Helmut Schmidt inherited the government from Brandt, the CSCE had already been formed to a larger extent by the previous Brandt government. The idea of an European Security Conference had first been floated by the Soviet government in 1954 but had only begun to be considered seriously by the Western politicians in the late 1960s. Change in FRG’s attitude was one important

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1684](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1684)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/verf74-i.htm>

element of this turnaround in the European Cold War history. Historian Petri Hakkarainen describes FRG as the “epicentre of CSCE” (Hakkarainen, 2011). Especially the Berlin Four-Power negotiations were tied closely into the initial development of Western strategy towards CSCE. West German approach towards CSCE became multilateralised in 1971-2 as Germany worked closely with its NATO and EPC (European Political Cooperation) partners. FRG was central in conceptualizing many aspects of the CSCE including human rights, disarmament, and peaceful change. In fact, Ostpolitik and CSCE were almost like two sides of the same coin and part of Brandt’s idea of “European Peace Order.”

It was Helmut Schmidt who presided over the signing event of the Helsinki Final Act alongside the East German leader Erich Honecker. The “reconciliation” of the two Germanies gave the impression that the Cold War was almost over. But Schmidt had no illusions about the difficulty of the security situation and the continued need for the Western alliance. Schmidt had been a supporter of Brandt’s Ostpolitik from the early days, but he was a realist enough to believe that this needed to be firmly grounded in Western security policy. As early as September 1966, Schmidt stressed in his Bundestag speech that in order to be able to achieve eventual goal of German unification, détente needed to be pursued while maintaining the balance of power. His goal was to achieve that balance at a lower level of forces by promoting arms control, which he called “the veritable strategic problem of the current epoch.” In fact, Kristina Spohr argues that for Schmidt, Ostpolitik was a “function of defence policy.” (Spohr 2016)

Chancellor Helmut Schmidt also emphasized, in his inaugural address to parliament, the central importance of the North Atlantic Alliance, the importance of maintaining the balance of power, and the pursuit of arms control and disarmament.<sup>3</sup> In his speech at the signing ceremony of the Helsinki Final Act, he stressed the security political importance of stressing the renunciation of use of force and the threat of use of force in Europe. Simultaneously, he emphasized that inviolability of frontiers meant that it could only be changed by peaceful means through consensus. He stated, “Our goal remains to work towards a state of peace in Europe in which the German people regain their unity in free self-determination.” He also expressed hope that this will lead to further disarmament negotiations, especially regarding the MBFR (Mutually Balanced Force Reduction) negotiations in

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.helmut-schmidt.de/aktuelles/detail/die-erste-regierungserklaerung>

Vienna.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of Soviet conventional superiority, either the Soviets agreed to lower their conventional forces through MBFR, or the Western side had to vastly strengthen its conventional forces. Facing deadlock in the MBFR talks, this was actually what Schmidt ended up demanding, not only in conventional but also in the theatre nuclear weapons. His approach was to demand a “double-track” in both conventional and nuclear weapons. Balance of power was sacrosanct in his mind in order to achieve stability.

Brandt and Schmidt had considerable differences in the pursuance of détente. Brandt pursued more liberal agenda, whereas Schmidt put weight on balance of power based on realisms. But they did not differ about the importance of leaving open the possibility of future reunification.

The signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975 was a high point in the history of détente. But on this occasion, West Germany made careful reservations so that what had been signed would not compromise future possibility of German reunification. FRG declared that nothing in the declaration could be interpreted as renouncing the goal of German unity in peace and freedom, as stated in its constitution. FRG claimed that it was signing on behalf of all Germans, whereas GDR claimed to be signing as an independent state. FRG attached interpretative declaration when signing the Final Document. By the signing of the Document Chancellor Schmidt’s address included the following words:

“Frontiers are inviolable; but one must be able to change them by peaceful means and by agreement. It remains our aim to work for a state of peace in Europe in which the German nation will regain its unity through free self-determination.”

## **6. The World after 1975 and the Divided Germany**

The Cold War had gone through a systemic transformation by 1975. Nixon and Kissinger had changed the game of the Cold War by the visit to Beijing and opening up to Communist China. In fact, Helmut Schmidt was also a believer in the future of China and the coming of the tripolar world.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/speech\\_by\\_helmut\\_schmidt\\_helsinki\\_30\\_july\\_1975-en-b5644902-545f-432e-8cf3-a11bf924d54c.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/speech_by_helmut_schmidt_helsinki_30_july_1975-en-b5644902-545f-432e-8cf3-a11bf924d54c.html)

The world was moving ahead and so seemed Germany. At the time of the Helsinki Summit, people believed that the Postwar European order was now legitimized and the borders were secure.

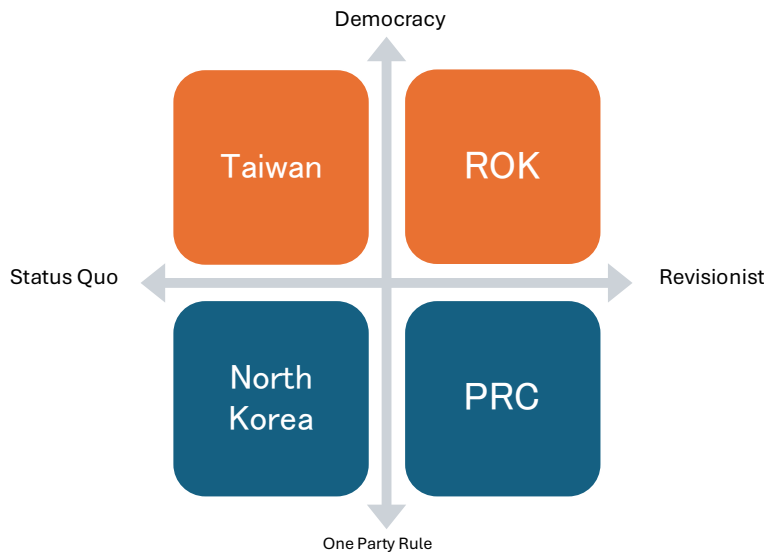
The attitude towards unification were different between the two Germanies. East Germany accepted division and separate statehood, so it had become a status quo power by late 1960s. But West Germany never gave up the goal of unification, so it would be appropriate to say that it was a “revisionist” power. West Germany struck a delicate balance in Ostpolitik and CSCE between admitting the status quo de facto but not de jure, and keeping the ultimate goal of unification alive. The acceptance of “inviolability of border” at Helsinki was coupled with “possibility of peaceful change.” West Germany wanted to keep open the possibility of future unification, but in Helsinki, it accepted that this had to happen in a peaceful manner. Hence it had the stabilizing effect for the international order of the time.

Helsinki Final Act was a multi-faceted construct. Whereas Brandt pursued more human and political aspect of Ostpolitik through CSCE, Helmut Schmidt was more conscious of the security and military aspect. His hope was to achieve a simultaneous progress by the MBFR (Mutually Balanced Force Reduction) negotiations in Europe. Failing that, he needed to address the problem of the deterrence and restoring the balance of the Theatre Nuclear Force was for him a logical consequence. The NATO double-track decision and the consequent introduction of American nuclear missiles to Europe was for him not a deviation from the Helsinki principles, but it was not acceptable to many of his fellow Social democrats including Willy Brandt. CSCE was indeed a multi-faced creature and even within the Social Democratic Party itself, there were differing approaches to it. But the West Germans remained united with respect to the necessity of keeping open the eventual possibility of reunification. This was of great importance after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

## **7. Some implications for Asia Today**

In Asia today, we actually have two “divided” nations, China and Korea. Whereas on Korean Peninsula, the democratic ROK wishes to retain the possibility of change and unification, North Korea is slowly edging towards solidification of the “two-state” situation. On the other hand, democratic Taiwan is a status quo power, and it is the Beijing government which wishes to change the status quo. This is a far more complex situation than Europe at the time of Helsinki, and we need to proceed with utmost care. But this is all the more reason to accept the principle of “peaceful

change” and commitment to non- use of violence. While considering deterrence and balance of power, we must also build a foundation for confidence-building measures which would lead to détente and lay the foundation for future arms control and disarmament of both nuclear and conventional weapons.



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