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Special Analysis

THE GERMANY: Reunification—What Would Have To Happen

Chancellor Kohl and other West German leaders have asserted that German reunification is "on the international agenda" but are well aware that it would require fundamental changes in both East and West Germany. The most difficult obstacles are East Germany's adherence to Communism and Moscow's firm rejection of reunification as a practical, near-term issue. A Soviet shift, in particular, might precipitate rapid change in other areas.

Bonn has used reunification rhetoric in part to undercut the far-right Republican Party but the debate is also stimulated by the East German crisis, Soviet encouragement of reform and diversity in Eastern Europe, and an ebbing East-West conflict. Although many West Germans still see reunification as a thing that depends heavily on external events, these trends are making the phrase less an empty incantation.

East German Liberalization

West Germany's Basic Law calls for freedom and unity for all Germans through self-determination, and reunification would be impossible without democratization in East Germany. West German leaders probably believe the chances for this have not improved appreciably with the appointment of the orthodox Egon Krenz to head the East German party. Nevertheless, they probably think East Berlin will have to begin liberalizing to revive the slowing economy, cope with dissidents, and hedge against a massive protest that could, in the worst case, force Moscow to choose between intervention and a collapse of the East German regime.

Soviet Acquiescence

Bonn is keenly aware that Soviet memories of Nazi Germany and geostrategic interests make the USSR a major obstacle to reunification. Some Soviet officials have indicated that reunification might come about eventually but most have listed such preconditions as replacement of NATO and the Warsaw Pact by a new European security order, limits on German forces, and the denuclearization of Europe. West German officials probably wonder nonetheless if President Gorbachev's encouragement of reform in East Berlin might eventually stimulate changes that would make it harder for East Germany to sustain its identity.

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Foreign Minister Genscher, meanwhile, may be optimistic that his urgings to other Allies to "help Gorbachev," his favorable references to Gorbachev's concept of a "common European home," and his opposition to "raising tensions" through new weapons programs will calm Soviet fears. Some officials in Bonn probably believe Soviet objections to German unity, like so many other assumptions about Moscow, might eventually change or become unenforceable.

Western Acceptance

West German leaders note that reunification could not occur without the consent of their Allies and EC partners, but green lights in East Berlin and Moscow would heighten their expectations for cooperation from the West. While conceding that legally the victorious powers in World War II hold a veto over changes in Germany's status, the West Germans probably would press for acquiescence if they thought their goal was in sight, citing the Western Allies' longstanding treaty commitment to work for reunification. Bonn probably would calculate that its partners would try to enhance Germany's ties to the West by lending support rather than risk a bitter quarrel,

Despite the reservations of some West Germans, the broad consensus in favor of a unified Germany is certain to prevail domestically. Some West Germans probably have qualms about a unified Germany because it would be more Protestant and, probably, more Social Democratic. There would also be the imposing task of integrating East Germany's relatively backward economy and 17 million citizens who look to the state for their needs. But the additional skilled labor and enlarged domestic market would have the potential to increase German economic power, probably to more than 30 percent of the EC's GDP.

Implications for the US and the West

If reunification became a serious possibility, Bonn would push to retain its role in the EC, but—if perceptions of the Soviet threat continued to diminish—might accept a Soviet precondition to attenuate, or even drop, its NATO ties. In the near term, most West German leaders will want the US to support reunification in general terms, but they probably would see an activist US posture as counterproductive. Bonn will also encourage more Western economic and political help to Eastern Europe, but it will want to remain the primary Western link to East Germany.