



Expert Comment

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following talks in Berlin, 7 Nov 2019. (Credit: Carsten Koall/Stringer/Getty Images Europe/Getty Images News)

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: The unravelling of post-modern illusions

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Peter W. Schulze

Winds of change: The prelude

In retrospect, the time between spring 1989 and 1992 could well be considered the golden age of European security and international cooperation between the two formerly antagonistic blocs, the transatlantic alliance and the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union withdraw from Afghanistan, and in the case of the first war against Iraq, the UN Security Council was able to act as the ultimate and legitimate institution of global governance. Trust and thus consensus were present. In December 1991, the USSR ceased to exist and its imperial reach across Central and Eastern Europe evaporated: Comecon and the Warsaw Pact were dissolved.

Although it deteriorated over time, cooperation continued even after the collapse of the USSR under the first post-Soviet presidential administration of Boris Yeltsin. The withdrawal of the Western Group of the Red Army from Germany in 1994 was indicative of this. But by this time, the era of common understanding and trust between Washington and Moscow had eroded significantly: the eastward extension of NATO, decided in 1994 and passionately opposed by Moscow, put an end to the intentions of the Charter of Paris.

US victory in the Cold War ended the bipolar order, which subsequently mutated into a rather short-lived unipolar order under US hegemony. But the essential political and normative ingredients of the Cold War narratives survived, now instrumentalised and fashionably dressed up as an institutionalised liberal-democratic US mission to project democracy and free markets to Eastern Europe.

The early 1990s and the window of opportunity

Against this background, we could realistically argue that the window of opportunity for ending Europe's division and resolving the thorny German question – i.e., either unification or some variation of neutrality – was only open for a rather short time.

Both objectives – terminating the division of Europe and unifying Germany – were the legitimate children of trends originating in the 1970s that unleashed major changes across Europe: German Ostpolitik and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975. The priority at the time was the commitment of the respective parties to end the Cold War and to establish a rule-based treaty on common European security.

In November 1990, the Helsinki Accords' ten principles were incorporated into the Charter of Paris. Both documents intended to put an end to antagonistic bloc-based thinking and the arms race, as well as dealing with the security trap. They advanced the guarantee of sovereignty, territorial integrity of existing borders, conflict resolution by peaceful means, non- interference in the domestic affairs of neighbouring states, the right of self-determination, and the protection of human rights.

Undoubtedly, the Helsinki Act unleashed forces of change across Europe. Oppositional civil society groups emerged in Eastern Europe, primary in Poland, Hungary, and finally in the USSR as well. These forces led to the gradual and unstoppable erosion of authoritarian rule in Eastern Europe.

A changing Russia

Whilst problems arose due to the burden of the Afghan war, weakening economic development, the loss of emerging markets abroad and growing problems of supply at home, reform projects in the USSR began under Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985. However, blocked from access to international financial credits and suffering declining prices for Soviet oil and raw material exports – a burden that lasted from the beginning of the 1980s to the

end of the 1990s – the perestroika economic reform project failed to produce a modernised and competitive economy. Contrary to perestroika, glasnost was a success story, but it developed beyond Kremlin control.

The principal idea behind the Soviet reform project was to end the Cold War in order to gain access to international financial institutions and attract foreign direct investment for domestic modernisation. Ending the Cold War in Europe was central to Gorbachev's aim to redistribute internal resources away from military spending and towards consumption and productive investment. To achieve this ambitious objective, an even greater objective was necessary: ending the bipolar confrontation in Europe, which required addressing the German problem.

Germany and successful international cooperation

The consensus and goal-based cooperation between Moscow, Washington, and Bonn finally mastered oppositional voices in some Western capitals. Above all, there was no alternative – neither for Washington nor for Moscow – to repeating the Chinese path of either shooting at peaceful mass demonstrations or blocking them through prolonged diplomatic and political manoeuvring. Under these circumstances, it was not possible for Washington, Moscow, Paris, and London to reject the demands of hundreds of thousands of people, demonstrating peacefully in many East German cities, for basic human and constitutional rights. For the first time after 1848 and 1918, Germany experienced a successful and peaceful revolution.

Despite Germany's persisting problems of disparities between East and West in social, economic, and value-added terms, the country has mastered the transformation process well in comparison with its Central European and East European neighbours.

In midst of turmoil and shifting constellations of power in the international system and confronted with domestic confusion and intra-EU troubles like the unresolved refugee and

migration crisis, terrorism, uncertainties about security guarantees for Europe from the former hegemonic power, the US, Germany still enjoys a relatively safe place in an apparently chaotic environment.

Economic growth rates have been rock-solid. Despite confusion about looming trade wars between the US and China and the EU, the export-driven economy is not in depression. Unemployment figures are down to levels before unification and recent populist election gains have been met by a grand coalition of all established democratic parties. Surrounded by friendly EU member states, any threat of aggression or military intervention from abroad would seem absurd.

In other words, German society and its political spectrum have appeared soundly consolidated.

Post-modern dreams and political escapism

Given such an encouraging environment, Germany seems to be one of the last bastions in Europe of a formerly highly cherished post-modern dream that democracy could successfully be projected eastwards and southwards to initiate the transformation of formerly authoritarian countries.

Moreover, the post-modern dream supposed that the nation-state, as the foundation of civil societies around the world, would either gradually wither away or submit its functions to supranational institutions created in the wake of European integration. As predicted in the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, integration would finally move towards political and social dimensions and Europe would act as an internationally respected civil power, eliminating the risk of war in Europe while arbitrating military conflicts farther afield. Such conflicts would be solved by dialogue and political negotiation.

This dream is deeply embedded in contemporary German political culture.

But Berlin's post-modern policies, supported by a broad coalition of liberal-left and green parties, NGOs, social movements, media, and churches, have been unable to counter external challenges.

Meanwhile, immobilised by internal power struggles and suffering a loss of authority, Berlin has lost credibility as an anchor of European stability and as an engine of further integration. Given Germany's dominant economic and political position within the EU, this immobilisation has had an impact on the EU. The European Union's position as a mediator for conflict resolution in and beyond Europe is seriously troubled.

Outlook: Back to Realpolitik

Exposed to a conflux of internal and external factors, an essential shift of paradigm in German policy seems to be mandatory. Europe and Germany have arrived at a 'crossroads' where a balance between moral politics and Realpolitik must be established. The claim that post-modern policy design and its objectives in German foreign and security policies amounts to a variant of political escapism can be ignored no longer.

The shift of paradigm towards a balanced, realistic, and interest-driven foreign and security policy could well use elements from the past that enabled German unification and reunited Europe, i.e., the Helsinki process, German Ostpolitik, and the Charter of Paris.

What is to be done:

1. Of foremost importance is the strengthening of European self-assertiveness, such that it attains a role as a respected geopolitical actor of importance among the dominant players of the new emerging world order: China, the US, and Russia.
2. A balanced and realistic interest-driven relationship to the main actors of the new world order must underline Europe's commitment within the transatlantic community without jeopardising its sovereignty or blocking its pursuit of

objectives. Meanwhile, steps to normalise the EU's relationship with Russia are a precondition for stability, security, and welfare across the whole continent.

3. Constructive relations with Moscow are essential for Europe's role as a sovereign power in the emerging new global order. This objective should foster a political and security-orientated dialogue between the EU and Russia. Practical steps are necessary to build trust from below: easing the visa-regime; enhancing cultural and academic exchange programmes; and applying selected elements of conditionality to ease and finally end the disastrous sanctions regime.
4. The creation of a European Security Council, including Russia, would be an indispensable element in the restoration of cooperative relations between the EU and Russia. This Council could function as a clearing medium to resolve the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and, particularly, provide a foundation for the ending of the Ukrainian conflict.
5. In order to end the immobilisation between Brussels and Moscow, it seems obligatory for Berlin to create a consensus within the EU to restart a goal-driven dialogue about the defunct Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia.

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