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Essay J
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Committee 9
September 18, 1992

THE STATECRAFT OF WILLY BRANDT

When Willy Brandt was elected Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1969, his main goal was to improve relations with the communist countries to the east. This policy acquired the name "Ostpolitik," or Eastern Policy. Brandt's initiative stimulated a general relaxation of East-West tensions and contributed to the reunification of Germany some twenty years later.

This paper analyzes Brandt's statecraft. It addresses Brandt's perception of the political environment, West Germany's national interests, and the threats and opportunities affecting those interests. It considers the resources at his disposal and the constraints he faced. We then look at his objectives and his strategy to achieve those objectives. Finally, it discusses the lessons which Brandt's statecraft holds for American national strategy.

THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

Brandt became the leader of one part of a divided nation -- the legacy of Germany's defeat in the Second World War and subsequent East-West tensions. The German people were split between the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and his own Federal Republic (FRG). The traditional capital, Berlin, was technically governed, not by Germans, but by the four occupying powers -- the United States, the Soviet Union, France and Great Britain.

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1. REPORT DATE 18 SEP 1992		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 18-09-1992 to 18-09-1992	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Statecraft of Willy Brandt				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

A former mayor of Berlin, Brandt was the first socialist to lead the Federal Republic. The conservative Christian Democrats had ruled alone until 1966, when they led the so-called Grand Coalition with the support of Brandt's socialists. The Christian Democrats had taken a hard line in dealing with the communist East, and particularly with the GDR. They asserted legal rights over East Germany and generally behaved as if they represented all the Germans and the GDR had no government of its own. In an effort to isolate the GDR, they followed the Hallstein Doctrine, under which the FRG broke relations with any country which recognized the GDR.

Internationally, the FRG was well-integrated into the European Economic Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Its Allies pursued a conscious strategy of binding Germany to the West economically and militarily, so as to prevent a recurrence of German adventurism.¹ Lacking nuclear weapons, the FRG was dependent on its NATO allies for its own defense against a communist attack. The Christian Democrats had made a point of emphasizing their loyalty and reliability as western allies. Nevertheless, still bearing the burden of guilt for the Second World War and still occupied by the victors, the West Germans were at best junior partners in Western councils when Brandt took office.

GERMAN INTERESTS

Brandt pursued two of the three fundamental national interests

¹ Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979) 409.

which have traditionally motivated American statesmen.² He sought for his nation physical security and economic prosperity, but not value projection. Physical security was paramount for two reasons.³ In the first place, Germany had lost its territorial integrity. It had suffered physical trauma and needed restoration. Moreover, its strategic location guaranteed that Germany would be devastated in any future war. The maintenance of peace and relaxation of international tension was therefore essential.

The second major interest which Brandt perceived was the welfare of his country, understood to mean both economic prosperity and improved communication between East and West Germany.⁴ Brandt was keenly aware of the human problems caused by the division of the German nation. He also felt that an opening to the east could bring economic benefits - new markets and increased employment.

In contrast to many American statesmen, Brandt did not seem to feel that Germany's national interest required the projection of German values through Ostpolitik. He presumably expected that the larger and richer FRG would dominate the culture of a united Germany, but he did not make such value projection his overt goal. Indeed, he may have felt that an effort to project Western values would only complicate his effort to improve relations with the communist world.

² Terry L. Deibel, "Strategies before Containment: Patterns for the Future," International Security 16 (Spring 1992): 82-83.

³ Willy Brandt, People and Politics: The Years 1960-1975 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976): 167.

⁴ Brandt 167, 169.

THREATS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RISKS

Brandt faced specific threats, opportunities, and risks in advancing German interests. The hard line of the Christian Democrats seemed to have reached a dead end. Germany was no closer to -- and in some respects farther from -- reunification than in 1945. Erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 had deepened the nation's division. The Hallstein doctrine was increasingly ineffective. More and more countries in the nonaligned world were establishing relations with the GDR. The Doctrine threatened to isolate the FRG, not the GDR.⁵

Brandt believed that mere acceptance of the status quo risked leading to a status quo minus.⁶ Germany needed an active policy in order to avoid losing ground. In particular, Brandt feared a separate peace treaty between the Soviet Union and the GDR which would solidify the division of his country.⁷

Brandt felt that Germany needed to reassert control over its own affairs -- to take control of its own future. Continued tutelage by the Western allies would not necessarily serve Germany's interests and certainly did not reflect Germany's growing power. He was influenced in this view by his disappointment with the Western, and particularly the American, reaction to the Berlin Wall. Of that event he wrote in his memoirs, "The traditional patterns of Western policy had proven ineffective, if not downright

⁵ Brandt 367-8.

⁶ Brandt 21.

⁷ Brandt 22.

unrealistic....Ulbricht had been allowed to take a swipe at the Western super-power, and the United States merely winced with annoyance." ⁸

Brandt was also influenced by his perception of a warming in relations between the superpowers in the late 1960's.⁹ On the one hand, this presented an opportunity for the FRG to improve its own standing with the East in the more relaxed East-West climate. On the other, a superpower condominium with division of the world into spheres of influence did not serve Germany's interest: Germany would remain a divided pawn in such a superpower game. Brandt had long felt that the superpowers were basically comfortable with the de facto spheres of influence which developed after World War II.¹⁰ Although the United States and Germany's other allies said they favored reunification, in practice they would not risk a worsening of East-West relations to achieve it. In Brandt's view, Germany would have to take the initiative in order to improve its situation.

A new initiative was not without risks. The allies might not welcome this new assertiveness, with consequent damage to Germany's support in the West. There was also no assurance that the communists, and the GDR in particular, would respond constructively. They might merely pocket FRG concessions without offering any of their own. Dealing directly with the GDR, for

⁸ Brandt 20.

⁹ Brandt 168.

¹⁰ Brandt 168.

example, might merely affirm that government's international standing and solidify the division of the country. As a politician, Brandt took a personal risk in making this initiative. Failure to produce results as the German people wanted would mean political collapse in the next elections.

RESOURCES

Brandt had considerable resources at his disposal. The FRG was increasingly powerful, both militarily and economically. Neither its allies nor the communists could afford to ignore West German wishes. Economically, in particular, the FRG could offer the East access to advanced technology and high quality capital goods. Brandt was encouraged to detect signs of Soviet and Polish interest in developing trade with his country.¹¹ FRG membership in the European Economic Community also made the GDR a de facto associate member of that attractive market.

In addition, Brandt had powerful intangible assets at his disposal. The world wanted reassurance of German good behavior, and East Germany desperately sought international respectability and recognition. Not only might Brandt "monetize" recognition of East Germany, but he could also gain from recognizing the borders of his neighbors to the East. Never inscribed in a peace treaty, those borders were subject to challenge from a renascent Germany at any time. Fear of future German aggression also gave Brandt another card to play - pledges not to use force.

Domestically, Brandt was strengthened by widespread public

¹¹ Brandt 367.

support for improved relations with the East. He had just won a national election, and he had a stable legislative majority in coalition with the Free Democrats. He was ready to build on tentative efforts by the previous Grand Coalition to improve relations with the East and pledged to do so during the election campaign.

GRAND STRATEGY

Reversing the priorities of the Christian Democrats, who had made reunification the immediate goal, he sought to create a framework of improved relations which might make eventual reunification possible.¹² He does not appear to have had a detailed plan -- or even a detailed definition of the framework -- when he set out. This broad goal provided flexibility in the negotiations which followed. Brandt followed a strategy of direct bargaining, offering incentives for improved relations. He conducted negotiations at various levels and with various countries, from Summits with his GDR opposite number to routine diplomatic contacts.

Brandt learned from the unsuccessful past efforts of the Grand Coalition. The previous government had established relations with maverick Romania (at Romania's initiative) and with Yugoslavia, but overtures to other communist countries were rebuffed. Some observers faulted the FRG for not working through Moscow. In Brandt's view, however, the GDR had persuaded Moscow to block the

¹² Brandt 167.

initiatives.¹³ A major tactical objective was, therefore, to reduce the influence of the GDR in Moscow. To this end, Brandt dealt directly with the Russians from the start.

Brandt moved quickly to open talks with the USSR, the GDR, and Poland. He offered incentives: abandonment of the Hallstein Doctrine, de facto recognition for the GDR, recognition of existing borders, economic ties, non-aggression pledges, etc. Like Anwar Sadat going to Jerusalem, Brandt paid the first visit to the GDR by an FRG head of government.

He was sensitive to symbolism, however, and resisted GDR calls that he come to East Berlin, the GDR capital.¹⁴ In the end, Brandt went to Erfurt, and his communist opposite number, Willi Stoph, paid a return visit to Kassel. The GDR proved to be a difficult negotiating partner, often polemical and contentious. It took patience and rounds of proposals and counterproposals before conclusion of the basic treaty two years after the talks began. The Kassel summit ended without even agreement on the next meeting. When the talks resumed after a lapse of several months, they were at the junior ministerial level. The resumed talks gradually began to make progress, first on technical issues like mail and then on broader understandings between the two Germanies. Success required imagination, such as the formula of "two states, one Germany," which both sides eventually accepted.

Brandt needed to succeed not only with the East, but also with

¹³ Brandt 169.

¹⁴ Brandt 370.

his Western allies. To serve German interests, he felt the need to depart from the policy of his CDU predecessors by acting independently. According to his memoirs, "An essential ingredient of Ostpolitik was that we applied ourselves to our affairs in a new and more positive manner instead of relying on others to speak for us."¹⁵

Although ready to mount an independent initiative, he could not by any means ignore his Western partners, on whom the FRG depended for defense and for cooperation in dealing with the Soviets over Berlin. While he did not seek their permission to proceed, he was careful to keep his major allies informed of his plans and progress.¹⁶ In the case of the United States, he sent a special emissary to explain the initiative in Washington even before taking office.¹⁷

Germany's Ostpolitik did not -- and probably could not -- proceed in a vacuum. Indeed, it may have been the linkage between various East-West agreements which made any progress possible. Led by the United States, the NATO allies wrapped the German initiative in a cocoon of multilateral negotiations over Berlin and a European Security Conference.¹⁸ They made negotiation of the latter, a Soviet idea, dependent on progress in the Quadripartite Berlin and FRG-USSR talks. Brandt himself linked ratification of the FRG-

¹⁵ Brandt 168.

¹⁶ Brandt 169.

¹⁷ Kissinger 410-412.

¹⁸ Kissinger 412.

Soviet non-aggression pact to Soviet approval of a new Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin, and the Soviets responded by linking the agreements in reverse order.¹⁹

In the end, Ostpolitik produced a series of agreements between the FRG and GDR, ranging from technical communications issues to the broad Basic Treaty of 1972, which spelled out the fundamental principles of relations between the German states. Ostpolitik also produced a non-aggression treaty between the FRG and the USSR in 1970 and similar agreements with Poland and other East European states. Although Germany was not the principal actor, the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin of 1971 and the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, also resulted from the improved East-West relations which Ostpolitik produced.

Although detente by no means followed a steady upward course, the removal of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent reunification of Germany would probably not have taken place without Brandt's Ostpolitik. Those events - some twenty years after Brandt's initiative - marked its ultimate success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN STATECRAFT

Brandt's Ostpolitik posed a difficult problem of alliance management for the United States. Here was a formerly cooperative follower bent on making a major initiative toward the other superpower and almost the entire Warsaw Pact. Henry Kissinger writes, no doubt with understatement, that he was not an immediate

¹⁹ Brandt 387-8.

supporter of Brandt's ideas.²⁰

He quickly decided, however, to try to channel the German initiative in a constructive direction rather than to oppose it. Any other approach, even if successful in blocking Brandt, could have split NATO and almost certainly would have alienated the West Germans.

Brandt's readiness to act independently reflected the failure of previous German policies, the growing power of the FRG and the potential assertiveness which historically made so many neighbors fear German power. Brandt's readiness to deal with the Soviet Union and his perception that economic opportunities lay to the East reflect historic German attitudes which may be even more apparent -- and difficult to deal with -- as the Cold War fades in memory. Brandt deserves a large share of the credit for ending the Cold War. At the same time, that same Cold War submerged the threat which Germany had in the past posed to its neighbors. In the next century, we may hold Brandt responsible for creating that problem anew.

²⁰ Kissinger 408-10.