

**BRANDT'S  
OSTPOLITIK**

by

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September 20, 1991

# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE <b>20 SEP 1991</b>		2. REPORT TYPE <b>N/A</b>		3. DATES COVERED <b>-</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Brandt's OSTPOLITIK</b>				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) <b>National Defense University National War College Fort McNair Washington, DC 20319</b>				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 <b>Approved for public release, distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>UU</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>8</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

A review of Chancellor Willy Brandt's approach to West Germany's national security strategy left me with two principal impressions that can introduce this paper.

- First, his ostpolitik (eastern policy or, more specifically, an incremental conciliation with the then-communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union) make him appear a prescient catalyst or at least a visionary. Unless one takes a deterministic view of history, Brandt's policy appears to have fostered conditions conducive to subsequent events, including: East-West rapprochement, the Soviet Union's radical foreign policy reorientation under Gorbachev, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Germany's reunification on West Germany's terms.
- Second, Brandt's dogged, energetic diplomacy in the service of clear objectives showed that he, like all skilled diplomatists, knew that good play could enhance the value of his cards.

Brandt's conception of Germany's security interests and environment were explicit and precise. Perhaps key is the term "German"--as opposed to "West German". The transfixing reality for Brandt was the continuing postwar division of Europe, seen most acutely for him as the division of the German nation into two states and the division of Berlin into two cities. These divisions were not simply painful in human and psychological terms. In Brandt's view, only with German reunification and the resolution of Europe's unnatural schism could the physical security and economic prosperity of German be assured.

At least as far back as the raising of the Berlin Wall, Brandt concluded that the prospects for eventually overcoming the divisions of Germany and Berlin--while dependent ultimately on easing of European relations--required concurrent

impetus. Progress toward normalizing and “declenching” (his apt term) relations between the Berlins and the Germanies was possible, he believed, and could encourage movement toward the ephemeral European peace settlement. Brandt posited a mutually reinforcing chain of events: Progress in East-West relations would reinforce and give momentum to progress in inner-German relations, which would in turn promote increasing East-West accord. This logic served Brandt’s deeply held conviction that reunification was crucial to the national interest.

These basic assumptions were related to several more externally oriented ones. Brandt’s writings amply evinced his view that the Western powers, particularly the United States, were unable or unwilling to protect German interests, as Germans conceived them. He noted that it did not appear essential to the Allies to guarantee West Berlin’s links to East Berlin and to the Federal Republic. His recollections of Western responses to the erection of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia spoke volumes of his disappointment, if not disgust. Brandt suggested that President Kennedy’s alleged failure to mention East Berlin at the Vienna summit meeting may have abetted the Berlin Wall crisis. Brandt furthermore scoffed at Kennedy’s concern that the crisis could escalate to a nuclear exchange between the superpowers.

If Brandt did not feel that such concern was appropriate for a president of the United States, one wonders who Brandt thought should have been worrying about Berlin. In fairness, though, Brandt’s position at the time as Mayor of West Berlin makes understandable his intense reactions to the Allies’ decision not to try assertively to reverse the Soviet-supported action. By the time he assumed the Federal Chancellorship, Brandt had also developed a concern that detente between the superpowers and over Germans’ heads might somehow come at the expense of

FRG's interests. (I do not see how Brandt squared this concern with the benefits he believed East-West detente held for Germany, unless one posits that another national interest Brandt assumed was the enlargement of Germany's freedom to act internationally.)

Another key assumption underlying ostpolitik was the increasingly negative effects of previous FRG policy--notably the Hallstein Doctrine--on FRG political and economic interests. By cutting itself off from countries that recognized the GDR, the FRG threatened to deny itself beneficial trade and investment opportunities and to become isolated politically as it avoided acceptance of an inevitable reality.

But as the environment suggested to Brandt the necessity for change in German policy and a more assertive or independent approach, so too did that environment constrain West German action. Most important was the negative baggage Germany carried for twice bringing global war to Europe in this century. Nazism in particular made the world forever fearful of the basic nature and ambition of German nationalism. A more independent FRG bent on healing inner-German divisions could thus incite historically rooted fears at home and abroad.

Other potent fears with historical roots were that Germany might seek the role of a free agent between East and West--playing the United States and the Soviet Union off against each other--or, a more sinister possibility, that Germany might seek again an understanding with the Soviet Union to determine between them developments on the Eurasian land mass.

The manifestation of West German tendencies in any of these directions would instantly raise alarms among the FRG's Western European neighbors and the United States. Brandt's and Kissinger's writings show the interest of both statesmen in a

steadfast West German security policy. Brandt asserts or implies that he had no intention of playing off the superpowers or of distancing the FRG from Western Europe. Kissinger, for his part, was not about to allow the inevitable easing of German-German relations to complicate what he considered the larger issues of Western solidarity and East-West detente.

Another important constraint was the unwillingness of the GDR, the primary object of Brandt's ostpolitik overtures to pursue the same agenda. The GDR's attachment to communist dogma about NATO and its search for international respect led it to reject the goal of reunification and to seek instead West German's recognition of its independence. As Brandt launched ostpolitik, the East Berlin government tried to channel his approaches to negotiations on a recognition treaty, a prerequisite to seeking GDR membership in the United Nations

A lesser, but as Brandt acknowledges, nonetheless significant constraint, was public opinion in both Germanies. In the FRG, as Premier Stoph's visit to Kassel showed, extremists saw dire possibilities in German-German rapprochement. Toward East Germans Brandt had a special responsibility not to incite undue hopes of a common German future that could result in their persecution by the GDR security apparatus.

In deference to the constraints noted above, Brandt repeatedly emphasized the consistency of his views with previous West German policy. He took care to assert the continuity of West German policy as a way of convincing others--the FRG's friends in the West as well as its negotiating partners in the East--that the FRG was a responsible and mature nation. He explicitly placed his policy actions in the perspective of previous West German policies to strengthen the credibility and respectability of his views.

Although Brandt's assertiveness and initiative irritated and troubled American policymakers, there was a compelling logic in his approach and in the plan of action he adopted to pursue his objectives. His strategy of bargaining with incentives took account of the constraints imposed by the FRG's international position and history and of the country's economic vigor. He pursued a closely controlled and managed process of easing relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in which all the players could find advantage. The FRG could offer pledges of a political and security nature that could help legitimize the status quo as well as launch more cooperative economic relations. At the same time, Brandt calculated that agreement with the GDR on practical issues such as tourism, postal communications, telecommunications, and the environment would serve to gradually thaw frozen relations in the interest of long-term reunification. Through incremental, step-by-step diplomacy he sought to transform the status quo--with which the Western Allies appeared to him to be too content--into a situation more conducive to German interests.

Brandt's negotiating plan made sense. He drew on the policies of predecessor governments, began a series of ambitious, though at first narrowly focused, declarations, and established a basis for further, more ambitious agreements. This plan allowed the FRG to insist on mutual, practical benefits from the negotiating process, even as it prepared in the end to grant the GDR its dearest objective. Brandt was right to deny the GDR the prize of recognition until he had accomplished the FRG's objectives and could legitimize cooperation on the basis of advantages to the FRG in concrete terms.

The course readings provide a slim basis for venturing an assessment of how Brandt carried out this plan of action, how effective a diplomat and negotiator he was. I will try. His apparent reliance on a small number of trusted advisors perhaps

left him particularly vulnerable to later-revealed GDR espionage. Kissinger makes the point that Brandt's eagerness in pursuing ostpolitik lost him negotiating leverage. Pique over Brandt's independence may account in part for this judgment. But the materials suggest that Brandt moved pretty much at the pace he expected, patient in the face of setbacks but resilient enough not to take no for an answer. He proceeded from mutual declarations renouncing the use of force to more detailed agreements, culminating in a bilateral treaty with the GDR that reflected more of the practical substance the FRG initially proposed than the GDR's original declaratory proposal.

One aspect of Brandt's approach worth considering is the degree to which he factored ideology into his delicate minuet with the GDR. He addresses this point in our readings as if to answer critics who faulted him for tending implicitly to accept the two German states as moral equals. Brandt asserts that the FRG always held the moral high ground with its system of democratic freedoms, a point he made routinely during the conduct of ostpolitik. He seems to have understood that ideology, by definition, is not a fruitful manner for compromise.

Proof of the efficacy of Brandt's national security strategy is in the post-1987 events and policy changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe noted in the opening paragraph of this paper. The farther events are separated in time the more difficult and problematic it is to establish connections between them, much less causality. Brandt naturally can't retroactively claim sole credit for reuniting Berlin and Germany, but he can claim credit for intermediate results that promoted these long-term objectives. In the short term, Brandt obtained necessary, if reluctant, support from the United States. He quotes with pleasure Nixon's expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo in divided Berlin and the American President's

hope that negotiations might produce something better. That result occurred with the completion of the Quadripartite Agreement in 1971.

Brandt's diplomacy produced a series of agreements of practical and economic benefit, which in turn helped support and spur momentum for detente and the 1975 political undertakings of CSCE. Achievement of these non insubstantial intermediate goals did not cost the FRG very much, except the commitment of prestige and time from its top leaders. In sum, in the face of considerable risk to the FRG's international reputation, Brandt began a process whose intermediate accomplishments laid the basis and built confidence for further progress. The content and pace of the negotiations he launched demonstrated over time--as Brandt had hoped--the FRG's dependability, constancy, and maturity. The reunification of Germany may have been inevitable, but great statesmen, if not great men, tend to serve as apostles to fate.