

Conflict Moderation in the Cold War.

Contacts between East and West German analysts from the late 1960s

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In July 1985, specialists from the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at Hamburg University (IFSH) and the Institute for International Politics and Economics (IPW) gathered in East Berlin for a security policy dialogue. Its purpose was to produce a concept for joint security. This meeting became the first of a series of roundtable discussions between the two institutes, held alternately in Hamburg and East Berlin. The makeup of the academic delegations depended on the respective discussion's specialized topics. The IFSH was represented by Egon Bahr, Dieter S. Lutz, Erwin Müller, Reinhard Mutz, Christiane Rix, Herbert Wulf and Peter Wilke. The IPW sent Max Schmidt, Harald Lange, Klaus Engelhardt, Klaus Benjowski, Burkhard Koch, Jürgen Nitz and Wolfgang Schwarz. One of the roundtables added Major Bernd Pröll of the Bundeswehr General Staff deputized to the IFSH, and East German Army Colonel Wilfried Schreiber.

The discussions on joint security focused both on questioning the doctrine of deterrence that was valid at the time and eclipsing it as a long-term goal. This objective was a security structure that would



dispense with deterrence and gradually become a system of collective security.

The exchange of views between the IPW and IFSH – one of the most effective and intensive of its kind – was only one of many discussion forums during the 1980s in which a whole series of scholarly institutions took part, including the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the East German Institute for International Relations (IIB), the Federal Institute for International and Eastern European Studies (BIOst), The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Research Center of the Community of Protestant Studies (FEST). However, the foundation for mutual trust in contacts among East and West German specialists in foreign and security policy was laid earlier, at the beginning of the 1970s.

Since direct contact between the West and East German governments was hardly possible before the late 1960s, talks between the two Germanys were shifted to the semi-official level. Economic discussions were conducted by companies, cultural exchange was handled by cultural bodies on behalf of official authorities, and security policy dialogue took place at the institutional level. From the late 1960s and early 70s these institutional contacts assumed the role of a communications medium for exchanging information, clarifying foreign- and security policy positions and presenting proposals for possible solutions. Over the longer term, this process would lead to a gradual reduction in misperceptions and suspicion while boosting trust and additional contacts. As perceptions of the two sides' respective



opposites became more lifelike, awareness of possibilities for mutual cooperation began to flourish.

My dissertation project examines these contacts among East and West German political institutes. The research encompasses multiple perspectives and, necessarily therefore, multiple archives. Even today, a scholarly examination of how foreign and security policy issues were analyzed by political institutes in East and West Germany and how perceptions of the respective opposites, both positive and negative, were constructed and revised remains a blank space in historiography. The project is based on analysis at multiple levels, including the sides' changing views of themselves and their opposites, East-West communication, perceptions of threats, evaluation of security policy models, bilateral relations within the context of the international system and representations of the various levels of perception and action. Also, examining contacts to senior state authorities such as the West German cabinet and the SED politburo promises to contribute important new insights to the historical debate over the East-West conflict in the 1970s and 80s, and not least the deeper roots of the of Communist implosions between 1989 and 1991.

West German political research institutes played a fundamental part in disseminating, articulating and implementing the country's "new Ostpolitik" and the process of détente in their own land. Meanwhile, their contacts with comparable institutions in the GDR stabilized the de-escalation process between the two Germanys and contributed to the evolution of standpoints that had previously been ideologically fixed. The



relationships established at conferences, symposia and other events in the early 1970s enabled states to communicate their basic positions on issues of international and European security and disarmament without having to make official statements. The fact that institutional contacts between the two blocs could be used to such good effect in the late 70s and early 1980s came thanks to the years of laying the groundwork from the beginning of the 1970s. The signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975 marked the introduction of a system of ground rules that would further intensify the networking process.

Despite the frostier relations between the superpowers in the late 1970s and early 80s, both German states remained committed to a de-escalation process at both the bilateral and multilateral levels and acted accordingly, sometimes in defiance of the explicitly formulated wishes of their respective hegemonic powers. Ties between the two Germanys at the institutional level grew substantially, both in quality and quantity, precisely because superpower relations had deteriorated. If the focus at the outset of the 1970s was still on communicating one's own positions, by the end of the decade it had progressed toward expanding political ties and complementing them through military de-escalation.

The rapid deterioration of the global political climate posed enormous challenges for both German states. Talks conducted since late October 1973 on the reduction of conventional forces in Europe (MBFR) failed to make any notable progress. The CSCE follow-up meeting in Belgrade remained without result and negotiations on the SALT II agreement between the US and Soviet Union seemed to be going in circles.



Meanwhile, the superpowers escalated their arms race. All this yielded a common interest for West Germany and the GDR: preventing a war and the use of nuclear weapons in a time of heightened confrontation between the blocs.

This trans-systemic basic interest in security and economic cooperation in Bonn and East Berlin constituted the basis for a dialogue. It produced not only a new sense of trust between East and West German specialists; there emerged a new dynamic in relations between the Federal Republic and the GDR. The East and West German experts had grasped that, regardless of existing conflicts and antagonisms, they had become partners. Their goal was to align their security interests, especially in the area of confrontation avoidance. In particular, their discussions concentrated exploring new models of arms control and disarmament. Egon Bahr's idea of joint security defined the policy direction of institutional contacts between East and West during the 1980s.

Moreover, from late 1984 the IFSH produced systematic analyses. A comparable development also took place in the East German institutes, especially the IPW. From the mid-80s the individual approaches began being dovetailed in joint roundtable discussions and individual talks. This process paved the way for achieving complex recommendations for implementing the idea of joint security. The recommendations were examined, refined and expanded together. Along the way, however, difficulties were also revealed in the drafting of requirements acceptable to both sides in arms control and disarmament.



Essentially, the discussions revealed that clinging to the deterrence doctrine would greatly diminish prospects for disarmament. The analysts saw that the alternative – namely, joint security – would become a viable option only once both sides had agreed on conventional weapons parity and to decouple conventional from nuclear weapons. Doing so would render obsolete the accepted approach of deterring a conventionally superior adversary by threatening nuclear retaliation. At the conventional level the analysts demanded an approximate balance that would hike the risks accompanying an attack to unacceptable levels. Implementing these ideas would also reveal that, within the framework of collective security, armed forces at far lower levels would suffice. This realization alone could provide the catalyst for disarmament talks. The idea of collective security sought to achieve conventional stability by structurally disabling strike capacities and keeping arms levels as low as possible on both sides.

In the years 1983 to 1989, inter-German collaboration at the institutional level succeeded furthermore in devising security concepts that transcended the individual blocs and presenting them to representatives of their respective governments. Despite numerous issues concerning the details and short- and medium-term proposals, the longer-term goal of collective security, i.e. dissolving the military blocs and replacing them with a system of European collective security, never fell from sight.

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