

## **“Lessons of reunification for peacebuilding”**

Virtual talk between former Federal President Horst Köhler and

Secretary of State James Baker

at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington

*January 28, 2021*

*To celebrate the 30th anniversary of German reunification, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington invited preeminent figures in the U.S.-German partnership to look back at the lessons German reunification can provide to peacebuilders around the world today.*

*In a virtual discussion with James A. Baker, former U.S. Secretary of State, moderated by the American Historian Jon Meacham, former Federal President Horst Köhler gave a short introductory statement. This is followed by his speaking notes.*

### **Introductory statement**

Thank you, Lise Grande, Stephen Hadley and Ambassador Emily Haber, for this initiative in honour of our joint journey to German reunification. I’m particularly delighted that Secretary of State Jim Baker is here today.

**Mr. Secretary, while in office President Bush and yourself showed “America at its best”!**

An America which was good for the American people, for Germany and for the world. This America is needed just as much in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. I trust that it will be back with President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. And I trust that the European Union and Germany are eager to revitalize the transatlantic partnership, and yes, friendship.

**German reunification remains a monumental moment in history which showed that “the unthinkable can happen”.**

In early November 1989, hardly anyone thought that the Berlin Wall would fall and that Germany would be united less than a year later, on October 3, 1990.

**Reunification stands for hope, even under the most adverse conditions: The future is essentially open. And people can shape it!**

**The history of German reunification is clearly also a history of great political leadership.**

The new “reconciliation hall” remembers President George H.W. Bush and Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl. But I ask you not to forget General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Without his vision for change in the Soviet Union through Glasnost and Perestroika and his political courage, German reunification and the end of the Cold War would not have been possible.

As a German, I want to take this opportunity to say again from the bottom of my heart:  
Thank you, spasibo, danke!

### **Speaking notes – check against delivery**

*Question: “At what point did you believe that the wall would come down and reunification would be a possibility?”*

#### **1. No one could have foreseen the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.**

- It was the result of some ill-considered words by the then "Secretary for Information" Günter Schabowski at a press conference in East Berlin about a new law on freedom of travel.

#### **2. But like many others, I had long perceived that things were changing in the East:**

- Change had started with the founding of the Solidarność trade union in Poland in 1980. During the local elections in the GDR on May 7, 1989, citizens had publicized electoral fraud for the first time - discontent was growing, also in the GDR. On Hungary's border with Austria, Foreign Ministers Gyula Horn and Alois Mock symbolically cut a piece of fence on June 27, 1989.
- Beginning in September 1989, regular "Monday demonstrations" took place in the GDR, first in Leipzig, then throughout the country. More and more East Germans tried to leave the GDR. On October 17, 1989, Erich Honecker was ousted as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED.

#### **3. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the window of opportunity opened:**

- The call for reunification began to appear at the Monday demonstrations in mid-December – from shouting "We are the people", the protesters began to claim "We are one people". Around the same time, another slogan appeared: "If the D-Mark comes, we'll stay; if it doesn't come, we'll go to it!"
- In the Federal Ministry of Finance, we had been working on the concept of a German monetary union since mid-December 1989. In January 1990 we decided to pursue the concept of an immediate transfer of the D-Mark. On February 13, 1990, the two heads of government – Helmut Kohl and Hans Modrow – set up a commission to examine the feasibility of a German monetary union. I was the chairman of the West German delegation, my counterpart the finance minister of the GDR, Walter Romberg. In our joint report in early March 1990, we unanimously came to the conclusion that a monetary union was feasible.

**From then on, German reunification was no longer a dream for me, but just a question of smart negotiations.**

*Question: “What key diplomatic initiatives and strategies produced this success – and what did they build on”?*

- No one had a plan in the drawer on how the goal of reunification, which was enshrined in the West German constitution – the Basic Law – could be achieved. Ultimately, reunification was the result of strategic patience combined with tactical impatience. The window of opportunity had been opened by countless courageous individuals in East Germany through their protests.

**Three key diplomatic initiatives were the Helsinki process, the 2+4 negotiations and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Germany.**

### **1. The Helsinki process**

- In the midst of the Cold War, in July 1973, the representatives of 35 NATO, Warsaw Pact and neutral states met in Helsinki for the first time for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Almost all European states, the Soviet Union, the United States and Canada took part. The aim of the CSCE was, as former Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt had said several years previously, “the search for solutions to those problems which, in spite of continuing differences, affect common interest”.
- In the Final Act of 1975, these countries agreed on, among other things, the existing borders in Europe, the right to self-determination of peoples and the recognition of human rights. Although the Final Act wasn't a legally binding agreement under international law, it gained clandestine clout because opposition forces all over Central and Eastern Europe, including the GDR, were able to invoke it.
- And something else of importance was achieved during the negotiations: greater understanding for the perceptions and expectations of the other side.

**The Helsinki Final Act thus marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War, which was sealed with the Charter of Paris in November 1990.**

- Gorbachev regarded the Charter of Paris as a blueprint for a European house in which Russia would have its rightful place. In the West, we spoke of a large area of freedom, democracy and free trade from Vancouver to Vladivostok.
- But Triumphalism in the West also sowed the seeds of new distrust, new injuries and tensions.

### **2. The 2+4 negotiations**

- The concrete negotiation format for the German reunification – the famous 2+4 formula – was devised in the US State Department under the guidance of Jim Baker. It wasn't a given from the outset that the Germans would be able to decide the internal unification

process for themselves. It could also have been a “four-power conference”, that’s to say 4+0, or 4+2, with Germany on the sidelines – at “the cat’s table”, as we say in German and as Foreign Minister Genscher pointed out.

- Ultimately, the 2+4 format won the day due to the confidence which the United States placed in its German partners and the desire to uphold the principle of self-determination.

### **3. The negotiations on the withdrawal of troops**

- Parallel to the 2+4 process, Federal Finance Minister Theo Waigel and I negotiated the agreement on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany, around half a million soldiers and their families. This was one of the most delicate issues surrounding reunification.
- While preparing for the negotiations, I learned that the Soviet Union had withdrawn troops from Hungary and subsequently had to accommodate them in tents at home. I suggested to Helmut Kohl that we build homes and facilities in the Soviet Union for the troops withdrawn from Germany. He agreed immediately, saying: “Always treat the Red Army with the greatest respect.” Similar to the former German Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker, he considered the end of World War II as Germany’s liberation from National Socialism and wanted to enable the Soviet troops to return home in dignity.
- We devised a housing programme and included a re-training programme for the soldiers. My proposal was immediately welcomed by the high ranking officers in the Soviet negotiating delegation – it took a bit longer to win over the civilian negotiators. They had been mainly hoping for cash. On August 31, 1994, Federal Chancellor Kohl personally bade farewell to the last soldiers of the Red Army in Germany in the presence of President Yeltsin. The Soviet soldiers had been withdrawn without a shot being fired.
- Ensuring that the other side didn’t leave as losers – that was the shared understanding of Bush and Kohl.

*Question: “What lessons can be drawn from the successful negotiations on German reunification?”*

**Reunification was the outcome of a unique combination of personalities, timing and sheer luck.**

- Therefore, a word of caution is needed for anyone looking at the 1989/90 negotiations as a template for the management of other diplomatic crises or conflicts.

**But there *are* some takeaways that could also be relevant in entirely different situations:**

**1. Get ahead of developments, prepare to expect the improbable – and have the guts to lead!**

- President Bush and Federal Chancellor Kohl did lead.

## **2. “Trust is the coin of the realm”:**

- This is a quote from George P. Shultz, summing up his experience during his one-hundred-year private and political life. The trust Bush, Gorbachev and Kohl had in each other made it possible for them to seize the “Kairos”, the right moment to act, and to overcome the skepticism of other European leaders.
- Trust requires investment in reliability and credibility and takes a long time to mature. In negotiations, the human factor is always an important element. Bush never tried to dominate Mikhail Gorbachev during negotiations, and he understood the domestic situation Helmut Kohl was in and gave him latitude.

## **3. Keep the promises you made and make sure others are aware of this.**

- The US had consistently supported the quest for German unity and liberal democracy in Western Europe. This was part of the West’s normative clout and its appeal to Central and Eastern Europe.
- Transactional approaches, ignorant or disparaging of the long-term effect of investment in reliability and credibility, would have made this outcome impossible and would have opened space to those who wanted to prevent it.

## **4. No external strength without internal strength.**

### **Foreign policy begins at home, for nations as well as for alliances.**

- Bill Clinton's phrase “It's the economy, stupid” also applies to the situation in East Germany and the Soviet Union. The East German economy couldn’t keep pace any more with the West German economy. The peaceful revolution came about because people wanted freedom and – with the Deutsche Mark – a better life. Gorbachev also wanted a better life for the people in the Soviet Union, and he knew that the arms race with the United States could not be won.
- I am not surprised that President Biden and his National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, want to make U.S. Foreign Policy work better for the middle class.

## **5. Final takeaway: Don’t go it alone.**

- 1989/90 was a time of historical challenges that needed a multilateral response. The actual negotiations took place in a multilateral framework that brought the necessary actors involved to the table and created transparency and a degree of predictability. In this framework, strength and cohesion among western allies was key.

*Question: “Looking back, would you have done anything differently?”*

**Not really.**

- We all admired Mikhail Gorbachev's courage for reforms in the Soviet Union. But we also perceived, for example, that he was booed at the traditional Victory Parade in front of the Kremlin in May 1990. At the G7 World Economic Summit in London from 15 to 17 July

1991, the news of the putsch against Gorbachev burst in. There was great consternation among all the heads of government. I then was very glad that the reunification and not least the agreement on the withdrawal of the Soviet troops was already done.

### **Time had been of the essence in this process!**

**So what we did then, I would do again overall. How we did it, not so sure. First, in Germany:**

- The transformation of the East German economy from a state economy to a market economy came with painful disruptions for many people.
- Many felt as mere objects and not subjects of the tremendous transformations. They thought that their biographies had been unfairly devalued. People felt that they were not being taken along. Too little was explained. This frustration continues to have an impact today.
- And perhaps it would have been better to organize the privatizations in a more decentralized way, with greater involvement of the new Bundesländer.

### **Second – towards Russia:**

- Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl tried hard to get the support of the G7 for President Gorbachev's reform course in Russia. But while there were many warm words from his colleagues, few concrete actions of help showed up.
- The privatization processes received too little attention from the international financial institutions (IMF, WB). They relied too much on pure market forces.
- Even the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) – despite its mandate to promote the development of an economic middle class in the transition countries – had, up to the Russian financial crisis in 1998, become entangled primarily in the privatization of banks and larger enterprises. The result is the now familiar oligarch capitalism in Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe.

*Question: “What do you believe the legacy of the process of reunification is for the German people themselves?”*

**The peaceful revolution and the following reunification were the unexpected, happy ending in a long German history that had rather been marked by the failure of democracies than by their success.**

- So most Germans take pride in this part of their history and remember with gratitude all those who have made it possible.

### **Reunification still remains to be finished – materially and mentally.**

- We still have to strive for equal living conditions everywhere.
- We still need to bridge the gap between our different historical paths: While the West was allowed to practice freedom, democracy and a market economy and grappled (late but intensively) with the legacies of the NS- dictatorship, in the East of Germany two

dictatorships followed each other and a truly open confrontation with the Nazi era did not take place.

**Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we experience that the foundations of democracy, peace and prosperity must be permanently reinforced.**

- To me, there is a double legacy of the reunification for the German people:

**It needs to draw confidence from pride, and responsibility from gratitude.**

- Germany can draw confidence from its historical experience that freedom won over oppression, that solidarity overcame confrontation and that difficult transitions could be mastered.
- In a world of new upheavals, this legacy has never been more important.
- From our gratitude towards a Western community that supported Germany during a most fragile moment, we need to draw the conclusion to take greater responsibility – for European unity and for peace and balance in the world. The German historian Heinrich August Winkler gave such advice: German policymakers should neither allow themselves to be paralyzed by history, nor should they elevate political decisions by presenting them as the "right lesson" from the German past. I believe this is a good advice!

*Question: "Time to learn from the past and seize the new chances"*

**Today we know that 1989 didn't mark the "end of history" but signalled the opening of a new chapter.**

- 30 years after reunification, China under President Xi has risen to become a new world power. And Russia, too, is back on the international stage with an aggressive foreign policy.
- The political, economic and social chaos following the wars in Iraq (2003) and in Libya (2011) showed that military victory is not enough to change the world for the better. The real strength of the West is the soft power of its values. If these values lose credibility, this will only embolden autocrats throughout the world.
- The Munich Security Conference called its 2020 report "Westlessness", by which it meant: "a feeling of uneasiness and restlessness in the face of increasing uncertainty about the enduring purpose of the West. A multitude of challenges seem to have become inseparable from what some describe as the decay of the Western project."

**My take of the situation is different. The West is still needed in the world. But it must regain credibility in its promise of freedom and prosperity for all.**

- The West must regard the global upheavals as a call to learn from its mistakes, to re-invent itself and to find a new purpose. It should promise less and deliver more, lead by example and deliver for the people!

- The renewed western project should appeal especially to the young people. They are waiting for it. That is how I understand the young American poet Amanda Gorman at President Biden's inauguration: "If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy, and change our childrens' birthright."

### **It's time to revitalize and modernize the Western project!**

#### **1. We need a fresh start for the transatlantic partnership:**

- Back in December 2020, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed "A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change." It encompasses proposals on cooperation on COVID-19, trade and climate change and also supports President Biden's proposal for a "Summit for Democracy". This should be discussed as soon as possible.
- Together with George Shultz, Jim Baker formulated the "Strategic Case for US Climate Leadership. How Americans can win with a pro-market solution". This proposal, published in "Foreign Affairs" would be a nice input in these talks. And I also share Professor Anne-Marie Slaughters observation made for the "New America" Think Tank that "if the US and the EU could agree on common rules and norms for an open and secure internet that safeguards digital rights, they would lay the foundation for a new 21<sup>st</sup> century order".

#### **A "partnership in leadership", such as the one offered to West Germany by President Bush back in May 1989, will place considerable demands on Europe and, not least, on Germany.**

- Helmut Kohl said in the German Bundestag merely one day after reunification: "We realize that greater responsibility is incumbent on the united Germany in the community of nations, not least for the preservation of world peace." To this very day, Germany has not lived up to this responsibility in all areas. It now needs to review its will and capacity for robust military responsibility, to be a politically *and* materially reliable partner within the NATO that has been re-enshrined by President Biden.
- Europe – together with the United States – should never give up the dialogue with Russia about security and cooperation in Europe within the OSCE. Dialogue has been continued even at the height of the Cold War. The fact that Russia and the United States have agreed to extend the START Treaty is an encouraging sign.

#### **2. The West must learn to live with China as a systemic rival and necessary partner at the same time.**

- The west should recognize that China's tremendous rise during the last few decades is also the result of reforms, innovations and the immense diligence of the entire people.
- A general "decoupling" is problematic. However, there is an urgent need to establish reciprocity and a level playing field with China's state capitalism. I regard the "Comprehensive Agreement on Investment" between the EU and China as a step in this direction – having in mind what President Reagan used to advise: "Trust and Verify!".



- The west must face the reality of a new systemic competition. Differences in values and ideas of order should be clearly stated, but always keeping up channels of dialogue. In any case, conjuring up a new “Cold War” will not help to prevent it.
- China remains an indispensable partner for providing global common goods like health, climate stability and biodiversity. 2021 offers us opportunities to work on them together – from the UN Biodiversity Conference in Kunming to the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow.

### **3. Combining the restart in transatlantic relations with a strengthening of the UN**

**The UN is the right and legitimate organization for finding solutions to those problems which no nation, no matter how powerful, can resolve on its own.**

- The fact that rejoining the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement was one of the first official acts announced by the new US Administration is an encouraging sign for international politics.
- The Paris Agreement on Climate Protection and the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015 are the strategic alternative to a policy of national egoisms and short-termism. I hope that the fresh start in the transatlantic partnership will also set an example of how national goals can be reconciled with the Agenda 2030 framework.
- We urgently need a discussion on the reform of the United Nations, and the Security Council in particular. For it is first and foremost the latter body which has to find a way to enable the international community to prevent a new arms race. And many protracted regional conflicts cannot be defused with a Security Council which is not doing his job.
- You at the United States Institute of Peace know that very well. Your staff has been working for many decades in the most fragile countries, in states marked by conflict or upheaval; mostly bottom up at local level, with the persistent patience which paves the way to trust; and with the necessary cultural sensitivity. Through this work, the United States Institute of Peace is creating peace capital – for that I would like to thank you!

### **4. Today as then, 30 years ago, the future is open. It can be shaped:**

- If we are internally strong, self-confident and reliable towards all partners; if we are prepared to build trust and engage in dialogue even with those who do not share our values; if we prioritize cooperation on global issues over great power competition, and if we can engage the youth according to Amanda Gorman: „And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us.“
- ... then peace and a better world for all is possible.