The Changing Status of German Reunification in Western Diplomacy, 1955-1966

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In Europe every important issue of international politics is entangled with the historic “German problem.” That problem has many facets. Broadly it is: how to contain Germany’s energies in a manner that will reassure its wary neighbors, yet guarantee national expression and security; how to keep Germany’s political weight in balance with the rest of Europe, yet avoid the dangerous frustrations that might accompany its diplomatic isolation. The post-war division of Germany did not create this problem, but it has greatly accentuated it.

When West Germany joined NATO in 1954, the allies undertook a formal commitment to pursue German reunification in negotiations with the Communist bloc. The formula then envisaged involved a climatic negotiation between East and West. By 1967 the conditions affecting Germany’s position in Europe have changed greatly. The commitment to reunification remains, but Germany and its allies have now adopted a new formula in which reunification is seen as occurring as the result of a long-run process of bridge-building between East and West.

Mr. Planck’s essay analyzes the essential background of the current developments in the status of German reunification. He examines the major junctures in East-West diplomacy after Germany joined NATO—the Geneva Summit Conference, the Soviet campaign for détente, the Berlin crisis, Kennedy’s
and de Gaulle's initiatives in Europe—from the perspective of Bonn's efforts to maintain the commitment to reunification. Western unity was most complete at the Geneva meeting of 1955. Thereafter interallied disagreement on the role of German unity in a final European settlement increased, while Bonn, because of its extreme dependence on allied support, continued to stress a uniformity of interests in reunification. Periods of difficult readjustment were frequent, and the measure of success became not whether Western interests in German unity were identical but whether they could be viewed as compatible. Increasingly, the Federal Republic has had to devise a more independent and flexible policy, suited to a looser community of interests. The West German experience mirrors the transitional state of all Western thought concerning such questions as disarmament, European security arrangements, and the future of East-West relations. This essay is part of the Center's continuing effort to interpret the mingling of old and new elements in basic international trends.

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