7 Europe in Transition

The totalitarian system in the Soviet Union and in most of its satellites is breaking down, and our nations are looking for a way to democracy and independence. This is a historically irreversible process and, as a result, Europe will begin again to seek its own identity without being compelled to be a divided armory any longer.

Vaclav Havel

Only peace will emanate from German soil:

Hans-Dietrich Genscher

Until the late 1980s, of all the regions of the world, Europe had experienced the least political change since, say, 1949, when the most important postwar political arrangements seemed more or less to have been consolidated. The change of the status quo appeared irreversible in the longer term, the nuclear stalemate proving sufficient both to prevent war and to prevent either side from imposing its will on the other. But the bipolar structure established after the war did contain inherent flaws, particularly within the Eastern sphere, which became apparent ultimately in the last days of the 1980s, when peaceful change was at work in Europe. A political earthquake shook Eastern Europe and a geographic East Central Europe was restored. The execution of Nicolae Ceausescu, the long-time tyrant of Romania, became a symbol of the final collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Ultimately the people in the streets of the cities of Eastern Europe took control of events. “The initial changes were political,” as Ralf Dahrendorf analyzed the revolution of 1989. One of the basic assumptions of this book was that the division of Europe was based on the outstanding political problems related to World War II. The Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe was the key to eliminating the division. Another key factor was the unification of Germany. Yet the driving force of both these fundamental changes should be identified primarily in the longer-term historical processes. Indeed, one could draw the conclusion, as did Edward N. Luttwak, that “the force of collectively motivated ideas” is the most decisive factor,
more decisive than strategy or economic self-interest, among the factors of European change. With the events of 1989, several historical processes gained strength: the reemergence of national sentiments, the fight for freedom and democracy, and the efforts to build a new and whole Europe. As a result, the restoration of Europe as a unified political region took a giant step forward. The problem is that it will take many more years before it is clear whether the Soviet Union will be able to establish its place within the political-economic core of Europe. It seems obvious, however, that the Soviet states, at least the western ones, want to belong to Europe. The future of Russia may remain open longer. It is large enough to constitute its own "world region." Yet in the modern world a greater Russia should be at least part of the CSCE process, and thus part of the European security system.

It is self-evident, however, that without the consent of the Soviet Union, no breakthrough in the development toward democracy in Eastern Europe would have taken place so abruptly. The two superpower leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush, at their meeting in Malta in December 1989 closed the chapter on the postwar history of Europe opened in Yalta in 1945. In Yalta the Soviets achieved domination over Eastern Europe. At Malta the leaders agreed to put an end to the zero-sum game in European politics.

In the wake of the political events in Eastern Europe it is more evident than ever before that the postwar bipolar security order—in particular, the high degree of armament—does not adequately reflect European sociopolitical realities. Undoubtedly, Europe’s top agenda item in the early 1990s will be accommodating and managing the revolutionary situation in Eastern Europe, especially in the Soviet Union.

Now, more than ever, it is difficult to predict what the 1990s will bring for Europe. Two things, however, seem certain: the new decade will produce a new internal European order, and Europe’s relative standing in the world will change primarily as a function of that new order.

The overall changes under way in Europe are affecting domestic as well as international structures in both East and West. They seem likely to lead toward increased self-consciousness almost everywhere in the continent. Nationalities, ethnic minorities and, of course, nation-states are becoming increasingly assertive in voicing their concerns. There is more room for differences and nuances, the