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A Baxter Publication

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A New European Order

In the space of the last few months, we have witnessed nothing less than the birth pangs of a new Europe as the Iron Curtain is dismantled from within. A non-communist government has been elected in Poland. The Communist Party in Hungary has liquidated itself in preparation for free elections. The whole power structure of the communist regime in East Germany has been swept away in favour of a reformist coalition which has proposed free elections. And in Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party is under pressure to negotiate an end to its monopoly. The brutal oligarchy in Romania has at last been toppled and the ice is thawing in Bulgaria.

Apart from Romania, all this has been remarkably peaceful so far, but the pace is breathtaking and could easily get out of hand. Revolution, not evolution, it is coming from below, unlike the reform from above which Mikhail Gorbachev is trying in the Soviet Union. The trouble is that while old regimes have lost legitimacy and the capacity to govern, the new popular movements have not yet gained either the authority or the experience to do so. In this vacuum, the frustration and anger of the people could degenerate into anarchy. Thus, while the East-West confrontation has declined, the dangers of instability have mounted.

Most dramatic to date is the breaching of the Berlin Wall. Deeply moving and politically profound, it put German reunification squarely on the international agenda again. And this time it seems likely to be not a question of whether, but of when and how. Chancellor Helmut Kohl proposed a three-stage shift — in tandem with East German reforms. Vague about 'when' and careful about 'how', he evidently hoped to satisfy his domestic audience while not provoking those elsewhere who harbour fears of a resurgent Germany. He has not been entirely successful.

West Germany's EEC partners propose to accelerate their own integration. The United States stresses the need for a gradual process that also would involve NATO. In East Germany, reunification calls have been voiced at mass rallies but both the reform movements and the communists remain skeptical. As for the Soviets, they warn against any 'artificial pressures' to precipitate the question. Significantly, the Soviets also have invoked anew the quadrilateral machinery in Berlin, underlining what they see as the continued responsibility of themselves, Britain, France and the U.S. for eventual disposition of the German question.

Less dramatic but no less important is the transition that has been taking place from a bipolar to a multipolar world, with the relative decline of the two superpowers and the rise of new power centres. It is the EEC which so far has produced the most substantial aid package for Eastern Europe and there is little doubt that it will be German capital and technology which will have the greatest impact on the economic reconstruction of Eastern Europe. In fact, economic integration of the Germanies will come before their political reunification.

At the same time, the Americans and Soviets find they have a common interest in maintaining security and stability as the new Europe takes shape. NATO indeed may be more relevant now than ever, not so much militarily but as a political instrument for co-ordinating Western policy and ensuring that change is managed in a stable manner. NATO also could develop, in time, organic links with the Warsaw Pact as the latter becomes increasingly divested of its military and ideological accessories. And there may well be a role for a more structured Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The 1990s promise to be interesting.

John Halstead is Chairman of the Canadian Council for European Affairs and former Canadian ambassador to NATO and West Germany.

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