The Special Status of the GDR in East-West Relations

The Initial Situation

In accordance with the European policy of the Soviet Union, East Germany's ruling SED [Socialist Unity Party] claims for itself the function of a “Western outpost of socialism in Central Europe” and derives from this a special role. In its 1976 Party Program, the GDR leadership defines its foreign policy in terms of the need “to assure, together with the Soviet Union and the other Socialist states, the most favorable international conditions for building socialism and communism.” Toward the West, and in particular toward the Federal Republic of Germany, this policy is based on the ambiguous concept of “peaceful co-existence,” which is to proceed parallel to the growing “ideological struggle.” Relations in Eastern Europe are characterized by the principle of “socialist internationalism,” which boils down to the subordination of the Warsaw Pact states to the Soviet claim to hegemony.

In East Berlin this doctrine of Soviet supremacy is regarded as an indispensable guarantee of bloc cohesion and an essential requirement for the regime's security. The interventionist potential of the USSR, manifest in the 400,000 troops stationed in the GDR, precludes internal political change, as well as reunification with West Germany. Early in 1978, when the signs of crisis grew in East Germany, Soviet military and political leaders made unmistakably clear their intent, together with the GDR's military and paramilitary forces, to “protect the achievements of the October Revolution.”

The more strongly a communist regime aligns its policies to Soviet purposes, the greater are its difficulties in presenting itself as the legitimate representative of its own people's interests. Nevertheless, as the directive theme of its al-

liance policy, the SED repeatedly emphasizes that "the relationship to the Soviet Union is the crucial test of loyalty to Marxism-Leninism and of proletarian internationalism." To be sure, political and social systems of the Soviet type can enforce demonstrative solidarity toward the outside world and at least the appearance of internal conformity, but they cannot solve the problems of domestic economic and political viability. Bloc cohesion, achieved by Soviet standards of discipline, is paid for dearly. For the communist party leaders of Eastern Europe, the price includes deficient domestic political support and poor economic performance. This gives rise to potential conflicts of interest between Party leaders in Eastern Europe and CPSU leaders in Moscow: greater national freedom of movement, through relaxation of political dependence in foreign affairs and/or emancipation from the restrictive and repressive domestic implications of the Soviet model, should enhance the legitimacy of these regimes at home.

Although SED officials certainly criticize the Soviet model in private, they do not command the option (open to the leaders of other communist states) of choosing to mobilize popular support by defending national interests against Soviet interference. In the GDR, any such effort would inevitably set in motion a ground-swell of popular sentiment which, if it spread to the Party and state apparatus, would probably draw the East German state and society under overwhelming influence from the Federal Republic. Constantly fearful of such an uncontrolled development, the SED leadership steers a sharply different course.

The SED’s claim to represent the national will is also called into question by the lack of identity of the East German state. East Germans have also felt they belong to the German nation—and not merely to the artificially formed German Democratic Republic. Moreover, the populace continues to suspect the GDR of being an anti-German polity, a divisive element which caused the destruction of German unity. Until the mid-1960s, Walter Ulbricht attempted to negate this sentiment by means of recurrent initiatives in inter-German politics. Until 1966-67, the FRG’s unresponsive posture allowed Ulbricht’s regime to present itself as the protagonist of unified, socialist Germany, without fear that its proclamations would have any substantive effect.

Since Ulbricht’s fall, and as a consequence of European détente, the SED leadership has attempted to discredit the very notion of German nationhood to which it had previously nurtured. Accordingly, the new concept of a “Socialist nation” is intended to furnish the GDR with an unambiguous identity, sharply differentiated from that of the Federal Republic. But this effort has been unsuccessful: four-fifths of the East German population still considers itself as belonging to an “all-German” nation. This fact has been reluc-