

The Fall of Berlin Wall in the Eyes of China: From the “Dramatic Changes in East Europe” to the “Unification of the Two Germany”

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The fall of the Berlin Wall on the 9th of November 1989 lead to the culmination of the confrontation between Eastern and Western blocs and the end of Germany's separation. Far in the East, China paid close attention as the event unfolded. The Chinese government perspective on the event experienced major changes as things developed from the “Dramatic Changes in East Europe” to the “Unification of the Two Germany”.

The “Dramatic Changes in East Europe” was the official term used by China's official media. A simple interpretation from the words suggested that the East European Socialist regimes went through major and dramatic changes. This could be seen as a subtle and indirect manner of describing the collapse of East European Socialist regimes and its replacement by capitalist systems. The fall of the Berlin Wall was an important event during the “Dramatic Changes in East Europe” and to the Chinese government, it was an event with strong ideological and political implication on China's political situation.

1989 was not a peaceful year for China and the rest of the world. In January, massive protests broke out in Czechoslovakia. In May, Bulgaria opened its borders and massive numbers of Muslims flooded into Turkey. June, the Independent Self-governing Trade Union “Solidarity” won the Poland general election with a landslide victory. In August and October, massive protests broke out again in Czechoslovakia. November, the Berlin Wall fell. December, violence broke out in Romania and the exiled leader of the Romania Communist Party and Head of Government, Nicolae Ceausescu, was secretly executed. By the summer of 1990,

the Communist Regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany and Romania had all collapsed. Similarly in between the spring and summer of 1989, China was stuck in a political turmoil. In Beijing and many other cities, large scale demonstrations broke out and masses of students, workers and urban residents took to the streets demanding that the government put an end to corruption and allow more democracy and respect for human rights. In Beijing, the demonstrators camped at the Tiananmen Square and erected a “Statue of Liberty”. In the end, the army was called in on the 4th of June to end this “Anti-Revolutionary violence aimed at toppling the Socialist system”. From the Chinese government’s point of view, China and the Socialist states in East Europe were in a political crisis and “the socialist movement world wide was at its lowest point”. The fall of the Berlin Wall had unquestionably catalytic effect on the worsening of this crisis.

The Chinese government believed that China and East Germany belong to the Socialist camp and shared similar social system. Due to common ideology and internal politics demand, China supported and empathised with the East Germany’s Socialist government. The Chinese government never expected the Socialist regime in East Germany to collapse and nor were happy about it.

China had a long period of diplomatic relation with the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) united China and founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the 1st of October 1949. The GDR was founded on the 7th of October 1949 and diplomatic relationship between the two was established on the 27th of the same month. During the 60s, China’s relationship with GDR deteriorated for a while as Walter Ulbricht, then leader of GDR, was implementing policies similar to those of Khrushchev. The relationship returned to normal in the 80s. In 1986, the Secretary-General of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, Erich Honecker, visited China and in 1987, then CCP Secretary General cum State Premier, Zhao Ziyang visited GDR. In the aftermath of the “June Fourth” Incident, the GDR government expressed their support for Beijing’s effective measures in suppressing the violent riots. In October 1989, the vice-Premier of China, Yao Yilin led a delegation to East Germany to participate in the 40th anniversary of the founding of GDR. Both parties acknowledged each others’ contribution to socialism for the

past 40 years and affirmed their determination to walk the path of socialism.

Until the middle of November in 1989, both countries' still had frequent political and cultural exchanges and everything appeared to be normal. The Chinese official media reported on East Germany's society as per normal. For example, there was a report in August which reports on the "Solidarity Day" in which the GDR Reporter's Association held a garage sale and all proceedings were used to support developing countries. The cultural exchanges had further painted a serene picture of the domestic situation of both countries. In September for example, Beijing Hotel sent senior chefs and service crew to East Berlin to start a "Beijing Restaurant". To celebrate the 40 years of diplomatic relation between China and GDR, the East Berlin city government held a "Beijing Week" from the 7th of September till the 25th. To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of GDR, the Beijing Cultural Palace of Nationalities organised a GDR movie week. Even after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the GDR People's Army Song and Dance Troupe still went to China to perform on the 13th of November.

The Chinese government did not expect the situation in East Germany to undergo such a dramatic change within a sudden, that the Berlin Wall will collapse overnight. On the 9th of November, the GDR government decided that the GDR citizens may now cross the border to go into the Federal Republic of Germany for tourism purpose. The Chinese official media's report read: "China sees that the check points in between East and West Berlin, at the border of the two Germany, and the various police stations in East Germany were all crowded with East Germany citizens applying to cross the borders." Massive numbers of people drove or walked across the borders, crowding out every street and alley in East Germany. According to initial statistical survey, tens of thousands of people have entered West Berlin. On the 17th of November 1989, State Premier Li Peng, who was then on a visit in Brazil, held a press conference to answer questions on the situation of East Germany and other countries in East Europe. He said, "Recently, certain socialist countries in East Europe, including East Germany, underwent some rather "shocking" changes." Here, "shocking" refers not only to how sudden the changes are, but also to the gravity of the event.

To the Chinese government, the collapse of the Berlin Wall signified that the Socialist regime in East Germany was facing a dire crisis, but it did not necessary mean that the regime will or have been dissolved. The Chinese government hoped that East Germany will be able to overcome this crisis and continue its socialist path.

If East Germany's socialist regime can survive, the CCP government will be able to gain more support in the international community to resist pressure from the West. To the Chinese leaders, China and East Europe socialist regimes were facing a common threat; the regimes were facing a possibility of being toppled by external forces. On the 9th of June, the Chairman of the Central Military Committee, Deng Xiaoping gave a speech when he met with the officials above Army level in the crackdown forces. He pointed out that, "This storm will come sooner or later. This has been decided by the big climate at the international level and the small climate within China. It will come. It is not something that can be swayed by human will." This "big climate" refers to the Western countries attempt in toppling socialist countries. On the 9th of September, Li Peng said while hosting some guest, "China wants a relationship with the West, but we must also be on alert for external toppling effort." October, the East Germany leader said, when he met with Chinese delegates, that while the trend of easing is irreversible, the imperialists' "intention to doom me is still well and alive". They are starting launching offensive against socialism and GDR is their first target. East Germany reiterates its understanding and support for China's suppression of anti-revolutionary riots while China expressed its understanding of East Germany's present difficulties. After the "June Fourth" incident, the Chinese government faces immense pressure from the international community. East Germany's support had a positive effect in alleviating this pressure.

To China, the existence of East Germany is not restricted to being an international cheer leader. If East Germany can save socialism through reforms, it will cause more Chinese to believe that the reforms policies implemented in China by Deng Xiaoping is right. This will inevitably help to stabilise situation in China. For almost 30 years since the founding of the PRC, China had been under the influence of extreme left policies. This leftist politics reached its peak when Mao Zedong launched the Cultural

Revolution. With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Cultural Revolution ended and China's economy was on the brink of collapse. In 1978, China put an end to its extreme left policies and embarked on Deng Xiaoping's route of "Reform and Opening Up". Within less than 10 years, China went through a positive overhaul. The peasants are no longer hungry and they have meat in their bowls now. At the same, Chinese citizens are able to see the outside world and saw China's gross material difference with the Western developed countries. Deng's policies could be summarised into two premises, stick to socialism and determined to reform and open up. After the "June Fourth" incident, an additional premise would be that there will be absolutely no tolerance for social disturbance and that stability will have priority over everything.

Based on Deng Xiaoping's three premises policy, China's official media provided "positive" coverage on East Germany's crisis management. Firstly, on the issue of sticking to socialism, Chinese official media reported on a speech by Egon Krenz, Secretary-General of Socialist Solidarity Party. He pointed out that the future of socialism in GDR is beyond doubt and the leadership role of Socialist Solidarity Party should not be underestimated. The Socialist Solidarity Party has the ability to find the best solution for problems that arises as socialism progress. The changes in every sector in GDR are not a departure from socialism, but to reinforce socialism. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall on the 9th of November, China reported on the influx of East Germans to West Germany, but also reported on the Socialist Solidarity Party's emphasis to maintain a Marxist world view. In early December, the Socialist Solidarity Party announced their en masse resignation and established a Party's interim working committee. The committee expressed their determination in holding a party general meeting so that it can build a "Neo-Socialist" state in Germany. In short, China wished to express, through these reports, that despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, GDR's socialist status has no room for discussion, and that GDR's determination to walk the path of socialism will not waver. Secondly, on the issue of reforms, the Chinese reports emphasised the Socialist Solidarity Party's understanding of the relationships between reforms and socialism, between reforms and stability. The Socialist Solidarity Party had expressed once and again that the purpose of reforms is to have a better socialist state. Reforms do not mean less socialism, but more

and better socialism. The Party also emphasised that while reforms are necessary and urgent, it must not threaten to harm the stability of the nation. Thirdly, on the issue of intolerance of instability, the theme of the Chinese reports was that the GDR government will not allow volatility to exist. In the December of 1989, in cities such as Dresden and Hansestadt Rostock, government agencies were occupied or attacked and prevented from functioning normally. Hans Modrow declared that GDR will not allow a state of lawlessness; it will ensure the lives and properties of its citizens. Weapons must be held by those reliable and there will be no attacks on important government ministries. These reports were important to China's propaganda to counter the West's strategy of "peaceful revolution", stabilising China's society and consolidating the CCP's "proletariat rule".

Although the Chinese government realised that it would be beneficial for China's domestic stability if East Germany is to continue its socialist route, China kept by its principle of "non-interference" at the diplomatic level. A week after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Chinese Premier Li Peng said, "China does not interfere with other nation's internal affair". He also pointed out that, "China also does not interfere with the party affairs of those who maintain a friendly relationship with CCP. This is a fundamental principle of China." As a matter of fact, this is China's attitude not only towards East Germany but also to the entire episode of dramatic changes in East Europe. In December, riots broke out in Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu was secretly executed. China's Ministry of Foreign Affair held a press conference and expressed China's stand, "China had always believed that what is currently happening in some countries in East Europe is entirely their internal affair. China does not interfere with other nation's internal affair. We believe that the Romanian people are able to handle their own affairs." Even in the realm of ideology, the Chinese government has retained maximum flexibility. Right from the start, the Chinese government has proclaimed that Deng Xiaoping implemented "socialism with Chinese characteristics". China's socialism will have its own destiny and track. The fate of the communist parties in East Germany and East Europe cannot decide the fate of the CCP. Just as Li Peng said on the 17th of November, "China chose the socialist system. This is the correct choice due to history and China's situation. China will not change

its system because of what is happening in Europe.” Adopting the principle of non-interference in foreign policy and emphasising the Chinese characteristic on the ideology of socialism prevent China from tying its political fate to those of East Germany. It allows the Chinese government to catch up with the development of the “collapse of the Berlin Wall” and rapidly refocus its attention from the “Dramatic Changes in East Europe” to the “Unification of the Two Germany”.

From the Chinese government’s point of view, the “unification of the two Germany” episode demonstrates the reunification of two Germanic countries that had been separated for almost half a century since the World War II. It signifies that a major change in the international political order is underway. Within a span of twenty years from 1989 till 2009, the political significance of the unification of the two Germany has gradually dissipated. The reason for this change is the development of China’s domestic situation and the changes in the international order.

Towards the end of the month in which the Berlin Wall fell, Helmut Kohl proposed the “Ten Points Strategy” for Germany’s unification. The way the Chinese government sees it, re-unification is likely to result in East Germany being devoured by West Germany and the diminishing of socialist East Germany. China gave a positive report on East Germany’s criticism on the “Ten Points Strategy”. East Germany points out that unification is not an issue on the schedule, the relationship between the two Germany should be one where there is mutual respect and recognition for sovereignty, integrity, equality and mutually beneficial. Germany Democratic Republic will not sell itself to others nor combine with any country. This situation changed in the February of 1990 when the East Germany’s Modrow administration raised a re-unification proposal on the 1st of February. On the 9th of February, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a press conference expressing “our understanding of the Germanic people’s wish for nation re-unification”. China mentioned that it has noted both Kohl and Mondrow’s proposals and hoped that the unification will be mutually beneficial. China’s reports on Germany’s re-unification began to become more neutral and by mid May, Chinese official media’s comments on the issue began to root for the Federal Republic of Germany. When reviewing the unification history of Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany was portrayed as a

positive and active role: “historically, it maintained a common nationhood among the Germanic people through its “New Eastern policy”, fundamental agreements and a series of other agreements to development the relationship of the two Germany and promoting the German people to interact.” In comparison, GDR was cast as a more passive role: “it emphasised on the difference between socialist Germanic nation and the capitalist Germanic nation, insisting on a clear line to be drawn between the two ideologies and obstruct the German people from becoming closer.” On the 2nd of October, the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, Kohl, gave a speech, “Our motherland is once again united”. Midnight, the bell in the Berlin city hall rang in celebration of the unification while the Bundesflagge flew on the Reichstag Building. The two Germany are finally united. The Chinese government made a swift and active response. On the 3rd of October, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Wu Xueqian met Germany’s ambassador to China, Dr Hannspeter Hellbeck, and said, “The Chinese government and people understands, empathise and support the Germanic people’s wish to be re-united. We respect the choice of the German people and welcome Germany’s peaceful re-unification.” He also said that China has had good relationship with both Germany and wish to enhance and develop the already well-established friendship with a united Germany based on the “Five Basic Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”.

On the issue of Germany’s re-unification, the Chinese government was able to prevent itself from being influenced by its ideology. This is primarily due to the following reasons: Firstly, East Germany had already collapsed. It was no longer credible to cite East Germany to illustrate the superiority of socialism or as a correct approach of reforming socialism. If East Germany was to be utilised in the ideological arguments, it will have to be cited as a source for “learning from mistakes”.

Secondly, it is detrimental for China’s domestic affair and effort to maintain nation integrity to place emphasis on the ideological aspect of the issue of Germany’s re-unification. When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, it did not only signify the implementation of socialism in China, but also marked the re-unification of China. In 1911, the Qing Dynasty collapsed and China was thrown into an era of fragmentation with factional warlords dominating pieces of China and battling each other. Prior

to 1949, the Kuomintang (Nationalist), headed by Chiang Kek-shek, was effectively controlling only the South-eastern coastal region of China. All other provinces were under control of the warlords. In 1949, the CCP had once again established a centralised administration that controls an area that stretches west to Xingjiang, east to the coast, north to Mohe and south to the South China Sea islands. The Nationalist retreated to Taiwan. Till today, Taiwan still refuses to recognise PRC as the only legal government of China and still maintain diplomatic relationship with a few countries. The CCP government had always dreamed of reunifying the entire China. In the early 80s of the last century, in order to take back Hong Kong and Macau from the United Kingdom and Portugal, Deng Xiaoping proposed the idea of “One Country Two Systems”. The basic concept was that under the pretext of one China and that the main body of the nation will remain socialist, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan can retain its capitalist status without changes. It was because of this flexible “One Country Two System” which downplayed ideological relevance that China was able to repossess Hong Kong and Macau in the 90s, thus gaining a big step towards nation re-unification.

In respond to Deng Xiaoping’s concept of “One Country Two System” (一国两制 / *yi guo liang zhi*), Taiwan counter proposed the concept of “One Country Good System” (一国良制 / *yi guo liang zhi*) to voice their opposition towards Deng’s concept in which socialism will be the main system. Two (两) and Good (良) are homophonic in Chinese. Taiwan’s concept is a pun line and the “Good System” refers to the “Three Principles of People” and capitalist system in Taiwan. The underlying meaning is that the socialist system in China is a bad system. To the Nationalists in Taiwan, the two Germany in October 1990, the unification of socialist East Germany by capitalist West Germany, is historical evidence that “Good System” will definitely win over bad system and be the final victor. The day after Germany’s re-unification, Taiwan leaders spoke at an executive branch meeting, “The re-unification of Germany proves that only good system will unify bad system and bad system will have to accept good system”. Mainland China refuted the statement but did not escalate the exchange into a war of ideological criticism, for overtly heated debate over ideology will only worsen the political mood in the straits and emphasise the difference between Mainland and Taiwan. Taiwan also raised the

idea of “One Country, Two Governments”, which was shot down by Mainland China using international law. There are those in Taiwan who used the unification of Germany as precedent to illustrate that “One Country” can have “Two Governments”. Mainland China however, thinks that this is an inappropriate comparison. In the Chinese government’s eyes, firstly, China’s situation is, of all things, very different from the two Germany and hence incomparable. Secondly, prior to their unification, East and West Germany were in effect, two separate sovereign states. The Nationalist administration on the other hand, was overthrown in the Mainland and occupied the Taiwan Island and is hence nothing more than a renegade regional authority. It has no authority to represent China and the international law does not allow two governments to represent one country at the same time. Yet regardless of the Communist’s “One Country Two Systems” or the Nationalist’s “One Country Good System” or “One Country Two Governments”, the political precondition is that both Mainland and Taiwan held the consensus that there is only one China. This situation changed during the 90s. Then, the pro-independence faction in Taiwan was rapidly growing; Lee Tenghui came up with the “Two Countries Theory” which aimed at creating “One China and One Taiwan”. At the dawn of the new century, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came into power and Chen Shuibian emphasised that there is “One Country on each side” of the straits and even attempted to legitimise Taiwan’s independence via a referendum. Mainland China’s policy bottom line on this issue is, “As long as Taiwan recognises the One China principle, anything is negotiable”. Chinese government’s ideological emphasis on the Taiwan issue is fading away. Similarly, in the eyes of the Chinese government, the element of ideological confrontation in the re-unification of Germany is fading away while the theme of national reunion and nation re-unification is standing out.

Another reason why the Chinese government had swiftly set aside the ideological differences and support the re-unification of the two Germany is because it hopes that a unified Germany will not support separatist forces in China. Towards the end of the 50s, the Dalai Lama of Tibet went into exile. Since then, he has been seeking the administrative right of Tibet. In October 1990 prior to the re-unification of the two Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany was seeking support from the international community. To gain the support of China, which occupies a permanent seat

of the UN Security Council, the Federal Republic of Germany had rejected a meeting with the Dalai Lama and recognised that Tibet is a part of China. In December 1989, Kohl did not receive the Dalai Lama in Bonn. The Federal government's explanation was that meeting the Dalai Lama equates to recognising his right to rule and is against the diplomatic principle between Germany and China. But things changed the very next day after the two Germany unifies. On the 4th of October 1990, the German President, Richard Karl von Weizsäcker, met the Dalai Lama in Berlin. On the 6th of October, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an official protest to Hellbecker and sees the event as open support for the Dalai Lama's quest for Tibet independence and interference in China's internal affairs. While the Chinese government wishes to develop a pragmatic and mutually beneficial relationship with the unified Germany, the Tibet issue casted a shadow over the relationship right from the start.

Lastly, allowing the ideological colour of the collapse of the Berlin Wall is useful for the Chinese government to walk out of its foreign affairs predicament caused by the "June Fourth Incident". After the June Fourth Incident, the Chinese government was politically ostracised and economically sanctioned by the international community. Chinese government has been trying to improve this situation and hopes to normalise its relationship with the Western countries. This is very important to China if it is to continue its route of reforming and opening up. The fall of the Berlin Wall provided such an opportunity. To the Chinese, the fall of the Berlin Wall signifies the end of the Cold War in Europe and that the U.S. and Soviet Union will end their confrontation to engage in dialogues and cooperation and also signifies a reshuffling of powers among the various countries. This sudden turn of events certainly provided China with such an opportunity. In first of November 1993, the Maastricht Treaty entered into force and the European Union was established. This marks the transition of the European Community from an economic entity into a political entity. By mid 90s, China was actively responding to the multi-polarisation of the world and economic globalisation. To the Chinese government, the fall of the Berlin Wall suggests that a unified Germany and a united Europe will play a major role in the world order of the future. By the turn of the century, China established multi-facet and multi-dimensional diplomatic relationship with Germany, European

Union and the majority of the nations in the world. Compared to a decade ago, China's external situation had improved drastically.

The Berlin Wall has collapsed for 20 years. During the past 20 years, China went through a complete overhaul. 20 years ago, the main form of transport on the road was the bus while the economical "Santana" car was the sedan of government and Party officials, a symbol of power. 20 years later, the roads and streets are packed with private vehicles and sedan cars are entering the average household in large quantity. In 2009, China became the world's largest automobile market. Rapid development of the market economy caused fundamental changes in the structure of China's society and with it, the Chinese's thinking and values change. 20 years ago, the Chinese official media criticise "Western" democracy in the harshest possible means. 20 year later, Chinese official media promoted the book "minzhu shi ge haodongxi (Democracy is a good thing)" by Yu Keping. The book believes that democracy is a universal value and that developing democracy is beneficial to China's reforms. 20 years ago, the Chinese eagerly awaits the return of Hong Kong and Macau, today; they look forward to the re-unification with Taiwan. In the memories of the Chinese, the fall of the Berlin Wall has faded as an episode of the "dramatic changes in East Europe" but still lingers in their mind as part of the "unification of the two Germany". The happiness and excitement on the faces of those who tore down the Berlin Wall 20 years and run towards unification is still imprinted in our minds. The Chinese yearn that in the future not too far away, they too, can taste the sweet fruit of nation unification like the Germans 20 years ago.

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