

DAILY NEWS

From the archives: New world, new balance

Experts analyzed what effects the fall of the Berlin Wall would have in international politics

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WASHINGTON - In the closing days of World War II, German troops and refugees streamed westward, trying desperately to surrender to the Americans. Their goal: avoiding capture by the Russians and confinement behind what their propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, had already called "the Iron Curtain."

A barrier of barbed wire, landed mines, automatic machine guns and tracker dogs was built from the Baltic to the Balkans. For nearly 50 years, the occasional desperate escapes and grinding confinement have continued, and the fortified East-West divide was a given fact of international life.

Life changed last week and all of a sudden diplomats and scholars were talking of a new world, a new map, new alliance and a new balance of international power.

With no warning Thursday, an unknown new East German leader named Egon Krenz punched holes through the Berlin Wall - described by President Bush as "the most vivid symbol of the Iron Curtain."

Thousands of East Germans who had lived for 28 years within the sounds and smells of the West poured through the Wall - some to stay, others just to look around, go back and hope that maybe life has changed for good. The consequences of opening the Berlin Wall - unless this is all a cruel dream - are likely to be spectacular. "We're watching the collapse of the postwar order," said former Assistant Secretary of State Charles Maynes. "This is an explosion of people power. Somehow, the governments are the last to know."

But with the collapse of the postwar order, we lose the cruel balances that have, more or less, kept the peace in Europe for 45 years, and we are likely to lose its structures - most significantly the North Atlantic alliances.

Bush greeted this dramatic new change with a mix of caution and elation, promising to pursue a "foreign policy with the prudence that these fascinating times demand."

Bush and his adviser are children of the World War II era, and for them the division of Europe has been Magnetic North, the source of all their bearings. Without the familiar compass, they are heading into the unknown.

Without a Wall, there will be an almost inevitable reunification of Germany, creating a nation of 80 million people of near superpower status. A unified Germany would be the dominant member of the unified European Community that is to be created in 1992. And the EC is a political entity that will challenge the U.S. in wealth and political power.

Though the Soviet Union has insisted that its reform-minded East European allies remain in Warsaw allies remain in the Warsaw Pact, Moscow has also talked of eliminating all military alliances. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the mainstay of U.S. defense against aggression in Europe, would become irrelevant, and the U.S. will have to find some new way to continue playing a role in Europe.

The current standoff of alliances - NATO vs. the Warsaw Pact - could be replaced by Central European neutrality. A unified Germany, free of American and Soviet troops, is not the only nation that might prefer neutrality to membership in NATO. Norway, Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands could opt for the Swedish route of armed neutrality, while maintaining close technical cooperation with the Pentagon. Hungary and Poland could emulate neutral Finland or Austria.

“The Soviets are looking for a graceful way out of the military confrontation in Europe,” says Christopher Layne, a lawyer at Kaye, Scholer in Los Angeles and a strategist at the Cato Institute. “But they also have legitimate security interest. They don’t want to see a reunited Germany as part of a U.S. led NATO, right on the Soviet-Polish frontier.” They may not want to see a reunited Germany, even neutral at all. Neutral doesn’t mean unarmed.

Layne’s suggestion: Retain a skeleton headquarters staff if three U.S. divisions, plus air support, in Germany in return for a Soviet withdrawal of its troops behind its own borders. “That way, we’d still keep an eye on the Germans. If the Russians wanted to invade Western Europe; we’d have to fly our combat forces across the Atlantic - but the Russians would have to fight their way through Poland and Czechoslovakia,” he said.

Why did the old Communist order in East Europe collapse so suddenly? The opening of the Berlin Wall, remember, coincided with the resignation of Bulgaria’s party leader, Todor Zhivkov, the virtual dissolution of the Communist Party in Hungary and the election of a non-Communist government in Poland - all within the space of a couple of weeks.

Maynes, now editor of Foreign Policy magazine, has perhaps the best explanation for what happened: old age.

“The Communist rulers of East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia came in with the tanks of the Red Army, and they would never have won a fair election, but at first, they had some credibility,” he said. “At least they had fought the Nazis. At least they had no part in the corrupt

old order that had so disgracefully led their countries into abyss. But now the old Communists are dying off - and nobody under them believes in the old system.”

This could be the simplest epitaph for communism in Europe: It got old and it died.