

Europe's new order has an old look

Europeans, who are much given to formalism, were rather taken aback this week when West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev, both wearing causal sportswear and looking very much like your average vacationers, signed a pact that will almost certainly mark an epochal change in the history of our world.

At Zheleznovodsk, a wooded spa in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, close to the point where the German Army reached its deepest point of penetration into the USSR during World War II, the two leaders agreed to the final reunification of divided Germany. This act, in turn, clearly symbolized the re-emergence of a united Europe as the future pivot of international affairs, with a united Germany as its robust heart.

Chancellor Kohl, long dismissed by the liberal German press as "Farmer Kohl," a sort of bumbling rustic politician, now looks to all like a second Bismarck. Behind his folksy exterior is an immensely clever leader and a gambler with nerves of steel.

Mikhail Gorbachev, beset by a rising sea of trouble at home, once again seems like a magisterial statesman and icon of good will.

Dramatic and exciting all this certainly is, but it should also be taken in its historical perspective. Germany, a land without fixed borders, has been a loose cannon in the middle of Europe for the past four centuries. Throughout its turbulent history, the states that make up Germany have oscillated between East and West. Sometimes they allied with Western Europe against Russia. Other times with Russia against the European imperial powers.

In fact, Zheleznovodsk reminds me very much of Rapallo. There, in 1922, a desperately weak, isolated Soviet Union, struggling for its very survival, signed an alliance with equally desperate Weimar Germany that had been ground into the dirt by the rapacious Allied victors of World War I.

This new Rapallo offers both sides important benefits.

The wretched Soviet economy urgently needs German capital investment, technology, advisers and consumer goods. In Russian, "German" is a synonym for efficient.

Russia has relied on German technicians and merchants since the 16th century. Gorbachev is merely repeating what his predecessors, Ivan the Terrible, Peter and Catherine the Great did by importing German expertise.

For a united Germany, a friendly, open USSR offers a huge new market and an assured supply of cheap raw materials — including oil and gas.

Moscow seems to have more or less agreed to allow East Europe to again become what it was before 1940 — an economic hinterland and sphere of political

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influence for Germany. In addition, Gorbachev has managed to remove any military threat from a united Germany. Kohl agreed to limit the armed forces of the unified nation to only 370,000 men in exchange for keeping Germany in NATO.

The 390,000-man Soviet garrison in East Germany will be slowly withdrawn, but not before the rich Germans pay billions of marks into the Soviet treasury.

Once NATO troops are thinned out in Germany — and this is inevitable — the Germans will not have enough troops to defend their nation against any serious Soviet attack. Germany will thus be left in a state of permanent military vulnerability, with an army even smaller than that of neighboring Poland.

The Russians, I believe, are counting on this fact and the economic lures of the East to slowly draw united Germany into their orbit. Germany's NATO allies will tug the other way, all the while feeling the pressure of a reinvigorated Soviet Union. The U.S. will be relentlessly squeezed out of a united Europe and probably out of the Mideast, as well.

In other words, Europe will pretty much revert to the days of 1910, only this time with fewer internal rivalries — at least for a while.

An even more daring theory is that a working alliance between Germany and the USSR might even produce a new hybrid superpower, combining German brains with Russian brawn. Or, just as easily, an imperial, united Europe dominating a crumbling Soviet Union, weak East Europe and the Mideast.

Gorbachev predicted at Zheleznovodsk that the world was about to enter an era of long-lasting peace. This is what Europeans foresaw in 1900 and again in the late 1920s — and both times they were terribly wrong.

Let's not forget that even after Soviet troops pull out of East Germany and return to the USSR, they can be back in 10 days or less. Now that NATO is quickly disintegrating and U.S. troops are sailing back across the Atlantic, the USSR will still remain the dominant military power on the continent.

One more point: No one could have predicted the collapse last year of communism in East Europe. What dramatic surprises will next year bring?