The Oder-Neisse Line: Contingency, Path Dependence and Emergent Property *

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Abstract

The Oder-Neisse Line has been the frontier between Germany and Poland since the World War II. This Line was a symbol of a divided Europe, but now it has become a symbol of an integrated Europe. The purpose of this article is to explain the historic unfolding of Germany’s recognition of the Oder-Neisse Line in terms of path dependence. This study shows that a contingent selection of a path at a critical juncture tends to be path dependent; a path dependent sequence of events necessitates recognition of the status quo as a prerequisite for reconciliation and cooperation.

Key words: Oder-Neisse Line, Path Dependence, Contingency, Ostpolitik, German Unification

“No people can escape from their history.”
Willy Brant, 1970

Introduction

The Oder-Neisse Line has been the frontier between Germany and Poland since the World War II victors created it in 1945. No other boundary line in Europe was as controversial or freighted with so much bitter history. The Oder-
Neisse Line was a symbol of a divided Europe, but now it has become a symbol of an integrated Europe.

The dramatic fate of the border line originated from Poland’s geopolitical position, sandwiched between the two major powers of Germany and Russia. This is epitomized by the secret agreement of August 1939 known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to partition Poland as part of their nonaggression treaty. In fact, the Oder-Neisse Line was drawn up as a result of dealings between the Western powers and the Soviet Union for postwar settlement. In return for the Soviet Union’s participation in World War II, Britain and the United States agreed to let the Russians occupy about one-third of Polish territory. The Polish people were awarded all of the German territory east of the Oder and Neisse rivers as compensation. In fact, the Western powers wanted a substantial buffer zone between themselves and the Soviet Union. At a critical juncture in history, Poland was chosen as the sacrificial victim, and the Oder-Neisse Line was contingently selected as the western border of Poland.

During the Cold War period, the Oder-Neisse Line emerged as a key security issue in European politics. The border line became a source of tension between Germany and Poland. Recognition of the territorial status quo was requested by Poland as a precondition for reconciliation between the two countries. It was German Chancellor Willy Brandt who made the first overture for reconciliation with Poland. In 1970, he visited Warsaw and made an agreement in which West Germany recognized the Oder-Neisse Line as the western border of the Polish state and renounced all future German claims to Polish territory. Brant went further, demonstrating West German atonement for Nazi crimes by walking to the memorial for the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and falling to his knees in a gesture of repentance and reconciliation.

It is notable that Brandt’s Ostpolitik ushered in a new era of rapprochement between the East and West. Germany’s eventual recognition of the Oder-Neisse Line became the first path leading to the collapse of the Cold War in Europe and subsequent German reunification. This was an unexpected consequence of history at that time. Thus, the history of the Oder-Neisse Line teaches us a valuable lesson that reconciliation between adversaries starts from the recognition of the status quo.

The underlying assumption of this essay is that the recognition of the status quo can be construed in terms of path dependence. As Brandt mentioned in 1970, ‘history matters’ because a contingent event put in place in the early stages of history effectively comes to constrain the following sequences after that point. In