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One of the most remarkable transformations in 1970s international politics has been the irresistible rise of institutionalized summitry, which is evident not least in the creation of the world economic summits and the European Council. Whereas heads of state and government had previously only met occasionally and infrequently, these new bodies now provided a framework for regular consultation at the highest level that changed the dynamics of international diplomacy quite profoundly. Yet, the 1970s also saw a unique and highly unusual summit that had no precedent and would never again be repeated. In January 1979, the political leaders of the West’s ‘Big Four’ – Britain, France, Germany, and the United States – spent two days snorkelling, sunbathing, and scuba-diving on the small Caribbean island of Guadeloupe (178). They also discussed the most sensitive matters of nuclear and security politics; talks that ultimately paved the way for NATO’s dual-track decision of December 1979. Kristina Spohr’s important and well-researched article provides the first detailed historical treatment of this highly unusual tête-à-tête, utilizing recently declassified sources from Britain, Germany, and the United States.

It is Helmut Schmidt, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) from 1974 to 1982, who stands at the centre of the article. Departing from a historiography that has tended to portray Schmidt at Guadeloupe as rather hesitant and indecisive, Spohr instead

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shows how Schmidt’s performance at the summit in fact signified Germany’s rise to the “West’s nuclear top table” (186). Thanks to his “personal and intellectual authority” (186), the article claims, Schmidt managed “to carve out a leadership role for both himself and West Germany that proved crucial to the shaping of international affairs in the central areas of economic and security politics” (168). This is evident above all in Schmidt’s undisputable imprint on NATO’s subsequent double-track decision, which resolved simultaneously to pursue theatre nuclear-forces modernisation and arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Though the actual decision was taken only in December 1979, it was possible only because of the frank and cordial exchanges at Guadeloupe, where the four participants reached a common understanding of the security problems they confronted. “With perseverance, clear rationale, and friendly persuasion,” the article concludes, “Schmidt ensured that post-Guadeloupe his way became NATO’s. ... Schmidt ultimately emerged as the de facto designer of the alliance’s dual-track decision, in spite of his country’s precarious geopolitical position and non-nuclear status” (186).

The idea that West Germany came of age during the global crises of the 1970s is, of course, not a particularly new revelation, and neither does Spohr claim that it is. Nonetheless, her article is one of the first to precisely reconstruct the ways in which Schmidt pursued his strategies, and the tactics he employed to achieve his aims. Guadeloupe, as the article points out, offers a particularly suitable case study for such an investigation, since its informal nature put the direct interaction between the four leaders at centre stage: the media was kept away from the talks as much as possible, foreign ministers were deliberately excluded, and the only other people present were one or two personal advisors each, and the wives of the leaders (176). There was also no pre-cooked agenda, which meant that, unlike most other summits, “Guadeloupe was important for what would happen at the actual talks,” rather than for its build-up (176).

The first part of the article investigates how Schmidt’s push for the quadripartite summit was driven primarily by on-going West European concerns over the nature of the East-West superpower relationship under U.S. President Jimmy Carter, as well as by more particular concerns over the Soviet Union’s deployment of a new generation of intermediate-range nuclear weapons, the so-called SS-20s, that were excluded from ongoing arms limitation talks. Guadeloupe therefore offered an ideal opportunity to ease transatlantic tensions, as well as to confront the long-term dilemmas of NATO’s security credibility in light of the Soviet build-up. Above all, then, the summit was driven by the desire to “achieve political co-ordination and a (military-) strategic consensus” on the highest political level (171). With no formal decisions to be made, there were “no position papers, no fixed agenda, no communiqué, and no translators” (178). Instead, Guadeloupe provided an “opportunity for open and flexible consultations ... which could serve

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3 As is documented in the article, these notions were already prevalent in the press coverage of the Guadeloupe summit at the time (186-7).
subsequently to create a momentum to kick-start the *political* process of NATO’s decision-making” (176).

Then, the article moves on to offer a thorough analysis of the summit itself, reconstructing the positions of the four protagonists’ key views and preoccupations. This constitutes a significant piece of detective work, given the lack of any formal minutes or protocols. With even personal advisors excluded from some sessions, leaders could only afterwards produce some notes based on their personal recollections (179-80). Here, the value of multi-archival research becomes evident, since the utilization of German, British, and American primary sources enables Spohr to offer a much more detailed and comprehensive picture of the talks than was previously available, combining the records of Schmidt’s advisor Jürgen Ruhfus, the files produced by the British Cabinet Secretary John Hunt, as well as Carter’s “personal, brief post-talks notes” (180).

With regard to the actual talks, the article’s main focus is on Schmidt’s quest to make progress on the “theatre-nuclear-forces-modernisation-cum-arms-control issue” (167). It stresses the importance of Schmidt’s impromptu intervention during the informal first session, in which the German Chancellor offered a “relatively lengthy” exploration of the FRG’s unique historical and geostrategic vulnerabilities. In so doing, Spohr argues, Schmidt “created from the outset a lasting impression on his counterparts and carved out a dominant role for himself in the talks,” in effect having “taken the lead on defence matters” (179). For the second session, the article then explores the differences between Carter and the French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who were “doubtful of any future agreement with the Soviets on grey-area weapons” (181), and the British Prime Minister James Callaghan, who argued for an inclusion of the grey areas in the SALT framework since “SALT II effectively created a US-Soviet strategic stalemate … while the new Soviet SS20 arsenal increased the prospect of an attack on Germany” (181). After the three others had spoken, Schmidt intervened: while he was prepared to support theatre force modernisation in principle, the FRG could not be singled out as the only deployment country, given the likelihood of Soviet blackmail (182). Carter, by contrast, continued to press for a European deployment commitment prior to any production decision (182). The talks had reached deadlock.

By the final session the next morning, however, Carter had made up his mind, declaring that he would be willing to negotiate with the Soviet side over the grey area issue while simultaneously also pursuing theatre force modernization. While this meant that the American President had “effectively managed to dictate the imminent outcome of the summit” (184) with regard to the modernization issue, the article nonetheless suggests that, due to Schmidt’s performance, Carter was now clearly convinced “that the ‘grey-area’ problem was for real and needed to be dealt with” (186). Not only did this constitute a marked shift from the American President’s previous views, but it also reflected Schmidt’s own strategic thought and convictions to a large extent. Thus, Spohr concludes, Schmidt’s performance at Guadeloupe ultimately signified “West Germany’s entry into a
new area of international activity in which Bonn not only revealed a new assertiveness but had started to assume a leadership role as well” (187).

The major contribution of the article is that it provides the first detailed study of the Guadeloupe summit based on multi-archival research, as well as the first primary source-driven analysis of Schmidt’s role in shaping the nuclear-strategic consensus on the highest political level. We now know much more about this highly unusual get-together in the midst of the Atlantic Ocean, since previous analyses were necessarily based only on key memoirs and secondary works. Even more importantly, Spohr’s study also highlights the paramount importance of summitry as a forum for informal and frank consensus-seeking on the highest political level. In so doing, she manages to reintegrate individual agency and human elements into her study without becoming preoccupied by it; indeed, a particularly striking feature of the article is the beautiful interplay between structural, longer-term dynamics and the element of chance and personality during the summit itself. This applies in particular to the analysis of the summit’s run-up, where the article explores at great length the nuances and subtleties of the issues at stake.

Unfortunately, however, there is comparatively little discussion of the summit’s afterlife, perhaps because Spohr has already discussed these aspects elsewhere.4 One such omission, for example, is the role of the NATO allies who were not assembled at Guadeloupe, even though the article discusses at length the participants’ fears of being perceived as a “directorate” in the summit’s run-up (170-1). Yet, whatever the leaders’ professed desire to avoid these impressions, they nonetheless came to be seen as precisely that in the summit’s aftermath; perceptions that surely contributed to the profound lack of enthusiasm amongst medium-sized NATO members, like Italy or the Netherlands, to push through the subsequent dual-track decision domestically.5

The perceptions of such a high-political directorate also did not help Schmidt himself. For, while the dual-track decision is rightly seen as one of his major achievements, it already contained the seeds of his subsequent political downfall. Not only was his Social Democratic Party hopelessly divided over the question, but such party-political troubles also mirrored the German public’s unease over the FRG’s role in the Cold War. In October 1981, for example, over 300,000 citizens marched the streets of Bonn in protest of the double-track decision; a highly heterogenic group of protestors who were nonetheless united in their aversion to the “technocratic” belief “that the risk of nuclear war could be


managed.” Schmidt, the archetypical crisis manager politician, was an obvious target here; and Guadeloupe, with the four leaders discussing the potential deployment of nuclear-warheads on German soil while scuba-diving and snorkelling, surely did little to rectify this image. Yet, these long-term domestic legacies do not feature at all in the article, apart from a loose reference to “electoral politics” (185).

While a greater discussion of these aspects would surely have put Schmidt’s undoubted success at Guadeloupe into some perspective, such minor quibbles should not obscure the fact that Spohr’s article offers a highly important historical analysis of Schmidt’s major contribution to the international standing of post-war West Germany – a legacy that sometimes gets lost between the milestones of Konrad Adenauer’s Westbindung, Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, and Helmut Kohl’s reunification. Spohr does so with analytical rigor and stylistic elegance; enabling us to better understand not only Schmidt’s own story, but also the sea change in international politics and the Cold War during the late 1970s more generally. In so doing, the article brings home the fact that high-level summity can no longer be ignored by any historian seeking to truly understand the history and legacy of the Cold War.


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