

THE HOUSTON SUMMIT

THE HOUSTON SUMMIT; A New Balance of Power

By R. W. APPLE Jr., Special to The New York Times
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HOUSTON, July 11— It was, as President Bush described it on Monday, the first economic summit conference of the "post-postwar era." And it turned out to be a kind of coming-out party for Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany, reflecting the new, more subtle balance of power in the world.

On every key issue, from aid to the Soviet Union to the environment, from relations with China to agricultural subsidies, hard-fought, word-by-word negotiation and compromise were necessary at the 16th meeting of the seven ranking Western powers. The final communique, issued today as the meeting ended, was notably short on big breakthroughs.

At Paris a year ago, the other six members of the group were already flexing their muscles more than they had in the past. But the seismic changes in Eastern Europe still lay in the future, and no other leader had emerged to stand near the same level as Mr. Bush.

Mr. Kohl emerged here, even more than at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization meeting in London last week, as a dominant figure in these international deliberations - "the leader," as a French diplomat put it, "of the richest, strategically best placed, most populous country in Europe, and acting every inch of the role."

And Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu of Japan, in a less striking way, paved the way for a more assertive role for his country.

Europeans Support Kohl

The other Europeans tended to rally behind the Germans - the French most avidly, the Italians a bit reluctantly, the British only episodically. But even Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain, for all her proud nationalism, acknowledged that "there are three regional groups at this summit, one based on the dollar, one based on the yen, one on the deutsche mark."

Once upon a time, the United States was able, within the bounds of good sense and good taste, to get what it wanted at the annual meetings of the seven strongest industrial nations. At this week's meeting, held with fanfare in Mr. Bush's adopted hometown, that was manifestly no longer true. It will probably not be true again any time soon.

Not that the President was defeated or routed or anything of the kind. He fought his corner hard, yielding relatively little ground, so he had a success of a sort. But it was not an unqualified success; the broad agreements sought on key questions remained elusive.

Mr. Bush frankly acknowledged the new reality. "We're not urging everybody to march in lockstep," he said at his news conference today. In what he called "a rapidly changing world," other countries should not have to clear their policies with Washington, the President said, any more than Washington clears its policies with them.

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'Entirely Different Times'

It is impossible to imagine Lyndon B. Johnson or Ronald Reagan making such statements. But then, as Mr. Bush said, "we're dealing with entirely different times," when the looming threat of the Soviet Union is no longer there to enforce Allied adherence to the United States as the essential nuclear counterweight.

More bluntly, one of his aides remarked, "The age of the superpowers is obviously over."

Robert Hormats, vice chairman of Goldman Sachs International, the investment firm, who has worked on or observed dozens of meetings like this one, sees some dangers in the evolving regional pattern.

"What you get is the Germans leading on aid to the Soviets and the Japanese leading on aid to China," he said here this week. "Both of them came to Houston, told the United States what they planned to do, and told us to take it or leave it.

New Zones of Interest

"This is the new architecture of the economic world. It represents no rupture of relations, no real friction among the partners, but a tendency to break things into zones of interest, which in the long run is not in our interest if we want to remain a global power."

On the matter of aid to the Soviet Union, the bottom line was drawn even before last week's NATO meeting. West Germany, whose contacts with Moscow are broad and deep, and getting more so every day, had already agreed to provide large and immediate financial aid to the Soviet Union, and it had no intention of modifying the amount or the timing of that aid.

Mr. Bush was equally determined not to expose his right flank in domestic politics by giving direct financial aid or endorsing the action of anyone else in doing so. But he also wanted to be seen as part of a joint, affirmative response to Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's pleas for assistance. The result was a form of words, referring to individual and collective aid, that was acceptable to everyone but sent no clear signal to the Soviets.

As for the study of Soviet needs commissioned by the leaders, a near-duplicate of the one already commissioned by the European Community, it is unlikely to change any of the positions now held by the seven.

'A Leaky Roof'

"I knew that we would have to build a roof over the conflicting positions," a European negotiator said, "but I never suspected that it would be such a leaky roof. Maybe we've bought a little time for events to unfold. Maybe when we get the report, we will have made progress in the arms talks; the picture in Moscow will be clearer; the United States will feel free to act. Maybe not. But it was the best we could do." Mr. Kohl prevailed most obviously on the Soviet aid question. He and his West German colleagues never wavered from their position that nothing done here would alter their policy one whit, and the Chancellor even went so far as to suggest, at his summing-up news conference, that he could do more for Mr. Gorbachev than Mr. Bush could because the German economy was so much more robust.

But he was no more able than Mr. Bush to prevail on everything.

Split on Environment Issue

Isolated on the environment, Mr. Bush nonetheless forced the Europeans to retreat from their plans to attack "global warming," though that may hurt his efforts to win renown as an "environmental President." But they obliged Mr. Bush to accept in the communique what sounded a lot like a repudiation of the view of his conservative chief of staff, John H. Sununu: "Lack of full scientific certainty is no excuse to postpone actions which are justified in their own right."

Everyone claimed victory on the vexing question of agricultural subsidies, whose importance the Bush Administration unexpectedly emphasized here in a series of heated briefings. The United States clearly caught the attention of the Europeans on the issue in a way it has not managed to do before, but the substantive questions remain unresolved with time running out on the current round of world trade talks.

The West's Triumph

The Houston meeting, like the NATO gathering last week, took place in an atmosphere of great good will, at least partly because of the leaders' shared delight at the recent triumphs of Western ideals. As Gianni De Michelis, the Italian Foreign Minister, commented the other day, "With the West so near to final victory with respect to our struggles over the last 40 years, it would be a criminal form of stupidity to enhance West-West tensions now."

Any immediate danger of debilitating factionalism was diminished by the close cooperation between Mr. Kohl and Mr. Bush on most questions, a collaboration rooted in the President's prompt decision to support German reunification without stint.

But on another day, with another President and another Chancellor, things might well go less smoothly. What might happen, for instance, if the Soviet Union sought to trade withdrawal of their troops from a unified Germany for the withdrawal of United States troops?

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