

RUSSIA AND GERMANY: FROM ESTRANGED PARTNERS TO GOOD NEIGHBORS

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Like Moscow's relations with the West more broadly, Russia's ties with Germany—its most important European partner—have grown increasingly strained over the past few years. Previous hopes of Russia's integration into a Greater Europe from Lisbon in the west to Vladivostok in the east have evaporated. The formerly cordial relationship between Moscow and Berlin has cooled off, as estrangement and even mutual alienation have set in.

Yet, while past illusions of integration cannot and should not be revived, Russian-German relations can be made more productive. Russia could take steps to streamline and strengthen its geopolitical posture in Eastern Europe, while improving the climate for Moscow's relations with Berlin. Such steps would include easing tensions in eastern Ukraine and a series of costly frozen conflicts involving Moldova and Georgia, while also seeking to improve Russia's ties with Germany, especially economically. Of course, Moscow needs to remember that Germany is not a stand-alone power but an integral part of the EU and NATO. With that in mind, Russian efforts to improve relations with the EU's premier economy should be seen as a key element in a wider strategy of repairing Russia's strained ties with Europe.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF GERMAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Russian-German relations have been at the center of European politics for three hundred years. While Russia and Germany have been allies on many occasions, in the twentieth century

they twice went to war against each other. In World War II, Adolf Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union eventually led to the defeat of Nazi Germany, a victory that made the Soviet Union the leading power in control of half of Europe and Germany. Soon thereafter, the Soviet Union became a nuclear superpower. Even today, the legacy of World War II serves as a foundation for Russia's international status and moral authority and as one of the bases of modern Russian identity. For Germany, too, the end of World War II and the demise of the Third Reich became a watershed event, which helped mold a new German identity based on the rule of law, market economics, a respect for humanity, tolerance, and restraint in the use of military force.

Historical Reconciliation

The impending end of the Cold War, which resulted in the reunification of Germany in 1990, marked another important turning point. Moscow's support for German reunification under the framework of the Federal Republic of Germany became a symbol of historical reconciliation forty-five

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years after the bloodiest war in the history of the two countries, in which 28 million Soviet citizens died. This reconciliation got under way soon after the end of the war, especially on the territory of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), a state that the Soviet Union helped to create. The rapprochement between Russians and Germans continued with then West German chancellor Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* (New Eastern policy) in the early 1970s, which resulted in the 1970 Moscow Treaty between the Soviet Union and West Germany, as well as West Germany's treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia and the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 that came on the heels of German reunification did not roll back the relations between Germany and what came to be the Russian Federation, the historical successor to the Soviet Union. To the contrary, bilateral relations actively developed at every level and in many spheres.

For a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, relations between Russia and Germany progressed steadily. Berlin tried to serve as Moscow's guide in its efforts to integrate with the West, creating a Greater Europe spanning from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Over time, Germany would become Russia's most important trading and economic partner. Many German companies established themselves in the Russian market. At the same time, cultural and humanitarian ties between Russia and Germany reached new heights. Between 2.5 and 3 million ethnically German people from Russia and other former Soviet republics, such as Kazakhstan, moved to Germany, creating a sizable Russian-speaking diaspora in the center of Europe. Subsequently, many Germans stopped seeing Russia as a threat, and most Russians started seeing Germany as one of Russia's closest, most loyal partners. In his September 2001 speech at the Bundestag, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Russia had committed itself to the "European choice."

Of course, the two countries did encounter some problems during this period. For their part, the Germans were concerned about the challenges Russia faced during its democratic and market transformations. They warily watched authoritarian rule and oligarchic capitalism take root in Russia; specifically, they were dismayed by the atrocities committed during the Chechen Wars, human rights violations in Russia, and the Kremlin-sponsored resurgence of conservative and traditional values. In turn, the Russians were disappointed with Germany's role

in the breakup of Yugoslavia and, subsequently, the Kosovo conflict, as well as with German support for the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Finally, Moscow did not welcome the restored Atlanticist tilt toward the United States in Berlin's foreign policy after Chancellor Angela Merkel replaced Gerhard Schröder in 2005. At the same time, tensions were mounting in U.S.-Russian relations. In an oft-cited February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Putin sharply criticized the global hegemony of the United States.

Nevertheless, on the whole, Russian-German and Russian-European relations continued moving forward up until 2011. Berlin launched the Partnership for Modernization initiative, with the goal of helping modernize the Russian economy and other aspects of life in the country. For its part, Moscow proposed the signing of a treaty on European security and supported Berlin's proposal to create a Russian-EU foreign policy and security committee to resolve frozen conflicts, known as the Meseberg initiative. On his visits to Germany, Putin personally promoted the concept of Greater Europe as a platform for close economic, technological, and potentially political cooperation.

A Deepening Diplomatic Reversal

The trend of largely positive Russian-German relations began to unravel in earnest after Putin announced that he would again run for president in 2012. Many Germans were deeply disappointed with this decision, which they interpreted as a sign of regression in Russian politics that foreshadowed a negative turn in Moscow's foreign policy. For what it is worth, Putin's decision to return to the Kremlin was largely influenced by his interpretation of U.S. policies on missile defense, NATO expansion, support for the Arab Spring, and the intervention in Libya. Putin concluded that European states, including Germany, were unable or unwilling to positively influence these U.S. policies.

After winning the election, Putin accused the West of interfering in Russia's internal affairs and proceeded to eliminate or reduce foreign influence in the country, asserting Russian sovereignty over domestic politics. As part of this process, the government curtailed the activities of Russian NGOs with funding from overseas. Restrictions were also imposed on a number of foreign foundations, including German ones. Russia's image, as reflected by German media coverage and public opinion,

became clearly more negative; many Germans increasingly perceived Russia as an authoritarian, kleptocratic state, proving unable to build a modern economy and instead living off its natural resources. Furthermore, Germans tended to see Russia more and more as cracking down on political dissent and threatening the democratic choices of its neighbors (including Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine). Moderate German politicians that called on their peers to seek to understand the motives behind these Russian policies were harshly criticized by their fellow party members.

The Fallout of the Ukraine Crisis

The 2014 Ukraine crisis put a more decisive end to the era of friendly cooperation between Russia and Germany, as cool diplomatic relations gradually devolved into outright alienation. Even back in 2012 and 2013, before the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Berlin had been irked by Moscow's efforts to keep Ukraine within its orbit and integrate it into the Eurasian Economic Union, a Putin-created customs union of several former Soviet states. For its part, Moscow blamed Berlin for Brussels's refusal to discuss with Russia the terms of the EU's proposed Association Agreement with Ukraine. The Kremlin also accused Germany and other EU members—specifically, France and Poland—of not insisting on honoring the compromise that then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich had reached with the opposition in February 2014, which these three countries helped bring about. Consequently, Moscow believed these countries to be complicit in what it saw as a coup d'état that toppled Yanukovich's government in Kiev.

Moscow's heavy-handed reaction to the events in Kiev shocked Germany. Soon after, Russian armed forces took control of the Crimean Peninsula, where a referendum on Crimea and Sevastopol's joining the Russian Federation then took place. Immediately thereafter, Moscow supported a failed attempt to create a state of Novorossiia (New Russia) in eastern Ukraine and helped assemble and support a motley crew of anti-Euromaidan forces from Donbas, as well as volunteers and ultranationalists from Russia. The ensuing confrontation with Kiev led to war in the Donbas region. Russian foreign policy changed drastically, as the country used force to intervene in the affairs of a neighboring state and annexed part of its territory, where the population overwhelmingly gravitated toward Russia.

Faced with this crisis, the Kremlin essentially shifted into military mode. Lacking either a strategy or an action plan, Moscow was forced to improvise and made many mistakes. In the course of the war in Donbas, especially in 2014 and 2015, Moscow did not just help local insurgents assembled by the so-called counterelites of Donetsk, but also provided various forms of military and intelligence support. At key moments, Russian military units were clandestinely involved in combat operations to stave off the defeat of the Donbas militants at the hands of the Ukrainian troops loyal to Kiev.

But accomplishing this mission came at a high price. Many Germans gradually stopped trusting Russia's actions and its leaders' words. Berlin categorically rejected Putin's statement that Germans should "relate" to the sentiments of Russians in Crimea who were "returning home to Russia," because the Germans themselves were given an opportunity to reunify their country twenty-five years earlier with Moscow's permission. Germany viewed Russia's actions in Ukraine as an unprovoked use of military force, the annexation of territory belonging to a neighboring state, and support for separatism there. From the German government's perspective, such actions undermined the post-World War II European political order and violated fundamental agreements on the underpinnings of European security. Some Germans could not help but draw historical parallels, comparing the situation in Ukraine to Berlin's annexation of German-populated territories in the 1930s and the calls on all ethnic Germans abroad to return home, so to speak.

Further escalation in the conflict to the rest of Europe was avoided in 2014–2015. Speculation about so-called Russian revanchism and the threat Moscow might pose to the Baltic countries and Poland, which had been far-fetched from the start, subsided. Germany and France played an important role in reaching the February 2015 Minsk agreement (Minsk II) on ceasefire and conflict resolution measures for eastern Ukraine. Minsk II, which Merkel and Putin were personally involved in shaping, theoretically remains the pathway to a resolution of the Donbas conflict. At the same time, it is obvious that this agreement was more amenable to Moscow's interests, and it became clear that the government in Kiev never intended nor had the ability to implement it. Besides, Ukraine's leaders were mostly relying on U.S. assistance and were not inclined to respond to rather restrained German and French

attempts to steer Kiev toward complying with the conditions of Minsk II.

The Specter of Hybrid Warfare

The current relationship between Russia and the West is frequently labeled a new Cold War. This is the wrong way to approach this issue. The Cold War was a unique set of historical conditions that will never be repeated. The current standoff has a different nature, takes different shapes, and occupies different spheres. A more apt alternative for the current confrontation chiefly between Russia and the United States is the term “hybrid warfare,” which has become a common shorthand for Western analysts to describe Russia’s efforts to undermine the political foundations and social unity of other countries—from Montenegro to the United States.

This ongoing conflict has placed Moscow and Berlin at odds with each other. Germany has not just taken part in the collective Western sanctions regime targeting Russia but also leads and coordinates this policy within the EU. Merkel got the segment of the German business community most closely involved in economic cooperation with Russia to reluctantly acquiesce to the need to pressure Moscow to change its foreign policy. Most of the German business community that is not involved in such cooperation readily accepted the sanctions and supported the government’s position. Many Russians initially thought that Germany’s position was mostly a product of the extremely close ties between German political, business, and media elites and their U.S. counterparts. Moscow often tends to overestimate Washington’s role in various international situations, and the opposite is also true. In reality, solidarity with Washington was not the only reason Berlin acted the way it did. The categorical rejection of military intervention in Europe, especially territorial annexation, is at the core of post–World War II German identity. Germany has made some exceptions to that principle, but only as it has related to the United States and NATO (in places like Kosovo and Serbia). Evidently, Berlin tends to trust the good intentions of its senior ally and other members of the military/political bloc it belongs to, but Russia cannot count on that same courtesy.

Today, the German government essentially views Russia as a potential threat to European security and supports NATO’s collective efforts to strengthen the eastern members of the

alliance to contain Russia. A symbolic German Bundeswehr battalion has already been deployed in Lithuania on a rotational basis. Germany adopted the program to help increase its military spending, although the country’s spending levels have not yet reached the NATO-mandated 2-percent threshold. Despite all that, German citizens and even the German political class still do not appear to feel that the Russian threat is as great as it was during the Cold War. After all, a survey published in late 2017 by the German public broadcaster ARD shows Germans who view Russia as a reliable partner outnumber those who view the United States as such. Clearly, in this context, the United States stands for the administration of President Donald Trump, and the views of the general public differ substantially from those of political elites; but even with those caveats, this finding is striking.

Russia, meanwhile, sees the United States as its chief foe and, recently, the UK joined the list of Russian adversaries. Moscow unofficially considers NATO’s European members to be some sort of semi-combatants rather than full-on adversaries, insofar as they take part in the confrontation—especially in the intelligence, military, economic, and information spheres—but do so mostly out of a sense of solidarity with or dependence on their senior ally, the United States. Russia treats these NATO members, including Germany, in a fundamentally different way than it does the United States. In terms of politics and especially propaganda, Russia’s treatment of these European countries is similar to how the West treated Eastern Europe during the Cold War. At the same time, in terms of economic and technological cooperation, EU members—unlike the United States—continue to remain extremely important partners for Russia.

Notably, while Berlin is a consistent critic of Moscow, Germany still engages in dialogue with its Russian peers. Amid the hybrid war between Russia and the United States, Germany has taken the peculiar position of a loyal U.S. ally that is permitted to maintain constant contact with Russia. On an official level, the transatlantic allies have the same view on Russia. But unlike the U.S. foreign policy establishment (which views Russia as toxic and treats it as it would Iran or North Korea), Germany sees Russia as an important neighbor that it has to deal with.

The military sphere does not play the central role in this hybrid war, at least for now—the competition in the information

space is far more intense. Practically all German media outlets have taken a critical stance on Moscow's policies, although these publications are far more moderate than the U.S. or British press corps. German media outlets continue their professional coverage of Russia, its foreign policy, and relations between the two countries. A diverse range of ideas and approaches, in fact, exists.

On the other side, apart from criticizing Berlin's handling of its relations with Moscow, Russian state-run media have started to criticize German domestic policies on, for instance, the issue of immigration. Germany, a country that many people born in the former Soviet Union call home, saw such Russian criticism as an intrusion into its domestic politics and an attempt to destabilize the sociopolitical situation in the country. (A notable example is a [2016 news story](#) picked up by several Russian media outlets, in which a young girl in Germany made allegations—later proven to be false—that she had been raped by an immigrant.¹⁾ Recently, the Russian media's lack of restraint and a slew of personal insults directed at German politicians, including Merkel, have further damaged the bilateral relationship.

Suspicions of election interference have only made matters worse. Following allegations of Russian cyber-enabled interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the German government [accused Russia](#) of attempts to penetrate its servers. Even though no official statements on interference into Germany's 2017 Bundestag elections were issued, Germans have come to associate cyberattacks and espionage with Russia. In addition, German media outlets have repeatedly criticized Russia for its military operation in Syria, especially for supporting President Bashar al-Assad and bombing his opponents' positions in the densely populated neighborhoods of Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta.

In addition to these specific charges, Russia has been accused of undermining the liberal democratic world order, of which Germany and the United States are viewed as prominent members. The seriousness of these accusations increased after Trump's election, since many observers see Germany as a temporary leader of the liberal democratic order until the political situation in the United States normalizes. Germany interprets this order as a set of principles, norms, and rules rather than a case of U.S.-

led geopolitical domination of the West. Germany has just a few supporters of the conception of a unipolar world with the United States at the helm.

By contrast, Russia sees a direct link between the liberal democratic order and U.S. hegemony, which Moscow began challenging more forcefully in 2014. From Russia's perspective, a new world order based on a stable power equilibrium and interactions between several centers of power will inevitably emerge in the future. But, in all fairness, Russia tends to care more about its own place in the new world order than it does about what this order will look like in overall terms.

As this rendering of the past quarter century shows, Germany has a history of closer relations and cooperation with Russia than with many other European countries, although Moscow and Berlin have had their share of serious differences. The situation in Ukraine and the hybrid war between Russia and the United States have led to a general worsening of Russia's ties with Europe, although (again) this tendency has been somewhat less pronounced with respect to Germany.

A DISPASSIONATE APPRAISAL OF GERMANY'S STANCE ON RUSSIA

Yet Russia's long track record of warm relations with Germany should not be allowed to obscure the real limits imposed on Russian-German relations by Berlin's close integration with its EU partners and NATO allies. This is especially true amid the heightened tensions of the last few years. Consequently, Russia must adopt a full, realistic understanding of how Berlin views Moscow—the Kremlin must calibrate its own policies accordingly.

The new German government formed in the spring of 2018 mostly has continued the previous government's policies on Russia. The revamped grand coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has reaffirmed Germany's prioritization of transatlantic relations and European integration. Meanwhile, the most influential parties outside of the governing coalition—the Free Democratic Party, the Left, and Alternative for Germany—are trying to offer an alternative to the mainstream conception of relations with Moscow. The Green Party consistently has advocated for a value-centered approach

to Russian-German relations. At the same time, Germany is now reinventing Brandt's conception of Ostpolitik by paying more attention to its relations with Eastern European countries—from Poland to Ukraine. The CDU/CSU bloc and even the SPD unequivocally oppose the pursuit of any form of special relationship between Russia and Germany, let alone the creation of a Berlin-Moscow axis of some sort. Berlin is prepared to have dialogue with Moscow but will do so from the moral high ground, supported by other EU and NATO members.

The German government's position precludes or at least postpones previously discussed ideas, including possibilities such as Russia's returning to the G8 under some pretext, the gradual weakening of anti-Russian sanctions as the situation in Donbas normalizes, and the partial revival of the Russian-German partnership—particularly as it relates to restoring Ukraine's economy. One has to admit that some of these ideas, such as the notion of restoring Russia's G8 membership, are already obsolete, but Berlin is expecting Moscow to take the initiative on the others. In any event, there are sufficient grounds for productive Russian-German dialogue to foster peaceful coexistence although the countries have different and occasionally opposing geopolitical interests.

For its part, Moscow has lost hope that Berlin's Russia policy would be significantly more liberal than that of its partners and allies. The methods of advancing a policy do not determine its content. Moscow strongly believes that even if the German government wanted to, it would not be able to treat Russia radically differently than the United States does. Berlin's reaction to the poisoning of former Russian and British double agent Sergei Skripal in the UK, which Moscow considered an anti-Russian provocation, further confirmed this belief. If and when the U.S.-Russian hybrid war escalates, Berlin will likely, however reluctantly, have to toughen its stance on Moscow.

Given that likelihood, it is important that Russia appraise Germany's Russia policy realistically. Moscow should not be upset with Berlin and accuse it of failing to repay its historical debt of gratitude for Russia's support of German reunification at the turn of the 1990s. If Germany significantly departs from its allies' and partners' position on Russia, it will face enormous problems in its bid to play the leading role in the EU. While smaller German parties and individual politicians may voice

softer views on the issue of Russia, Germany's leading political forces consistently follow a pro-Atlantic path and have no doubts about which side to take.

After all, even the strongest, most influential members of the EU cannot conduct a purely national foreign policy. Germany is part of the EU, and as one of the union's most European members (so to speak), Berlin consciously constructs its policy toward Russia as European from the outset. The more staunchly anti-Russian views of Poland and the Baltic states, in no small measure, inform the EU's approach to Russia. Neither the UK's impending departure from the EU scheduled to occur in 2019 nor the victory of populist factions in the March 2018 Italian elections will make the Europeans' collective position any more pro-Russian. A number of other countries—from Sweden to Spain, the latter of which was friendly toward Russia until recently—are suspicious of Russia and its policies. The importance of individual states notwithstanding, the EU's supranational governing bodies—the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament—also play their own roles and are skeptical about Russia. It would be impossible for Moscow to ignore Brussels and focus exclusively on Berlin, nor would that be the right way for Moscow to proceed.

Beyond intra-EU politics as a whole, the domestic political futures of Europe's two biggest actors—France and Germany—will have a significant effect on Russian-German relations. As Merkel's political position weakens and her tenure as the German chancellor nears its end, France and its ambitious president, Emmanuel Macron, may start playing a more active role. The German-French duo suddenly have become more competitive, although the fundamentals of Germany's international standing are clearly stronger than those of France. Another related question is who will succeed Merkel as head of the German government.

Meanwhile, in economic terms, the importance of the Russian market to Germany has declined, due to the stagnation of the Russian economy. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe's integration with the EU has proven to be successful. German-Czech trade volumes have now exceeded German-Russian trade flows. And when Germans talk about the East, they tend to have China rather than Russia in mind. Germany's political class

sees Russia's role and place in the world in a totally different light than the Kremlin does. Russia must take all of this into account when planning its long-term approach to the bilateral relationship.

Given Russia's current geopolitical position, Moscow no longer has the strategic goal of creating a common Greater European space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Instead, Russia should focus on building neighborly relations with Europe as it actually exists, from Lisbon to Helsinki—a Europe that will remain a junior partner of the United States for a long time. By the same token, Germany should not treat Russia as an economically and socially backward part of Europe that has to be civilized and integrated with the rest of the continent by bringing Moscow closer to EU standards. Russia should not be conceived of as the biggest part of some imagined “other Europe” that should be brought to the level of so-called advanced Europe. Rather, Russia is Europe's largest immediate neighbor, alongside other neighbors such as Arab-majority countries, Iran, and Turkey. Berlin should certainly take Moscow into account, but more importantly, Germany should accept the way Russia is now to avoid new disappointments.

Consequently, the Russian-German political relationship is almost certainly going to remain strained over the long haul, including as it relates to the broader relationship between Russia and the West collectively. While interactions between Russia and Germany are likely to remain much less hostile than those between Russia and the United States, bilateral progress between Berlin and Moscow will be curtailed by Germany's adherence to NATO and EU solidarity. Germany will not sacrifice even a small part of its relationship with the United States and its EU partners for the sake of improving relations with Russia.

A RUSSIAN ALTERNATIVE TO A GREATER EUROPE

Russia's history of constructive relations with Germany coupled with the constraints Berlin's alliance partners place on Russian-German bilateral cooperation mean that Russia must proactively seek to shape these dynamics in ways that are more helpful than harmful to its interests. Much of this burden will fall on unilateral actions Russia can take of its own volition—cooperation with Germany would be useful, but in essence complementary (and secondary) to these efforts.

Imagining a Unilateral Russian Strategy

Because relations with Germany (and with Europe more broadly) are likely to remain strained for some time, the onus will be on Moscow to proactively free up Russia to tackle domestic challenges and bolster its geopolitical positioning as much as possible. Good starting points would be for the Kremlin to find ways to roll back its involvement in several lingering and frozen conflicts across Europe, and to seek to attract Russia-sympathizing people who live in these places to resettle in Russia rather than sustain strongholds along Russia's periphery. While important to Russia's development in view of the country's worsening demographic outlook, doing so could also have the added benefit of reducing European threat perceptions of Russia, and perhaps could offer Moscow an easier path to gradually reknitting economic and societal ties with its most important European partner, Germany.

To cut its geopolitical losses where necessary and recalibrate its geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis Europe, Russia will need to focus on taking unilateral steps to achieve these goals, while also engaging with its immediate neighbors and other European countries, including Germany, as necessary. The current trouble spots in Europe that should be up for discussion include Ukraine and Donbas, Moldova and Transnistria, and (further down the road) Georgia in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The suggestions that follow about how Russia should handle these points of tension are not primarily aimed at changing the fundamental character or even the climate of Russian-German relations. That will remain an unattainable goal for the foreseeable future. Instead, Russia's main objective should be freeing up resources Moscow has been using to prop up unviable political actors in these flashpoints (that are generating diminishing returns) and use the proceeds to strengthen human capital and address other needs in Russia. In some cases, cooperation with Berlin might help Moscow optimize the geopolitical situation surrounding these lingering or frozen conflicts. Such a move cannot be interpreted as a concession on Russia's part, or as a sign of Russian escalation. This approach might even have a positive side effect, if it encourages Europeans, and specifically Germans, to view Russia as less threatening.

Ukraine: Russia should act within the framework and the spirit of the Minsk agreements, demonstrating its sincere commitment

to the full implementation of the agreement to Germany and other relevant European parties. First and foremost, the parties should ensure that the ceasefire on the line of contact be upheld, so as to eliminate the absolutely senseless bloodshed. Other steps should include conducting prisoner exchanges, aiding the population of the region, and normalizing day-to-day life in Donbas, which should be treated as part of Ukraine. Russia has no territorial claims in Donbas and believes that the future of the region should be determined in the course of implementing the Minsk agreements. During that process, the parties should decide whether the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission would be allowed access to the Donbas segment of the Russian-Ukrainian border.

It is time for Moscow to acknowledge that Ukraine has now completely severed its geopolitical ties to Russia, effectively becoming a military and political partner of the United States and an economic responsibility of the EU. Ukraine no longer shares the same political, economic, humanitarian, and intellectual conditions as Russia. Now, it is up to Russia to exclude Ukraine from its orbit and treat it as a full-fledged foreign state. Moscow should abandon its hopes for regime change in Kiev and the restoration of its however minor influence over Ukraine. Russia should refrain from trying to influence Ukraine's political processes: any changes in the country for the foreseeable future will likely have a solid anti-Russian slant. In the years to come, Moscow should start treating Ukraine as it treats countries like Bulgaria and Romania.

While Russia and Ukraine's growing estrangement does not make their conflict any less serious, it is becoming less emotionally charged. Russia can approach the question of Ukraine's NATO membership more calmly now. This question is not on the agenda now, and it does not even make much sense given the new political realities. Ukraine will be a potential Russian adversary even if the country remains outside of NATO, and this fact will not change until the issues of Donbas and Crimea are resolved. (Addressing the former may take years, while fixing the latter may require decades.) In the meantime, with help from the United States and other NATO countries, Ukraine can strengthen and rearm its military, making it a more formidable opponent for the Russian armed forces than it is today. Even without NATO membership, Ukraine—in principle—may offer to host U.S. military bases and other sites. For instance,

having lost its chance to be based in Sevastopol, the U.S. Navy may be stationed in Odessa. Besides, being under no obligation to defend Ukraine as long as Kiev remains outside of NATO, the United States can allow the Ukrainian armed forces to act more freely without fearing that Washington might be automatically drawn into a conflict with Russia.

In economic and political terms, while Ukraine will not become a member of the EU for the foreseeable future, it will increasingly engage with the EU. Germany will take the lead in this process on the EU side. Russian-Ukrainian economic relations are rapidly collapsing, as did Russia's trade relations with former Comecon members and the Baltic countries in the early 1990s. Russia will probably not have a chance to participate in Ukraine's economic reconstruction alongside Germany but, then again, it will not have to pay for its neighbor's modernization either. Nevertheless, Ukraine remains a transit state for some of Russia's gas exports to Europe. Moscow will have to agree with Berlin's position: the Nord Stream pipeline should be expanded if the Ukrainian gas-transit arrangement continues, at least to some degree. The question of volumes will be subject to negotiations.

In the course of an ultimate divorce with Ukraine, it would be reasonable for Russia to switch from gathering territories to gathering people. Specifically, Moscow should launch a program that would attract pro-Russian Ukrainians to the Russian Federation. This program could be actively implemented in the parts of Donbas controlled by the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, and (if successful) it could be further expanded. If pro-Russian elements leave Ukraine for Russia, the problem of Donbas, control of which will sooner or later revert to Ukraine, can be solved more easily. If and when this happens, Russia would lose a geopolitical buffer that it essentially does not need but would acquire people willing to cast their future with the Russian Federation.

Moldova: Russia could adopt a similar approach with respect to Moldova and Transnistria. Political forces there that claim ties to Russia or the West have long competed for power, a struggle that is really between factions of elites pursuing their own interests. Russia boasts long-standing connections with Moldova, but closer integration with the country seems out of reach. Meanwhile, not even the supposedly pro-Russian forces in the coun-

try can change Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, which entered into force in July 2016.

So far, Moldova has remained neutral. Its hypothetical NATO membership or the prospect of eventual unification with Romania (a NATO member) does not pose a significant additional threat to Russia in the context of a de facto partnership between Ukraine and the United States. On the contrary, drastic geopolitical changes in Ukraine in 2014 and the start of the new confrontation between Russia and the United States make the small Russian contingent in Transnistria extremely vulnerable. The fact is that Moscow has no need to latch on to Transnistria as a mythical bridgehead at the Dniester River that has no strategic significance and lacks resources. It makes no sense for Russia to financially support the top government officials of the Transnistrian Republic, who have long set their sights on engaging with EU countries. Just as in the case of Ukraine, Russia could offer all Transnistrians and other residents of Moldova who wish to resettle in Russia an opportunity to do so and a chance to subsequently receive Russian citizenship if they do not have it already.

Past joint Russian-German attempts in the early 2010s to broker a diplomatic settlement largely failed. Still, Moscow (in possible collaboration with Berlin) could urge Chişinău and Tiraspol to start negotiations under the OSCE aegis on the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict and the reunification of Moldova. If successful, such negotiations could become an important precedent for overcoming a decades-old conflict and reducing tensions in at least one part of Europe. In addition, cooperation between Russia and Germany and/or the EU on the reunification of Moldova could become a model for further cooperation on security in Eastern Europe.

Georgia: If Russian-German cooperation on Moldova were to prove successful, cooperation on the South Caucasus could follow. The multilateral consultations in Geneva on Abkhazia and South Ossetia have already gone on for ten years and are effectively stalled. Neither side appears willing to substantially change its position for the foreseeable future, but enhancing security along the line of separation between the Russian and Georgian border guards seems possible. In addition, the parties could expand humanitarian exchanges, as well as economic and cultural cooperation. The dialogue on conflict

resolution between all interested parties could first be restarted on an unofficial level, with the Europeans acting as a moderator. At present, Germany appears tired of its involvement in the unproductive conflict settlement, but progress in Moldova could create a positive momentum.

Another important, albeit distant, goal is starting to normalize Russia's relationship with the EU, primarily in economic terms with respect to Germany. The most immediate objective of Russian-German economic relations and scientific cooperation for Moscow is to limit the impact of the sanctions to designated economic sectors, companies, and individuals. Such restrictions need not be an obstacle to the development of economic relations in other areas. At the same time, Russia needs to take into account that the nature of U.S.-German relations, for some time, will allow Washington to pressure Berlin to limit and reduce its economic ties with Moscow.

Russian oil and gas exports to Germany remain a critical economic link. The export revenues comprise a significant part of Russia's budget, and it is also in Germany's interest to continue receiving pipeline gas from Russia, including by completing the Nord Stream 2 project across the Baltic Sea. For its part, Russia will have to bear in mind Germany's political interests as the EU's leading member and abandon Moscow's plans to completely discontinue gas transit through Ukrainian territory. Additionally, Russia needs access to German technology, which has traditionally stimulated its economy. The question is to what extent Germany can provide this access given the confrontation between Russia and the United States.

Like Russia's actions with respect to the aforementioned European flashpoints, Moscow can take many important unilateral steps to brighten its economic outlook. For instance, Russia directly needs an improved business climate at the time of increasing economic sanctions. Moscow could open the country up to midsize European, particularly German, businesses, while doing more to guarantee them property rights, fair and legal due process, and freedom from bureaucratic interference. If these steps are taken, economic relations between Russia and Germany will probably receive greater political and public support in Germany. Similarly, expanding visa-free travel for citizens of EU countries could help Russia as well. In this respect, Russia could follow China's recent example.

Beyond the economic sphere, Germany and Russia should seek to preserve and strengthen the historic reconciliation they reached after World War II. This truly unique reconciliation occurred outside of common alliances and integration projects, but it requires strengthening in the current geopolitical climate. To accomplish this, Russia should refrain from any steps that could be interpreted as interference in Germany's domestic affairs, drop public insults directed at German politicians, and foster cooperation between German and Russian NGOs.

In addition, preserving historical cooperation between Russians and Germans requires maintaining and developing contacts between German and Russian civil society. This is especially true among historians, political scientists, young people, school teachers, professors, journalists, clergymen, and other influential groups. Unlike during the Cold War, the current brand of hybrid war between Russia and the United States has not yet produced any equivalents to the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall. For the most part, the present confrontation is limited to elite groups, and this leaves space for professional, cultural, and humanitarian exchanges between Russia and Western countries, including Germany. Relevant parties should take advantage of this fact to stabilize their political relations as well.

The Real but Limited Merits of German-Russian Dialogue

Despite the constraints on robust, constructive ties between Berlin and Moscow, more cooperation is possible. The silver lining is that most German politicians believe that, in light of the current adversarial relationship between Russia and the United States, it is impossible to ensure European security without Russian participation. Thus, German leaders' openness to admittedly limited cooperation creates conditions for maintaining ongoing political dialogue between Russia and Germany at the highest levels of government—at least to exchange information.²

Apart from Europe, it is worth noting that Moscow and Berlin have previously shared and continue to share a number of interests in other regions of the world. Germany and Russia both criticized the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq in 2003. As for the Iranian nuclear issue, unlike the United States, both Russia and Germany remain committed to upholding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement adopted in 2015. Both countries also advocate for reducing tensions on the Korean

Peninsula. As for the Middle East and North Africa, despite some differences on a number of key issues, Russia could conceivably cooperate with EU members, including Germany, to stabilize the situation in Syria and the country's postwar reconstruction. Similarly, Russia and Germany, as well as other EU members, can cooperate to help restore stability in Libya. Of course, such cooperation is only possible if the parties first agree on the fundamental questions that divide them now, such as the future of the Syrian political regime.

Despite these common global interests, Russian-German dialogue and cooperation will not be sufficient for resolving the pressing issues of European security. The United States and NATO play the leading role in this sphere, and reaching a compromise between them and Russia seems out of the question for now. Washington is demanding that Moscow completely change its political course, which essentially would mean capitulating—the Kremlin cannot make meaningful concessions under such conditions. The prospect of a UN peacekeeping operation in Donbas could only serve as a means of implementing the Minsk agreements, not as a substitute for the agreements. Here, a caveat is in order. If Moscow were to simply surrender Donbas to Kiev, that would not make the United States weaken its pressure on Russia and would not lead to a schism in the Western bloc that could benefit Moscow. Rather, the opposite is more likely to happen: Western pressure on Moscow would increase on all fronts—from Crimea to Kaliningrad. Instead of a coveted seat at the negotiation table to hammer out a contemporary equivalent to the Yalta Conference, the Russian leadership may receive a subpoena to a tribunal in The Hague. Given this political climate, the hybrid war between Russia and the United States is going to continue.

Nevertheless, some opportunities for stabilizing the conflict do exist, and Russian-German cooperation in this respect may prove useful. One such avenue is the preservation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the abrogation of which could bring this type of weapon back to Europe and drastically increase military risks in the region. In addition, Russia and NATO could try to exercise mutual restraint in deploying weapons and engaging in military activities in Europe. As traditional forms of arms control threaten to gradually recede into the past, interested parties need to discuss how to ensure security in an increasingly unregulated regional and global strategic environment. To this

end, Russia and Germany, in conjunction with other members of the OSCE, could intensify professional dialogue on modern non-nuclear weapons.

LOOKING BEYOND THE HORIZON

Russian and German politicians should not just look toward the historical relationship of reconciliation between their two countries but should also be mindful of long-term global trends. When looking at Germany, Russians should realistically assess the chances that Europe will rise to become a full-fledged strategic player independent of the United States. The gradual weakening of U.S. global hegemony and the emergence of new non-Western centers of power are clearly apparent. The EU's prospects are not that certain. On the one hand, EU countries' population and GDP are comparable to those of the United States; in addition, European countries have abundant experience as global players. On the other hand, there seem to be no forces in Europe today able and willing to conduct their defense and foreign policies independently of Washington. At this point, Europe's propensity for Atlanticism looks stronger than any streak of Europeanism.

Europe's leadership deficit on the global stage in many ways stems from a similar deficit within Europe. The majority of Germans are unwilling to accept their country's leadership mantle, a tendency that hampers their country's guiding role in the EU. Since World War II, German elites have been conditioned to unquestionably accept U.S. global leadership, while exercising caution and self-restraint. In addition, Berlin's role is checked by its neighbors' phantom fears of German hegemony in Europe. Washington obviously would not look approvingly at a Europe that is relatively autonomous from the United States and is run collectively with active German participation. Realizing this, Germany and France will most likely advance and protect European economic interests in dialogue with the United States, while remaining loyal to Washington politically and militarily. The Germans and other Europeans have to recognize, however, that, for all the importance of the European dimension of Russia's foreign policy, its focus has recently shifted. After 2014,

Russia has pivoted inward, seeking a balance in its relations with Europe and Asia, especially China. Bolstering ties with Europe, including Germany, would help increase Moscow's bargaining power vis-à-vis Beijing.

Russia's future is less clear than that of Germany or Europe. Can Russia achieve an economic breakthrough in the foreseeable future, as Putin promises? What will Moscow's political system look like after the long Putin era ends? Will Russia have sufficient resources and willpower to endure the hybrid war with the United States, and how might the new U.S.-Russian confrontation end? There are no answers to any of these questions now. The only things observers can be confident about are that Russia will continue to exist no matter what happens, and that Moscow's relations with Germany and the EU in general will be important factors for Russia's development and maintaining a stable geopolitical equilibrium in the world of the mid-twenty-first century, during which the United States and China are poised to play the leading roles.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A thirteen-year-old girl with dual Russian-German citizenship was reported missing for thirty hours in Berlin in January 2016. After returning, she first claimed that she had been kidnapped and raped by three strangers of what was termed southern origins. The case was used by Russian officials and media outlets to accuse Germany of tolerating child abuse. Shortly thereafter, police proved the kidnapping story to be false.
- 2 In March 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel remarked that Germany and Russia should "pursue dialogue and promote the relations between our countries and peoples," and stated that the two countries "should endeavor to address bilateral and international challenges constructively and find sustainable solutions." Joseph Nasr, "Merkel Urges Dialogue With Russia in Congratulation Message to Putin," *Reuters*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-germany/merkel-urges-dialogue-with-russia-in-congratulation-message-to-putin-idUSKBN1GV2DO>.

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