



Can and Will Germany be a Viable Partner in a U.S. “Pushback” Strategy towards Russia?

By Hannes Adomeit

Introduction

Joe Biden, as presidential candidate, is on record as having stated that “the biggest threat to America right now in terms of breaking up our – our security and our alliances – is Russia.” As president, he asserted, “the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions are over.” The first months of his tenure in office have given some substance to such claims and confirmed that the new administration aims at containing and counteracting Russian malign behavior and to impose costs so as to affect the Kremlin’s risk calculus. Can Germany – and most likely will it – be a viable partner in such a U.S. strategy?

German Perceptions of Russia

On the face of it, German government perceptions of Putin’s Russia appear to be congruent with those of the Biden administration. For instance, on May 13, 2020, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) stated in the German parliament, “Russia has [developed] a strategy of hybrid warfare. We must not push this aside. This is warfare in the form of cyber disorientation and disinformation. This is a strategy, not some random outcome.”¹

Similarly, Heiko Maas (SPD), shortly after he had taken office as foreign minister, shared this diagnosis. He deplored Russia’s “increasingly hostile behavior” and pointed to the fact that “for the first time since the end of the Second World War, chemical weapons forbidden [under international law] have been used in the middle of Europe.” Cyber attacks seemed to have become an integral “part of Russian foreign policy.” In Ukraine, Russia had committed “aggression.” In such a serious conflict as Syria, Russia had “blocked the UN Security Council,” and he accused the Russian air force in that country of having committed “war crimes.”²

Michael Roth (SPD), secretary of state in the foreign ministry, has supported this assessment of his superior. In a much-noted comprehensive analysis, he argued that Russia was massively upgrading its conventional and nuclear weapons; using military force in its neighborhood; and

¹ Daniel Schreckenberg and Patrick Diekmann, “‘Ungeheuerlich’: Merkel macht Russland schwere Vorwürfe,” *T-Online*, May 13, 2020, https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_87871608/angela-merkel-ueber-orona-politik-keinerlei-erhoehungen-von-steuern-.html. CDU stands for Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democrats); SPD for Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democrats); FDP for Freie Demokratische Partei (the Liberals); AfD for Alternative für Deutschland (right-wing populists); and Die Linke is the (radical) Left.

² “‘Syrien ist nicht Auschwitz’: Spiegel-Gespräch,” *Der Spiegel* 16/2018 (italics mine).

backing up its foreign policy by military and political threats. In sum, Russia defined itself as a “countervailing power to the West” and had created a situation that “poses very specific threats to Germany.”³

Such views are echoed by some prominent deputies in parliament. Thus, Norbert Röttgen (CDU), chairman of the Bundestag’s foreign affairs committee, charged that Putin “ordered the largest troop deployment since the annexation of Crimea in 2014” and that, therefore, to call on *both* sides to de-escalate, was “sending the wrong signals to Russia. We have to make it clear to Putin that he has to pay a price for every aggressive step.” If Europe accepted Russia’s aggression and the use of violence as part of its foreign policy, “then Europe is once again a divided continent where violence reigns [in one part of it].”⁴

There is also an increasing realization by government officials and parliamentarians of the domestic roots of Putin’s foreign policy and linkages between the two dimensions. Michael Brand (CDU), chairman of the German parliament’s committee on human rights and humanitarian assistance, has pointed to this connection.

In Russia, the former KGB agent has installed old, corrupt comrades at almost every important switchboard of the state and the economy. What is even more dangerous than these internal developments, however, is Putin’s undeclared war against democracy and human rights in his own country and Putin’s digital war against Western democracies. What is at issue here, to use the appropriate military terminology, is “all-out” or “total war” against democracy.⁵

As will be noted below, such assessments have failed to elicit appropriate responses. In fact, a wide gap has existed between perception and policies, that is, between the acknowledgement of the Kremlin’s repressive domestic policies and aggressive foreign policy, on the one hand, and the correspondingly “tough” responses, on the other. That gap for a brief time appeared to have been closed by the poisoning of blogger and opposition leader Alexei Navalny on August 20, 2020. Thus, in an interview on September 6, 2020, Foreign Minister Maas said that if Russia were not to cooperate with the investigation in the poisoning, sanctions might well be necessary, but he hoped that “the Russians won’t force us to change our stance on Nord Stream 2.”⁶

³ Michael Roth, “Unser Verhältnis zu Russland: Die Chancen nach dem Tiefpunkt,” *Der Spiegel*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/eu-und-russland-die-chancen-nach-dem-tiefpunkt-a-8f81bab1-75b1-46b5-8e76-2d41107963ed>.

⁴ Norbert Röttgen, “Russland droht unverhohlen mit Krieg in Europa,” *Oldenburger Zeitung*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.oldenburger-onlinezeitung.de/nachrichten/roettgen-russland-droht-unverhohlen-mit-krieg-in-europa-63498.html>.

⁵ Deutscher Bundestag, 19. Wahlperiode, 208. Sitzung, S. 26243-26244, German Parliament, February 10, 2021, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19208.pdf>.

⁶ Angelika Hellemann and Thomas Block, “Außenminister Heiko Maas im BamS-Gespräch,” *Bild am Sonntag*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/2020/politik/heiko-maas-in-bams-beschaedigt-gerhard-schroeder-deutschlands-ansehen-72757924.view=conversionToLogin.bild.html>.

Similarly, Chancellor Merkel who—with one single exception—had called Nord Stream 2 a purely “commercial project” and insisted on separating the poisoning of Navalny and Nord Stream 2, also appeared to have moved away from her previous position: On September 7, when Merkel’s spokesman was asked whether she had changed her mind and whether she agreed with Maas to the effect that sanctions could include scrapping the project, he unambiguously replied, “Yes, the Chancellor also sees it that way.”⁷

Analysts worldwide accordingly rushed to the conclusion that the poisoning of Navalny now had become

a turning point in Russo-German relations. The details of the incident are still largely unclear, but what *is* clear is that it has prompted Berlin to make a crucial decision for German foreign policy: It will no longer follow a special policy toward Russia. Berlin will not try to understand the other side’s motivation or strive for mutual understanding and at least basic cooperation. Nor will it act as an interpreter of Russian political language, or take it upon itself to communicate the position of its allies to Moscow.⁸

Nothing, however, came of the idea of including Nord Stream 2 in a package of sanctions. The issue was shunted to a siding, that is, to the European Parliament and the European Council. This raises the question as to why there is such a strong aversion in Germany toward adopting a tough line vis-à-vis Russia. Domestic politics provides the answer.

Domestic Political Constraints

There are many factors accounting for this. These include serious internal splits between and within the governmental coalition parties of CDU/CSU and SPD; decidedly apologetic and Putin-friendly attitudes of the prime ministers of the *Länder* in the eastern part of Germany, no matter what their party affiliation;⁹ the determined refusal of the opposition parties, right-wing populist AfD and left-wing *Die Linke*, in parliament; business interests as represented in particular by the influential *Ost-Ausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft* (Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations); and strong pacifist, Russia-friendly currents in German public opinion.

⁷ Federal government press conference, Federal Government, September 7, 2020, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungspressekonferenz-vom-7-september-2020-1782978>. The single exception came in April 2018 during a visit by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko in Berlin. Merkel acknowledged that Nord Stream 2 was “of course of strategic importance to Ukraine”; it was “not just an economic project but, of course, political factors also [had] to be taken into account.” “Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Staatspräsidenten der Ukraine, Petro Poroschenko.” Federal Government, April 10, 2018, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenzen/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-staatspraesidenten-der-ukraine-petro-poroschenko-1008752>.

⁸ Dmitri Trenin, “Moscow’s New Rules,” Carnegie Moscow Center, November 11, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83208>.

⁹ That includes the party leaders of the CDU (Michael Kretschmer, Saxony), SPD (Manuela Schwesig, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) and *Die Linke* (Bodo Ramelow, Thuringia).

The aversion to adopt a “hard” line towards Russia starts from the top down in the governmental institutions. In what observers have considered to be a departure from the conventional practice that the head of state not to step into the ring of political controversies, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in an apparent departure from the standard government position about Nord Stream 2 being a purely “commercial” project, pointed not only to the political importance of the project but also to energy relations in general.

After the enduring deterioration in relations in recent years, energy relations are *almost the last bridge between Russia and Europe*. Both sides have to think about whether this bridge should be demolished completely and without a replacement. Breaking bridges, in my view, is not a sign of strength. How are we supposed to influence a situation that we perceive as unacceptable when we cut the last connections?¹⁰

Steinmeier’s reasoning is fully in conformity with the positions the SPD has taken on Russia. Although the chancellor is constitutionally empowered to determine the basic orientation (*Richtlinien*) of policy, as a member of the SPD, Foreign Minister Maas must look over his shoulder to ascertain and, if need be, conform to party positions. Thus, after Maas’s *Spiegel* interview about Russia acting in an “increasingly hostile” manner, the SPD leadership met to discuss foreign policy issues. It transpired that it was not at all happy with the foreign minister’s stance. The then-party secretary general, Lars Klingbeil, said that German-Russian relations were (as if Maas had ever denied this) both historically and at present “very important” and concluded from this, “We want dialogue with Russia, we are looking for dialogue with Russia, and we want the dialogue to be intensified.”¹¹

This is precisely the position Maas ultimately took as part of the justification for excluding Nord Stream 2 from Russia sanctions. By adopting new sanctions in the Navalny case and previously in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the EU and the West had amply demonstrated to the Kremlin that they were prepared to react decisively to malign Russian behavior. He rejected therefore the incessant demands by “smart alecks” (*Schlauberger*) to adopt ever more harsh measures and refused to “join in the clamor for confrontation (*Konfrontationsgeschrei*). We want dialogue and good neighborly relations with Russia.”¹²

Such formulations and formulas are congruent with the attitudes of what ironically or polemically in Germany are called the *Putin-* and *Russland-Versteher*, those who claim to really “understand” Putin and Russia. In the coalition government, apologetic, Putin-friendly attitudes are prevalent in the SPD. For example, denying any semblance of the geopolitical significance of

¹⁰ Interview with *Rheinische Post*, Federal German Presidency, February 6, 2021, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Interviews/2021/210206-Interview-Rheinische-Post.html> (italics mine).

¹¹ Hans Monath, “SPD-Vorstandssitzung Heiko Maas stellte sich der Kritik an seiner Russlandpolitik,” *Tagesspiegel*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/spd-vorstandssitzung-heiko-maas-stellte-sich-der-kritik-an-seiner-russlandpolitik/22617256.html>.

¹² Conversation with ARD’s First German TV Channel, April 25, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/video/video-854839.html>.

Nord Stream 2 and reiterating the party's position on the project, co-chairman of the party Walter-Borjans claimed that "To shoot oneself in the foot isn't any kind of solution," and apart from that, "the pipeline doesn't make us more dependent but more independent."¹³

"Understanding" for the Kremlin's policies can also be found in the SPD's coalition partner(s), the CDU and its Bavarian wing, the CSU. In this context, the views of CDU chairman, prime minister of North-Rhine Westphalia and the party's candidate for the chancellorship Armin Laschet, are of particular interest.

Laschet has dismissed and denigrated the outrage over the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 as "anti-Putin populism."¹⁴ When Britain asked for solidarity after the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury in 2018, he asked: "If you [want to] force almost all NATO countries to show solidarity, shouldn't you have reliable evidence?" He has toed the line of the Kremlin and German fellow travelers on other international issues. Thus, he has suggested that the West draw closer to the Syrian despot Assad; denied that the 2018 chemical weapons attack in Eastern Ghouta was committed by the Assad regime; falsely accused the USA of supporting the IS terrorist militia against the regime in Damascus; and in general failed to take issue with the Russian military intervention, including the systematic bombing of civilian areas. It is presumably because of such Kremlin-friendly positions that ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has several times spoken out in support of Laschet.

It was only after a protracted struggle with Markus Söder, the chairman of the CSU and prime minister of Bavaria, that the CDU officially nominated Laschet as the party's candidate for the chancellorship and that Söder withdrew from the contest. This move, however, cannot be taken as evidence that the advocate of a "tougher" position on Russia had lost out. In this respect, Söder's position does not appear to have been much different from that of Laschet. The CSU chief has advised restraint in reaction to the poisoning of Navalny, saying that in the relationship with Russia, one should refrain from "moral rigidity." He also has rejected the idea of scrapping or freezing Nord Stream 2.¹⁵ For an assessment of German government policies after the September 2021 elections, it is important to note that Söder has in no way departed from the traditional apologetic and Putin-friendly attitudes of the party. That includes his predecessors in the position of head of the CSU, Edmund Stoiber, Günther Beckstein, and Horst Seehofer.

¹³ "SPD-Chef Walter-Borjans verteidigt Pipeline Nord Stream 2 trotz Nawalny-Inhaftierung," RP Online, January 26, 2021, https://rp-online.de/politik/deutschland/spd-chef-walter-borjans-verteidigt-nord-stream-2-trotz-nawalny-inhaftierung_aid-55879975

¹⁴ For evidence on Laschet's foreign policy positions see Dmitri Kartsev, "Will This Contender for German Chancellor Be a Friend to Russia?" Carnegie Moscow Center, January 27, 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83742>; Roger Boyes, "Germany is falling out of love with America," *The Times* (London), January 26, 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/germany-is-falling-out-of-love-with-america-932w3zrlx>; and Richard Herzinger, "Die deutsche Nachgiebigkeit," *Perlentaucher*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.perlentaucher.de/intervention/armin-laschets-hoechst-problematische-aussenpolitische-aeusserungen.html>.

¹⁵ Jasper von Altenbockum, Timo Frasch and Berthold Kohler, "Söder zu Nord Stream 2: Nicht nur Russland verletzt Menschenrechte," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/markus-soeder-zu-nord-stream-2-nicht-nur-russland-verletzt-menschenrechte-16949338.html>.

Concerning other political parties represented in parliament, the AfD and *Die Linke* are vociferously critical of the government's Russia policies on a solidly accommodationist basis. Whereas the AfD's weakening of a common European stance towards the Kremlin can in part be considered to be one of the consequences of the party's platform calling for Germany's exit from the EU, the position of the *Die Linke* rules out any alignment with U.S. policies because of the party's traditional "anti-imperialist" stance, whereby "imperialism" does not pertain to Putin's Russia but to the United States.

As for the liberals, the FDP, it is as much divided as the parties in government. Christian Lindner, its leader, has vacillated in his views. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, he made a splash by calling for the acceptance of the status of Crimea as a "long-term provisional" entity (*dauerhaftes Provisorium*) that should not stand in the way of attempting improvement of relations with Russia. He also deviated from standard EU and German government positions by arguing that sanctions could at least in part be lifted prior to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreement on eastern Ukraine. In 2021, however, he added his voice to the chorus calling for a moratorium on the construction of Nord Stream 2.¹⁶

The respective positions between and within the political parties and their leaderships make it an almost foregone conclusion that the September 2021 electoral campaign and any conceivable constitution of a government coalition will be exceedingly difficult and that, on relations with Russia, no "hard" line is likely to emerge. This includes a coalition government that may be formed between the CDU/CSU and *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (the Greens).

In fact, according to several public opinion surveys in April, the Greens have for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic overtaken the Conservatives in voter popularity. Following the nomination of Laschet as candidate for the chancellorship for the CDU/CSU and Annalena Baerbock for the Greens, public opinion surveys showed that the CDU/CSU lost seven percentage points, tumbling from 28 to 21 percent in voter preference. In contrast, the Greens gained five percentage points and thereby moved to first place with 28 percent. The coalition partner of the Conservatives, the SPD, also lost two percentage points and came to 13 percent.¹⁷ Whereas it is improbable that these figures will be replicated at the polls in September and that Baerbock will be Germany's next chancellor, the Greens are likely to be a major constituent part of a coalition government, whatever its precise composition. This raises the question as to their foreign policy positions, notably on Russia.

The Greens, Security and Defense Policy Wild Card

In the past few years, the Greens have consistently and harshly criticized the Putin system and its domestic and foreign policies, and they have been staunch advocates of sanctions. These, as the party program for the parliamentary elections in September 2021 states, include stopping Nord

¹⁶ "Lindner fordert Moratorium für Nord Stream 2," *Die Zeit*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/news/2021-01/23/lindner-fordert-moratorium-fuer-nord-stream-2>.

¹⁷ The survey was conducted by the Forsa polling institute. The trend analysis relates to the period from April 13-20, 2021. The FDP won two and moved to 12 percent. *Die Linke* and the other smaller parties each gained one percentage point, the Left advancing to 7 percent. Only the result for the AfD remained unchanged at 11 percent. See RTL/ntv-Trendbarometer, Presseportal, April 20, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/gruene-nach-kanzlerkandidaten-wahl-in-forsa-umfrage-auf-platz-eins-17303893.html>.

Stream 2 “not only for considerations of climate and energy but above all—in view of the situation in Ukraine—*geostrategic*” reasons.¹⁸ That position is in conformity with the party’s traditional value-based (*wertegeleitete*) approach to foreign policy and it is linked to its assessment of Russia as a country that “has increasingly turned into an authoritarian state and is ever more vigorously undermining democracy and stability in the EU and in the common neighborhood.” But the party discerns grounds for optimism. It thinks that “the democracy movement in Russia is growing” and therefore promises: “We want to support the courageous civil society, which is standing up to the ever harsher repression by the Kremlin and fighting for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and we want to intensify the exchange with it.”¹⁹

The party program, however, contains not a word about Russia as a security threat, nor does it provide some idea about the scope of what in U.S. parlance is referred to as “malign” international behavior. It also fails to point to the Kremlin’s military modernization efforts, its use of force in Europe and in Syria, and its recurrent threat of the use of force. This makes one wonder about what could be meant by the demand for the elaboration of a “new strategic posture of NATO and a common threat assessment” of the alliance.

The party program calls for “fair burden sharing between member states” of NATO. Germany, like other European countries, is failing to live up to the commitment it assumed at the Wales NATO summit to spend a *minimum* of 2% of GDP on defense until 2024. The German defense budget has increased but the 2020 figure adds up to only 1.4 percent of GDP and the projected increases in the coming years are far from reaching the agreed-upon alliance target.²⁰ It is doubtful that the Greens will improve on that figure considering that the party program rejects the NATO 2 percent target as “arbitrary” and Baerbock even called this commitment “absurd.”²¹

Furthermore, apparently in response to discussions about the possible achievement of EU “strategic autonomy,” the program advocates the “establishment of an EU Security Union with strong parliamentary control and a common restrictive arms export policy.” No detail is provided as to how this is to be achieved and what the balance of financing might be between a “fair share” for NATO and the EU’s Security Union. It is more than likely that in any conflict between budgetary allocations for environmental purposes and defense, it will be the latter that will lose out.

¹⁸ “Deutschland. Alles ist Drin. Programmwurf zur Bundestagswahl 2021, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen,” https://cms.gruene.de/uploads/documents/2021_Wahlprogrammwurf.pdf (italics mine). The program is a draft, made public on March 19, 2021; the final version is scheduled to be adopted in June.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The increases are projected to rise from €44 billion in 2020 to €45.6 billion in 2021, adding €1.6 billion each following year to reach €50.4 billion in 2024. The calculations are based in part on Kathrin Bastian and Graeme Herd, “Renewed Transatlantic Responses towards China: Identifying Common Ground,” *Marshall Center Perspectives*, No. 18 (November 2020), https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/PDF_PUB_PER_18.pdf.

²¹ “Mützenich springt Baerbock im Streit um Verteidigungsausgaben bei,” *Der Spiegel*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/rolf-muetzenich-gibt-annalena-baerbock-in-zwei-prozent-frage-der-nato-recht-a-cf1bae76-5bea-48a8-8605-10c16d75340f>.

The party, however, does realize that “the use of military force may be necessary as *ultima ratio* in some situations,” of which it mentions two: “to prevent genocide and to create the possibility of a political solution to a conflict.”²² The emphasis is clearly on humanitarian interventionism and application of the UN’s principle of the “responsibility to protect.” Yet even this rationale is controversial. For instance, in November 2014, the party opposed weapons deliveries to the Kurds in support of their (effective) military operations against ISIS and the atrocities committed against civilians, one argument being that the weapons could fall into the wrong hands and another that “Arms only make wars even more bloody.”²³

It is evident, however, that for the Greens, arms exports for *non-humanitarian* purposes are out of the question, particularly if these were in any way related to strengthening the defense capabilities of actual or potential targets of Russian military intervention in Europe. That position is widely shared by the German government, parliament, and public opinion, and it certainly has a negative bearing on the prospects of Germany participating in a “pushback” against Russian malign behavior.

“There can be no military solution!”

Chancellor Merkel apparently anticipates that this will be the case. One day after Biden’s inauguration, she admitted

There will [...] be different opinions with the Biden administration. For example, I have always been against certain forms of arms deliveries [lethal weapons] to Ukraine but the United States under Barack Obama and especially Joe Biden disagreed. This, I believe, previously played a role [in our relationship].²⁴

The foreign ministry continues to be adamantly opposed to weapons deliveries. In April 2021, it again rejected a request by Kiev for the delivery of air defense systems, anti-ship missiles, and mine-sweeping equipment; earlier it had rejected the sale of corvettes no longer in use in the German Navy.²⁵

The refusal to strengthen the defense capabilities of Ukraine against the potential use of force by Russia conforms to the general pattern of the government to avoid “provocations” and apparent risks of escalation and confrontation. The most memorable of such attitudes has been provided

²² Ibid.

²³ Statement by a spokeswoman for the Green Party’s Working Group on Peace, “Grüne stimmen gegen Waffenlieferungen an Kurden,” *Die Zeit*, November 23, 2014, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-11/gruene-waffenlieferungen-kurden-cem-oezdemir>.

²⁴ “Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zur aktuellen Lage” [Merkel press conference], January 2, 2021 <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-zur-aktuellen-lage-1841788>.

²⁵ Konrad Schuller, “Kiew will deutsche Defensivwaffen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/russlands-truppenaufmarsch-ukraine-will-deutsche-defensivwaffen-17309012.html>. The defense ministry, in contrast, appears to favor such deliveries. In accordance with the constitution, the last word on the issue will be that of the chancellor.

by then-Foreign Minister Steinmeier in the context of the large-scale military exercises Anaconda carried out by Poland with other NATO partners, including Germany.

What we shouldn't do now ... is to further aggravate the situation with loud saber rattles and howls of war (*Kriegsgeheul*). Anyone who believes that symbolic tank parades on the eastern border of the alliance will create more security is wrong. We are well advised not to deliver free of charge any excuses for a new, old confrontation."²⁶

Such appeals to “non-provocative” behavior towards Russia have been repeated by Maas with his warnings against *Konfrontationsgeschrei* and his reasoning that “Ultimately, nobody can have an interest in permanent provocations turning at some point into serious disputes, especially in Europe.”²⁷

At the Munich Security Conference in 2014, Germany's President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged that Germany needed to engage more decisively and substantially in foreign and security policy and that this included the use of military instruments. The so-called Munich Consensus, however, essentially failed to be translated into meaningful measures and actions. There is little realization to be found in Germany of the rising relevance of military power in international affairs, be it the overt use of force or the threat of its use. One of the most widely-used reactions to conflicts, be they new or old, frozen or reactivated, continues to be the mantra of government officials and society, “There can be no military solution!” – a notion that flies in the face of both Clausewitz and current international reality.

The aversion to transforming Germany into an effective power for deterrence and military intervention was demonstrated yet again by the SPD reneging on commitments in the 2017 coalition agreement for the purchase of combat drones and, by implication, the drone-based Future Combat Air System (FCAS). Rolf Mützenich, the leader of the SPD parliamentary party, justified the postponement of the decision and thereby moving the issue into the campaign for the parliamentary elections this fall by saying that “we have to discuss really fundamental issues and ask ourselves whether the [employment of drones] is morally appropriate. That is a question that is also posed by the church.”²⁸

Forces and capabilities targets are as important for effective deterrence as political will. Germany has a lot of catching up to do in all of these spheres. As for the former, a plethora of reports have bemoaned the claims that “aircraft can't fly, U-boats can't submerge, tanks can't move, and rifles stall,” provoking the parliamentary watchdog of the Bundeswehr to charge that the defense ministry's procurement policies were nothing but “organized irresponsibility.”²⁹

²⁶ “Steinmeier kritisiert Nato-Manöver in Osteuropa,” *Bild Zeitung*, <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/dr-frank-walter-steinmeier/criticizes-nato-maneuver-and-demands-more-dialogue-with-russia-46360604.bild.html>.

²⁷ “Maas warnt vor Konfrontationsgeschrei gegen Russland,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/maas-warnt-vor-konfrontationsgeschrei-gegen-russland-17311918.html>.

²⁸ “Ausrüstung der Bundeswehr mit bewaffneten Drohnen” [Mützenich speech in the Bundestag], Mützenich website, January 31, 2021, <https://www.rolfmuetzenich.de/rede/ausrustung-bundeswehr-bewaffneten-drohnen>.

²⁹ “Kommando kaputt: Was bei der Bundeswehr schiefläuft” [Documentary by the Second Channel of German TV], ZDF, February 2, 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/zdfzoom/zdfzoom-kommando-kaputt-100.html>.

Conclusion

The essence of Biden's Russia policies will most likely not lie in a vigorous and determined comprehensive containment strategy reminiscent of the Cold War but in a search for some improvement and selective cooperation, only "pushing back" in cases where Russia yet again is contemplating using force as in Georgia in 2008, eastern Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015. The U.S. president clearly stated this in his remarks at the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference.

We cannot and must not return to the reflexive opposition and rigid blocs of the Cold War. Competition must not lock out cooperation on issues that affect us all. We must stand up for the democratic values that make it possible for us to accomplish any of this, pushing back against those who would monopolize and normalize repression. This is also how we're going to be able to meet the threat from Russia. The Kremlin attacks our democracies and weaponizes corruption [and] seeks to weaken European – the European project and our NATO Alliance. He wants to undermine the transatlantic unity and our resolve, because it's so much easier for the Kremlin to bully and threaten individual states than it is to negotiate with a strong and closely united transatlantic community. That's why – that's why standing up for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine remains a vital concern for Europe and the United States.³⁰

The German government and the major part of parliament and the public share this concern. The concern, however, does not translate into meaningful, coordinated action in conjunction with the United States. Three major examples can be provided for this. To be mentioned are, first, the government's refusal, shared in parliament and by the public, to *provide Ukraine with defensive weapons* to deter the Kremlin from military aggression and if that were to fail to defend itself; second, the failure to terminate *Nord Stream 2* as part of the realization that this project is far from being purely "commercial" but has geopolitical implications, including the economic and political weakening of Ukraine as part of Moscow's overall project to destabilize the country and deny to it a European path of development; and third, to alleviate some of the United States defense burden in Europe by a significant *military modernization effort* and meeting its obligation to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defense.

The formulation and execution of a coordinated strategy with the United States would require major changes in the German government's stance. It would have to communicate to the public that Russia has turned from being a "partner," let alone a "strategic partner," to a *strategischer Gegner*, that is, to a strategic adversary or opponent – to what Mitt Romney called the "number

³⁰ "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference," The White House, February 19, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

one geopolitical foe” and Biden the “biggest threat” to the United States’ security, and acknowledge that it is also the biggest threat to European security.³¹ It is more than doubtful that the current government coalition parties during the electoral campaign or their successors after the fall elections will provide such clarity.

About the Author

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³¹ For more on the requirement that the German government embark on such a conceptual change and communicate it to the public, see this author’s “Russland und der Westen: Von ‘Strategischer Partnerschaft’ zur strategischen Gegnerschaft,” *Sirius – Zeitschrift für strategische Analysen* 5, No. 2 (2021): 107–124.