



THE WEST'S RESPONSE TO THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

A TRANSATLANTIC SUCCESS STORY

Ulrich Speck

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On the cover: Normandy format talks in Paris (October 2015).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transatlantic cooperation in dealing with Russian aggression in Ukraine has been a surprising success story. European countries and the United States, together with partners such as Canada and Japan, have responded to that challenge with a high degree of unity and consistency. Through that process, the idea of the West as an international actor, as the central pillar of the liberal world order, has experienced a renaissance.

By using coercive means such as sanctions coupled with diplomacy, the West has helped Ukraine to resist Russian aggression. At the same time it has sent a strong message to Moscow and other capitals that the West continues to support core international rules such as territorial integrity and

sovereignty, and is ready to invest a considerable amount of energy in holding up these norms. German Chancellor Angela Merkel played a central role in building this coalition and keeping it together. Berlin and Washington, alongside Paris and Brussels, were the key Western capitals during the Ukraine conflict.

With the joint response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, Europe and the United States have set a precedent for a successful transatlantic cooperation on international conflicts. Whether this success story can become the starting point for a true renaissance of the West depends on the willingness of the central actors to move from crisis management to long-term strategic planning.

1

A TRANSATLANTIC SUCCESS STORY

Transatlantic cooperation in dealing with Russian aggression in Ukraine has been a success story. European countries and the United States, together with other partners such as Canada and Japan, developed a joint, strong, and meaningful response to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. And despite a lot of skepticism, they have managed to hold the line.

This joint response went far beyond a lowest-common-denominator approach; it was ambitious. Its three main pillars were defined by German Chancellor Angela Merkel very early in the crisis, in her speech in March 13, 2014, shortly before the referendum in Crimea took place: 1) attempts to resolve the conflict with Russia diplomatically; 2) sanctions in order to change Russian behavior; 3) support for Ukraine to help it to resist to the assault.¹

The response is a success story because the transatlantic community has managed to stick together, to coordinate and cooperate closely, on all levels, and to use a wide range of tools for a joint purpose.

That such a high degree of meaningful unity has been achieved and maintained is a powerful sign that the "West"² remains a much more coherent grouping of states than many have thought. More than two decades after the end of Cold War, which produced the West as a collective actor, bonds between Europe and the United States apparently remain strong beyond the core connection of the NATO security alliance. Transatlantic unity may have been especially surprising to the Kremlin,

¹ A. Merkel, "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel" [Government Statement by Federal Chancellor Merkel], Bundesregierung, March 14, 2014, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Regierungserklaerung/2014/2014-03-13-bt-merkel.html>.

² By the "West," the author means the European Union and the United States, who remain the core of the configuration of liberal democracies who support the liberal international order, together with Canada, Japan, and other partners.

which may have calculated that Moscow had enough leverage in Europe to prevent such unity from emerging.

What produced this unity was Russia's assault on core principles of the European peace order and on basic rules of civilized international behavior. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its only thinly veiled, entirely unprovoked military attack on eastern Ukraine shocked many in the West who thought that Europe had overcome this kind of behavior. It also reminded many observers of the period in the 1930s when the Versailles order in Europe unraveled. It was continued Russian aggression and Russian President Vladimir Putin's unwillingness for many months to engage in meaningful diplomacy that produced the common Western front.

Western unity was not easy to achieve and often remains difficult to maintain. A first success was to build that common front and thereby send a strong signal to the Kremlin. This signal was underlined by the fact that Western governments were ready to pay a cost for sending this message to Moscow, in terms of disruption of economic flows and interruption of engagement with Russia.

Western sanctions have also hurt the Russian economy, making Russia pay a tangible price for its military aggression against Ukraine. While the exact costs are hard to pin down, sanctions appear to have contributed to the current crisis of the Russian economy, as Putin himself has admitted ("Concerning our possibilities on the international financial markets, the sanctions are severely harming Russia," Putin told Germany's *Bild* tabloid).³

The extent to which Western diplomacy and sanctions have changed Russian behavior in

³ N. Blome, K. Diekmann, and D. Biskup, "Putin: The Interview: For me it is not borders that matters," *Bild*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russian-president-vladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html>.

Continued Russian aggression and Russian President Vladimir Putin's unwillingness for many months to engage in meaningful diplomacy ... produced the common Western front.

Moscow's diplomacy over the last two years has been completely based on the fiction that it had not attacked Ukraine. Without that fiction, Russia would have lost more international standing and would have more likely become an outcast.

Ukraine remains hard to determine. Given the Kremlin's opaque decision-making and constant use of disinformation, one can only speculate. What can be said is that for many months, Western leaders tried to prevent Russia from going deeper into Ukraine in pursuit of the *Novorossiya*⁴ project, using diplomacy and sanctions.

The main reason for the Russian failure to gain more territory in Donbas appears to have been the lack of enthusiasm and support of the local population, combined with the growing ability of regular and irregular Ukrainian troops to push back. This resistance forced Russia at a certain point in August 2014 to bring regular Russian troops into Ukraine (still covertly), as local and irregular insurgent forces risked defeat.

But there are indicators that Western resolve played an important role as well. Russia never moved from a military involvement in Donbas that was deniable — though with shrinking plausibility — to open intervention. Even at the Minsk negotiations, Moscow was careful to make sure that it would not be defined as a party involved in the conflict; instead it pretended to be a concerned neighbor.

One reason for that behavior may have been fear of a domestic backlash if Russia moved from hidden and hybrid warfare to open warfare, as indicated by the Kremlin's attempt to keep the number of Russian troops killed secret. But the massive Western response seemingly also played a role. Moving from the role of a concerned neighbor to admitting being a party to a war would have burnt bridges with the West. Moscow's diplomacy over the last two years has been completely based

on the fiction that it had not attacked Ukraine. Without that fiction, Russia would have lost more international standing and would have more likely become an outcast. It would have lost its narrative, and therefore the ability to win support or at least acceptance at home and abroad.

Western unity and sanctions have been a warning shot that Russia is putting at risk its relations with Europe and North America. While the Kremlin tries to isolate Russia and its neighborhood from the political influence of the West, Moscow clearly is interested in maintaining good relations with Western leaders. Apparently Putin very much cares about meetings with other leaders, especially with the U.S. president. Being seen as a global leader seems to be an important part of his image.

And unlike the Soviet Union, Russia depends economically on close relations with the West. Diminished economic interactions with the West are highly risky for Russia, especially in conjunction with falling income from oil and gas. The economic and financial sanctions were a clear warning shot from Western capitals to Moscow, and Russia had to face potential further escalation on the side of the West. The “nuclear option” of cutting Russia off from the SWIFT international financial payment system was at least discussed in the West at the height of the conflict.

The West used its economic leverage over Russia. By demonstrating meaningful unity, condemning Russian action, and by making it pay a prize in terms of sanctions and support for Ukraine, the victim of the Russian attack, the West has signaled the Kremlin that it had to make a choice: either to escalate massively in Ukraine, getting rid of all pretenses, or find some accommodation with the West and with Ukraine itself.

Ultimately, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to step back from full confrontation with

⁴*Novorossiya* (New Russia), an 18th and 19th century name for the southeastern regions of contemporary Ukraine, described a Russian nationalist project to form a larger breakaway entity from Ukraine. See M. Menkiszak, “Russia's Long War on Ukraine,” Transatlantic Academy, February 2016, http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Menkiszak_RussiasLongWar_Feb16_web.pdf, p. 7-8.

Ukraine and the West and agreed, in February 2015, to a negotiated deal, the so-called Minsk II agreement. This happened after a months-long period of wrestling in which both sides tested the other by escalating and deescalating: the West with diplomatic and economic pressure and Russia by using military means.⁵

Minsk II managed to move the conflict largely — but not entirely — from the military playing field to the diplomatic playing field; since then, the main struggle has been about what the agreement means. Russia wants to use it as a tool to gain decisive influence over Ukraine by making a Moscow-controlled Donbas its main lever over internal Ukrainian affairs, while Ukraine and its Western backers insist that the main point of Minsk is to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity, its control over its borders.

Since then, Russia has emphasized Ukraine's obligation to deliver on the political elements of Minsk, which include constitutional reform in Ukraine in the shape of an agreement between Kyiv and the separatists in Donbas. Ukraine and the West, in contrast, put the emphasis on Russia's obligations to stop fighting, to remove heavy weapons, and to allow OSCE observers full access.

While the main battle has shifted to the field of diplomacy, Russia continues to use military means in Donbas. The goal appears to be to intimidate Ukraine's Western supporters and to remind everybody that Russia can revert to military action if its goals are not being fulfilled by peaceful means.

The Minsk II agreement, negotiated by Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France, has been criticized for being too conciliatory toward Russia. But critics have failed to present an alternative way forward. Given the limitations — the West's early and

⁵ This period included the failed Minsk Protocol of September 2014; further references in this paper to Minsk refer to Minsk II.

unanimous decision not to fight Russia in Ukraine — Minsk at least helped decrease the violence. Ukraine got some breathing space.

The unspoken assumption on both sides — Russia and the West — has been that the party that would get the upper hand in defining what Minsk means — either restoration of Ukraine's borders and therefore its sovereignty, or Russian control of Ukraine via Donbas — would win the conflict. Russia probably bet on the expectation that Ukraine would become weaker soon, and that "Ukraine fatigue" would soon prevail in the West, as well as concern over conflict with a more dangerous, unpredictable Russia. A weak, unreformed, and isolated Ukraine would naturally fall back in Russia's sphere of control.

To date, however, the West has been steadfast in its support for Ukraine, by helping it to reform, providing it with financial aid, and by renewing sanctions against Russia linked to Moscow's fulfillment of the Minsk agreement. Merkel regularly repeats that sanctions will stay "until Russia and its proxies have fully fulfilled the Minsk agreement and have left the Donbas, in other words, have removed the troops from there, have restored the border and removed the weapons."⁶

This paper looks at some of the constitutive elements of this transatlantic success story. Who has led, and which countries were most engaged? What were the main elements of the West's response to Russian aggression? What has motivated transatlantic unity? And could this cooperation represent a template for future transatlantic cooperation on other issues?

⁶ Bundesregierung, "Pressestatements von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Staatspräsidenten der Ukraine, Petro Poroschenko, am 1. Februar 2016" [Press Statements from Chancellor Merkel and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, February 1, 2016], February 1, 2016, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2016/02/2016-02-01-pressestatement-poroschenko.html>.

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2 LEADERSHIP IN THE CONFLICT

Transatlantic cooperation in the Ukraine conflict has mainly been German-U.S. cooperation, centered around the German chancellery and the White House.

Germany Steps Up

The Ukraine conflict is a major international crisis with global repercussions. Therefore, it not surprising that the United States has played a key role as the only global power and with a strong interest in stability in Europe and a constructive relationship with Russia. What has surprised observers, however, is that Germany decided to play a leadership role. Never before in recent decades has Germany led in an international crisis. While it was leading on intra-EU affairs, usually together with France, Germany was rather cautious not to become entangled in conflicts. That became visible once more when Germany refused to support its Western partners in the decision to intervene in Libya in 2011.

And yet, transatlantic cooperation in the Ukraine conflict has mainly been German-U.S. cooperation, centered around the German chancellery and the White House. On many occasions, it was Merkel who took the lead on behalf of Europe and even the West: defining the problem, proposing a solution, and pushing for support for this solution among allies.

Victoria Nuland, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, who has been closely involved in managing the Ukraine conflict, has acknowledged that role: “Throughout this crisis, no country in Europe has led more strongly than Germany — politically, economically, or morally. And the United States has had no stronger partner in supporting Ukraine, in imposing costs on Russia, but also in keeping the door open for diplomatic de-escalation.”⁷

The central role of the German chancellor becomes evident if one looks at the conversations that have

taken place between Western leaders and Putin between February 2014 and November 2015. Merkel talked with Putin far more often than any other Western leader: Merkel 65 times (35 of those conversations one-on-one), French President François Hollande 38 times (13 one-on-one), U.S. President Barack Obama 15 times (11 one-on-one), and British Prime Minister David Cameron 14 times (8 one-on-one).⁸

There are a number of reasons why Berlin has taken on that central role. First, Germany has grown into a leadership position in Europe in recent years, because of its size, the strength of its economy, its geographical position in the center of EU-Europe, and its determination to work together with EU partners on every major issue, to find European solutions and to keep the EU together. In addition, since Merkel now into her 11th year as German chancellor, she is the most experienced leader among her European peers.

Secondly, the relationship with Russia is of key importance for Germany. Russia is an important market and a supplier of energy. But much more importantly than that, it is a source of constant geopolitical concern to Germans. As a nuclear power with a relatively unpredictable leadership, questionable internal stability, and a history of hostility toward the West, Russia could again become a threat to Germany.

Germans remain thankful to Russia for having put no obstacles in place to German unification in 1990 and for having removed Russian troops from German soil in the years after unification. That is why the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, remains immensely popular in Germany. From the end of the Cold War on, Germany tried to build close relations with Russia in order to overcome the

⁷ V. Nuland, “State’s Nuland at Berlin Aspen Institute on U.S. and Germany,” Embassy of the United States, Kyiv, Ukraine, October 9, 2014, <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/nuland-germany-10092014.html>.

⁸ Sources: www.bundeskanzlerin.de, <http://kremlin.ru/>, www.whitehouse.gov.

history of hostility and to open a new chapter of friendship.

Another reason for the priority of Russia in German foreign policy is that Russia is a major concern for Germany's key partners in Central Europe, first of all Poland. In the last few years, Poland has become a major partner for Germany, not only economically (trade with Poland is higher in volume than with Russia), but also politically. Warsaw and Berlin have coordinated their policies closely. Poland, bordering on Russian territory (the Kaliningrad exclave) is much more hawkish on Russia than Germany. Finding common ground with Warsaw, inside and outside the EU, means that Berlin has to deal with the perception of Russia as a threat.

In Berlin's view, it is of major importance to make sure that Europe and Russia are not falling back into a Cold War constellation, with dividing lines in Europe, massive troop deployments, and the permanent threat of war (by design or by accident), including nuclear Armageddon. A constructive, largely cooperative relationship with Russia is one of the major geopolitical gains that Germany feels it has achieved since the end of Cold War.

This relationship came under massive stress with the Ukraine conflict, and it collapsed in the months after the annexation of Crimea. While there are still forces in Germany who think the relationship can be restored to the status quo before the Ukraine crisis, it is much more likely that Germany will have get used to a more tense and antagonistic relationship with Russia.

When the Russian conflict with Ukraine started, with the departure of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich into Russian exile on February 22, 2014, alarm bells were ringing in Berlin. For the German government, there was no question that this was Germany's moment — that Berlin was in

charge, with the national interest at stake. It was clear that either Germany would play a leadership role or nobody else would, because nobody else was in a position to do so. The United States was too far away, Britain and France were closer but not as close as Germany and also had other priorities, and Brussels was much too powerless.

But while Germany felt it had to take the lead, it was well aware that its power to do so depended entirely on its ability to bring EU partners in by forging a joint EU and Western approach to the Ukraine conflict. All three elements of the response — sanctions, diplomacy, and support for Ukraine — could not work if Berlin was not able to put together the broadest possible alliance. Germany needed the backing of the EU and the United States in order to have a chance to influence Russian behavior and to control the damage.

Building EU Consensus

While building and keeping a national consensus in Germany, the chancellor at the same time worked closely with other Western capitals in order to build and maintain coalitions. Key for success on the level of the EU has been German-French cooperation. Bringing Hollande on board was crucial to win the support of other EU member states as well, especially southern member states such as Italy and Spain, which have been skeptical of a more hawkish policy toward Russia.

Together Germany and France have kept a critical mass within the EU in favor of the unified policy. While Paris from time to time appeared reluctant, especially with regard to tougher sanctions, Hollande nevertheless became Merkel's key partner in Europe, joining her on many calls and meetings with Putin. Without the close cooperation between Paris and Berlin, it would have been impossible to keep the EU on track and to shape a response that gained the support of all 28 EU member states.

Finding common ground with Warsaw, inside and outside the EU, means that Berlin has to deal with the perception of Russia as a threat.

While Merkel's position has been rather "hawkish" in the German political context, it was "dovish" in the U.S. context and therefore fit into the broader set-up of Obama's foreign policy, an effort to reduce and not to increase U.S. military engagement abroad.

The EU institutions in Brussels were clearly not in the lead: neither the president of the Commission, nor the president of the European Council, nor the high representative for foreign and security policy played a leading role; they were not involved in most of the key talks with Russia or with the United States. Nevertheless, the institutions in Brussels were important as facilitators in the process of building consensus, and they provided important expertise (especially on sanctions) and helped with the execution of joint decisions.

Transatlantic Cooperation

German-French cooperation was one indispensable element of the joint Western response; the second was German-U.S. cooperation. Talks between the German chancellor and the U.S. president were the most important transatlantic communication channel. Between February 2014 and November 2015, Merkel talked to Obama 26 times (22 times one-on-one), while Hollande talked to him 19 times (12 times one-on-one) and Cameron 16 times (12 times one-on-one).⁹

For the Obama administration, having Germany take the lead, together with its European partners, was a welcome development, for a number of reasons.

First, Obama and Merkel saw the conflict in similar terms: a violation of fundamental international norms against which the international community must push back in order to restore those norms.¹⁰ Both wanted to use non-military means to try to stop Russia from further advancing in Ukraine and to restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

⁹ Sources: www.bundeskanzlerin.de, www.whitehouse.gov.

¹⁰ See for example the joint press conference on February 9, 2015, White House, "Remarks by President Obama and Chancellor Merkel in Joint Press Conference," February 9, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/09/remarks-president-obama-and-chancellor-merkel-joint-press-conference>.

Second, while Merkel's position has been rather "hawkish" in the German political context, it was "dovish" in the U.S. context and therefore fit into the broader set-up of Obama's foreign policy, an effort to reduce and not to increase U.S. military engagement abroad.¹¹ From the beginning, Obama and Merkel ruled out the use of military power — both wanted to prevent the conflict from becoming a proxy war, and were concerned about the risk of matters escalating and spinning out of control.

Third, Merkel had become the key leader in Europe, at least in the EU, as had become obvious during the euro crisis. She was the one European leader with the power and capability to build the necessary coalitions inside the bloc. Working with the German chancellor was therefore the most promising approach to forging transatlantic unity on Russia and Ukraine.

As a consequence, Germany and the United States became "partners in leadership" in the Ukraine conflict — a concept that U.S. President George H.W. Bush had presented in a speech in Mainz, Germany, shortly before the Berlin Wall fell.¹²

¹¹ See J. Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹² G.H.W. Bush, "A Europe Whole and Free," U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany, May 31, 1989, <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>.

3 ELEMENTS OF THE WESTERN RESPONSE

The Western response to the Ukraine conflict has been built on four main pillars: 1) the very early decision not to defend Ukraine militarily; 2) coercive diplomacy, with a broad range of sanctions against Russia; 3) diplomatic efforts to convince Russia to change course; and 4) support for Ukraine in order to increase its resilience when under Russian attack. All four elements have been supported by all 28 EU governments and by the U.S. government, as well as by other Western partners, including Canada, Japan, Australia, Norway, and Switzerland.

Ruling Out the Military Option

From the early stages of the conflict on, no Western government called for a military intervention in order to stop to Russian aggression in Crimea or eastern Ukraine. It was undisputed that NATO would not fight in Ukraine, as the country is not a member of the alliance and therefore not protected by NATO security guarantees. Moreover, throughout the conflict, the main Western players were determined to make sure that the conflict would not become a proxy war between Russia and the West.

While Russia was supporting the so-called rebels with arms and Russian nationals as fighters, and increasingly sending its own armed forces into the fight (without admitting it), the Ukrainian military did not receive similar support from the West. For the main Western players, the priority was to end the fighting, even at the price of temporary territorial losses for Ukraine.

In line with this policy of no direct military intervention, the West did very little to help Ukraine militarily.¹³ Western countries refused to send heavy

¹³ Besides some non-lethal military equipment and training by the United States and United Kingdom; see E. Slotkin, "Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Elissa Slotkin at a Media Availability following the U.S. - Ukraine Bilateral Defense Policy Consultations," Embassy of the United States, Kyiv, Ukraine, November 5, 2015, <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/slotkin-11052015.html>.

weapons to Ukraine. The widespread impression that Germany and the United States disagreed over the delivery of defensive lethal weapons is mistaken, as the U.S. president never endorsed such a step. Both Merkel and Obama were in agreement that the risk was too high. Arming the Ukrainians with lethal weapons was a contentious debate in the United States, however, with some members of Congress and government officials in favor of the move and critical of Obama's Ukraine policy.¹⁴

For Merkel, lethal defensive support to Ukraine would not stop Russia but rather force it to escalate: from "hybrid" warfare with (more or less plausible) deniability to open warfare, invading Ukraine openly with the full weight of the Russian army.¹⁵ This view was also shared by Obama, who "knocked down the idea" of sending lethal weapons to Ukraine, "worrying that Putin would simply further escalate in response."¹⁶

From Light to Heavy Sanctions

Since the military option was off the table from the beginning, Western governments chose to use sanctions as an alternative hard power tool.

¹⁴ For an overview of the U.S. debate on arming Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons, see I. Medynski, "U.S. Lethal Weapons for Ukraine: Mechanisms and Consequences," Institute of World Policy, January 2016, http://iwp.org.ua/img/US_weapons_eng.pdf. A key moment in the debate was a February 2015 report by eight former senior U.S. diplomatic and military officials calling for the United States and NATO to provide Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons. I. Daalder, et. al., "Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression: What the United States and NATO Must Do," Atlantic Council of the United States / Brookings Institution / Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2015/02/ukraine-independence-russian-aggression>.

¹⁵ C. Johnston, "Ukraine crisis will not be solved by military means, says Angela Merkel," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/07/ukraine-crisis-will-not-be-solved-by-military-means-says-angela-merkel>.

¹⁶ M. Crowley, "Rift in Obama administration over Putin," *Politico*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/10/syria-obama-putin-russia-discord-214677>.

For the main Western players, the priority was to end the fighting, even at the price of temporary territorial losses for Ukraine.

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From the moment it became clear that Russia had indeed sent unmarked troops to Crimea, in late February 2014, the EU and the United States both started to prepare sanctions. At an extraordinary meeting on March 3, EU foreign ministers condemned “the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces.”¹⁷ On March 6, the U.S. president signed an executive order that authorized sanctions “to impose a cost on Russia.”¹⁸ Obama noted the United States “took these steps in close coordination with our European allies.”

On the same day, EU leaders met in Brussels and agreed to start to preparing three levels of sanctions, with economic sanctions as the third, strongest step. The intention was to use the threat of economic sanctions as an instrument to prevent Russia from destabilizing Ukraine’s east.¹⁹

When Russia, apparently unimpressed, went ahead with the Crimea referendum on March 16, the United States and the EU on the next day both responded with a sanctions consisting of travel bans and asset freezes on key individuals. When Moscow annexed Crimea two days later, Obama announced that Washington would prepare far-ranging economic sanctions against Russia. On the same day, EU leaders meeting in Brussels agreed on further personal sanctions and threatened Russia with economic sanctions as well; the summit tasked the European Commission to quickly draft proposals. Merkel said that the adopted sanctions were “close” to the U.S. list and indicated that

¹⁷ Council of the European Union, “Council conclusions on Ukraine, FOREIGN AFFAIRS Council meeting,” March 3, 2014, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/press-data/EN/foraff/141291.pdf.

¹⁸ B. Obama, “Statement by the President on Ukraine,” White House, March 6, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/06/statement-president-ukraine>.

¹⁹ A. Rinke, “Wie Putin Berlin verlor” [How Putin lost Berlin], *Internationale Politik*, May/June 2014, p. 41f.

economic sanctions would come if Russia invaded eastern or southern Ukraine.²⁰

As Russia’s actions to destabilize eastern Ukraine went on despite the warnings, on April 26 the G7 called for more sanctions.²¹ Two days later, both the EU and the United States enlarged their lists of personal sanctions. On May 2, Obama and Merkel met to discuss sanctions. In his statement, Obama thanked “Merkel’s leadership on this front.” U.S. and EU experts, he said, “at the highest level, and not just bilaterally, but multilaterally through the European Commission and our diplomatic teams, have been working through all the possibilities.” Merkel said that “should further destabilization happen, we will move to a third stage of sanctions.”²²

As fear over open war in eastern Ukraine grew, on July 16 the United States decided to initiate economic sanctions, targeting Russia’s financial, energy, and military technology sectors. The same day, an extraordinary meeting of EU leaders agreed on sanctions that were still below economic sanctions (“third stage”), described as “stage 2.9” sanctions. A number of countries, among them France, Italy, Austria, Slovakia, and Greece were not ready to move to the third stage, despite pressure

²⁰ V. Pop, “EU leaders agree new Russia sanctions,” *EUobserver*, March 21, 2014, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/123559>.

²¹ The West suspended Russia from the G8 on March 24, 2014 over its “illegal attempt to annex Crimea in contravention of international law and specific international obligations.” The group had been scheduled to hold its next summit in Sochi in June 2014; the leaders of the G7 instead met in Brussels. J. Acosta, “U.S., other powers kick Russia out of G8,” CNN, March 24, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/24/politics/obama-europe-trip/>.

²² B. Obama and A. Merkel, “Remarks by President Obama and German Chancellor Merkel in Joint Press Conference,” White House, May 2, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/02/remarks-president-obama-and-german-chancellor-merkel-joint-press-confere>.

from Washington to move in tandem with the United States in order to keep Western unity.²³

After the downing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, and amidst growing fear that Russia may be planning an outright, open invasion of eastern Ukraine, the United States and key European leaders agreed to jointly escalate sanctions to a new level. The leaders of the United States, Germany, France, the U.K., and Italy agreed in a July 28 video-conference on a package that targeted Russia's financial, energy, and military sectors (officially adopted by the EU the day after). The new measures "brought Europe to near-parity with the United States in imposing 'Level 3' sanctions affecting broad sectors of the Russian economy."²⁴ According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Washington had "very much encouraged the Europeans" to agree to this escalation; the EU sanctions "follow a period of many weeks of close consultations between the United States, the European Union, a number of member states, and other governments."²⁵

In September 2014, the economic sanctions were refined and reinforced on both the U.S. and EU sides in response to another round of Russian military escalation in eastern Ukraine. Since then, sanctions in the EU have been prolonged every six months by a decision of all 28 EU governments in the Council of the European Union.

²³ D. Marchak and P. Donahue, "EU Readies Russia Sanctions Amid U.S. Pressure on Ukraine," Bloomberg Business, July 16, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-15/eu-leaders-weigh-sanctions-against-russia-over-ukraine>.

²⁴ G. Witte and K. DeYoung, "Obama announces expanded sanctions against Russia as E.U. aligns," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-agrees-to-sweeping-new-sanctions-against-russia/2014/07/29/97db98e2-e28d-43f8-a2b6-8816f9ce49ec_story.html.

²⁵ Embassy of United States, Kyiv, Ukraine, "Background Conference Call by Senior Administration Officials on Ukraine," July 29, 2014, <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/administration-officials-07292014.html>.

Overall, the U.S. side was more ready to use sanctions as a tool against Russia than the EU, and it was the United States that took the decisive step toward economic sanctions. In the EU, it was much more difficult to find agreement among the 28 member states. Especially with regard to economic sanctions, each country had its specific concerns and interests.

On the EU side, Merkel's Germany was a leading proponent of sanctions, supported by the U.K. and by Scandinavian countries. Poland and the Baltic countries were the most hawkish. More reluctant were western and southern European countries. But in the face of intense Russian aggression against Ukraine, under the shock of the downing of the civilian airliner MH17, and with growing peer-pressure in the EU as well as pressure from the United States, sanctions skeptics finally gave up their resistance. Even these more skeptical member states have stuck with the sanctions approach.

Sanctions against Russia had three major tasks. First, they were an important signal to everybody that the West was united in its rejection of Russian aggression. Second, they demonstrated the depth of this rejection, as Western countries were ready to pay a price: economic disruption and a more confrontational relationship with Russia. Third, sanctions imposed a serious economic cost on Russia for its actions.

Tireless Diplomatic Efforts

The third element of the West's response to Russian aggression against Ukraine was diplomacy. Diplomacy had two purposes — one external, the other internal. Diplomacy has been an instrument intended to convince the Russian leadership to change course. But at the same time, it has been a pre-condition to build and keep Western unity: the permanent efforts to reach out to the Kremlin, led by Merkel and Hollande, made it much easier to

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convince skeptics in Europe that the aim was not to punish or isolate Russia, but to persuade Moscow to change course and overcome the conflict.

During the entire conflict, Western leaders and foreign ministers have been in constant contact with the Russian side. In June 2014 — one of the most tense months — Merkel and Putin talked no fewer than 10 times (four times one-on-one, six times with Hollande included).

A series of diplomatic initiatives were undertaken, on different levels. Already on February 14, 2014, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had met Putin in Sochi and proposed an OSCE mission for Ukraine (agreed on March 21). On February 21, the German, French, and Polish foreign ministers went to Kyiv to try to mediate between President Yanukovich and the Maidan movement.

In early March, Germany and France proposed an international contact group consisting of Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and the EU.²⁶ On April 17, this group met in Geneva, at the level of foreign ministers. The push for this meeting came from the U.S. side.²⁷ In these negotiations, Russia surprisingly agreed to measures such as occupied buildings being vacated under the auspices of OSCE envoys, but the deal had no impact on the situation on the ground.²⁸

On June 6, 2014, the leaders of Germany, France, and Russia and the president-elect of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, met in France on the sidelines of an event celebrating the 70th anniversary of Operation Overlord. The “Normandy format” was born: since

then, these four countries have negotiated many times at the level of foreign ministers or heads of government. But while the format has been seen as worth keeping, the result of the first meeting was disappointing, as it did not prevent Russia from escalating its actions in the coming months.

Equally disappointing was the first Minsk agreement, which was signed after a new offensive of the Donbas rebels with direct involvement of Russian troops. On September 5, 2014, Ukrainian and Russian negotiators and the rebels plus the OSCE — the “contact group” — signed a ceasefire in Minsk, at the initiative of the Russian president, but it failed to end the fighting.²⁹

After another round of “contact group” format talks had collapsed on January 31, 2015, Merkel and Hollande personally took the initiative and met with Putin and Poroshenko in Minsk to hammer out an agreement. After 16 hours of talks, the so-called Minsk II agreement was signed on February 12, including a ceasefire and a broader plan to end the conflict.³⁰ EU leaders endorsed the agreement the same day.³¹

The Minsk II agreement became the central blueprint in the West’s diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Both Ukraine and the West on one hand and Russia on the other highlight different elements and are pursuing conflicting goals with the agreement. For the Russian side, Minsk II is a tool to regain control over the Ukrainian state: the goals appear to be a) to keep

²⁶ A. Rinke, “Wie Putin Berlin verlor,” p. 41.

²⁷ A. Rinke, “Vermitteln, verhandeln, verzweifeln” [Mediate, negotiate, despair], *Internationale Politik*, January/February 2015, p. 10.

²⁸ R. Balmforth and A. Vasovic, “Ukraine peace deal falters as rebels show no sign of surrender,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-idUSBREA3A1B520140421>.

²⁹ N. MacFarquhar, “Ukraine Deal Imposes Truce Putin Devised,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/06/world/europe/ukraine-cease-fire.html>.

³⁰ The text can be read at “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements,” February 12, 2015, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/package-of-measures-for-the-implementation-of-the-minsk-agreements/>.

³¹ European Council, “Informal meeting of heads of state or government, 12/02/2015,” February 12, 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/02/12/>.

control over Donbas, and b) to force Ukraine to give the Donbas region far-reaching influence over the decisions of the central government in Kyiv. The Kremlin, hampered in its military advance by growing Ukrainian resistance and Western sanctions, decided to try to reach its goal of keeping Ukraine in its sphere of control by using diplomatic means, hoping that over time Ukraine would become weaker and lose Western support, allowing Moscow's interpretation of Minsk II to prevail.

For Ukraine and the West, in contrast, Minsk II is a roadmap toward a solution whereby Russia retreats and restores Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as far as Donbas is concerned (Crimea is seen as a separate, much more difficult case). For Ukraine and the West, Ukraine's control over its territory and its borders are the key elements of the agreement; everything else is just meant as a step in that direction.

Shortly after the deal, on March 16, 2015, Merkel called for making the lifting of the existing economic sanctions against Russia dependent on Russian compliance with Minsk II. At their summit on March 19 and 20, European leaders endorsed this linkage.³² According to many statements by European leaders since, economic sanctions will stay until Ukraine regains control over its border in the east.

The United States has backed the Minsk II agreement. The White House welcomed it on the same day in a statement, while the State Department's Nuland said in October 2015: "The September 2014 and February 2015 package of Minsk agreements remains the best hope for peace, weapons withdrawal, political normalization, decentralization in Eastern Ukraine, and the return

³² European Council, "European Council, 19-20/03/2015," March 19-20, 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/03/19-20/>.

of Ukrainian state sovereignty over that part of its border."³³

By linking sanctions with the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty, the West has given Russia a strong incentive to comply with the Minsk II agreement. At the same time, it has set a relatively clear set of criteria against which the lifting of sanctions can be measured. In doing so, the EU has made sure that the debate over sanctions against Russia stays closely connected with the assessment of Russia's actions in Ukraine; the two cannot be decoupled. The burden of proof is on the side of those who want to lift sanctions: they need to demonstrate that Russia is indeed complying with Minsk II.

Support for Ukraine

The fourth element of the Western response to Russia's attack on Ukraine has been support for Ukraine, the victim of Russia's unprovoked aggression. As the Russian goal has been to prevent Ukraine from associating itself closer with the EU and from moving toward greater independence from Russia, it was important for the West to deny Russia success by strengthening Ukrainian statehood. As a well-governed liberal democracy and market economy Ukraine is in a much better position to withstand Russian pressure and to defend its borders efficiently.

As early as March 5, 2014, the European Commission unveiled a stabilization plan for

³³ The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary on Ukraine," February 12, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/12/statement-press-secretary-ukraine>; V. Nuland, "Victoria Nuland's Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Testimony on Ukraine," Embassy of the United States, Kyiv, Ukraine, <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/nuland-testimony-10082015.html>.

For the Russian side, Minsk II is a tool to regain control over the Ukrainian state: the goals appear to be a) to keep control over Donbas, and b) to force Ukraine to give the Donbas region far-reaching influence over the decisions of the central government in Kyiv.

While Europeans and Americans work together on the level of the G7 and the IMF to support Ukraine, they do not always coordinate their other efforts on the ground.

Ukraine worth €11 billion.³⁴ On April 9, the Commission set up a Support Group for Ukraine, composed of experts from EU institutions and member states. On April 23, the EU granted Ukrainian exporters preferential access to the EU market. On May 22, the EU agreed to loan €1.8 billion to Ukraine.

Despite Russian objections, Ukraine and the EU signed their Association Agreement on June 27, 2014. The DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) between the EU and Ukraine came partially into force on November 2014; despite further Russian maneuvers to derail it, it came into full force on January 1, 2016. In December 2014, an EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform was put in place in Kyiv. The EU has brokered deals with Russia over gas supply for Ukraine (October 2014; September 2015); it also supports the modernization of the Ukrainian pipeline system.

The EU is also in negotiations with Ukraine over visa liberalization, using the prospect of easy travel into the EU as a pressure point to push authorities to accelerate a number of reforms (in the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan). The EU and its member states are the biggest contributors to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine that monitors the implementation of the Minsk agreements. It also provides Ukraine with humanitarian assistance.

Besides support on the level of the EU, member states also support Ukraine on a bilateral level. In 2014, 44 percent of the assistance came from the EU, 30 percent from the United States, 9 from Germany on a bilateral level (in addition to its

³⁴ European External Action Service, "EU-Ukraine relations," http://eeas.europa.eu/factsheets/news/eu-ukraine_factsheet_en.htm; for an overview of EU reform efforts, see S. Solodkyy and V. Sharlay, "How Could the EU Accelerate Reforms in Ukraine?," Institute of World Policy, November 26, 2015, <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/1838.html>.

contributions to the EU part), and 5 percent from Canada.³⁵ A recent research paper concludes that "Germany belongs to the countries that allocate the most funds for reforms in Ukraine, rivaled only by the U.S. or the EU in general."³⁶

The United States committed \$2 billion in loan guarantees and nearly \$760 million in security, programmatic, and technical assistance to Ukraine from February 2014 through December 2015.³⁷ In addition, Washington advises "almost a dozen" Ukrainian ministries and localities.³⁸

Europeans and Americans also support Ukraine via their contributions to the IMF. In April 2014, a \$17 billion bail-out with the IMF was agreed upon; in March 2015, a new \$17.5 billion bail-out followed. But only a part of the money has been disbursed as not all conditions have been met.³⁹

While Europeans and Americans work together on the level of the G7 and the IMF to support Ukraine, they do not always coordinate their other efforts on the ground. One example is the U.S.-led reform of patrol police in major Ukrainian cities, in which the EU was not involved though it is part

³⁵ A. Sobják, "Momentum Not to Be Wasted: Aid Coordination in Post-Revolutionary Ukraine," Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), October 30, 2015, <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-139>.

³⁶ A. Getmanchuk and S. Solodkyy, "Ukraine-Germany: How to Turn Situational Partnership into Priority One," Institute of World Policy, February 9, 2016, <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/1918.html>.

³⁷ The White House, "FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to Ukraine," December 7, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/07/fact-sheet-us-assistance-ukraine>.

³⁸ V. Nuland, "Victoria Nuland's Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Testimony on Ukraine."

³⁹ *The Economist: Free Exchange*, "How much has the IMF really given to Ukraine?," February 16, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2016/02/not-exactly-profligate>.

of the larger efforts to reform police in Ukraine.⁴⁰ However, the lack of coordination on reform is not a specific transatlantic problem in Ukraine; donor coordination is a general, broader challenge.

Conclusion: A Well-Coordinated Response

The degree of Western unity and its ability to agree to a forceful response to Russian aggression in Ukraine has been impressive. Few observers would have thought that the transatlantic community would unite behind strong economic sanctions against Russia. In all stages of the conflict, a remarkable degree of smooth coordination and cooperation has taken place among European partners and with the United States.

Equally strong and consistent German leadership, in partnership with France and the United States, has played a crucial role in achieving Western unity and in defining the main elements of the Western response: economic sanctions, diplomatic outreach to the Kremlin, and support for reform in Ukraine. German leadership was most visible on the diplomatic front. The Minsk II agreement, which helped move the conflict from the military to the diplomatic playing field, was its main result.

The United States was initially strongly involved in joint diplomatic efforts on the level of foreign ministers, but the Geneva agreement from April 2014 failed to produce a tangible outcome. While permanently engaged in diplomacy with all players, the United States did not push for being integrated into the “Normandy format” (France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia).

⁴⁰ Anita Sobják writes, “An example of poor coordination is in the area of the rule of law, where the EU ensured valuable expert support via the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM), but no material and technical support to assist not just the design, but the implementation of the reforms. Meanwhile, the U.S. invested in substantial reform of patrol police in big cities. The EU was not involved in this, although the EUAM helped with overall police reform, for instance by developing the law on national police.” Sobják.

On sanctions, Merkel was also a major driving force, but her hand has been less visible, for tactical reasons. Merkel had to make sure to keep the support of her coalition partner in Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), as well as to gain the support of those EU member states that have been more skeptical of sanctions. Moving too far ahead or exposing the laggards in public would have endangered her ability to build the necessary consensus at the regular, crucial meetings of EU leaders in Brussels.

From time to time, especially when it came to the tougher economic sanctions (“third level”), the United States went ahead without the EU. U.S. efforts to push those EU countries that were more skeptical of sanctions (largely in western and southern Europe, some in south-eastern Europe) apparently played an important role in building and maintaining an EU-wide consensus on sanctions.

Regarding the decision not to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine, there was a broad consensus in Europe but not in the United States. The more Russia advanced militarily in Donbas, the more the pressure rose in the U.S. Congress and in media commentary and think tanks to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons. The Obama administration itself was apparently split on this question. But ultimately the president decided against such a course of action.⁴¹

The United States and Europe were united in the view that support for Ukraine must be an important part of the West’s response. On one hand, this was part of the crisis response. On the other, the West realized that the failure to build a strong, legitimate, and capable Ukrainian state has provided Russia with the opportunity to intervene at relatively low cost. In order to help build a stable system of sovereign states in the post-Soviet space, the West apparently must do more to help reformers in those countries.

⁴¹ M. Crowley, “Rift in Obama administration over Putin.”

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4 MOTIVATIONS

Having grown up in East Germany under Soviet occupation, Merkel's views toward Russia are in many aspects closer to those of Central European former dissidents than to those of the Western German establishment.

Russia's double attack on Ukraine — first the occupation and annexation of Crimea, then the “hybrid” war against Eastern Ukraine — came as a shock to the West. Policymakers in Western capitals had largely held the view that Putin would ultimately not risk interrupting Russia's vital relations with the West. The Kremlin's view by contrast seems to have been that Russian leverage in Western capitals, especially in Berlin, would be strong enough to largely neutralize the West and to prevent a serious crisis in Russian-Western relations. Russian policymakers may have expected a reaction rather similar to that to the Georgia-Russia War in 2008: some symbolic action but soon a return to business as usual, in fact even a renewed effort to reach out to the Kremlin (the United States “reset” its relations with Russia).

So why did Western leaders decide in favor of a strong response to Russian aggression? Why did economic interests, dependency on Russian energy, disinterest in Ukraine, fear of conflict with Russia, and hope for cooperation with the Kremlin in other areas not prevent the West from imposing harsh sanctions and moving quickly back to business as usual?

At least one part of the answer can be found in the views of the German chancellor. Angela Merkel, on succeeding Gerhard Schröder in 2005, brought to the German chancellery some skepticism toward the established policy on Russia. Having grown up in East Germany under Soviet occupation, Merkel's views toward Russia are in many aspects closer to those of Central European former dissidents than to those of the Western German establishment. While Merkel did not significantly change course on Russia after she became chancellor in 2005, she grew increasingly impatient when Putin returned to the Russian presidency in 2012, criticizing him

publicly to his face in a joint press conference for his handling of the opposition.⁴²

In November 18, 2013, when the EU still expected Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the EU despite emerging Russian pressure, Merkel also warned, in a speech at the German Parliament, Russia over Ukraine: “To put it unequivocally — the countries must decide themselves on their future direction. Third parties cannot have the right of veto. That is our understanding of the unqualified mutual respect of the freedom to choose as laid out in the OSCE Charter. I have also raised this issue many times in my meetings with the Russian President Vladimir Putin. I have repeatedly made it quite clear that neither the Eastern Partnership, nor the bilateral contractual relations between the EU and our partners are directed against Russia.”⁴³

The trust Merkel and Putin had developed in their increasingly cool working relationship evaporated over the annexation of Crimea. Putin allegedly had openly lied to Merkel about the presence of Russian troops.⁴⁴ In the early days of March 2014, Merkel made the decision to confront Russia seriously over its aggression against Ukraine.⁴⁵

In a speech to the German Parliament on March 13, 2014, Merkel prepared Germans for a policy change on Russia. The chancellor calls it “almost a miracle” that after World War II Europe developed an order that guarantees “peace, freedom, and prosperity.”

⁴² See U. Speck, “How Germany should work with Russia,” Carnegie Europe, November 23, 2012, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=50118>.

⁴³ A. Merkel, “Government statement delivered by Chancellor Angela Merkel on the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit to be held on 28/29 November 2013 in Vilnius,” The Federal Chancellor, November 18, 2013, <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/ContentArchiv/EN/Archiv17/Regierungsrekl%C3%A4rung/2013-11-18-merkel-oestl-partnerschaften.html>.

⁴⁴ A. Rinke, “Wie Putin Berlin verlor,” p. 41.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

This order, she says, is now threatened by a Russia that brings back a type of conflict “which we know from the 19th or 20th century,” which “we thought we had left behind”: a conflict over “spheres of influence and territories.”⁴⁶

In her speech, Merkel juxtaposes the world of globalization, characterized by interdependence and cooperation, with the world of old-fashioned geopolitics. Germany and Russia, she argues, have become deeply interconnected in the last decades, following the logic of globalization. But in its conflict with Ukraine, Russia is putting the “right of the strongest above the strength of the right.” What is at stake is “the territorial integrity of a European neighbor, the respect of the principles of the United Nations, the principles and methods of reconciliation of interests in the 21st century.” Russia has committed “a breach of fundamental principles of international law.”

When the conflict started, Merkel was in a strong position. Undisputed and trusted at home, she had moved in a leadership position in the EU during the Euro crisis.⁴⁷ Deeply concerned over what she perceived as a Russian threat to “the entire European peaceful order,” Merkel started to take a leadership role in shaping and coordinating Europe’s answer to Russia, in close cooperation with other leaders, especially Hollande and Obama.⁴⁸

For the Obama administration, which backed and supported Berlin’s leadership role, what has

⁴⁶ A. Merkel, “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel.”

⁴⁷ “During the euro crisis, Germany has become Europe’s unquestioned leader on economic policy-making,” wrote Charles Grant in May 2014. C. Grant, “What is wrong with German foreign policy,” Centre for European Reform, May 6, 2014, <http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/what-wrong-german-foreign-policy>.

⁴⁸ A. Merkel, “Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Lowy Institute for International Policy,” Bundesregierung, November 17, 2014, https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2014/2014-11-17-merkel-lowy-institute-sydney_en.html.

been at stake is the European security order in which the United States remains deeply involved even after Europe has, following several rounds of NATO and EU enlargement, become largely “whole and free.” A second reason for U.S. involvement has been the interest in preventing Russia from becoming a rising threat and a spoiler. The Obama administration would instead like to see Moscow as a partner in dealing with issues such as the Iranian and the North Korean nuclear programs, conflict management in the Middle East and North Africa, and responses to global challenges. In addition, the United States continues to see itself as the guardian of the liberal international order; Merkel’s remarks juxtaposing old style geopolitics with the win-win logic of globalization have probably resonated in the White House. In his own statements, Obama has referred to principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity in order to describe what is at stake. On March 20, 2014, Obama said, echoing at least partly what Merkel had said a week earlier in the German parliament: “The basic principles that govern relations between nations in Europe and around the world must be upheld in the 21st century. That includes respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity — the notion that nations do not simply redraw borders, or make decisions at the expense of their neighbors simply because they are larger or more powerful.”⁴⁹

Merkel’s decision to use her political capital and her leadership position in order to oppose Russian aggression and to reassert the principles of international order in Europe was one important factor that has shaped the Western response. Another one was Obama’s decision to work closely with Merkel as partners in leadership. A third,

⁴⁹ B. Obama, “Statement by the President on Ukraine,” The White House, March 20, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/20/statement-president-ukraine>. Interestingly, Obama’s statements on Ukraine from March 17 and March 6 only refer to sovereignty and territorial integrity without making the larger reference to the 21st century; that points to the assumption that Merkel’s thinking had an impact on him.

For the Obama administration... what has been at stake is the European security order in which the United States remains deeply involved even after Europe has... become largely “whole and free.”

indispensable factor was the fact that Merkel and Obama found support among those EU member states that were equally willing to push back against Russian behavior and managed jointly to convince

the skeptics. Bringing France on board was a key element on the way to building such a broad coalition inside the EU.

5 A MODEL FOR TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION?

The joint transatlantic response to Russian aggression against Ukraine has been impressive. The West, together with allies such as Japan, has pushed back against Russia, has very likely helped to stop Russian advance in Ukraine by changing Moscow's calculus, has helped providing a framework to manage the conflict (Minsk II), and has supported Ukraine. In doing so, the West has demonstrated its ability to act jointly and it has reasserted key international norms and rules.

This has been a major achievement. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq in the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, led to many divisions inside Europe and between the transatlantic partners. And Germany under Merkel for years remained passive on most foreign policy issues, a position that had been confirmed by the failure of Germany to support the Libya intervention in 2011 and its passive stance on the war in Syria.

Germany seemed to be willing to act forcefully only on internal EU issues and to remain very reluctant to engage beyond the EU space. Given Germany's size and weight inside the EU, the country's relative foreign policy abstinence had become an increasing problem in the years before the Ukraine conflict.⁵⁰

What the Ukraine conflict demonstrated was that when fundamentally challenged, the West, as a grouping of liberal democracies that have signed up to a cooperative international order, is capable of responding resolutely when it has the political will. While disagreements and differences dominate the often increasingly shrill media headlines, deeper down the West as community of values is alive and strong. To state this does not mean to underestimate the challenges, but they should be

put into proportion. The Western response to the Ukraine crisis has been a success story from which Europe, the United States, and their partners can draw confidence.

The question for the next months and years is going to be: how can the West move from crisis response to strategy?

One set of questions concerns the relationship the post-Soviet space. Is the West capable of developing a longer-term answer to the challenges posed by a Russia that is enormously ambitious but lacks the means to compete with the West on anything besides military power? Can the West bring more stability to the post-Soviet space by building islands of stability, by supporting state-building, by deterring Russia from the further use of military power, and by helping to solve protracted conflicts?

The second set of questions relates to foreign policy in general. Can the positive experience of having gone through this together and formulated a joint response encourage Western capitals to seek similar cooperation on other important foreign policy issues? Is it possible to use the transatlantic channels and networks that have been broadened and deepened for the management of other crises, and also for longer-term strategic cooperation on the Middle East and Asia-Pacific?

The answer to these questions to a large extent depends on the ability of Western capitals to institutionalize the gains in cooperation and coordination. The biggest risk is that all these achievements evaporate once new leaders who do not understand the advantages of such cooperation come to power in Washington, Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere and try to solve the issues by addressing them unilaterally.

One way to prevent this would be to set up more formats in which senior officials from both

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⁵⁰ See U. Speck, "Merkel's strategic opportunity," Carnegie Europe, July 3, 2013, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/07/03/chancellor-merkel-s-strategic-opportunity/gdmm>.

sides of the Atlantic discuss strategic issues. Transatlantic cooperation is only institutionalized on the level of NATO on one hand and on the level of U.S. meetings with EU officials (“EU-US summits”) on the other. What is lacking is a regular, institutionalized exchange between key officials in major European capitals and their counterparts in Washington.

The joint Western response to the Ukraine conflict is an example of the high potential of such

cooperation. If challenged on major principles, the West is able to respond in a forceful and meaningful manner. The challenge, however, is to move from crisis response to strategy: from a rather passive reaction to the kind of action that is able to shape the environment according to long-term strategic interests shared by the West and its partners.

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