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Realistic U.S.–German Cooperation over Russia

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The Russian Aggression Prevention Act of 2014 contains a number of effective proposals that advance transatlantic security cooperation while seeking to restrain Moscow’s imperial ambitions in Eastern Europe. However, one of the bill’s main proposals—enhancing U.S. ties with Germany to confront Russia—is a flawed idea.

The Germans view the threat and challenges posed by Russia completely differently than the U.S. does. Instead, the U.S. should be placing a far greater emphasis upon strengthening the security relationship with allies in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Nordic countries—which are in the direct line of fire from Moscow and are taking a tougher line against Russian aggression.

Germany’s Meek Dealings with Russia

Although German Chancellor Angela Merkel has built a reputation as the most powerful politician in continental Europe, Merkel has been remarkably meek in her dealings with Russia. She has been in frequent contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, but she has been careful not to alienate powerful business interests at home, which have significant economic interests in Russia and close ties to Moscow’s ruling elites.

Merkel has also shied away from calling for a more assertive stance from NATO and has resisted efforts by NATO allies in Eastern Europe to bulk up the troop presence of Western forces. In fact, Germany continued to export weapons to Russia until March of this year.¹

Merkel’s less-than-robust approach toward Russia reflects divided public opinion at home and rising fears of a new Cold War.²

Germany’s Deep-Seated Economic and Political Ties to Russia

The trade and investment ties between Germany and Russia are deep and a key factor shaping Berlin’s weak approach toward the Ukraine crisis. According to an *Economist* report, 6,200 German companies have operations inside Russia, with €20 billion invested in the country and 300,000 German jobs at stake. Germany is heavily energy-dependent on Russia, with a third of the country’s oil and gas coming from there. German exports to Russia account for nearly one-third of the European Union total.³ EU–Russia trade was worth nearly \$370 billion in 2012. In comparison, U.S.–Russia trade was valued at \$26 billion.⁴

Many of Germany’s leading corporations have built close ties with Moscow, and several prominent German business leaders have lobbied against sanctions levied on Russia. Executives from Daimler, BASF, Siemens, Volkswagen, Adidas, and Deutsche Bank have all added their voices in opposition to a tough sanctions regime.⁵ Siemens chief executive Joe Kaiser even went so far as visiting Putin’s residence following Russia’s invasion of Crimea and posing for photos with the Russian leader.⁶

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4223>

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Prominent members of Germany's political elite have also sided with Moscow. Three former German chancellors have expressed their sympathy for Russia's actions in Ukraine: Helmut Schmidt, Gerhard Schroeder, and Helmut Kohl.⁷ Social Democrat Schroeder has been particularly vocal in his backing of Moscow as a board member of Russian energy giant Gazprom. Schroeder recently celebrated his 70th birthday with Putin at a lavish party at St. Petersburg's Jussapov Palace, where he embraced the Russian dictator. He was joined at the party by Philipp Missfelder, chief foreign policy adviser to Merkel's Christian Democratic Union.⁸

An Important but Hesitant Partner in NATO

There is a positive history of recent U.S.–German military cooperation that should be acknowledged but not overstated. Germany is also home to numerous U.S. military installations. Through NATO, Germany has stepped up to the plate in Afghanistan. At one time Germany was the third-largest troop contributing nation to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. However, German soldiers were largely confined to the peaceful northern part of the country and were heavily restricted by operational caveats.

German involvement in recent NATO operations has been at times problematic. During the 2011 NATO-led air campaign over Libya, for example, Germany would not allow its crews to operate NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System planes. Consequently,

German crews had to be sent to Afghanistan to free up other NATO crews serving there so they could be diverted to NATO operations over Libya.

There are also German constitutional constraints that make U.S. military cooperation with Berlin problematic. The Bundestag (the German parliament) must approve any overseas deployment of German armed forces. Even parliamentary support for deploying German troops inside other NATO countries is not guaranteed. In 2012, Turkey's request to NATO to provide Patriot missile batteries to defend its border with Syria became a controversial political issue in Berlin. In the end, the Bundestag approved the request, but it took months to come to an agreement, and a great deal of political capital was spent by Merkel to make this happen. This might not be the case in the future.

Time for a Real Strategy

While Germany is an important U.S. ally, the Administration should be focusing its immediate efforts on enhancing the security of American allies in eastern and northern Europe that are directly threatened by Russian aggression. The U.S. should:

- **Deepen relations with like-minded allies in Europe.** Instead of focusing heavily on ties with Germany, the U.S. should seek to deepen relations with other allies on the Russia/Ukraine issue, including the United Kingdom, the Baltic states, the Nordic states, and Poland.

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1. Tony Paterson, "Germany Halts Weapons Exports to Russia," *Daily Telegraph*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/10785658/Germany-halts-weapons-exports-to-Russia.html> (accessed May 12, 2014).
 2. Clemens Wergin, "Why Germans Love Russia," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/06/opinion/why-germans-love-russia.html?hp&ref=opinion&_r=0 (accessed May 12, 2014), and Matthew Karnitschnig, "Germany's Angela Merkel Treads Softly with Russia's Putin on Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304819004579485311981419836> (accessed May 12, 2014).
 3. *The Economist*, "German Firms in Russia: Lovers, Not Fighters," March 15, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21599034-german-exporters-are-pushing-back-against-economic-sanctions-russia-lovers-not-fighters> (accessed May 12, 2014).
 4. Alison Smale and Danny Hakim, "European Firms Seek to Minimize Russia Sanctions," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/world/europe/european-firms-seek-to-minimize-russia-sanctions.html> (accessed May 12, 2014).
 5. Matthew Karnitschnig, "Corporate Germany Opposes Sanctions," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB20001424052702303948104579535983960826054> (accessed May 12, 2014).
 6. Karnitschnig, "Germany's Angela Merkel Treads Softly with Russia's Putin on Ukraine."
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Tony Paterson, "Angela Merkel Aide 'Attended Vladimir Putin Party,'" *Daily Telegraph*, May 1, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/10801979/Angela-Merkel-aide-attended-Vladimir-Putin-party.html> (accessed May 12, 2014).

- **Establish a permanent military presence in the Baltic region.** It is time for NATO to scrap the 1997 agreement with Russia, which limits the basing of NATO assets in Central and Eastern Europe. This would offer more opportunities for joint military training and demonstrate U.S. commitment to transatlantic security.
- **Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article 5.** It should be made clear to Russia that any armed aggression toward a NATO member will immediately cause the U.S. to call for NATO to invoke Article 5 of the 1949 Washington Treaty.
- **Maintain pressure on America's European allies to invest in defense.** In practice, Washington can do little to force European countries to spend more on defense. However, this should not prevent the U.S. from expressing displeasure at the failure of most European allies to invest the agreed minimum 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense.

- **Lift restrictions on the export of natural gas to U.S. allies in Europe.** Reducing energy dependence on Russia would dramatically weaken the economic grip Moscow has on parts of Europe, reinforcing the position of NATO allies.

Strengthening the Transatlantic Alliance

The U.S. needs to demonstrate strength and resolve when it comes to dealing with transatlantic security. The Obama Administration has attached little importance so far to the transatlantic alliance, and Europe has barely figured in the Administration's foreign policy. In light of recent events in Ukraine, the Administration now has to play catch-up. A strong transatlantic alliance, with robust support for NATO allies threatened by Russia, should be at the heart of U.S. foreign policy in Europe.

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