



Germany's foreign policy paradox risks European security

January 16, 2018 **Stephen Blank** *The Hill*

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It now appears that Germany, after long negotiations has a new and functioning government. This announcement came not a moment too soon. Germany is the richest and strongest player in Europe and the engine of the European economy.

Germany also is and has long been a stalwart ally of the U.S. and champion of democracy abroad. However, German foreign policy is prone to contradictory pressures. Throughout German history, there have been those whose first orientation was to Russia while other political forces have steadfastly believed that Germany's destiny was primarily tied to the West and espoused its inclusion in a Western community.

Such contradictory tendencies are inherent in a country that was long divided politically, culturally, and religiously while being in the center of Europe and thus subject to competing geopolitical forces of attraction.

These dilemmas continue into the present. The current Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and vice chancellor of the government, has recently embodied the contradiction in his own rhetoric. On the one hand, he gave an interview observing that when and if the U.S. retreated from the world stage, other, hostile claimants to power and influence would inevitably fill that vacuum. At the same time, he has publicly stated that concessions on the Minsk accords about Ukraine could be made to Russia, e.g. a loosening of sanctions, without Russia's full compliance with the agreements. In other words, though he acknowledges the necessity of U.S. leadership, Gabriel's inclinations, like those of many in the SPD, turn to Russia.

While keeping the wires open to St. Petersburg is always a sound policy, the channel of communications must be filled with meaningful messages and policies not what Lenin called "rotten compromises."

Earlier Gabriel told Russian President Vladimir Putin that the wonderful thing about the proposed Nord Stream gas pipeline is that Russia and Germany could decide on it by themselves without consulting Germany's allies in the EU.

In other words, for the sake of German business' desire for cheap Russian energy (which is subsidized by high prices to customers in Eastern Europe) and opportunities to exploit the Russian market, he was prepared to sacrifice those East European states' economic and political interests to Russia and give Moscow multiple opportunities for extending its influence over German business and politics.

Not surprisingly this provoked an explosion of opposition in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, especially as there is no compelling economic justification for building a new gas pipeline from Russia to Germany whose main purposes are to punish Ukraine and extend Russian influence.

Similarly, in September 2017 he organized a conference (where this author spoke) arguing the necessity of resuming dialogue on the CFE treaty (Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe) with Russia that Moscow unceremoniously broke almost a decade ago for their own sake. Such talks' purpose appeared to be their intrinsic value in spite of the fact that Moscow has broken every arms control treaty except the New Start Treaty since 1990. It also expressed the unwillingness of the SPD to spend more money on German defense while the necessity of doing so has come into sharper focus due to Moscow's militarization and invasion of Ukraine.

The paradox of German policy is even stronger when one considers that Prime Minister Angela Merkel has consistently taken a strong line against Russian aggression in Ukraine and that Germany has now begun, in tandem with its other NATO allies, to rearm to defend the Baltic and European security more generally. Gabriel's actions thus reflect the abiding paradox of German policy, recognizing and calling for strong American leadership while shirking from taking on the responsibilities inherent in Germany's position.

It is hardly surprising then, that President Trump and other U.S. leaders like Robert Gates, in earlier administrations, have admonished European governments, many of whom also did not and still may not want to acknowledge the full extent of the Russian threat, for their unwillingness assumes their share of the responsibility for the common European defense and security.

Now that Germany has a new government we can hope that under Merkel's leadership and that of the coalition that she has formed with the SPD, that Germany will conduct a consistent policy commensurate with its capabilities to enhance the EU and NATO and not chase after the mirage of appeasement-like concessions to Russia at the expense of Eastern European governments and the larger security of the continent.

A Germany that fully accepted and expressed its European vocation is indispensable to any overall progress towards revitalizing the EU and NATO and the process of European integration from which it has been perhaps the chief beneficiary since 1945. A united and vigorous Europe buttressed by an enduring and strong German commitment to democracy and European integration is one of the greatest assets we have. While we can do what we can to bring it about, unless Germany grasps its role the overall European project remains incomplete and subject to senseless dreams in Moscow that it can recover its lost empire.

Stephen Blank, Ph.D., is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. He is the author of numerous foreign policy-related articles, white papers and monographs, specifically focused on the geopolitics and geostrategy of the former Soviet Union, Russia and Eurasia. He is a former MacArthur fellow at the U.S. Army War College.