

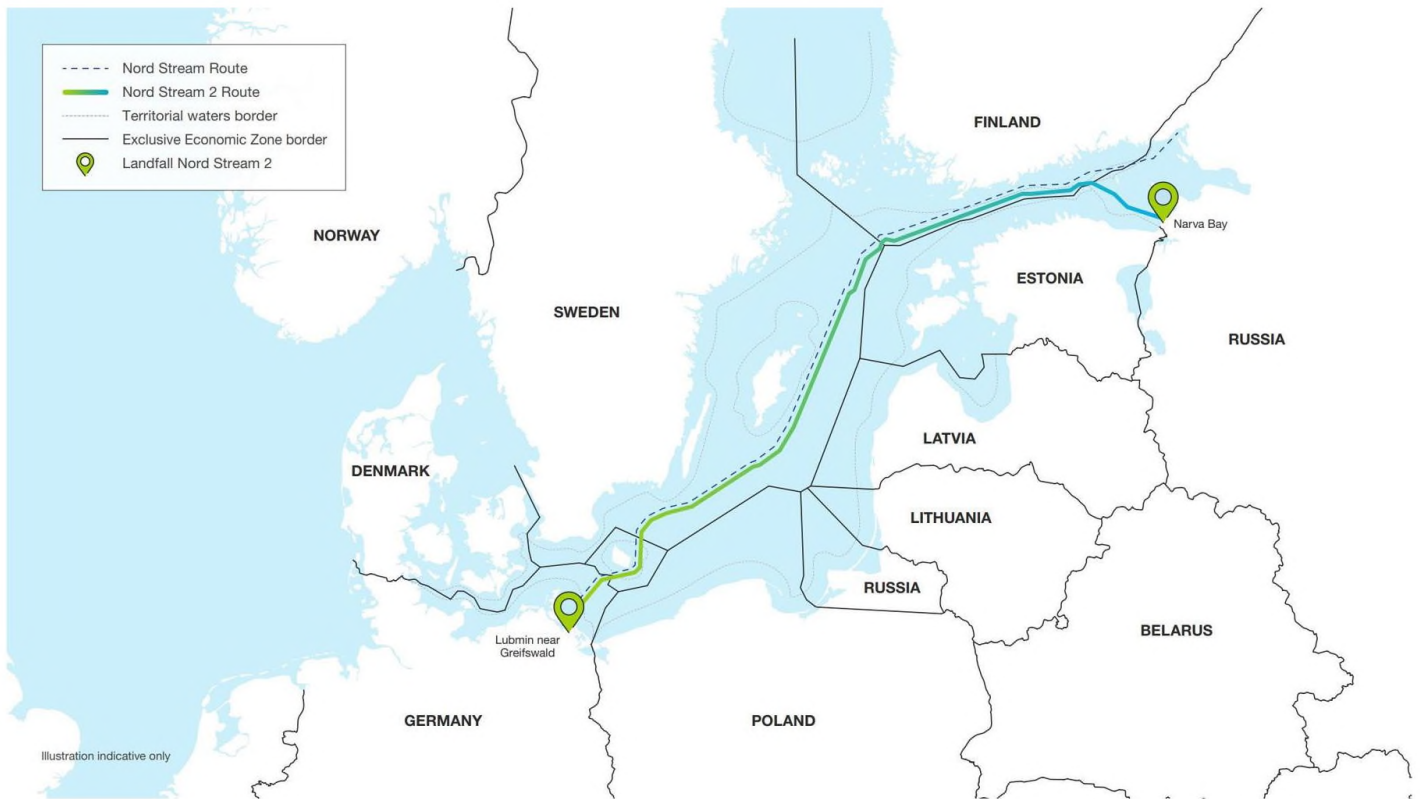
Politics

Germany Sees No Commitment to Shut Off Russian Gas in Biden Deal

By [Patrick Donahue](#)

August 2, 2021, 12:00 AM EDT

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- ▶ Berlin's focus is on EU sanctions, according to officials
 - ▶ Stance falls short of the hard line sought by the White House
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The Nord Stream 2 undersea link to Germany.

Germany has little intention of shutting off Nord Stream 2 if Vladimir Putin tries to use the controversial pipeline as a geopolitical weapon, whatever the U.S. might say, according to Berlin officials familiar with the plans.

Instead of targeting the direct gas link with Russia, the government would focus on broader sanctions at the European Union level, a more difficult path for retaliating against the Kremlin, said the officials, who asked not to be identified because the discussions are private.

U.S. President Joe Biden tried to get the Germans to commit to stiff retaliation if Putin seeks to exploit the pipeline to undermine Ukraine. While Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed to take action “at the national level” as part of a July 21 deal, Berlin’s reticence to take the ultimate step and turn off the valves is a potential win for the Russian president and a blow to the White House.

A spokesman for Merkel’s government reaffirmed that Germany is obliged to act in the event the pipeline is misused, but declined to specify further.

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The officials' comments could bolster Biden's critics in Congress who say he caved in on the dispute. This week, Senate Republicans threatened to block two Biden Treasury nominees unless the administration revived sanctions aimed at halting the project. Bob Menendez, the Democratic chairman of the Senate's foreign relations committee, last week said the accord falls short and that Nord Stream 2 "should be stopped."

With the 1,230-kilometer (760-mile) link 99% complete and the rest due to be finished in August, attention is turning to what would happen once gas starts to flow and if Putin seeks to choke off transit through Ukraine, an economic lifeline for the former Soviet republic.

Berlin's approach is likely to persist even after Merkel steps down following the Sept. 26 election. Support for the Russian pipeline stretches across the political spectrum, while legal issues would complicate any targeted action.

Armin Laschet -- the Christian Democratic leader who is the front-runner to succeed Merkel -- has diverged little from the chancellor on the Gazprom PJSC project, while the Social Democrats largely back an energy partnership with Russia.

The Greens -- in contention for the chancellorship for the first time -- have been outliers in the political mainstream. Annalena Baerbock, the party's candidate, has drawn Kremlin ire for flatly opposing the project.





Angela Merkel and President Joe Biden attend a news conference in Washington, D.C. on July 15. *Photographer: Alex Edelman/CNP/Bloomberg*

During a July 15 visit to Washington, Merkel drew a line on American efforts to secure a harder commitment from Germany to hit back against Russia in the event of malign action. The chancellor made it clear that her preference was for an EU solution, which would require consent among the 27 member states.

Asked after the meeting whether her options include shutting off the pipeline, Merkel said: “We have a number of instruments -- this would be on a European level rather than a German level -- that we can implement.”

Merkel has argued that Europe’s threat of sanctions is an effective deterrent for Putin. The EU imposed broad sanctions after Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014 and more targeted measures after the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexey Navalny.

“It doesn’t mean that we’re completely defenseless on our side,” Merkel told reporters at a June 22 press conference.