Germany’s Worldview and the Crisis in Ukraine

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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- Ulrike Franke, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations
- Liana Fix, Program Director, International Affairs, Körber-Stiftung
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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2065-virtual-event-germany-s-worldview-and-the-crisis-in-ukraine22022

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Hello, and welcome to Hudson Institute. My name is Peter Rough. I'm a senior fellow here at the Institute, and this is our latest programming in our "Crisis in Ukraine series, The Germany Edition." Today's episode is airing as Olaf Scholz, the successor to Angela Merkel, is making his maiden voyage to Washington as Chancellor to meet with President Joe Biden at the White House. And so we thought it's an auspicious time to examine the sources of German conduct to analyze the German roots and foreign policy decision making. And I can think of no better analysts than our three star panelists that are joining us today for this discussion. It's no secret that over the past six to eight weeks, Germany has been in the limelight in American foreign policy thinking. The crisis is about Ukraine, but there's been a lot of discussion about Germany and German foreign policy. And perhaps just to take away the sugar coating, I think we've, a lot of us at least, heard feedback from analysts from Capitol Hill congressional leaders that there's a bit of dismay, if not doubt, about Germany's willingness to deter Russian power in Eastern Europe.

And so rather than litigate the past or assess every little decision, I thought to anticipate the future to understand German decision making and where it might head in the years to come, we would explore the German soul as it were. And so we have three Germans with us today. First, Liana Fix who is the Program Analyst for International Affairs at the Körber-Stiftung, a Hamburg based foundation with beautiful offices also in Berlin that overlook the Brandenburg Gate. The Körber-Stiftung is known for hosting dialogues for convening and collaborating. It also works with Munich Security Conference on a young leaders program at the MSC. And annually, it puts out an important survey of German political opinion as part of its Berlin Pulse Conference. But Liana today comes to us, I should say, from Washington. Not because she's a part of the advanced guard for Olaf Scholz, but because she's a resident fellow for a few months at the German Marshall Fund here. I learned recently that Liana was born in Kazakhstan and she works a great deal in her own work on German views of Russian foreign policy.

In a way, in her own work and she's much quoted in the American press right now, she's looking east and we'll learn a lot from her in the hour to come. Perhaps someone who's traveled a bit more west, we also have Ulrike Franke with us who did her graduate work in France and in the United Kingdom. She's a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations where she runs the technology and European power initiative. Ulrike is well known to German speakers as a co-host of Sicherheitshalber, which is a German language security podcast with something of a cult following, I think we can say. And she regularly writes on all sorts of dimensions of German foreign policy. She's probably also Germany's foremost experts are all things related to drones and the German acquisition or non acquisition of drones and use in their military. She also had two really interesting articles, which I'll recommend to.

I'm sure we'll discuss them and they'll come up in her remarks. Just a few days ago in the Washington Post, she wrote about the German world views, on January 31st, an article about how it sees the Russia crisis. And then perhaps more of a personal introspective a few months ago, in War On the Rocks, she talked about her generation, the millennial generation's experience with foreign policy. It's thinking about hard power and the use of force in the world. Last, but certainly not least, is the always brilliant Ulrich Speck who is a historian and journalist by training. Ulrich is a senior visiting fellow at GMF in Berlin. He has written wildly. I met him several years ago at a conference for the Aspen Institute in Berlin and consumed his bimonthly column in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung which is one of Zurich's major
newspapers. He now writes every morning, it arrives in my inbox, a must read on German foreign policy
called Morgenlage Außenpolitik which in German language gives you a read on what matters for
German decision makers and German analysts of the world and events.

He's also edited several books. He's quoted in all sorts of publications. And I won't list his many
affiliations with think tanks across Europe and the United States. I will say he also worked for RFE and RL
in Prague for a stint, so there's the journalist aspect that comes in. All three are just a short Google
search away, so if you want to learn more about their work or read their writing, you can do that. And
they're all pretty active on Twitter as well. Sometimes Twitter can be like swimming through molasses,
but they're all a rather clever and witty and informative on Twitter. I would encourage you to follow
them there as well. With that, we thought we would just have an opening round of comments, maybe in
the order I just introduced you all. And then look forward to an informal and rich discussion about
Germany and the world. With that, Liana, the floor is yours.

Liana Fix:

Thank you so much, Peter. That was probably one of the kindest introductions I've received. It's a
pleasure to be here to discuss Germany and where Germany is headed in this Russia crisis I would say.
And I will try to make in my introductory remarks, the case that not everything is lost with Berlin and
that it is too early to write Berlin off. And I will try to do this by looking at German public opinion. You
already introduced The Berlin Pulse, which over longer period of time, so every year asks for Germans
opinions at attitudes towards Russia, towards other countries in the world. And therefore gives a
relatively good view into the German soul, as you put it Peter. And I would argue that if we look at these
polls, we do see that the German public is certainly not abandoning the west, but there are some
interesting nuances to the way Germany thinks and the German public thinks about Russia, which can
help us to understand the current situation in Germany stance better.

Let me start with something very basic, but I think it's still important to repeat it, which is Germany's
special historical relationship with Russia. And this is something which I was asked quite often, especially
from U.S. Americans. Well, if Germany was divided for such a long period of time, why would there still
be sympathy towards Russia? Wasn't it the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact that was responsible for
the division of Germany. This is true, but the events of 1989 and 1990, despite the difficult past, have
led the German public opinion to a feeling of gratefulness towards Gorbachev, towards unification. And
that is a feeling, which despite all the years before of Germany being divided, remains very strong. This
feeling of gratefulness, also this feeling of continuous guilt towards in particular Russia.

Although these days also the fact that this obviously should apply to all people and countries of the
former Soviet Union has become more prominent. This is an important basis, but it does not explain
everything about German public opinion towards Russia. And it certainly does not make Germans close
their eyes towards everything that is going on in the world that Russia plays in international affairs. Let
me introduce a couple of survey results from last year's Berlin Pulse survey, and you can find all the
results www.theberlinpulse.org. The results were presented last year in November, and they come from
September. Obviously, they're not immediately related to the current situation, but it's interesting, as I
said, because it's longer term surveys. One of the questions that we always ask in the Berlin Pulse, and I
do think it's one of the most interesting questions, is who is Germany's most important partner? And
there Russia obviously comes up, but Russia for many years now is not ranking very highly in this survey result.

Russia is roughly on the same level as China with around 10%, 8%, 9%, 11% throughout the last years. In contrast, the most prominent and most important partners for Germany have always been France and the United States. And we've seen an interesting shift in last year when the United States jumped up to 45% and left France behind after the election of President Biden. In this perspective, it is very clear that Germany's Western partners, France and the United States, are perceived as much more important by the German public than Russia. And if we ask what is more important for Germany, having good relations with the United States or Russia? This is also a question that we ask every year. The result is also very clear. Last year, it was 62% argued in favor of closer relations with the United States. This is more important. And only 16% said that relations with Russia are more important for German foreign policy.

I have to say during the Trump years, this number has gone up a little bit of those who argued that Russia is more important, but not too much. It went up to around 25%. Even during the Trump years, it was clear that the U.S. is more important, good relations with the U.S. are more important than good relations with Russia. And the third that I would like to introduce for our discussion, the third question, and I think this is an interesting one, was whether Russia is a threat to German, American, let's say Western values. That's a question that we've asked this year. And here, although you see the importance of the Western countries, we do see, and looking forward to hearing what Ulrike has to say about this, that there's not a big threat perception in Germany when it comes to Russia.

49% of Germans said that Russia is only a minor threat and 33% that Russia is no threat at all. If you put this together, it's 82% saying Russia is only a minor or no threat at all. There really is no immediate threat perception towards Russia, which can be explained because Germany skillfully managed to surround itself with the NATO members and has no immediate border to Russia. But this is certainly something which looks very different from Eastern European countries and looks different from the U.S. perspective. The Pew Research Center asked the same question in the United States and there, 54% of U.S. Americans do see Russia as a threat. There was a difference in threat perceptions. And the last point that I would like to make is to look a little bit more into the details of these survey results.

And there, we constantly over many years, see that East Germans, as well as the older generation, is friendlier towards Russia. They see Russia is more important. They consider Russia to be less of a threat, whereas west Germans and the younger generation have, let's say, a sober approach towards Russia. We also see this in the party political spectrum. The fringe parties, the AFD and Left in Germany also tend to see Russia in a more positive light. Russia has an appeal for some groups in Germany, but the majority is clearly oriented within the west and has only a limited threat perception when it comes to Russia. Perhaps just to take this as a basis, I do think the German public is firmly rooted in the west. But what I would say is perhaps my greatest concern is taking on this longer view is the perspective from East Germany.

And that is something which concerns me because there's not a lot work that is being done on addressing the differences between the perceptions of the east and the west. And this is something which in a crisis, as we have it right now, can play out in a quite difficult way if the heads of the German Lender try to find a common position on Russia, for instance, or within the social democratic party. This
is something which I find constantly overlooked, the challenge of how to unite Germany in its views towards Russia. And I'll leave it at that with an introduction.

**Peter Rough:**

Thanks. That's really interesting. Just perhaps to add on two comments that you can maybe think about and address, if you like, in the broader discussion. One being would a major move on Ukraine, but even if there is not a major additional military action to Ukraine, the absorption of Belarus and the motorization of Kaliningrad, fundamentally restructuring the European security architecture, snap Germans into a different threat perception of Russia? Or do you think that those polling numbers will essentially reflect what they reflect now?

And then secondly, whether or not that data tells us anything about the likelihood or unlikelihood of hedging behavior? There might be a preference for the United States and less interest in Russia, but does that mean that Germany is prepared to take on more of a muscular leadership role in Eastern Europe? But we can leave that for the discussion. I do remember in the War On the Rocks article, 'Reading Away,' Ulrike has this nice caveat where she's like, by the way, this just applies to my west German, suburban life, not perspective of an East German. I'm glad you mentioned that Liana, but with that, Ulrike, looking forward to your comments.

**Ulrike Franke:**

Thank you so much, Peter. And it's lovely being with you. And I always love hearing from Liana and Uli on these issues. This is fun. I didn't actually want to address this, but just since I'm standing here in London, I think it's really interesting to compare the German and the British breadth perception when it comes to Russia, because the Brits, admittedly here I'm talking about the government level rather than the population level, which I'm not sure about, but at the government level, the integrated review they had of national security strategy basically of the United Kingdom from last year identifies Russia very clearly as the most acute threat to UK security. And this is interesting given when you look at the map and think about the geography of where the UK is and where Germany is. Now, of course, this has to do with the Salisbury poisoning and these issues.

But it's quite a stark contrast, I feel, between these two countries in particular. But I wanted to kick us off with a few remarks, maybe more broadly about German foreign policy and German foreign policy thinking, both at the government, but to some extent also the popular level. And I guess my main point is that I have to say, I would argue that Germany watchers really shouldn't be surprised by the current German foreign policy. I think it has been somewhat badly communicated, and I come to that in a second, but it isn't really surprising. And I think this may also maybe explain why Germans themselves or the German political lead seems to be rather surprised by how the allies have so far reacted to it. We've had all these discussions about Germany not being a reliable ally anymore, et cetera.

And from what I can hear, in Berlin, the reaction is, but why? Why is this happening? Or indeed there is even a rejection of the facts. Not too long ago, Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor, gave an interview where he was basically asked about this. And he said, oh, no, that's not the case. Our allies know exactly what they have on us. And we're doing all these great things. And I thought that that was really surprising, but it shows this distance maybe between what Berlin is thinking and what the rest of the allies, in particular Washington, is thinking. Now, why am I saying that we shouldn't really be surprised by what Germany is
doing? And when I say what Germany is doing, I primarily refer to the fact that Germany is unwilling to export weapons to Ukraine, that it stopped, at least for now, the export of older German weapons from Estonia to Ukraine, to which it would need to give authorization. And that it generally, doesn't seem to have kind of the best communication around this.

Now, I'd say most of what we've seen here is basically based on the central tenets of German foreign policy, and there are three that I would mention in particular. The first is that German foreign policy really values diplomacy and dialogue, and kind of talking and communication above everything else. Basically, to any problem, international, the solution is always to say, "We're going to sit down together, we're going to talk, we're going to have a diplomatic track." Ideally, we'll use international law, international institutions, United Nations if we can, or other kind of institutions to do that. Now, totally understandable and a kind of reasonable first step, but I almost want to say that for Germany, that's the first of the last step. This is what you do and this is how you solve crises, kind of not recognizing that if you have competing interests, just talking about it may not lead to an answer.

The second important tenet for German foreign policy is the importance of economic ties and economic power as the only thing that really matters these days. And I'll just use one polling result that I thought that was really, really quite striking. I mean, 62% of Germans believe that in international crises, economic power is more important than military power. So not just generally, but in a crisis, they say what really matters is economic power. And I think there's a certain mindset behind it, which discounts the military, and I'll get to this in a second, but also makes the economic part even more important. This may be somewhat self-serving because this is where Germany and EU is strong, but I think it's a stronger belief also in the power of straight and in economic links to bring people together.

So there's this very strong narrative that throughout the Cold War, Germany kept links with the Soviet Union, gas pipelines, things like that. And there is this idea of a trading to get closer to another player, both Russia, but also the same narrative has very much been a play with regard to China, though it's kind of going down a little bit. And so there really is this belief that A: if you have economic power, you are strong and you can maybe use that. And B: if you have economic ties with others, you will be able to communicate with them and find solutions and there won't be kind of disputes and conflicts here. And I'd say that the economic realm is also pretty much the only real area where Germans may be more or less comfortable in exerting pressure, namely through sanctions. And that's indeed what we have seen with regard to Russia in the past.

And then kind of the third element of German foreign policy that I think is incredibly important that I keep explaining to, especially people in Washington, but also kind of Paris and London where this is less well known, is that for Germans, there's a bit this idea that all things military are, I want to say evil, or at least that there's a general rejection of all things military. This of course is a result of what we consider having learned our lessons from history and Analina Berbock has said, "Our rejection of delivering weapons is rooted in our history." And it even goes so far that just mentioning the military and kind of thinking and invoking warfare is seen as negative. So we've kind of turned this idea of if you want peace, prepare for war, we've turned it on its head. And we're now saying you shouldn't even talk about these things, shouldn't even mention these things, because then they may become a reality.

So I think this is kind of the, in a nutshell, the German thinking of foreign policy. And what is really important is the Germans don't just think that this is the right approach, but they really do consider it kind of enlightened. And they believe that we've kind of moved on from this great power politics,
military confrontation of the last century. In discussion, so often, the narrative really is like, oh, this is thinking from last century, this is obsolete. Someone should really tell Putin that that's not how you do foreign policy anymore. Things like that, which I find hilarious given that's the reality we're faced with. So there's no point in telling Putin that we've moved on. But I think this is kind of the mindset.

So yeah, I think I'll end here. I mean, in a way, what annoys me most and what we've seen over the last few weeks is that I don't actually think that the German positioning in the Ukraine crisis is that terrible. I'm critical of certain elements. You can do certain elements differently. But I think given what this government is actually doing, basically, if you were to communicate this better, if you took stronger rhetorical positions, if you explained this better, if you said, "Okay, we're not delivering weapons, but we're doing A, B, C, and D," I think this could actually work. I don't think that German foreign policy stands in full force with whether or not they're exporting weapons to Ukraine. But it has been really badly communicated. There has been a cacophony of voices coming out of Berlin pretty much excluding all possibilities and really limiting the foreign policy space that Germany can interact in or can act in, which hasn't been really helpful. But yeah, that, I find particularly frustrating because it really plays into this narrative of Germany as an unreliable ally, which of course, I find very unhelpful.

Peter Rough:

Thanks. It just occurred to me while you're speaking, I think one of the dangers that Germany runs is there's a very fine line between enlightenment and moralizing. And so at times, it tips over into the moralizing sphere, which can cause some heartburn. And maybe one more editorial comment, and I'll run the risk of wearing my own welcome out as moderator but I'll say this anyways, because I know you work on France Ulrich, perhaps one way of illustrating the differences as the Americans perceive it between France and Germany is that with the French, they can be rather brash. They thrash forward in their positions and expect the world to follow in behind their worldview. And in a way, that can produce heartburn in Washington or it can be even an annoyance, not to take a patronizing term, but it can create that.

But when the French worldview and the American worldview overlaps, it's a wonderful thing because the French actually do things. They'll go and die in places like West Africa and they'll really try to push forward. Whereas with the Germans, I think there's a desire for consensus through diplomacy. And so there is a reservation in that, in their attitudes, they're more held back. And the flip side of that coin is somewhat of a deference to the United States, which makes them an easier partner for the Americans than the French. But they're not always prepared to take the hard power steps that are necessary to execute some of the policies. And I think that might be, although I didn't express it all that well, something of a fundamental difference sitting in Washington, how one views Paris and Berlin. But with that, over to you Uli, for your thoughts.

Ulrich Speck:

Yes. Thank you, Peter. Great to be in this wonderful company here. And a lot has been said. So I'm the third speaker. I just want to comment briefly on the current debate. I think Germany is a good ally in this crisis. Germany has put Nord Stream 2 on the table. After some hesitation, the chancellor has said everything is on the table. So it took a little time, but I don't think that anyone can really complain. Weapons delivery, France is not delivering weapons neither. Nobody's complaining about that. Most
European companies don’t do that, also for practical reasons, because many think that it's just too late to do something that will change the military balance between Russia and Ukraine.

So I think the problem is not what Germany is doing; I think the problem is what it is not doing. And the expectation for Germany is to lead, certainly on this crisis. Germany is the most important country in Europe when it comes to relations with Russia, far more than France, because of economic relations, because of Germany's key role in central and Eastern Europe. It's the biggest economic partner of the Visegrád countries. So it’s all over the place. And everybody, including Warsaw, is looking at Germany. And I just heard that in Warsaw, there is no complaint about France at this moment, even if they are skeptical about Macron’s hyperactivity, his attempts to take on the leadership role that Germany has played in the last years. But they’re very critical of Germany because the expectation is high and they want an active Germany. They want Germany really somehow to balance Russia in this region.

And so the problem with Germany at the moment is that it's just not stepping up. The chancellor is giving commentaries, but he’s not showing leadership. He's just confirming that everything is on the table again and again. But you don't see any kind of vision, how he wants to get out of this crisis, to deescalate. There's no vision yet for a long term relationship with Russia and what all this means for NATO, security in Europe. There’s just nothing coming out of Berlin these days. And I think this is what concerns people and creates some of the anger.

Of course, you can argue that Scholz is new and Scholz has spent his whole career in domestic policy. He's a lawyer for labor law and he has been finance minister, he has been mayor of Hamburg. So yes, he had contact with international affairs, but he was never a real player in all that. And he’s a Western looking person. And I think he is very convinced of the value of NATO, of the Western Alliance. And he's just not as familiar with the East as Merkel has been. So Merkel, in this regard, has been an exception with all her background, her knowledge of the Russian language, her background in Eastern Germany. So we cannot set this as the standard. But that allowed her to play a real leadership role in Europe in 2014-15, during the first big Ukraine crisis. And she together with Obama at that time, she took a lead on sanction policy, on diplomacy, and we are just missing it this time. It's early and Scholz is getting into gear, into diplomatic gear, going to Washington soon, to Moscow and probably to another place as well. So I think over time, he may grow into that role far more than what we are seeing now.

On Germany and Russia, and I agree with Liana, you often read that it's all about the second World War and War Guild and that Germany things it owes Russia something. I think it's far more the end of the Cold War, the feeling of gratitude that Moscow, Gorbachev, agreed to the German unification in NATO finally, and that they removed their troops from East Germany. Until 1994, there were Soviet troops in Eastern Germany. And ever since then, Germany, the chancellors, the government, the political class, is very keen to keep this new relationship on track. And so a lot of the favors we see Germany’s doing to Russia is meant as a gesture to keep this new relationship on track, which is the opposite of the Cold War. So when you talk to Germans about a new Cold War with Russia, it's exactly what they want to get away of. And I think ultimately what is grounds is some kind of fear. The Germans don’t want to get back in this position where, during the Cold War, where they were supposed to be the battlefield of nuclear war, nuclear Armageddon, all this uncomfortable situation. It kind of has been moved towards the past and I think that is really what very much grounds German friendliness towards Russia today.

So this will remain. But on the other hand, we also see, I think, a great degree of unity in the west. And also, thanks to US leadership, a clear position towards NATO, European security order, a clear threat of
sanctions. Yes. Okay. It could be always better. But I think overall, we are not looking back and we give Russia some hard time to think whether they really want to move ahead with some military operations. So, yes, I agree that Germany hasn't been really filled out the role that we wanted to play and that it needs to play given its size and its importance in Europe. But I think especially we should wait, after Schulz gets more socialized to international affairs in Washington and after he meets Putin, which he didn't do in his new role yet. So he's really young as an international affairs person. So we'll see how he's evolving. And I think we, yes, should be critical, but this is not a lost case. Certainly not. I stop here and looking forward to the debate.

Peter Rough:

Great. Uli is already auditioning for ambassador to Washington. Well done in your opening statement. Let me just stay with you then and ask a follow-up question. You mentioned on the one hand the gratitude at the end of the Cold War, which is an analysis Liana also began with, but then subsequently also talked about the importance of the Transatlantic Alliance to Germany. So how do we square that circle? And I'll just give you one concrete example.

I was speaking to an American analyst yesterday who said, "Look, in 2014 when the Russians went into Crimea and began their operations in the Donbas, the Germans did not move to sanctions until after the shoot down of MH17." So, if Putin has a limited incursion to even all the way to say Odessa along the Black Sea coast, which would be anything but limited, but setting that aside, Putin might be able to exploit differences in sanction mentalities between the U.S. and Germany. Do you think that there is a wedge there, or do you dismiss that as unlikely?

Ulrich Speck:

Well, certainly. I mean, that's a debate we're having, what constitutes a threshold for sanctions. It's a debate in Europe, between the U.S. and Europe. But that's how we are operating in a democracy and there always differences of opinion. I would say that Germany in that case, is the biggest problem. I mean, this first experience of the new government of being kind of called out as an unreliable ally has also brought some realization in the Chancellery that they have really to speed up. And I'm not in doubt about the fundamental orientation of Scholz, who has always said during the whole campaign that Boris should not be removed by force. That is all almost his mantra. So for Scholz, he's very much in this kind of mood that speeches Merkel gave in 2014 in Bundestag where she really tried to rally Germany behind more than one would say hawkish or realist Russian foreign policy, but waking them up for the threat.

It's not true that in 2014 it was just MH17, that was the last drop kind of. Everything was already prepared and Merkel talked about sanctions in March, so that's really where Germany was aware of its role. And I think Scholz's principle is where Merkel has been in 2014. However, he has to deal with his party. He's not the party chairman. So he has to bring with him the left wing parts of the party. The advantage is the Greens are pretty robust when it comes to Russia, and FDP as well. So Lindner, who is now finance minister, the party chairman, tweets all almost every week about Navalny, saying that now it's, I don't know how long, but he's counting the months and years Navalny is in prison.

So this Germany has become more aware of the need to stand up to Russian pressure. It's really perceived as an attack on the European Security Order. And Germany certainly is in the camp of those who say we need to protect this order, which emerged after the Cold War based on the Helsinki 1975,
the Paris Charter, and the list on 1999. So all this is pretty much in Germany's mind. And also the understanding that Germany's business model, economically, but also politically, depends on that order, and that the US is the guarantor is pretty important. And I think that's what everybody can see now pretty much because the US is sending 3000 soldiers to reinforce NATO's Eastern Flank. There's plenty of... This is also a moment where everybody gets aware how the Euro Atlantic security space is functioning and operating. So it's a very serious moment and Germans are aware of that.

Peter Rough:
Great. Go ahead, Ulrike.

Ulrike Franke:
Yeah. So I have admit I'm not quite as optimistic as Uli in a few of those points. I mean, it always depends on what's your starting point and where do you want to go, so I think it's basically just a nuance point. But I'm not sure whether I agree that I see this kind of level of realization that what we're currently seeing is really an attack or a threat to the European Security Order, which I agree it is, and not just a threat to Ukraine. Because it does strike me when I read these interviews with German politicians, both in government, but also in the opposition, that they still seem to be playing this very much as this is an issue about Ukraine and Russia, and I'm not sure with some of them, whether they realize that this goes beyond what Putin apparently wants, really is to change the European Security architecture and kind of get the U.S. out of Europe more or less, get its NATO pushback, really change the system in the status quo that we want and rely on.

So yeah, I'm slightly less optimistic whether this is indeed the case. And I also really do worry a bit more about Western unity than maybe Uli does, because it does strike me that if there's one thing that Putin has already achieved, like if he was to turn around tomorrow and say, "You know what? I changed my mind. Let's go back to last year," I think this whole situation really would've caused lasting damage. It's difficult to say for how long, but damage to the Western and NATO unity, for which, by the way, we have ourselves to blame, right? I mean maybe the impetus, but it's up to us to kind of keep the unity.

And just as an example, I mean, I was so struck... Some of the people listening to this may have seen this, when the UK decided that it was exporting or delivering weapons to Ukraine, it sent them by plane from the UK to Ukraine. And the flight paths of those aircraft were published. And they circumvented Germany, even though that would've been the fastest way to go there, and kind of flew more over the North Sea and Denmark.

And everyone kind of jumped on this including pretty serious publications, and basically said Germany must have denied overfly rights to the Brits because they're transporting weapons to Ukraine, which we found out much later, I would say, wasn't the case. The Brits hadn't asked. It's a bit unclear why they didn't ask, whether that has to do with flight crews, whether they were worried that they wouldn't get it, the authorization, whether they thought it would be taken too long. Anyway, they just didn't ask. But the fact that everyone just assumed like, oh yeah, that must be Germany hindering one ally from flying over territory to deliver weapons to a partner, I would say, not a NATO ally, but a partner, that really struck with me.
And so I do worry a bit about, or quite a bit about the unity of the Alliance and of the West. I also think that the U.S. isn't doing anyone any favors by kind of insisting on, I always want to say too much unity. I think NATO needs a common view and a common message of saying this is where our red lines are, this is how far we want to go.

I don't think that NATO needs a complete alignment in terms of policies, because there are 30 member states and they have different strategic cultures, they have different links with Russia, which may make sense to kind of use. So I think it's fine to say this country is a better place to talk to Putin than this other country. So I don't want to be wrong. I don't think we need 100% unity. So I don't think that the US is doing everything perfectly here as well. But yeah, just to kind of put a little bit of pessimism in the discussion.

Liana Fix:

Yeah. I think we had a couple of already super interesting points in the discussion. I'll try to pick up a couple of them. I think one important or interesting point is sort of the question of threat perception. You brought this up at the beginning again, Peter. So what if Russia moves at the Ukraine? Would Germany's threat perception then change?

And I think if it comes to the German public, to some extent, Uli is right, and the German public Ukraine has appeared on the mental map since 2014, but there's still a very clear border and sort of threat perception when it comes to EU NATO members and non-EU NATO members. So I think what really would change the threat perception of Germans would be if there would be destabilization of the EU NATO members, because then it would move closer.

But what I do see as a difference since I arrived here in Washington a couple of weeks ago, is that the same sort of intelligence analysis is shared of the situation at Ukraine's borders. So every NATO member is basically through the United States, which has sort of the best information, is basically informed what is going on.

But the interpretation of whether the leadership in Moscow will move is different. So here in the U.S., the White House has just withdrawn the word imminent. It seems to be much more probable that Putin would move militarily, whereas in Europe, and especially in Germany, it still seems to be more perceived as a negotiation strategy, like a leverage that Moscow is using to gain political concessions. And this goes back to something Ulrike said before, sort of the idea how can it be in anyone's benefit to use military force? So there is a really different assessment of the cost benefit analysis that we do, and what might be the cost benefit analysis in Moscow instead of an underestimation of Moscow's willingness to use military force.

And I think this is a mistake that Germany and many others have done already in 2014. And I would be concerned if this is a mistake that is being done twice, because if it is just about negotiation results, why does the military buildup continue the way it does right now?

And the other point, I would say looking at it from Washington, the effort that is put into keeping the Alliance together is remarkable. I mean, I don't know how many hours the day has for an NSC staff member, but the way they coordinate and cooperate with the European allies, despite all the, and I have to say probably annoying calls that you get from all the European capitals. Everyone wants to talk to
Washington, then there's Brussels complaining about having not enough visibility. So this is really a Hercules effort being done here in Washington of coordinating.

And I think it is so important because this was the idea of Moscow. Moscow has basically abandoned the Normandy Format, sort of the format between Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia. And since President Biden offered the strategic stability talks last year in July, which was great, but that was used by Moscow now to jump on and to say, "Well, we just continue talking with Washington. France and Germany, there are not of any use. This is the lie that we will pursue."

This has changed. Now, the Normandy Format has continued, but Washington's efforts are really sort of also directed towards not letting this narrative of US, Russia, negotiating Europe security, this Russian narrative sort of dominate. And therefore we have this incredible effort of coordination. And I have to say despite some divergent voices, it still looks pretty good. I mean, the fact that all NATO members were able to agree on a paper that was delivered to the Russians, which is nowadays a very weird way of doing politics, all these papers that are sent back and forth-

**Peter Rough:**

And delivered to us over El País, I believe.

**Liana Fix:**

Oh, wow, yeah. And I think some others, like the Irish also got a letter, and the Finns. But this just agreeing on some principles is difficult enough, but agreeing on a written paper where you have to agree on every word that is inside and then deliver to the Russians, is quite I impressive.

So I would say I'm rather positively surprised by the unity aspect, but sort of the final question will be in the end, whether this has any real impact on Moscow. And there, the risk could be that we are sort of so proud of our common effort, that in the end, we will be a little bit like the Emperor's new clothes, if Putin decides to move in, nevertheless. Because then all our efforts, we might look good in the history books, but we were not able to prevent this.

If that happens, I think nevertheless, that this will lead to an immense jump for security in Europe. New security and defense will get a boost. Already now we have us troops in Poland and Romania. So Moscow might achieve exactly the other results that it wanted. Instead of weakening NATO, it might achieve just the opposite if it continues this way. And hopefully this is something which some advisors in Moscow layout for the Russian president.

**Peter Rough:**

I saw your quote, the foreign policy where you described the difference between the German and American views, is the Germans thinking this might still be a bluff, whereas the Americans are convinced a war is imminent. Perhaps a slightly more cynical addendum to that, I think part of the reason why President Biden was willing to say, or muse out loud at a press conference that he thinks Putin is going in, because if Putin does go in, then he can say, "Well, look, I told you he was going to go in." And if he doesn't, "It's the wonderful deterrence efforts of that trans-Atlantic front," which you were just describing.
If I could just ask one, I think, general question that I think covers over the discussions in Washington a lot about Germany, and it's really open to any of you who want to tackle it. Ulrike has started getting at this in her second point, and that is some say that Germany's outreach to Russia or it's unique relationship with Russia is a product of, in a charitable interpretation, Willy Brandt Ostpolitik in engagement style, more cynically that it wants to trade because it has an export economy that's dependent upon that. And then others say, no, it really is historical memory and legacy. Be it the World War II shadow, or the end of the Cold War, irrespective where one places the historical memory. I suppose these are reinforcing, one could say, but is one more important than the other? How should Americans think about these two suns that never set on the horizon of trying to analyze this issue? I'll open that to anybody.

Ulrich Speck:

I think, I mean, it's a mix of all that. I mean, the beauty in the last 20 years was that Germany could invest in Russia economically and be part of the modernization transformation effort. So that was in general. I mean, as the US with China, a huge market. And at the same time you had the impression that you would change the system also politically. And I think this time is over, our economic bonds with China and Russia are not necessarily any more in our political interest anymore. And this is how Germany's, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, also its relationship with China, it's business relationship, becomes a problem. Germany was very strong, after the Cold War, in into these countries and building new relationship, economic strengths is always a German strength. And now all these economic relationships are becoming geopolitically problematic because these countries are not moving in the direction where we expected or hoped them to move.

And so this is where Germany currently is. It has to revise its attitude towards Russia and China. I mean, that's a big, big process of reorientation. It takes a lot of time. Merkel was unwilling at the end to do it, even if she was tough on Russia from time to time. But she didn't really change this overall relationship. But I think what Germany, getting back to Russia, I mean, there's a German saying that is, you can have security in Europe only with Russia. And this means you have to integrate, include Russia as a constructive partner, somehow into European security. And of course, this is followed by the claim that NATO-Russia Founding Act or other instruments to bring Russia in are not enough. And that you need to have a clean slate and start all over again. And I hear sometimes that this is something that Macron, he's talking about anew European security order. And so you might also find people in Germany, I don't think very strongly pushing that, but there is certainly, in some circles and openness to that.

But I think that, to me, the challenge for Germany is to understand that we can only have security against Russia. Look at Ukraine. Ukraine can only have security against Russia, not with Russia. I mean, that's the experience of the years since 2013. It has to build its own defenses against Russia. It has to deter Russia. We also experienced that on the NATO level again. So I think this realization that we have to accept tensions with Russia, that's the big challenge for Germans, for the German mentality... Ulrike talked about this pacifist or anti-militarist world view. So we have to learn that we have to live with tensions with Russia and that we can manage tensions.

For the moment when there are tensions, we look at Washington and we look at NATO, but I think we need to play a bigger role in managing those tensions without getting overly afraid or without panicking. It's difficult, it's tough because we are not a nuclear power and you have on the other side, Russia,
which certainly is, and which reminds every week, everybody of its military superiority. So that’s a tough thing to do, but it can be done in corporation with Washington. But here, Germany needs to step up. And you had, frankly, in the last years you had some signs that Germany was stepping up. And I hope after some hiccup, the new government will also just continue on that path.

**Ulrike Franke:**

Yeah. So I would say that these ideological elements or convictions are a bit more important than the economic ones, but honestly they both play and it’s a bit hard to put a percentage on this. But I guess what I find really important is the German foreign policy and emphasizing these ideological elements. This isn’t a smoke screen, this isn’t cynical, this isn’t something they just say because they want to keep economic relations on the gas pipeline. I wouldn’t go so far. And I think this is important because you hear these people that basically say, "Whatever. They are in Putin’s pocket, they need the gas," et cetera. And I don’t think it goes that far, but of course it does play a role.

And by the way, I think what really does play a role here is the gas, right? More than economic ties more generally. And why am I saying this? I mean, A, because we really do depend on Russian gas at the moment. There are different numbers floating around, but somewhere between 30% and 50% of German gas, I think, comes from Russia at the moment. And if this stops, Germans freeze and German economic output really goes down. That’s an actual problem that people really do care about, politicians really do care about.

Other there economic trade links? Sure, they matter, but we shouldn’t forget that clearly Germany was willing to forego those because Germany has been supporting the economic sanctions against Russia since 2014. And it’s not one of the countries we worry most about. So yeah, I think that's my point on that.

And just one tiny little thing, I think it was Liana talking about some of the things that Putin is doing seem a bit counterproductive, or indeed are counterproductive, and for his own declared interest. And I think this is really interesting, right? Because he is getting quite a lot out of the problems that he’s stir up in so-called respect or meeting with Biden and the Western disarray and all of this. But if this was really about security interests, then I'm sorry, but everything he's been doing over the last few years has been really counterproductive. Because Ukraine, wasn't so keen on NATO membership a while back. I mean, 2014 was about EU alignment and [inaudible 00:56:49] to EU, not to NATO. Now, a lot of people in Ukraine want to join NATO. Same with Finland and Sweden. I mean, if Putin is really concerned, has security concerns about more countries joining NATO, everything he's been doing has really been pushing those countries he's worried about, into NATO's arms. And so one more reason why I believe this security concern point that he puts forward much less than other things he seems to want.

**Liana Fix:**

I think that [crosstalk 00:57:22]-

**Peter Rough:**

Passing it to Liana, I would just make one point, this is also a debate we have about German foreign policy towards Iran, because there's similar elements to it. The importance of outreach, a UN Security
Council’ blessed agreement, like the JCPOA, which engages the Iranian economy. I mean, what’s not to like from a German point of view, right? A diplomatic off ramp and so forth. But anyways, Liana, go ahead.

**Liana Fix:**

... Yeah. I mean, I think this is also part of the strategy right now to signal towards Moscow, "Well, you want NATO to go away. If you invade Ukraine, NATO will come even closer." Which, I think, makes a lot of sense. But I can only underline what you just said, Ulrike, the gas aspect is so important because it is really the last mantra of Germany's Russia policy from the past that is still standing, but slowly crumbling. So the other one is change through rapprochement, which died in 2014, I would say the approach. I mean, it's still applied to China, but for Russia it's over with change through rapprochement.

The other one is the Soviet Union was always a reliable supply of energy, even during the Cold War and the worst crisis that we had. This was the mantra that explained why Germany missed its homework and diversification issues. Also why we don't have an LNG terminal because there was always the idea, "Well, we can rely on cheap Russian gas." And this is only slowly changing, this is changing throughout the last half a year when we saw that the gas storages in Germany are not refilled by Gazprom, although it would be a good economic opportunity to do so, as prices are so high. So we see that this idea of Russia being a reliable supplier of gas is crumbling. And this is really the last... yeah, and again, this is counterproductive to Russian interest because this was the last argument of those who favored closer relations with Russia, that this still works.

And what I find surprising there, and a little bit, yeah, again, concerning when it comes also to the role of the EU, is how much effort the United States puts into securing EU's gas supplies. So the United States goes out there and talks to Qatar. Now Qatar will become a major non-NATO ally, just because we need gas for Europe. This is something. And I know that the EU is also talking to Azerbaijan and other actors, so it's not only the U.S. But energy security is really something where Europe should have taken care of themselves and should not rely on the U.S. now saving the winter and the cold time. And yeah, and this is something where I would argue, and Germany played an important role there because they were too slow in any of this diversification of energy security efforts, because Nord Stream 2 was such an issue. But this is something which... we can leave our security to the United States because we are not able to defend ourselves, but we should at least be able to secure our own energy supplies without needing to rely on the United States.

**Peter Rough:**

Well, we've reached the end of our hour. This has been a great conversation. Thanks to all three of you for joining. I hope those of you who are watching Olaf Scholz's visit to Washington today will consider this great background to help understand the German thinking in trans-Atlantic relations and also towards Russia and the Ukraine crisis. Stay tuned to Hudson Institute for more of our work on the Ukraine crisis and foreign policy writ large. And as I mentioned at the outset, if you'd like to see more from our three panelists, they're a simple Google search away. And I commend them to all of you. Thanks so much and have a wonderful day.