



GERMANY: BETWEEN TWO COMPETING NARRATIVES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Angela Merkel has categorically ruled out German involvement in any retaliatory military attack on Syria. Merkel said that “Germany will not be militarily involved”¹ contrary to the stance taken by the other EU countries. The United States, France, and Britain responded by launching precision airstrikes on the Syrian military and chemical weapons plants in an instant reaction. European Parliament President Antonio Tajani has also voiced concern and said that, “the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and represents a red line that cannot be crossed with impunity.”²

President Bashar al-Assad’s regime of Syria was alleged to have dropped a barrel bomb containing poison gas on the town of Douma on April 7, 2018 that killed more than 40 people.³ Germany initially decided to stay on the sidelines despite being one of the main supporters of disarmament. It vehemently protects the existing conventions of the prohibition on chemical weapons. “We recognize and we support the fact that every effort is being made to signal that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable.”⁴ It discourages the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Once the Western strikes had taken place, Merkel however said that, “the military response was successful and

¹ Judy Dempsey, “Germany’s No-Go foreign Policy”, *European Business Review*, April 17, 2018. <http://www.europeanbusinessreview.eu>

² Ibid.

³ “Chemical Weapons Inspectors enter Dauma two weeks after attack”, *The Telegraph*, April 21, 2018. www.telegraph.co.uk

⁴ Ibid.

appropriate.”⁵ Angela Merkel’s categorical preclusion on any German military involvement has been recurring historically as well. In fact, her foreign policy towards, Iran, Syria and Russia had been restricted and raises speculations on her indistinctive options. It creates ambivalence.

Russians response to the military attack by France and Britain along with the US has been relentless. Russian ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, said "such actions will not be left without consequences" and that "all responsibility for them rests upon Washington, London and Paris."⁶ Earlier, the Christian Social Union — the sister party of Merkel’s Christian Democrats — has repeatedly questioned EU sanctions on Russia and their effectiveness. Further, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a Social Democrat, and Michael Roth, Germany’s minister for Europe, have each warned against Germans demonizing Russia.

Why is Merkel accommodative towards Russia’s involvement in Syria when it is largely depicted by the Western Europe as a major cause of prolonged war? It is creating migration crisis as a consequence. In fact, Merkel, in her interview to the German publication *Welt* while referring to the decision to allow refugees free passage into Germany said that “all important decisions of the year 2015 I would make again.”⁷ Merkel has already received a significant political hit on her refugee policies within Germany as well. It appears to have driven the rise of the right-wing populist AfD party. Surveys point to growing ambiguity about basic democratic values across the continent and illiberal trends clearly afoot in the continent with particular reference to countries like Hungary and Poland. Merkel’s incertitude towards Russian interference has two particular reasons:

- (a) Her coalition with the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats is already floundering since there is no clarity about how to respond to Russian interference.
- (b) The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats are in support of Russia.

Historically, Angela Merkel has resisted blunt sanctions and has taken every opportunity to negotiate with Moscow in her efforts to de-escalate the fighting in Ukraine in the recent past. Though she supported mild sanctions on Ukraine much to the displeasure of Moscow, and immediately declared Russia’s armed takeover of Crimea to be unacceptable in Europe’s hard-won “peace order” of the past 70 years. It helped her more in assuming geopolitical leadership of Europe for the first time since 1945. Yet, she sensibly rejected putting Western forces on the ground in a theater where Russia enjoys overwhelming military dominance. She also agreed with Obama that in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “US, UK, France launch strikes on Syrian chemical weapons capabilities”, *DW*, April 4, 2018.
<http://www.dw.com>

⁷ “Chemical Weapons Inspectors enter Dauma two weeks after attack”, *op.cit.*

order to counter Russian aggression, the West will have to gamble on pitting its long-term financial might against Russia's short-term military superiority.⁸

On the other hand Merkel backs continued sanctions against Russia for its actions toward Ukraine. It in fact has turned the relations between Germany and Russia cool in the recent years. Germany, however, is highly dependent on energy supplies from Russia. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is being built by a consortium of German and other European energy companies led by Gazprom from Russia to across Baltic Sea in view of the increasing demand of depleting gas reserves in Europe. Though earlier Merkel repeatedly described the project as a commercial one, it is now taken as a highly political one in her recent declaration. Merkel has said that political considerations must play a role on the pipeline, which would double an existing pipeline's capacity to almost 30 per cent of European Union demand. Nord Stream 2 is opposed by countries such as Poland and the Baltic states for allegedly increasing EU reliance on Russian gas. In March, Germany issued the final permits needed for construction on its territory and in its waters. After completion, scheduled for late 2019, the pipeline would double the amount of Russian gas arriving in Germany via the Baltic Sea.⁹

Nonetheless, the question is: How would Germany place itself in this fragmented political gravitas and for how long? Would it be possible for Germany as a core country in the Western Europe to continue to take a softer stance on Russian involvement in Syria and Ukraine contrary to EU's policies? Already, EU foreign policy is encountered with two competing narratives alongside the lack of commonality. Merkel with her hesitant coalition government has to tread very carefully since 50 per cent of Europe's political, military, and industrial energy will get affected if it would go in different directions and would endanger the EU ambitions. Both France and Germany represent the 50 per cent of military and industrial capabilities within the EU after Brexit and about 40 per cent of those in wider Europe. Though the German military engagement has been avoided against Syria so far, the real question is, for how long?

⁸ Elizabeth Pond and Hans Kundanani, "Germany's real role in the Ukraine's Crisis: Caught between East and West", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2015. www.foreignaffairs.com

⁹ "Merkel casts doubt on Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline", *dw*, April 10, 2018. <http://www.dw.com>