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## Diverging Worldviews, Improvable Strategies – German-Russian Relations and the Syrian Crisis

by Wolfgang Seibel



This is part IV of our [current series on the Syria crisis](#)

The G20 summit starting today will be overshadowed by the Syrian crisis. Wolfgang Seibel assesses that, while Germany and Russia share a common history that has shaped their relationship as well as close and crucial economic linkages, their worldviews are incompatible – international problem-solving vs. prioritizing geopolitical interests. The question is, in light of the crisis in Syria, are German foreign policymakers in a position to influence Russian key-players?

### Wishful thinking?

When newly elected Russian President Vladimir Putin was scheduled to pay his inaugural visit to Berlin on June 1, 2012, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made an amazing statement the day before in the city of Stralsund on the occasion of the summit of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. As far as Syria was concerned, Merkel said, “Russia has cooperated constructively in the UN Security Council”. International media paid much more attention to this remark than their German counterparts. After all, Germany’s implicit alliance with Russia and China when the UN Security Council resolution on Libya came up in March 2011 was still fresh in the memories of the country’s Western allies. In the meantime Russia, again together with China, had vetoed several United Nations Security Council Resolutions in reaction to government-sponsored massacres in Syria, including the one in the city of Homs in February 2012. The French television station TF1 characterized Merkel’s statement in Stralsund as a de-facto defense of Russia’s obstructive role in the UN Security Council (“Syrie: Merkel défend l’intransigence de Poutine”, May 31, 2012). Merkel’s remark was so grossly erroneous that officials within the Federal chancellery in private conversation with the present author refused to believe that it had been made at all.

Merkel’s perplexing utterance might be interpreted as wishful thinking that to some degree is an inevitable element of crisis management. And certainly it was meant as a gesture of diplomatic politeness prior to Putin’s visit at the

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beginning of his new term as Russia's head of state. There is good sense in acknowledging, however, that it was also a sign of profound uncertainty regarding how to deal with Russia in international affairs in general and in a period of crisis management in particular. To some extent, these uncertainties may be due to the close and crucial economic linkages between Germany and Russia. However, it is rather the psychological consequences of an arduous and contradictory common history that shape the basic traits of German-Russian relationship. These psychological conditions constrain Germany's ability to make substantial contributions to international crisis management, especially when the role of Russia is so decisive and so dubious as in the case of Syria. In what follows, I will examine the nature of those constraints and the options of how to overcome them.

### **The German mindset...**

The German political class is comparatively inexperienced in crafting foreign relations due to the country's disastrous history in the 20th century and the fact that it is just little more than 20 years ago that it resurfaced on the international stage as a unified sovereign state. Russia and the former Soviet Union crucially participated in both the dark and the bright periods of recent German history and the country's foreign relations. The German onslaught on the Soviet Union of 1941 had triggered the bloodiest period of World War II with a traumatic impact on the collective memory of both nations. As both a post-traumatic coping pattern and a remedy against the latent instability of the Cold War order, a spirit of West-East cooperation and related political mechanisms emerged as a mindset of German foreign policymakers and large parts of the political class in general once the immediate post-War order, including the country's division in the middle of a bi-polar hegemonic system, had been settled in the early 1960s. The focal point became the policy of *détente* (Entspannungspolitik) according to the principle of "change through rapprochement" (Wandel durch Annäherung), a formula coined by Willy Brandt's advisor Egon Bahr in 1963, and West-Germany's proactive role in the CSCE-process (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) since 1973. The principle of dialogue and cooperation with the governments of the Soviet bloc and Soviet Russia itself, despite fundamental differences in terms of interests and values, became a complement to West Germany's firm integration in NATO and what was then the European Community as well as a core-ingredient of Germany being a 'good citizen' in the international community.

There was no reason to abandon that course when the Cold War was over, especially since the policy of *détente* had obviously made a major contribution to its end. The German political elite were well aware that it was virtually Soviet Russia alone that had made reunification possible since Mikhail Gorbachev had refrained from suppressing the peaceful revolution in the GDR by the use of force. There was, accordingly, broad consensus in support of the economic and democratic reconstruction in Russia during the Yeltsin era. Finally, it was in the very same vein that German governments – since the late 1990s – committed themselves to a "strategic partnership" with

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Russia. So it doesn't come as a surprise that some hope is currently being invested in Germany's role as a broker when it comes to an accord with Russia on how to overcome the Syrian crisis. Whether these hopes will be fulfilled or disappointed depends on how German diplomacy will act under the condition of basic contradictions and incompatibilities of German versus Russian worldviews and resulting strategies.

### ... and its Russian counterpart

German foreign policymakers have to deal with Russian counterparts who do not share their interpretation of recent European history in which Germany and Russia had been so dramatically involved. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe from 1989-1991 is subject to interpretations and narratives in both countries that could hardly be more divergent.

While the Germans worship Mikhail Gorbachev as the statesman who made the reunification of the country possible, the very same Gorbachev is being treated as a traitor and destroyer of Soviet Russia as a great power in large parts of Russian public opinion. While the domino-like collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 is being interpreted in the Western world and Germany alike as the proof that the policy of détente finally resulted in freedom and democracy all over Europe, the very same process is being deplored in present-day Russia as the loss of hegemonic clout. While the West – Helmut Kohl's Germany in particular – invested very much hope and even more money in what was perceived as embryonic democracy under President Boris Yeltsin, the Yeltsin era in today's Russia is the symbol of political and economic decay. Which in turn facilitates the authoritarian roll-back initiated already under Putin's first presidency and dramatically accelerated during his second tenure since 2012. While Western democracies have every reason to define EU and NATO expansion to Central and Eastern Europe and its stabilizing effects as the decisive contribution to the unprecedented event of the peaceful dissolution of an empire, it is interpreted in Russia as geopolitical land-taking under the hegemony of the United States. Vladimir Putin, in his state of the nation address of 2005, called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century".

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### **Incompatible Strategies**

These divergent worldviews result in incompatible strategies in the conduct of foreign policy. While German foreign policy is committed to the notion of cooperation for the sake of mutual benefits in terms of prosperity, security and stability, Russian foreign policy is devoted to the containment of what is being perceived as Western geopolitical encroachment. Consequently, Russia acts in accordance with a zero-sum game logic and prefers to apply ‘tit for tat’ tactics. German foreign policy, regardless of the actual composition of the federal government, continues to aim at the integration of Russia in existing or future systems of collective security. Vladimir Putin, in contrast, cultivates a worldview of “us” against “them”. He took the opportunity of the bi-annual meeting of Russian ambassadors in Moscow in July 2012 to admonish his diplomats to be on the alert everywhere and at every moment when Russia’s role could be strengthened on the expenses of, as he put it, the “historical West”.

Russia thus strictly prioritizes relative gains in positional strength over actual problem solving in international affairs. Consequently, Russian diplomacy is constantly forging bargaining chips out of crisis hot spots such as Iran’s nuclear program and North Korea’s nuclear threat, the status of Kosovo, the fate of the people of Darfur, the UN intervention in Libya – and the Syrian crisis. When President Obama recently said, “they [the Russians] slip back into Cold War thinking and Cold War mentality,” he was right and yet he was not getting the point straight. The more serious consequence of prioritizing positional strength over problem solving and the more disturbing effect of treating regional crises as bargaining chips rather than a challenge for international cooperation is that the problems remain intact. Iran and North Korea’s nuclear activity remain threatening, people continue to die in Darfur – and people in Syria continue to be massacred by their own government.

### **Lessons to be told and learned**



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What, according to all likelihood, chancellor Merkel has learned by now is that diplomatic politeness is the last thing that impresses Vladimir Putin. There are more general lessons to be told and learned though – lessons with a concrete bearing on the diplomatic efforts to overcome the Syrian crisis.

Germany's 20th century experience illustrates the consequences of misconceived world views. The parallels between the German condition in the 1920s and the political myths of present-day Russia are noteworthy: A country that bemoans the loss of great-power clout; counterfactual narratives portraying the consequences of one's own mistakes as the outcome of treason and conspiracy; the unfortunate coincidence of democratization and economic chaos and the subsequent preference for authoritarian solutions. Moreover, what makes Russia's political reinterpretation of recent history particularly delicate is the implicit message that Germany's reunification in 1990 was the result of Gorbachev's blundering and should have been prevented – necessarily by the use of force.

What is more important, however, is the hazardous consequences of historical illusions and the refusal to learn. Just as the quest for freedom and the resulting collapse of communism in 1989 is reinterpreted in present-day Russia as a geopolitical tragedy, Russian foreign policy conceives the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria as just another variant of Western encroachment while the brutal repression of the popular uprising by Bashar al-Assad is being interpreted as the legitimate use of force by an incumbent government. Consequently, Russian foreign policymakers refuse to acknowledge the nature of a perpetrator state. Instead, Russia continues to deliver weaponry to a government that wages war against its own people using artillery, surface-to-surface missiles and fighter airplanes, mostly of Russian origin. Unlike what conventional wisdom might suggest, this is not Realpolitik. On the contrary, it is the consequence of counterfactual narratives and the resulting lack of realism, leading to moral ignorance and complicity when it comes to state-sponsored mass crime.

### **Syria: Options of Active German Diplomacy**

Are German foreign policymakers in a position to influence Russian key-players when it comes to the Syrian crisis? This is virtually impossible to predict but one can identify the prerequisites. In a nutshell, German foreign policy must not share Russia's counterfactual worldview but it should adapt to Russia's tactical dispositions.

#### *Defying myths and counterfactual narratives*

German foreign policymakers have to insist vis-à-vis their Russian counterparts that this is not the Cold War. They should maintain the notion of strategic partnership and specify what it entails: a definition of common strategic challenges and frank and candid communication. They should also detail to their Russian counterparts that the Germans have a history in

political myth building and that they can confirm that it serves no purpose other than creating frictions and uncontrolled risk-taking in international relations. German diplomacy should also maintain that building foreign policy strategy on counterfactual narratives is particularly risky when combined with domestic political repression that inflames emotions but hinders open deliberation over the advantages and disadvantages of foreign policy options.

When it comes to Syria, German diplomacy must not leave any doubt that it acts in the awareness of Germany's own history of state-sponsored mass crime and that therefore any German government is strongly committed to the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005. The core of R2P is that a state's sovereignty and territorial integrity does not entail a 'licence to kill'. German foreign policymakers have to make it crystal clear to their Russian counterparts that, under the auspices of the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 and Responsibility to Protect, the poison gas attack near Damascus of August 21, 2013, marks a watershed. The US government's assertion that the Syrian government is responsible for that attack for gassing to death 1,429 people including 426 children is meanwhile confirmed by both the French and the German intelligence services.

This implies that the time has now come where prioritizing geopolitical interests over cooperative problem solving will have the gravest consequences, the least of which is the damage done to Russia's credibility as an international partner. A much more serious implication is that disavowing the obvious, which is the Syrian regime's responsibility for the mass murder, and to refrain from decisive action in response to it, would give carte blanche to Bashar al-Assad to continue to massacre his own people and that it would clearly signal that the international community is unable to enforce its own norms and principles even when countless human lives are at stake.

Moreover, German foreign policymakers should reject the Russian narrative according to which NATO has undermined the observance of the Responsibility to Protect when it overstepped the United Nations Security Council mandate of March 2011 (UNSC Res 1973) stipulating a no-fly zone over Libya in order to protect the people of Libya against the violence committed by its own government. The core of that narrative is that NATO allegedly replaced the mere protection of civilians through the goal of regime change. It is well known, however, that the Russian political elite was profoundly split over Russia's abstention vote in the UN Security Council that made the mandate possible and that foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, under heavy fire from the even more hawkish hawks in the Kremlin, assured, at a very early stage, that "the case of Syria will not be handled according to Libyan script". In reality, the Libyan script was written by Muammar al-Gaddafi whose non-compliance with UNSC Resolution 1973 made regime change inevitable as long as the resolution's enforcement was taken seriously.

Finally, on the basis of an undisputable applicability of the Responsibility to Protect principle and the foreseeable consequences of a collective non-response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, German diplomacy should press forward the case for a UN Security Council decision that opens the gate for constructive Russian diplomacy – a diplomacy that should be face-saving and problem solving at the same time. Germany should not refrain from appealing to Russia's pride and geopolitical role but it should make it clear that living up to the standards of geopolitical responsibility means to demonstrate Russia's capability to bring peace to Syria. German foreign policymakers should keep asking their Russian counterparts what exactly was meant when foreign minister Lavrov said, back in December 2012, the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would commit "political suicide" if it used chemical weapons. German diplomacy should point to the open window of opportunity in the current situation where not regime change but a decisive change of course in Syria still can avert military action in response to the poison gas attack of August 21, 2013.

It is in accordance with Russia's own ambitions and pretensions that it accomplishes that change of course in a credible and enduring way. While it seems to be of secondary importance at the operational level if this entails Bashar al-Assad's removal from power – and, say, a lavish exile in Russia instead of facing trial before the International Criminal Court – it would be unrealistic to expect pacification of the country with a man responsible for a war against his own people remaining head of state.

*Substantial cooperation: The virtue of 'tit for tat'*

German diplomacy must not confuse style and substance in German-Russian relations when it comes to high level international crisis management. Substantial cooperation is based on credible commitments and credible commitment is reached through action rather than through rhetoric. German and Western foreign policymakers alike are well advised to adopt Russia's preference for 'tit for tat' tactics in an attempt to achieve explicit and implicit package deals. It is about Robert Axelrod's well-known theorem that responding to obstructive behavior with cooperative offers rather reduces than increases the chance for enduring cooperation (The Evolution of Cooperation, 1984). By contrast, 'tit for tat' means to respond in kind – and that is what German diplomacy should pursue as the dominant though subtle course of action vis-à-vis Russia. The clearer that course, the stronger the bonds of a 'strategic partnership'.

It is in a variety of further sensitive issues that Germany may stimulate Russia's readiness – in the case of Syria and at other occasions – to prioritize cooperative problem solving over relative gains in geopolitical positional strength. A renewed Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Russia is in the making but negotiations are currently stuck. Meetings of German and Russian high level representatives to foster scientific and technological cooperation are being held on a regular basis, but

German students and scholars are appalled by recent Russian legislation discriminating against gays and lesbians. German-Russian partnerships in economic and scientific modernization are broad-based by now but put into jeopardy by Russian legislation stigmatizing non-governmental organizations receiving financial support from abroad as “foreign agents”. Russia is in possession of twice as many tactical nuclear weapons as the other nuclear powers put together, but so far Germany has not made this an issue in its own efforts to achieve the reduction or even total removal of those weapons. The same holds for Russia’s use of oil and gas supply to neighboring countries like Ukraine or Moldavia for obstructing closer economic and political links to the EU. And while Germany has refrained so far from travel bans affecting persons responsible for the detention, abuse and death of Russian attorney Sergej Magnitskij or other persons involved in other gross human rights violations in Russia, it could reconsider its policy in accordance with the claims of Human Rights activists and the German Green Party. This, like all the other topics, can be handled in a more or less constructive way. German diplomacy should leave no doubt that it is Russia who has to make the choice.



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