

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots. The dots are mostly light gray, with several red dots highlighting specific geographic locations, likely representing the U.S., Germany, and Ukraine.

U.S. and German Views on Ukraine

The Risks of Trans-Atlantic Misunderstanding

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- In the U.S. the debate over lethal weapons for Ukraine is quietly simmering among officials, experts, and the media. If there is a renewed separatist offensive, calls from familiar circles in Congress and the expert community will reignite the question of whether the U.S. should become an active party to the conflict by sending weapons to Ukraine.
- Berlin's staunch and consistent opposition to a U.S. policy of arming Ukraine has up to now posed an insurmountable hurdle to its advocates in Washington. Recently, however, U.S. advocates of lethal weapons for Ukraine have sought to remove the German obstruction by diluting Berlin's position behind the scenes.
- Germany will not change course because its current leadership lived through the decades of division during the Cold War, and peaceful reunification after 1989. The greatest danger may now be that Germans and Americans fail to communicate clearly with one another, even as they press a clear and united front on Vladimir Putin.

As the ceasefire frays on the ground in Ukraine, the two countries whose leadership has most determined the course of Western policy in this conflict, Germany and the U.S., could be heading for another tense decision point. Over the past eighteen months, Berlin and Washington have sustained a high degree of trans-Atlantic coordination, which has been based not only on broadly shared values and interests, but on a clear understanding of one another's views and the reasoning behind them. Until now, there has been little sign of U.S.-German divergence, despite Russia's best efforts to provoke it.

In February, Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, conducted shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Kiev and Moscow, to halt the Russian offensive and secure the Minsk II agreement. Germany invested considerable political capital to parlay Ukraine's weak military position and Western economic pressure on Russia into a deal that had prospects for freezing the conflict, while fighting a successful rearguard action in the U.S. against calls to send Ukraine lethal weapons. Both fronts of that success could now be unraveling.

The Minsk II agreement has failed to put the conflict on a path toward resolution, with ceasefire violations from both sides, and few visible steps to implement the crucial political components of the deal. Meanwhile, in the U.S. the debate over lethal weapons for Ukraine is quietly simmering among officials, experts, and the media, as if awaiting the inevitable resumption of fighting in the Donbas to set the next phase of U.S. policy into motion. If there is a renewed separatist offensive, even a militarily meaningless and unsuccessful one, calls from familiar circles in Congress and the expert community will reignite the question of whether the U.S. should become an active party to the conflict by sending weapons to Ukraine.

Berlin's staunch and consistent opposition to a U.S. policy of arming Ukraine has up to now posed an insurmountable hurdle to its advocates in Washington. Angela Merkel explained this position quite clearly at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year when she said, »The problem is that I cannot imagine any situation in which improved equipment for the Ukrainian army leads to President Putin being so impressed that he believes he will lose militarily,« before apologizing

for having to put the matter so bluntly.¹ In this sense, Germany has been at least as important an obstacle to arming Ukraine as the White House, which under considerable pressure from legislators of both parties has conceded that it is considering Ukraine's request for lethal arms. Recently, however, U.S. advocates of lethal weapons for Ukraine have sought to remove the German obstruction by diluting Berlin's position behind the scenes. The creative solution to overcoming an insurmountable mountain has been to reinterpret it as a scalable hill.

In the Trans-Atlantic alliance there are always points that get lost in translation, but German foreign policy is being interpreted in an ambitious, creative and fundamentally inaccurate manner in Washington, D.C. In private discussions, on background, and in veiled public comments, some assert that Germany would in fact not be opposed to the U.S. unilaterally sending weapons to Ukraine, or that if the Minsk agreement fails again, Berlin's exasperation would lead to a more permissive view. This stands in stark contrast to Angela Merkel's repeated position during the joint press conference with President Obama on February 9th: »I've always said I don't see a military solution to this conflict, but we have to put all our efforts in bringing about a diplomatic solution.«² Merkel's views on this subject appear to be categorical, especially in light of statements by other senior German officials.

While on a trip to Washington, D.C. in March, Germany's foreign minister said that supplying weaponry to Ukraine could trigger a »dangerous, permanent escalation« and could send the conflict spinning »out of control.«³ It is hard to find daylight between official German statements like these and President Obama's own reputed opposition to sending weapons. Yet unlike the Chancellor, the President faces intense pressure from both hawkish Republicans and his own Democratic allies in Congress, who have already passed bipartisan legislation authorizing lethal weapons for Ukraine, and whose voices and clout will only rise if the situation on the ground deteriorates. Germany will not change its views on the weapons issue. If anything, Berlin is increasingly frustrated with Kiev for

1. <http://www.dw.de/munich-security-conference-exposes-divisions-over-ukraine/a-18242456>

2. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/09/remarks-president-obama-and-chancellor-merkel-joint-press-conference>

3. <http://www.voanews.com/content/germany-again-warns-against-lethal-weaponry-for-ukraine/2678067.html>



failing to deliver on its side of the hard won Minsk II bargain. Still, advocates of arming Ukraine in Washington have been steadily walking the German position back in private, in hopes of creating space for the lethal weapons discussion to reemerge.

The result of all this maneuvering is that the U.S. and Germany now face a very significant possibility of mutual misunderstanding, which could undermine what has so far been a tightly coordinated joint position. Even if the White House inclined towards sending lethal weapons to Ukraine, it is certainly not worth the risk of breaking with the European ally chiefly responsible for holding the rest of Europe together on this issue. Sending weapons could collapse the already shaky coalition of European states that has enacted punitive sanctions against Moscow. Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Italy would be ready to drop sanctions at the first opportunity. Other countries like Greece would have long voted to remove sanctions were it not for strong German pressure. Arming Ukraine as the next phase of Western policy could be the breaking point for European and Trans-Atlantic unity that Russia has been looking for – an outcome that would abandon the real costs of sanctions for the speculative

benefits of a Ukrainian military that could impose more punishment on Russian troops and their separatist allies.

Some Americans, it seems, have failed to grasp the underlying logic of the German perspective – a logic that has made Germany a resolute diplomatic arbiter and the linchpin of European and trans-Atlantic resolve in the Ukraine crisis. Germany will not change course because its current leadership lived through the decades of division during the Cold War, and peaceful reunification after 1989. Angela Merkel stated this year, »But we've grown up under conditions – I have to point this again – where we said nobody would have dreamt of German unity.« That heritage lends itself to much greater strategic patience than Americans are accustomed to. The catastrophically destructive experience that Europe went through in World War II, which ultimately resulted in German partition, is an ever present reminder of what is potentially at stake. Thus, even if Minsk II collapses, Germany can hardly embrace arming Ukraine as a Western policy response. Ironically, the greatest danger may now be that Germans and Americans fail to communicate clearly with one another, even as they press a clear and united front on Vladimir Putin.



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