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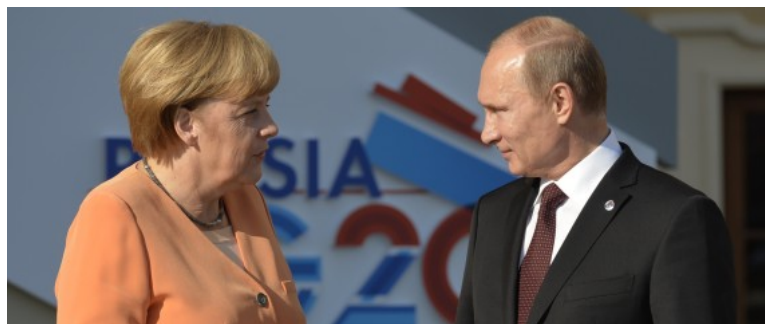


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Ukraine Crisis Has Pushed Germany to Center Stage

Posted: 03/14/2014 9:57 am EDT | Updated: 03/14/2014 9:59 am EDT



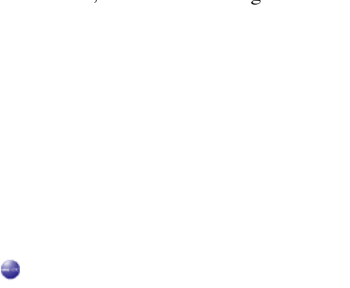
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Josef Joffe is an editor of Die Zeit in Hamburg and a fellow at the Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies and the Hoover Institution, both at Stanford. He just published "The Myth of America's Decline" (W.W. Norton).

HAMBURG -- Where is Europe as Vladimir Putin is about to pocket Crimea? Or more to the point: Who is Europe? In the past, the answer was easy. On the strategic chessboard, Europe was Britain and France, the last two nations with global interests and at least remnants of a warrior culture.

Now, the surprise. As Putin's Crimean gambit unfolds, we don't hear much from London and Paris. As they have shuffled sideways, Germany has moved to center stage. Mind you, not because Germany is so strong, but because France and Britain are so weak. In the affairs of nations, too, everything is relative. The German economy

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is booming by European standards while France seems doomed to long-term stagnation, and Britain has been coasting along below one-percent growth. Also note that Britain, America's most faithful comrade-in-arms, broke with tradition last year when the House of Commons abandoned Prime Minister David Cameron by voting against intervention in Syria.

So everybody is looking at Mrs. Merkel, Europe's uncrowned empress in the euro realm since the Crash of 2008. Which leads to the second surprise. In the confrontation with the Soviet Union, and then with Putin's Russia, Germany could always be counted among the most reticent. It was Bismarck all over again, who famously prescribed: "Never cut the link to St. Petersburg." Since the Ostpolitik of the Seventies, Bonn/Berlin has either stroked the Russian bear or refused to rile him. Indeed, the Schröder government harnessed an informal alliance with Paris and Moscow in 2002 to stop George W. Bush's march into the Iraq war.

Yet now, the shift, though hesitant and far from complete, is palpable, at least in terms of rhetoric. Earlier this year, a trio of German leaders changed the traditional tune of abstentionism, played most egregiously during the Libyan campaign when Berlin coldly refused to fly along with NATO's air forces. Suddenly, the kettle drums can be heard among the violins. President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his colleague in the defense ministry, Ursula von der Leyen, have all touted Germany's responsibility for world order and promised a more active role.

"Reticence," Gauck proclaimed "must not degenerate into self-serving privilege." Nor must Germany "hold back in the face of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity." Add to these three Chancellor Merkel who was raised in communist East Germany and holds to a more jaundiced view of Russia than the peace-and-understanding camp that runs from left to right in Germany.

Add further the idea that Ukraine is not a "far away country of which we know little," as Neville Chamberlain infamously put it when Hitler grabbed the Sudetenland in 1938. The Ukraine is right on the EU's doorstep, abutting on other objects of Russian desire like Poland and the Baltics. Also, Putin's foray into Crimea, preceded by excruciating pressure on the Ukrainian economy, was a direct strategic challenge to the EU.

Brussels had tried to draw Kiev to its bosom by extending an association agreement. Under duress from Moscow, Viktor Yanukovich, now president-on-the-lam, nixed the deal in exchange for \$ 15 billion in Russian credits. When he was deposed, Putin escalated by going for Crimea, then ordering his "Fifth Column" on the Peninsula to set in motion the mechanics of secession.

For Europe to remain pliant, as during Russia's march through Georgia in 2008, was not an option this time. Ukraine is simply too close and 10 times more central to the European balance than Caucasus republic. So Germany's old propitiatory reflexes didn't operate for long.

By previous standards, the response is actually quite harsh. It is a three-step program. The "first active measure," as Merkel puts it, is the suspension of talks about easing visa restrictions and about a "basic treaty" with Russia. Step 2, if negotiations on Crimea lead nowhere, is to ban travel and freeze the accounts of "certain persons," i.e., officials and oligarchs. The G8 summit is at risk, as well.

Step 3: "extensive changes in the relationship with Russia," which, according to Merkel, would include a "broad spectrum of economic measures," i.e., sanctions. These will be triggered if Moscow goes for the Eastern Ukraine or resorts to open military force. The penalties are couched in careful language, and they may not quite fit the crime. But then Obama's America is not threatening anything more severe.

The more interesting part is what didn't happen. Berlin could have blocked even such modest retaliation. But it did not. This new tack reflects -- what? For one, Germany is no longer threatened by Soviet shock armies ensconced at the gates of Hamburg. Second, the Kremlin's gas weapon -- Germany gets about 37 percent of its gas from Gazprom -- has become a bit blunt. The EU's reserves are overflowing, and farther down the line beckons America's gas bonanza. Third, the Germans are watching the U.S., their "surety lender of the last resort," going into retraction mode. Hence, a fresh look is needed.

How might this drama of Russia resurgent play out? Only fools would predict the dynamics of a developing crisis. What we do know is that the European chessboard has changed. Russia is back and intent to recoup its losses suffered at Cold War's end.



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Plane Search Confused By False Leads

Obama's America is difficult to fathom as it disarms and turns inward (for "a little nation-building at home," as the president keeps intoning). So suddenly, Europe -- this self-proclaimed "empire of peace" -- has to recalculate, and Germany is the best bellwether of change.

"What we do know is that the European Union has changed. Russia is back and intent to recoup its losses suffered at Cold War's end. Obama's America is difficult to fathom as it disarms and turns inward (for "a little nation-building at home," as the president keeps intoning). So suddenly, Europe -- this self-proclaimed "empire of peace" -- has to recalculate, and Germany is the best bellwether of change. "

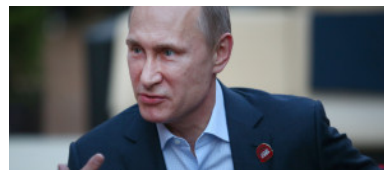
So suddenly, Europe -- this self-proclaimed "empire of peace" -- has to recalculate, and Germany is the best bellwether of change.

Will Tsar Vladimir get the point? For him, the loss of empire was the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" in Russian history. He will go as far as he can get with minimal risk and effort, as in Crimea. He is no adventurer like Nikita Khrushchev who almost brought down nuclear devastation on the Soviet Union with his Cuban missile gambit in 1962. The West will do best if it can confront Putin with the political and economic costs of his neo-imperialism. So far, Europe and the U.S. are not shying away from this test of wills. And the ruble is sinking.

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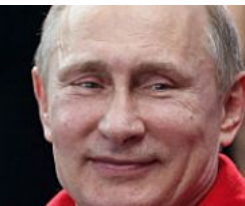
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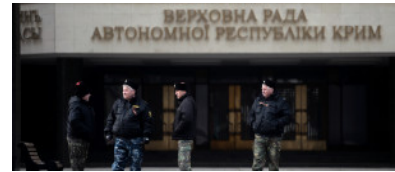
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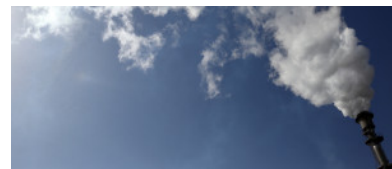
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