



German strengths and weaknesses in the Russo-Ukrainian war

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Summary

- The current war in Ukraine is primarily the result of German-Russian rivalry.
- The war is a case of an established power, Russia, miscalculating in its efforts to prevent a rising power, Germany, from absorbing a nation within its sphere of cooperation: Ukraine.
- Germany's strategy has been subtle, seeking to manage through economic interdependence an international conflict predicated upon balance of power considerations.
- Since circa 1900, Turkey has also played a key role in the German security system in the Black Sea region.
- With the benefit of hindsight, Germany's strategy has been the most appropriate to the situation, given that Russia has been completely isolated while Germany is surrounded by allies.
- Germany's problems today are not in its Russian policy, but rather in self-defeating ideologies which include the "Green" movement and economic statism.

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THE RUSSIAN ATTACK on Ukraine has activated a series of tropes about the international balance of power in Europe. Most mainstream opinion outlets have published criticisms of Germany for supposedly being dependent on Russia and threatening the European security system by hesitating when decisive action is required. The following points serve to reintroduce some facts into the conversation.

First, the war in Ukraine is primarily the upshot of German-Russian rivalry. This rivalry has been ongoing for centuries and owes much to the absence of a major geographical obstacle between the German and Russian geopolitical cores, which would serve to delimitate their respective spheres of influence. By the late eighteenth century, Russian influence in Central Europe had expanded to the Holy Roman Empire. Conversely, Prussian militarism and the unification of Germany in 1871 created a major security threat for the tsars. The first framework put in place to manage these mutual threats after German unification was the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887–1890. This treaty of neutrality recognised a primary role for Russia in South-Eastern Europe. The rivalry between the two powers has been almost permanent since Germany decided not to renew the Reinsurance Treaty in 1890, with a view to establishing closer relations with Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Tsar Nicholas II's fateful decision to declare full mobilisation on 30 July 1914, which precipitated the outbreak of World War I, owed much to his conviction that Germany was behind Austrian-Hungarian intransigence vis-à-vis Serbia. The German invasion of Ukraine in 1917 made the country a battleground for German-Russian rivalry. Later, Hitler also regarded it as a zone of major German interest.

With the end of the Cold War, Germany and the West gained increasing influence in Ukraine. Today's war is a case of an established power – Russia – miscalculating to prevent a rising power – Germany – from absorbing a piece of its sphere of influence – Ukraine. The classical realism of Thucydides, as recently revived by Graham Allison, can account for this conflict. Indeed, German economic power, with its capacity to keep markets open in Europe and sustain the European single market, is the primary reason why Ukraine has increasingly been looking westwards. As the Soviet economy proved incapable of ensuring prosperity and price stability in Central and Eastern Europe, the urge to join the vast, open Western European market led millions to vote with their feet and quit the Soviet bloc. This westwards movement precipitated the collapse of Soviet-controlled governments and led to a post-Cold War order in which former Soviet satellites and republics could prosper by entering the Western European economic architecture. Germany has been the pillar of the European single market, negotiating monetary union as compensation for France, and keeping European markets open despite Brexit and US challenges to global free trade all the way from the 1971 Nixon Shock to the trade wars of President Trump. With the European Union thus being largely a German creature, the post-Cold War era has seen the single largest expansion of any power since the end of World War II. Germany has not only incorporated East Germany, it has also consolidated around itself a sphere of cooperation which extends to nearly all of Europe. Ukraine has joined other Central and Eastern European countries in the movement to the West from the mid-2000s onwards. The successive upheavals in Ukrainian politics resulted from the growing attraction of the West and the need to reorient economic and political relations from East to West.

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In this contest in Ukraine between a rising power, Germany, and a declining power, Russia, Germany's strategy has been subtle. It is no surprise that mainstream commentators in the Anglosphere have claimed tough sanctions against Russia should have been introduced long ago. Anglo-American powers have been offshore balancers,

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more used to throwing their weight to tip the balance of power against their rivals than facing such a balance of power against themselves. US foreign policy has been based more on the brutal assertion of force than on the measured subtleties a major continental power like Germany, surrounded as it is by anxious neighbours, has had to employ. The German foreign office boasts of its successful track record when it comes to managing international conflicts predicated upon balance of power considerations through economic interdependence. Germany went to great lengths with France: in 1950, despite the centrality of its coal and iron resources to its post-war recovery, it placed them under a joint authority and offered the French access at the price prevailing on the German market. This was a more audacious political gesture towards a hereditary enemy than simply buying Russian gas, and yet this policy was the bedrock on which European integration, and today's European Union, developed. Hoping that a similar policy could produce equally transformative effects in the East, German policymakers have made extensive use of the prospect of economic interdependence to accommodate Russia peacefully. Until the war, Germany was Russia's second trade partner, supplying the country with refined equipment and machine tools.

Turkey has played a key role in the German security system in the Black Sea region.

But the German foreign policy armoury has also included instruments of a more strictly geopolitical nature. Since circa 1900, Turkey has played a key role in the German security system in the Black Sea region. Turkey controls the Straits, and since it can therefore cut the military and economic sea lanes on which Russia depends, it holds the key to containing Russian power. As [historian Lino Camprubí has shown](#), the German-Ottoman alliance during World War I was crucial to breaking Russian resistance. After the failure of the Allied attack on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1916, the economic effects contributed to the 1917 revolution in Russia and the collapse of the Russian front. Today, Russian military vessels need special permission from Turkey to join Russia's Black Sea fleet. As a result, the Russian cruisers *Marshal Ustinov* and *Varyag* remain blocked today in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is no accident that, in recent years, Germany has been the major power keeping Turkey in the Western alliance. Many have looked for evidence of German weakness here and drawn parallels between Germany's Russian and Turkish policies; nonetheless, the two have served distinct purposes. Germany's recent efforts aimed at conciliating Turkey in its border disputes with Greece reflect the country's importance for European security, as well as for European cohesion in the context of restrictive migration policies that depend on Turkey's cooperation on migrants.

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Now that Russia has attacked Ukraine, what conclusion should be drawn about German strategy? Admittedly, the attack has been a setback, and it is likely that German policymakers underestimated the incompatibility of German and Russian views on Ukraine. Anne Applebaum's excellent book [Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine](#) shows how entrenched the idea of destroying Ukrainian nationalism has been in Moscow. The imposition of the Russian language for education, the reform of the Ukrainian language to make it look closer to Russian, the orchestrated food shortages both during the Civil War and the Holodomor, were all meant to break Ukrainian nationalism and the Ukrainian peasantry. But drawing straight lines across time is easy: such an exercise could make German collaboration with France in the 1950s look foolish, too. Historical continuities last only until they don't. Russia's unilateral exit from cooperation was not pre-determined. As the decision-making process leading to the attack has shown, Russia's exit owed much to personal decisions taken by Vladimir Putin. He kept the planned attack secret even from his closest advisors, and barely consulted them before formally recognising the republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. Therefore, Russia's decision owes much to its system of personal rule. If the country had had a more pluralistic decision-making process, it would certainly not have taken such a risky course of action.

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The Russian attack does not call into question previous German strategy for even more fundamental reasons. First, given that it is the West, not Russia, that was expanding, it was important to signal good will vis-à-vis collaboration with Russia often. If the rising power wants to remain in the ascent where it is challenging an established power, it needs to act with care and benevolence. Second, this argument is reinforced by the fact that Russia is armed to the teeth and possesses the largest number of nuclear warheads in the world, more than the United States and about twenty times more than China or France. It would have been mad – in the Cold War sense of mutually assured destruction – not to do everything possible to secure an agreement with Russia and avoid escalation. Even today, this factor still justifies moving with care towards Russia and avoiding the sort of massive retaliation that could favour an escalation.

The strategy has also been a resounding success for the massive support Germany has received to confront Russia.

Third, despite the obvious failure of the attempts made to cooperate with Russia, the strategy was a good one insofar as the gestures of German benevolence towards Russia have ensured that, except for Belarus, no country has come out in support of Russia. Even China has kept its distance from the Kremlin. The German strategy of cooperation led to this isolation of Russia even though the latter has simply been trying to hold on to an area that had been within its sphere of influence, or even its territorial borders, for centuries. Fourth, the strategy has also been a resounding success for the massive support Germany has received to confront Russia. Russia has been completely isolated, while Germany is surrounded by allies who are, moreover, pressuring it to take a strong line. Last, despite numerous wrong-headed comparisons with pre-World War II appeasement, Putin has not made any lasting gains from his surprise attack. Hitler exploited the period after the September-1938 Munich Conference, the heyday of appeasement, to become stronger, annexing Czechoslovakia and half of Poland. Admittedly, Russian forces still control large pieces of territory in the east and south of Ukraine, but they are struggling to keep them, whereas by the time the Western Powers finally began to fight Hitler, he had secured the above-mentioned territories. For these reasons, even retrospectively, the German strategy with Russia was the correct one.

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Now that we have seen the strengths of Germany's conduct towards Russia in recent years, let us turn to German weaknesses. The problem in Germany has not been its Russian policy, but rather the rise of two self-defeating ideologies, which have been nearly as influential in the Anglosphere as in Germany. The first is the so-called "Green" movement, which has led Germany to close its nuclear plants and jeopardise the capacity of its industry and economy to access low-cost, reliable energy. Despite Germany being a leader in so-called "renewable" energy technologies, Germany's energy policy has led to [a 125% increase in the price of electricity over the past two decades](#); factor in public subsidies for wind and solar energy, and the total cost of energy in Germany has increased even more. Germany's energy policy has also led to [growing imports of gas](#) to compensate for the insufficiency of domestic production. The success of the "Green" ideology in Germany probably owes to the post-war German sense of national guilt: since the Holocaust, Germans have tended to look for cheap ways to redeem themselves and achieve moral righteousness.

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The second rising ideology in Germany has been economic statism – the primacy of the state to manage economic life. Statism remains less important in Germany than in other interventionist countries, like France, but the evolution in recent years has been towards a growing role for the state. With a massive rescue package, Germany has not only overreacted to the pandemic, it has also taken a direction deeply at odds with its economic policy tradition, which had consisted in limiting economic interventions in the

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forms of extensive regulation or rescue packages. This tradition helped the nation achieve the budgetary performance and resulting monetary stability that was at the root of the Federal Republic's strength. Today, the increase in money supply resulting from the massive pandemic rescue package is a major factor in the unprecedented inflation that is blighting the country. These developments do not bode well for Germany's ability to continue to guarantee economic stability at the heart of Europe.

To conclude, the attacks on Germany's Russian policy are absurd and reveal how little understanding of German foreign policy there is outside the German foreign office and a small circle of foreign policy analysts in Germany. By contrast, the twin evils – the "Green" movement and statism – that are currently besetting Germany have received widespread support and media hype throughout the West. Both have the capacity to undermine economic prosperity. Not confusing strengths and weaknesses is the key to prevailing in the current war.