



Russia–Germany Relations: Emerging Conciliatory Trends

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Russia and Germany are geopolitically too significant, particularly in Europe, to maintain mutual coldness in bilateral relations. Their cooperation and coordination is bound to have significant impact not only bilaterally but also on the continent. A fresh desire for enhanced political interactions between Russia and Germany is seemingly visible to widen the scope of policy convergence on mutually important bilateral, regional and global issues. Conciliatory approaches by the two sides have led to high-level reciprocal visits.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin have met two times in the span of last three months. Merkel visited Sochi in May 2018 to meet Putin and discuss bilateral and regional issues. Reciprocally, Putin after his re-election as President travelled to Germany for a bilateral meeting with Merkel on 18 August 2018 at Meseberg Palace, a German state guest house near Berlin. Though Putin's visit was considered as 'largely private', it has its own significance as it was first his bilateral visit to the country after the 2014 Crimean crisis. The engagements were taking place in the context of changing dynamics in Europe and other parts of the world.

Russia's alleged 'annexation' of Crimea in 2014 strained the bilateral relationship. The persisting crisis in Ukraine, increased military build-up on Eastern Europe-Russia borders and armed exercises further increased Russia's tensions with Germany and Europe. Allegations also surfaced about alleged Russian intervention in European countries' democratic processes. Multiple diplomatic spats added to the complication. Germany joined European countries in imposing sanctions on Russia. Merkel was in favour of continuing sanctions against Moscow until implementation of Minsk agreements. Consequently, their economic exchanges reduced. Bilateral trade declined from 80 billion euros in 2012 to around 48 billion in 2016, though it has started going up once again

Changing Dynamics in Europe

Domestically, Europe is undergoing multiple changes. There is weakening of traditional electoral support base of mainstream political parties, which is coupled with the rise of nationalist trends – particularly reflected in the increased electoral base of far-right parties. The cherished European norms and values are now a field of contestation. Regionally, Europe continues to face uncertainty from within over Brexit and the future of EU-UK relations.

On its relations with Russia, Europe has divergence in views. On account of deep and wide economic linkages, particularly reliance of certain parts of Europe on Russian energy, sanctions remained a divisive issue among EU members. Some European stakeholders favour engaging Russia while others intend to maintain distance from it.

Besides, the situation in Europe's periphery remains unstable. Political crises, conflicts and socio-economic distress in the countries of European neighborhood have social and security implications for European societies. No European country is able to resolve the emergent refugee problem alone. There is growing realization that only a multilateral approach with wider political cooperation and appropriate level of financial-technical assistance would contribute towards effectively addressing the challenges originating from these regions.

European countries are also unclear about Trump administration's policies and approaches towards Europe. In general, current US approaches to collective security, international trade and delicately crafted multilateral agreements are considered protectionist and even confrontationist. The US decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate and Iran nuclear agreements considerably undermined European efforts, which had invested substantial diplomatic capital in their negotiations. European countries including Germany, maintain that while the trans-Atlantic partnership is crucial; the unpredictability of Trump administration actions has caused deep unease.

Increased Germany-Russia Interactions

In the changing political and strategic environment, an emerging trend is of Europe-Russia rapprochement. European countries, including Germany, have increased their interactions with Moscow and are trying to find policy convergence on political crises and issues of mutual and global importance. The latest Merkel-Putin interactions appeared cordial. The two countries discussed the Ukraine conflict, Europe's response to the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and construction of pipeline Nord Stream 2. In contrast, when Chancellor Merkel had travelled to Sochi in 2017 in the backdrop of the G20 meeting in Hamburg, it was a 'tense meeting'.

The US\$ 11 billion Nord Stream 2 pipeline stretches more than 1200 km from Russia to Germany bypassing the existing land route via Ukraine, Poland and Belarus. Central and Eastern European countries have protested. Besides losing transit fee, Ukraine argues that the project could undermine EU sanctions on Russia. The US expressed concerns saying it would have security implications, with President Trump blaming Germany of being 'captive of Russia'.

Germany maintains that for transition from nuclear to gas power generation it needs natural gas supply. Germany and Russia believe that Ukraine can get transit fee despite Nord Stream 2. The stance of the US indicates that probably the American energy industry sees Europe as its future export market, so it is pressurizing Europe on imports from Russia. The European Commission President had said that Europeans may consider buying US gas if it is economically competitive. The Syrian crisis has been a matter of contention for Russia and Germany. Germany stresses end of crisis and reconstruction and development to assist the return of refugees. Russia suggests that if European countries want Syrian refugees to return to their homes, they should engage in reconstruction in Syria. European governments insist on Moscow sharing greater responsibility.

Conclusion

Russia and Germany have a long history of relations as well as legacy of wars and bitter Cold War memories. The two countries are now engaged in shaping their partnership amid changing regional and global scenarios. Both have been impacted by Trump's stance on multilateral agreements, international norms and promotion of protectionism. In a shifting environment, it is more prudent to engage than to be isolated. Merkel believes that 'permanent dialogue' despite serious conflicts worldwide, have potential to define the ways for greater German-Russian understanding on bilateral, regional and global issues. Putin, on the other hand, believes that political interactions and increased economic engagement with Germany, the largest European economy and largest importer of its natural gas, can contribute in shaping the West's policy towards broader framework of regional convergence. Seemingly, both Germany and Russia are trying to explore opportunities for engagement to find durable political solutions to crises in West Asia and Eastern Europe. Growing prospects of rapprochement between the two seems to be a crucial development to wade through geo-political complexities and find a common ground on multiple bilateral, regional and global issues.

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