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Is Germany ready to take a firm stand on Russia? Berlin is still in search of its foreign policy compass

Berlin–Moscow relations cooled over the Crimea crisis and caused Germany to break with its traditional Ostpolitik. Yet, it remains to be seen whether Germany implements its announced ‘culture of engagement’ by adopting economic sanctions.

German chancellor Angela Merkel outlined a tough policy in her statement to the Bundestag on 13 March, saying the EU is ready for a third round of sanctions that “could affect economic cooperation with Russia in many ways”. The bold line marked a remarkable break with the conventional German Ostpolitik, which is traditionally characterized by ‘change through rapprochement’. Still, it remained unclear whether this move reflected a wider and lasting shift in its relations to Russia.

The current stand-off with Russia showcases a conflict in the domestic debate on German foreign policy that is still in search of a compass. On the one hand, Berlin is determined to stand shoulder to shoulder with its Western partners in an international response to Russian aggression.

The events during the Libya crisis in early 2011, when Germany was the only NATO state abstaining from the resolution in the UN Security Council, was a wake-up call for the country’s leadership. The experience of being isolated in crucial questions of international diplomacy provided the grounds for a repositioning of its foreign policy role.

Coinciding with the start of the new Grand Coalition government, Berlin announced a new ‘culture of

engagement’ for its foreign policy at the start of the year. The main message in the speeches by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and President Joachim Gauck was that today’s Germany has learnt its lesson from the past and has to use its acquired maturity to shoulder more responsibility in the world.

On the other hand, Germany’s foreign policy tradition is characterized by a ‘culture of engagement with others’, even with countries that are not its closest allies. For Germany, ‘engagement’ does not equate with taking risks in terms of ‘throwing its weight around’, drawing red lines or even stepping up military involvement in the world.

After the experiences of the two world wars, Germany always sees its engagement in the form of multilateral and bilateral cooperation; cooperation extended beyond its Western partners and aimed at maintaining good relations with difficult, but strategic partners, especially Russia.

This tradition was reflected in its diplomacy during the beginning of the Crimea stand-off, which aimed at de-escalation. Germany only hesitantly joined its Western partners in pulling out of the preparations for the G8 summit in Sochi, and saw to it that the first round of EU sanctions

would not go beyond suspension of talks on visa matters.

The Ukraine crisis turned into a test case for the primacy of one of the two foreign policy approaches. Is Germany willing to assertively protect European values and the international order even if it jeopardizes its traditional close relations with Russia?

So far, Germany is sticking to its ‘culture of engagement with others’. Even after all the recent economic sabre-rattling, the main message coming from Steinmeier was that Putin should return to the dialogue with the West and that sanctions are a means of underlining Europe’s seriousness in this demand.

This foreign policy approach is backed by public opinion. A poll conducted by Forsa in February found that 86% of those Germans in favour of a more active German foreign policy want to see German engagement in terms of ‘diplomacy and negotiations’. An ARD poll at the beginning of March determined that two-thirds of Germans are in favour of political pressure, while only one-third favours economic sanctions.

Meanwhile, questions on whether economic sanctions would be harmful for the German economy are increasingly fading into the background. Lately, German business

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leaders have expressed general willingness to support the government in a possible implementation of sanctions. They are more worried about a worsening of the international political climate than about the short-term effects of economic sanctions. The traditional argument that economic interests are an obstacle for a more outspoken German foreign policy defending European values seems to be losing its bite.

The Steinmeier and Gauck speeches indicated that values and interests should not be seen as contradictory imperatives of Berlin's foreign relations, but as two sides of the same coin. A world order that follows multilateralism, human rights, democracy and the rule of law also benefits German trade interests in the long term. Gauck mentioned in a key section of his speech at the Munich Security Conference at the end of January:

“Germany is globalised more than most countries and thus benefits more than most from an open world order. A world order which allows Germany to reconcile interests with fundamental values. Germany derives its most important foreign policy goal in the 21st century from all of this: preserving this order and system and making them fit for the future.”

Russia's 'annexation' of Crimea, which disregarded international law and instead introduced “the law of the jungle” (Merkel), is directly opposing Germany's foreign policy goal, and calling Berlin's long-term interests and values into question. This caused a remarkable adjustment of Berlin's policy towards the Kremlin. Yet, it is not clear whether Germany will relinquish its traditional foreign policy approach of seeking dialogue with Russia in order to live up to its promise of a more assertive foreign policy together with the West.

The tipping point would be the implementation of broad economic sanctions together with its European partners. Berlin holds the key when it comes to the question of the broader economic sanctions that would increase pressure on Russia considerably. This would be a clear expression of Berlin's new 'culture of engagement', which defends European values, but also benefits Germany's trade interests in the long term. However, Berlin would risk a break with its 'culture of engagement with others', which is at the core of Germany's foreign policy tradition.