

# Germany: The EU's new foreign policy engine

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*What characterises Germany's involvement in shaping European foreign policy? Outlining the conclusions of a recent study, [Marco Siddi](#) writes that the nature of EU foreign policy has changed rapidly since the emergence of the Ukraine and refugee crises, with Germany taking on a key leadership role in the EU's attempts to respond to foreign policy challenges.*



The European foreign policy arena is changing rapidly. After the “Franco-British moment” during the controversial air campaign in Libya in 2011, Germany has taken up a central role in the most salient foreign policy issues that are confronting the EU. At the height of the Ukraine and the refugee crises, German leaders were expected to and indeed did take a leading position in negotiations and in formulating a policy response.

Chancellor Angela Merkel led efforts to impose EU sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea and negotiated the Minsk-2 agreement (together with French President Francois Hollande) with Vladimir Putin when the Ukraine crisis appeared to be escalating out of control. In the summer of 2015, facing a large inflow of refugees from Syria and other war-torn or poverty-stricken zones, Merkel dramatically influenced EU policies by waiving the EU's [Dublin regulation](#) and announcing that refugees were welcome in Germany. In early 2016, Merkel was again at the forefront of EU foreign policy in the negotiation of the EU-Turkey deal, which is meant to put a break on arrivals of refugees to the EU.

For better or worse, it seems that there can be no effective European foreign policy without Germany's leadership or backing. In a new [report](#) coordinated by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's role in the EU's foreign and security policy*, we shed light on the mechanisms of Germany's leadership in European foreign policy and analyse them in the context of key policy areas. We look into Berlin's policies during the Libya, Ukraine and Syria crises and in relations with Russia, the United States and Turkey. We also explore Germany's role within EU foreign policy institutions and in the context of the Union's common security and defence policy (CSDP) and neighbourhood policy (ENP).

Our findings highlight that Germany has exercised power primarily through economic and diplomatic, rather than military means. Its stance in the Ukraine crisis is a clear example of this: relying on its significant economic leverage, Berlin played the main role in the EU efforts to impose sanctions against Russia. Moreover, the German government categorically dismissed the option of sending arms supplies to Ukraine and sought a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Thanks to the long-standing policy of engagement with Russia, known as *Ostpolitik*, Berlin accumulated considerable political capital that could be spent at the worst time of tensions between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, Germany appeared as the only Western country with sufficient political clout and power to negotiate a ceasefire with the Russian leadership.

Russia's policies during the Ukraine crisis, most notably the country's violation of international law and its use of force, raised the question of whether the *Ostpolitik* tradition has been weakened or even lost relevance altogether. Our analysis shows that, even if considerable strain was put on it, *Ostpolitik* has remained an important feature of Germany's stance towards Russia. However, the cooperative approach has now taken on a stronger normative dimension, which makes full economic cooperation conditional on respect for international law. Hence, while Germany has continued to be supportive of energy trade with Russia (most notably by advocating the Nord Stream-2 pipeline project), it has also reiterated its support for economic sanctions until the Minsk-2 agreement is implemented.

Thanks to its new leading role in EU foreign policy making, Germany has also become a key axis in transatlantic relations. The partnership with the US has gained new momentum thanks to cooperation with the Obama administration and is seen as essential to the harmonious functioning of the western community. The US-German partnership is likely to continue unhindered as long as the post-Obama administration does not revert to George W. Bush-style, large-scale military interventions abroad, which are highly unpopular in most of Europe and especially in Germany.

The reluctance to use force as a means of solving international disputes has remained an essential component of German security culture. This is due both to a principled approach to international politics and to Germany's historical heritage – in particular the disastrous wars of aggression and genocide of the Third Reich, which have left deep scars on the country's national identity and collective memory.

Although the *Bundeswehr* has participated in military operations in Kosovo in the 1990s and in Afghanistan in the 2000s, as part of international coalitions, the use of force is often seen as the very last resort or even ruled out from the start. As our study notes, the German abstention from the UN resolution establishing a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011 provides strong evidence for this.

Germany's culture of restraint, economic power and its diplomatic approach to international disputes are thus deeply influencing European external action. As the EU is primarily an economic and normative power in the international arena, German leadership can be seen as a functional means to achieving the Union's foreign policy goal. Nevertheless, as our report concludes, excessive reliance on German leadership in the EU can be problematic.

Germany's economic power is largely based on its export industry and it is thus vulnerable to downturns in the world economy. During the refugee crisis, several member states questioned German leadership, particularly due to Berlin's initial humanitarian approach – which Merkel now seems to have abandoned (also due to heavy domestic pressure) by sponsoring the recent EU-Turkey deal.

Furthermore, Europe's international power projection also depends on the contribution of other large member states, notably France and the United Kingdom. Potential developments in partner countries (such as Brexit or a victory for the Front National in the next presidential elections) and in Germany's own political system (the rise of the Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant '[Alternative for Germany](#)') could result in abrupt changes in European politics and seriously challenge Berlin's leading role.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. The full report on which this article is based can be downloaded [here](#).*

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Angela Merkel with Vladimir Putin. Credits: [kremlin.ru](http://kremlin.ru)

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