

Germany puts Germany first



German soldiers hold Germany's national flag | Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images

Since the end of World War II, German statesmen from across the political spectrum have insisted that their nation has no national interests, only supranational ones. As founding chancellor of the divided, postwar Federal Republic, Konrad Adenauer chose to rehabilitate his defeated country through the path of *Westbindung*, (literally “binding to the West”), subsuming it under European and transatlantic integration.

Two decades later, the *Ostpolitik* of Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt sought to reconcile Germany with the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) through trade and highly symbolic expressions of repentance, like his impromptu genuflection at the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

In the waning days of the Cold War, as the prospect of reunification raised fears about a return of “the German problem,” Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the country's longest-serving foreign minister and a member of its liberal Free Democratic party, reassured wary neighbors that, “The more European our foreign policy is, the more national it is.”

To this day, German politicians and elites bend over backwards to portray their country's foreign policy as the epitome of altruistic multilateralism. So sensitive are they to perceptions of national chauvinism that, in 2010, Germany's president was forced to resign after making the perfectly reasonable point that his country might need to deploy troops overseas “to protect our interests such as ensuring free-trade routes or preventing regional instabilities, which are also certain to negatively impact our ability to safeguard trade, jobs and income.”



Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel | Adam Berry/Getty Images

American political leaders have long explained their country's foreign policies as a form of enlightened self-interest. Their German counterparts have gone out of their way to portray themselves as guided by enlightened selflessness. And the

election of U.S. President Donald Trump has provided Germans with ripe opportunities to contrast their cooperative, internationalist outlook with the president's "America First" nationalism.

In a barely-disguised attack on Trump's worldview at the United Nations General Assembly earlier this year, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel condemned "national selfishness" and declared that "The motto 'Our country first' only leads to more national confrontations and less prosperity." Gabriel repeated these criticisms at a conference in Berlin earlier this month, lamenting the U.S.'s "withdrawal under Trump from its role as a reliable guarantor of Western-influenced multilateralism."

Berlin's paeans to multilateralism and reproaches to nationalism, however, mask a foreign policy that is often itself unilateral and nationalist. An example of such hypocrisy was unintentionally provided by Gabriel himself. Among a litany of American policies supposedly undermining the liberal international order, he included newly introduced U.S. sanctions on Moscow that may affect German gas pipelines to Russia. Such measures, Gabriel warned, "pose an existential threat to our own economic interests."

Gabriel was referring to the highly controversial Nord Stream 2, which transports gas directly from Russia to Germany bypassing Central and Eastern Europe, thereby enabling Moscow to further entrench its energy leverage over the Continent. (The first iteration of the pipeline, completed in 2011, was denounced by Poland's foreign minister as akin to the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact for the way in which it sacrificed Central and Eastern European concerns on the altar of German-Russian relations). "Nord Stream lies in Germany's interests," Gabriel often said when he was Germany's economics minister. But it doesn't lie in Europe's.

Nord Stream is but the most blatant example of how German foreign policy forsakes its own Central and Eastern European EU and NATO allies to the benefit of Russia, an adversary that, with its seizure of Crimea, perpetrated the first armed annexation in Europe since Hitler.

Rather than apply that historical experience into a tougher policy against today's territorial revisionists in the Kremlin, German policymakers often do the opposite, citing their country's fraught wartime past with the Soviet Union as reason to

seek rapprochement with Russia — no matter how wantonly aggressive it behaves. Case in point: Gabriel called upon the EU to “initiate the first steps towards removing sanctions” on Russia pending a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine, even though such a concession would fall far short of what’s mandated by the Minsk accords.

This selective reading of history has real-world consequences. A recent Pew poll of publics in NATO countries found Germans were the least likely to support defending fellow allies against Russian attack, as mandated by Article 5 of the alliance’s charter (a key component of the “liberal world order” whose alleged destruction at Trump’s hands German elites constantly bemoan).

Shrouding nationalism behind a façade of internationalist rhetoric has long been a feature of post-war German foreign policy. Practitioners of Cold War *Ostpolitik* eventually came to see the “stability” of Communist regimes as the *ne plus ultra* of West German foreign policy, shunting aside the people-powered demands for change rising from below. By advocating the withdrawal of American nuclear-tipped Pershing missiles from West German soil — a move that would have put its fellow European NATO allies at risk of Russian nuclear blackmail — the West German peace movement of the early 1980s was, as a Social Democratic academic later confessed, “national in the guise of anti-nuclear.”

This pattern continues today. When NATO undertook exercises in Eastern Europe in summer 2016 to reassure members made anxious by Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine, then German Foreign Minister (and current President) Frank-Walter Steinmeier echoed Kremlin propaganda by labeling the maneuvers “saber-rattling and warmongering.”

In its insouciance toward its security commitments, Germany is hardly more reliable than Trump, who frequently undermined NATO’s mutual defense clause before explicitly endorsing it in his speech at Warsaw. And Germany’s strategic confusion and lack of moral clarity transcends the current occupant of the White House; by 28 percent to 25 percent Germans prefer Russia as a partner to the United States, the country that liberated them from themselves and provided the conditions for their post-war economic boom and political stability.

Germany’s paltry defense budget (only 1.2 percent of GDP, far short of the 2

percent recommended of all NATO members) and vastly under-equipped military further exemplify its national narrow-mindedness. As Europe's most populous country and economic powerhouse, Germany should be contributing far more to the Continent's collective defense. When Germany's NATO allies intervened to protect innocent Libyans from the depredations of the Gaddafi regime, not only did Berlin sit out, it abstained on a vote at the United Nations Security Council authorizing the mission.

Responding to criticism of their meager defense expenditure, Germans often self-effacingly claim that the last thing the Continent needs or wants is a Germany that's once again militarily powerful. Some offering this excuse sincerely believe that Germany, because of its past, should never again be trusted with the use of military force; but many just wish to unburden themselves of international obligations and cynically cite eternal historical trauma to justify that desire.

Today, the only people afraid of Germany are Germans. This opportunistic instrumentalization of history — whereby pacifism, not standing up to dictatorships, is the primary lesson gleaned from World War II — provides them with a convenient and moralistic alibi for shirking global responsibilities.

Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with pursuing national interest — all countries do. What's exceptional about Germany is the degree to which it claims not to.

Given its strength and the particulars of its past, this pretense has been an understandable component of German foreign policy rhetoric; the country that instigated World War II, perpetrated the Holocaust, and, long before, worried neighbors by mere virtue of its size was always going to be confronted with inhibitions, traumas and limits on its sovereignty with which "normal" nations are unencumbered.

But as demonstrated by the rise of the Alternative for Germany, the first far-right party to enter the Bundestag in decades, Germany is becoming more like a normal European country, warts and all. It's time it stopped pretending otherwise.

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