

Crunch Time in Minsk: Will the German Chancellor Bring Peace to Ukraine?

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande flew to Moscow on Friday for an emergency meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin to try to put an end to the spiraling bloodshed in East Ukraine. The negotiations lasted five hours and were held "without the presence of aides and officials" to ensure confidentiality and to prevent leaks to the media. The striking absence of a US representative at the confab, when US Secretary of State John Kerry was less than an hour away in nearby Kiev, suggests that there may be a split between leaders in the EU and Washington on their approach to the crisis in Ukraine. While US politicians and diplomats are nearly unanimous in their support for providing so called "defensive" weapons to Ukraine, leaders in Europe oppose the idea. Merkel has been particularly outspoken on the topic, saying on Monday:

"I am firmly convinced this conflict cannot be solved with military means. I cannot imagine any situation in which improved equipment for the Ukrainian army leads to President Putin being so impressed that he believes he will lose militarily. I have to put it that bluntly."

That's a good call on Merkel's part. Sending weapons to Ukraine will only add fuel to the fire. There's also reason to believe that if Washington is allowed to move forward with its plan, the fighting will intensify and spread, the US will gradually increase its military and logistical support to Kiev, and a strategically-located state on Europe's easternmost perimeter will descend into Somalia-like anarchy. While this scenario may be beneficial for the world's only superpower, it's hard to see the upside for Berlin or Paris both of who believe that their future prosperity depends on better relations with emerging markets in Asia. If Washington is allowed to take the lead and set policy, then Putin and Merkel's shared dream of a free trade area "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" will be doomed, mainly because the US will position itself between the two continents where it will extort tribute on the transfer of energy, demand that business transactions be denominated in dollars, and maintain a lock on regional security. Europe does not need a rent-seeking hegemon -skimming dimes off every barrel of oil and meddling in regional security issues-to act as mediator with its business partners. Europe and Asia are quite capable of handling their own affairs, thank you very much. Here's a little more background on Friday's emergency meeting in Moscow:

"All the talk in the Western media yesterday and this morning is of a split between Europe and the US. That is going much too far. However for the first time there is public disagreement in Europe with Washington on the Ukrainian question. Whether that crystallizes into an actual break with Washington leading to a serious and sustained European attempt to reach a diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis against Washington's wishes is an altogether

different question. I have to say that for the moment I very much doubt it.

I remain deeply pessimistic about this whole process. The best opportunity to settle this conflict diplomatically was last spring. I cannot help but feel that ... the train has now left the station...

The besetting problem of this whole crisis is that the Europeans have never shown either the resolve or the realism to face the hardliners down though it is certainly within their power to do so. In Merkel's case one has to wonder whether her heart is in it anyway. My view remains that this situation will only be resolved by war, and that the negotiations in Moscow will prove just another footnote to that." ([Talks in Moscow – a two-part analysis](#), Alexander Mercouris, The Vineyard of the Saker)

While it's clear that Merkel is inflexible on the weapons issue, she is still solidly in the US camp. On Saturday, at the annual Munich Security Conference, Merkel expressed pessimism about her negotiations with Putin and proceeded to blast Moscow for alleged violations to "the foundations of our living together in Europe"... "first in Crimea, then in eastern Ukraine." She also added that the "territorial integrity of Ukraine as well as its sovereignty have been flouted." So, while the rhetoric might be a bit less incendiary than, let's say, John McCain's; there's only the slightest difference in content.

On Wednesday, a meeting of the 'Normandy Four' (Putin, Merkel, Hollande, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko) will take place in the Belarus capital of Minsk if—as Putin says, "we manage to agree on our positions." This could turn out to be a sticking point since the terms of the original Minsk agreement will need to be altered to reflect changes on the ground. The Novorussian Armed Forces (NAF) have recently captured territory that they have no intention of giving up since it was seized after Poroshenko broke the terms of the original truce by launching an attack on the Donetsk airport in mid-January. Kiev will dispute this point, but probably not as vigorously as another provision introduced by Putin (which was leaked on Sunday by Hollande) for "a 50km-70km demilitarised zone along the front line." Putin will probably insist that Russian troops maintain the DMZ between East and West Ukraine to discourage Kiev from future adventurism and to prevent further NATO expansion. The fact that neither Obama nor Merkel mentioned this key point in their press briefing on Monday suggests that both sides are miles apart on the issue. While Obama will probably veto the proposal on the grounds that it is a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, Merkel might see the idea as the only reasonable way to separate the warring parties and bring the conflict to a swift end. (Although she would surely push for international peacekeepers to monitor the DMZ.) In any event, the issue is bound to be a bone of contention at Wednesday's meeting which means that the Obama team will have to tell their puppet Poroshenko what to say when the proposal comes up.

The question is whether, on this particular point, Merkel and Hollande will deviate from the US position and offer their reluctant support for Putin's demilitarized zone?

Why would they do that?

Because the Ukrainian economy is collapsing, (The country needs \$50 billion in emergency funding.) the currency is in freefall (The hryvnia lost half its value just last week) and the Ukrainian army is at the brink of annihilation. At present, a small army of 7,000 Ukrainian regulars is holed-up in a strategic railway-hub called Debaltsevo in east Ukraine. The troops have been cut off from their supply-lines and are surrounded by heavily-armed battle-

hardened veterans of the NAF who are tightening the loose by the day. The impending bloodbath could take place at any time.. According to the Financial Times, a defeat in Debaltsevo could be a “breaking point” in the war in Ukraine. “At stake is control over regional railway shipments of coal mined in rebel-held territory on which Ukraine’s electricity generators and export-oriented steel sector depend.” The situation is desperate and likely to get worse. Kiev is very close to losing the war in the east. The losses to the army, the economy and to morale are bound to be devastating.

So time is running out for Poroshenko and his crew. If Merkel doesn’t push through a peace agreement on Wednesday—even one she doesn’t like or that may be politically unpopular—then hostilities will resume, the hawks will get the upper hand, the Obama administration will send weapons and trainers to the theatre, and the US will use the deepening crisis as an excuse to seize the initiative and take things to the next level, a level that will inflict so much damage on the Donbass, that Putin will be forced to deploy troops to protect Russian-speaking people in the conflict area. That will transform a manageable proxy war on the eastern perimeter into a full-blown confrontation between nuclear-armed adversaries.

Merkel must see the danger or she wouldn’t have rushed off to Moscow last Friday. But seeing isn’t enough. Something has to be done. What’s she going to do about it? Will she use her influence to muscle through a peace deal that will keep events from spinning out of control or will she sit on her hands and let the opportunity pass her by?

Carpe diem, Angela. Carpe diem.

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