

Military History, Beyond the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact: Germany and the Geopolitical Balance of Power

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*The recent release by the Russian authorities of the Soviet copy of the infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact signed in August 1939 on behalf of Germany and the Soviet Union by **Joachim von Ribbentrop** and **Vyacheslav Molotov** has led to a bout of rancorous discussion. In the West, the agreement is largely perceived as having had dire consequences for the peace in Europe, while in Russia it is largely seen as a last ditch attempt at staving off war. But while each perspective has its merits, analyses that is limited only to explaining the causes of the Second World War as well as which army played the greater role in defeating Nazi Germany miss a wider and enduringly crucial picture; this is the centrality of Germany to any calibration of the geopolitical power balance.*

The Nazi-Soviet Pact was an agreement which provided that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union would not attack the other or support aggressive third parties. It also provided each signatory state with spheres of influence. One week later, Hitler attacked Poland, occupying the western and central parts of the country, while the Soviet Union took over the eastern part. Hitler would later turn his military westward while Stalin would annexe the Baltic States.

The case for the pact as having served as a malign force in disturbing the peace among European nations would appear to be an open and shut one. The argument is that it enabled Hitler to attack and conquer much of Western Europe and thus start a colossal conflagration that would consume millions of lives. However, a compelling counter-argument to this from the Russian side posits that Stalin was forced into the unholy alliance simply because the Munich Agreement signed in September 1938 by Hitler and British **Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain** had the motive of encouraging Hitler to embark on his anti-Bolshevik crusade.

It is, after all, widely accepted that many western politicians -and not only those who were right-wing conservatives- saw the Nazi regime as a bulwark against the spread of Soviet communism. Chamberlain's declaration of "peace in our time" did not objectively include the Soviet Union whose western lands, Hitler regarded with envious eyes.

There is also evidence presented in a recently published Russian book, in which the Russian copy of the Nazi-Soviet Pact is reproduced, that Stalin had sought an anti-Nazi alliance with Britain and France, but that his overture was rebuffed. As revealed in 2008, the offer to move over a million troops to the border of Germany to deter Hitler was made in Moscow by senior military officials of the USSR to a visiting delegation of French and British officers two weeks before the Wehrmacht attacked Poland.

The truth is that the Western liberal democracies on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other, were trying to shift Nazi aggression onto the other side.

The back and forth was of course set against the background of the recent commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings from which the Russians were not invited. The not unreasonable assertion that the Soviet Union had borne most of the burden in defeating Nazi Germany was met by claims that the Soviets received massive material aid from the West which enabled them to resist the German invaders.

And while most serious scholars of military history would pinpoint the Soviet defeat of the Sixth Army and other axis armies in Stalingrad as the turning point in the war which set in motion the inexorable process of Germany's defeat, the atmosphere among many Western analysts was not conducive to anything other than memorialising the sacrifice of allied soldiers who succeeded in the perilous venture of establishing a bridgehead in occupied Europe after the Normandy landings.

The point of this article is to put to one side the differing interpretations of the events which primed Nazi Germany to go on the attack as well as arguments pertaining to which side did the most to defeat Hitler and his axis allies, and instead to focus on the centrality of the German nation to the determination of the balance of power between the Western alliance and the Eurasian power of Russia.

The Cold War which followed Germany's defeat after World War 2 as well as the present Cold War which has arisen since the emergence of Vladimir Putin place Germany as a focal point of the tension between east and west.

The German nation, which lost a great amount of territory, was divided into two countries because the Western allies and the Soviet Union realised that having a regenerated Germany in one of the post war camps would have given a monumental strategic advantage to one side. This issue remains at the heart of the contemporary east-west divide because a key condition; indeed, arguably the preeminent proviso which enabled the leaders of the old Soviet Union to consent to German reunification and German membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was the promise given by the leaders of the West not extend NATO "one inch eastward".

This promise was not kept by the American-led Atlantic alliance which since the administration of President Bill Clinton has persisted in expanding NATO to Russia's border. Guided respectively by the Wolfowitz Doctrine and the Brzezinski Doctrine, the United States has in the period since the ending of the ideological-based Cold War sought to impose a historically unprecedented form of global hegemony.

By this is meant that the ends sought by the brutal and perverted philosophy of Nazi Lebensraum was constricted in terms of the amount of territorial conquest and control of other nations. This was implicit in Hitler's offer to Britain to keep its empire in return for giving Germany a "free hand in the east". The other belligerent of World War 2, Japan sought a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, imperialist by design, but not the global dimension suggested by the forged Tanaka Memorial.

But American worldly hegemony has its blue print in its domination of the global institutions of finance, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which were created after the post-war Bretton Woods agreement. Furthermore, the U.S. dollar emerged

as the de facto world reserve currency.

The “end of history”, as Francis Fukuyama infamously put it, occasioned by the fall of the Soviet Union and its dominion states in eastern Europe, meant that the free-market economic system and liberal democracy had won out in a dialectical struggle with Marxism. This would, he prophesied mean that free-market orientated liberal democracies would become the world’s “final form of human government.”

This line of thinking fell neatly into place in the new world order envisioned by those who believed in the strand of “American exceptionalism” that embraces the spread of American values by force of arms and those who subscribed to the ideology of neoconservatism and its Trotskyite-like fixation on a form of “permanent revolution” involving the export of the American economic and political system through the instrument of the American armed forces or its proxies.

Thus was born a new age of American militarism. The Wolfowitz Doctrine insisted on imposing the will of the United States even at the cost of abrogating multi-national agreements, while the Brzezinski Doctrine made a specific case for preventing the rise of a Eurasian power that would challenge Anglo-American supremacy. The latter doctrine explicitly sought to intimidate Russia to a state of military impotence, while creating the circumstances whereby Russia -preferably a balkanised Russian state- would service the energy and resource needs of the West.

Where does Germany fit into this? The projection of American military power under the auspices of NATO and the use of the European Union (EU) by the United States to provide legitimacy for a succession of disastrously implemented interventions has exposed the necessity for restraint on the desire for the imposition of a unipolar model of an international order insisted upon by the United States to be its historical right.

Apart from providing it with the legal cover for illegal military endeavours, the EU has been used by the United States to apply pressure on other countries through the imposition of trade sanctions even when such a course of action has been to the disadvantage of members states such as Germany. For instance, the United States provided covert support for the coup which forced out the democratically elected government of Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine and brought to power ultranationalist, Russophobic parties who proceeded to threaten Russia’s vital strategic interests in the Black Sea. The not unreasonable Russian reaction of annexing Crimea after a plebiscite was construed by the United States as an act of aggression which necessitated a range of sanctions including, at US insistence, German sanctions; measures which many German business leaders opposed because they harmed the German economy.

Yet, for all its influence as the dominant nation within the EU, Germany has been unable to assert itself by putting a leash on American aggression. There are many reasons for this, not least of which is that after defeat in two world wars, Germany has remained somewhat in the thrall of the Anglo-American world. The presence of 32,000 American troops who are permanently based there, albeit reduced from the Cold War figure of 300,000, is officially part and parcel of the business of conducting a mutually beneficial military alliance. But for a sizeable segment of the German population, their continued deployment, far from providing an assurance of national protection, bears the aura of an army of occupation; a reminder of Germany being somewhat of a dominion state of the American empire.

The lack of assertion in Germany's political leaders stem from an erosion of a form of national self-esteem that is based on fears that an assertive Germany may lay the seeds for a resurgence of German militarism. They are also conscious of the doubts which persist among allies. Margaret Thatcher, after all, was not initially in favour of German reunification because of this age-old fear. This fear, deeply rooted in the German psyche, was addressed by Goethe, who in the Napoleonic age cautioned his countrymen about their enthusiastic embrace of nationalism and militarism. He predicted that Germany would come to disaster if they followed that path and so called on them to invest in culture and the spirit: in other words, conquer the world with their talents in music, philosophy, trade and the sciences.

Today, shorn of its martial fixation and possessing the fourth largest economy in the world, Germany would appear to be firmly on the path of which Goethe advised. Many are inclined to view the EU as a German-dominated organisation, something made all the more glaring given the decline of French economic power. Germany imposes its values on economically struggling EU states by diktat. It is a state of affairs which some cynically view as the culmination of the 'long desired' German 'conquest' of Europe.

Yet, while Germany has forsworn the trappings and the burdens of militarism, some may lament that it does not use its economic might as the basis of tempering the excesses of the American empire. One way of achieving this is to manifest a greater resolve at casting away its inhibition at defying the malign enterprises pursued by the United States so far as consenting to the illegal military adventures pursued by the American, as well as the imposition of sanctions on those perceived to be the enemies of the United States.

Unfortunately, Germany has wilted under American pressure to maintain sanctions against Russia, and while a signatory to the Five Plus One Agreement with Iran, it has begun to buckle in regard to the Trump administration's sanctions against Iran after Washington abrogated on the treaty. Many larger German commercial concerns have ceased trading with Iran as a result of the threats issued by the United States that they would face repercussions.

There have been instances when the Germans have tried to act independently of American machinations. For instance, through the Minsk Accord of 2015 which was jointly brokered by Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Francois Hollande. It was a worthy effort aimed at creating the circumstances for peace between the warring sides in the Ukraine, but one whose failure owed a great deal to the opposition of the United States.

American animus towards Russia, something developed after the replacement of the pliant Boris Yeltsin by Vladimir Putin, poses a grave threat to world peace. It also serves as an impediment to the German national interest. Not only does NATO's expansion eastwards, renegeing of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and deployment of a missile shield system imperil Germany, the United States has actively sought to impede the development of Nord Stream 2, the second offshore natural gas pipeline emanating from the Russian mainland which has its entry point to western Europe in Germany. The threat of sanctions issued in June 2019 by U.S. President Donald Trump against Russia is redolent of the sort of paternalism practised by the Americans after the ending of the Second World War. In the words of Trump:

We're protecting Germany from Russia, and Russia is getting billions and billions of dollars in money.

These followed a letter writing campaign conducted in January 2019 by the US ambassador to Germany who urged the companies involved in the project to stop their work or face the possibility of sanctions.

The American claim -shared by some eastern European countries- that the project would increase Russian influence in the region, is one which Germany's political and business leaders feel does not outweigh the benefits that will accrue once it is operational.

Nord Stream notwithstanding, the development of closer ties between Germany and Russia in a much broader sense is one which provides an existential threat of sorts to different parties. For the Anglo-American world, it would represent the beginning of the process whereby Germany jettisons out of their orbit of influence; severely weakening the basis by which British and American empires have sought to counterbalance and contain the rise of any Eurasian-centred power. The French may view it as a dynamic which would shift German focus away from Franco-German relations, which of course was at the heart of the creation of the EU project. The strengthening of Russo-German relations is also viewed with alarm by those nations in eastern Europe who have historically suffered from the projection of Russian and German power, not least of which relates to the implementation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

Fears over an emerging power alliance were heightened in some quarters by the appearance of an [article](#) written in 2017 by a member of the Russian Izborsky Club. It called for a new geostrategic alliance between Germany and Russia which would serve as an updated version of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact by re-dividing eastern Europe between both countries.

Formed in 2012, and composed of a group of Russian intellectuals, the Izborsky club is a think-tank which disseminates strongly nationalist and anti-liberal views. The level of influence that it has in the Kremlin is something which is disputed. But the thoughts of Aleksandr Gaponenko, the head of the Baltic section of the club, were seized upon by anti-Russian think-tanks and media as evidence of what they believe would be the logical conclusion of a modern German-Russian axis.

Entitled "A Union of Russia and Germany", Gaponenko argued that such an alliance would allow Germany to "recover" the Sudetenland, Silesia, East Prussia, Poland, Hungary and Romania as well as portions of Ukraine and Lithuania. Russia, on the other hand would take over the rest of the Baltics, Transdnistria and establish a protectorate over Belarus.

How such a fantastical enterprise could be made practicable was not addressed by Gaponenko.

What is more realistic and would be of benefit to the region is if Germany served as a bridge between the West and Russia; in the process diffusing the manufactured tension developed by successive administrations of the United States who are prodded along this path by the self-serving interests of its military industry and national security apparatus.

What is needed is a radical change in the political culture of Germany, one which has been for decades dominated by subservience to the United States, which is insistent on maintaining a form of global hegemony in regard to which Russia, China and Iran offer the last resistance.

Such a transformation of attitude and action through a new-style detente would not only serve German interests, but also the interests of the wider community of nations.

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