

Pipeline Geopolitics: The Russia German Nord Stream Strategic Gas Pipeline

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In the postwar history of the Federal Republic, German Chancellors tend to disappear once they pursue political goals that deviate from the Washington global agenda too much. In the case of Gerhard Schroeder, it involved two unforgivable “sins.” The first was his open opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The second, far more serious strategically, was his negotiations with Russia’s Putin to bring a major new natural gas pipeline directly from Russia, bypassing then-hostile Poland, to Germany. Today the first section of that Nord Stream gas pipeline has reached the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern coastal town of Lubmin on the Baltic Sea, making Lubmin into a geopolitical pivot for Europe and Russia.



Gerhard Schroeder in effect owed his job to the quiet but influential backing of US President Bill Clinton who, according to our German SPD sources, demanded that a Schroeder Red-Green coalition, if elected, support a US-NATO war against Serbia in 1999. Washington wanted to end the era of Helmut Kohl. By 2005, however, Schroeder was far too “German” for Washington, and, reportedly, the Bush Administration turned its considerable attention to backing a successor.

His last act as Chancellor was to approve a giant gas pipeline from Russia’s port of Vyborg near the Finnish border to Lubmin, called Nord Stream. On leaving office, Schroeder became chairman of Nord Stream AG, a joint venture between Russia’s state-owned Gazprom and German companies E.ON-Ruhrigas and BASF-Wintershall. He also increased his public critique of US foreign policies, accusing US-client state Georgia of initiating the 2008 war against South Ossetia.

In 2006 Poland’s neo-conservative Foreign Minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, a close Washington ally, compared the Nord Stream consortium to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union Washington policy has been to cultivate Poland as a wedge to block closer Russian-German economic and political cooperation, including the decision to station US missile defense and now Patriot missiles in Poland, aimed at Russia.

This month, despite ferocious political opposition from Poland and other countries, Schroeder’s Nord Stream project completed its first major goal when the first of two pipeline strings reached land at Lubmin, exactly on schedule. When the second string is landed later this month and the pipeline begins operation in late 2011, it will be the world’s biggest subsea gas pipeline, carrying 55 billion cubic metres of gas throughout Europe each year. The subsea route goes through the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Germany, avoiding Poland and the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

From Lubmin, which will be a transfer station, the OPAL pipeline will go 470 kilometers through Saxony to the Czech border. Other western pipeline routes will deliver Russian gas via existing pipe to Holland, France and to the UK, significantly increasing the energy links between the EU and Russia, a development not greeted in Washington. France’s GDF Suez, formerly Gaz de France, just bought a 9% share in Nord Stream AG and Holland’s gas infrastructure company N.V. Nederlandse Gasunie has 9%, giving the project broad EU participation, a major geopolitical accomplishment for the Putin-Medvedev government in face of strong US opposition. Nord Stream now has long-term gas supply agreements to supply gas to Denmark, the UK, France, Netherlands and Belgium as well as Germany.

North and South Energy Streams

Gazprom is also advancing a second major gas pipeline project, South Stream, to bring gas from Russia's south coast under the Black Sea to Bulgaria, eventually ending up in Italy. On July 7, the Bulgarian government agreed after long negotiations to participate in the South Stream Gazprom project.

South Stream gas pipeline will transport Russian gas to western Europe, bypassing Ukraine, where Washington in recent years has expended considerable effort to push the country into an anti-Russian pro-NATO position. As a remnant from the Soviet era when the economies of the two countries operated as an integrated entity, most Russian gas pipelines transited Ukraine to the west, leaving Moscow highly vulnerable when a US-backed "Orange Revolution" in January 2005 brought Washington's candidate, Viktor Yushchenko to power on a pro-NATO anti-Moscow platform. Recent elections there have eased tensions between Moscow and Kiev considerably as the new President, Viktor Yanukovich, has moved Ukraine to a more neutral stance between Moscow and NATO, keeping ties to both. The offshore part of the South Stream gas pipeline, jointly operated by Russia's Gazprom and Italy's ENI, will run from Russia's mainland under the Black Sea to the Bulgarian coast. Under the new agreement with Bulgaria, pre-existing gas pipelines through Bulgaria will be used for the transit.

Washington has put major pressure on EU countries as well as Turkey to build an alternative to Russia's South Stream gas line, called Nabucco, that would eliminate Russia. To date Nabucco has little backing in the EU and insufficient sources of gas to fill the pipeline.

Completion of South Stream would weld a major geopolitical bond between the countries of the EU, Central Europe and Russia, something that would represent for Washington a geopolitical nightmare. US policy since World War II has been to dominate western Europe first by fanning the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and after 1990, by extending NATO eastwards to the borders of Russia. An increasingly independent western Europe turning east rather than across the Atlantic, could spell a major defeat for continued US "sole Superpower" domination.

So, unwittingly, the lovely seaside resort town of Lubmin in northeastern Germany de facto has become a major pivot of the geopolitical drama between Washington and Eurasia whether its citizens realize or not.

German Russian

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