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## #4: Is Germany spoiling the resilience of the liberal world order?

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Germany has faced harsh [criticism](#) lately due to its ambiguous position on Russia's military build-up near Ukraine and quickly deteriorating security situation in Eastern Europe. Russia's recent actions represent a dangerous attempt to undermine the post-Cold War liberal order established on the European continent. Germany's ambivalence towards the recent events is therefore seen by many observers as endangering European security. Has Berlin really become a challenge to the maintenance of the liberal world order? Below we unpack the reasons behind Germany's reluctant policy towards Russia and discuss to what extent those endanger the resilience of liberal order in Europe.

### What is a [resilient] liberal world order?

In simple terms, liberal world order refers to a peaceful, inclusive, open and rule-based global political system that transcends [the traditional balance-of-power politics and the concepts of spheres of influence](#). Over the past three decades, the liberal order expanded in much of Europe, but recently Russia – a major illiberal power in Europe - started challenging its norms. Russia's recent military build-up of some 100,000 [Russian troops at the Ukrainian border](#) could quickly escalate into a major expansionist military campaign in Europe. This would violate several key principles of liberal world order, which are also enshrined in the [UN Charter](#). They [include](#) sovereign equality of states, peaceful resolution of disputes, self-determination of peoples, and non-intervention.

Resilience in the context of international orders refers to the "[ability \[...\] to predict and identify challenges in world politics, manage them, and overcome and bounce back from any adverse consequences and effects.](#)" A resilient approach to liberal world order would then require continuous adaptation to changing global dynamics, and an effective pushback against authoritarian actors challenging the individual components of or undermining the entire liberal world order. In practical terms, this would presuppose readiness to impose a strong deterrence against the spoilers of the liberal world order. This would be in compliance with the European Union Global Strategy, which relies on diplomacy paired with restrictive



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measures and bets on smart sanctions to play a pivotal role in "deterrence, conflict prevention and resolution."

Formally, the current German government, like its predecessors, supports liberal world order and is committed to upholding it. The latest coalitional agreement refers to "a rules-based international order" and "multilateral cooperation in the world," which involves "systemic competition with authoritarian states and dictatorships". This echoes the EU's language which uses the term of "rules-based global order" but also "European Security Order." The latter is grounded in the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter, and is based on the elements of "the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of states, the inviolability of borders and the peaceful settlement of disputes."

### One of a kind: the German Culture of National Security

Yet, while formally upholding the liberal world order seems to be enshrined in Germany's foreign policy thinking, its practical implementation is exposed to many limitations. Some of them seem to be rooted in [the German Culture of National Security](#), which represents a unique blend of militant pacifism, anti-militarism, rejection of "normalcy", as well as passivity and restraint in international affairs. Germany's continued [refusal](#) to supply Ukraine with defensive equipment is being justified by Berlin's [historical responsibility](#). Germans also tend to have a "historical guilt and gratitude" towards Russia. However, the same courtesy is not extended to Ukraine which suffered equally from the Nazi regime as a part of the Soviet Union and is being threatened by the resurgent Russia. This is why Germany is often accused of historical opportunism – or using historical guilt as "a pseudo-moralist political bingo chip" to justify inaction on security and military-related matters.

Formally speaking, while German regulations are quite restrictive regarding the military exports in conflict-ridden countries, they do allow an exception based on the [Article 51](#) of the UN Charter, which underlines "the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations" – for which Ukraine could qualify. Additionally, there is Germany's past record of arms exports, for instance to [Egypt](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) – two countries that were recently involved in domestic or external conflicts and crises – which raises more questions about to what extent Germany in reality practices what it preaches.

Furthermore, German strategic culture does not only impair the country's ability to be more active in the security and military area. Some [scholars](#) even argue that "strategic thinking" and "geopolitical power politics" is "completely alien" to Germany's political class. That is why Germany often suffers from leadership qualities, especially when it comes to the geopolitical competition with illiberal powers. When a strong deterrent and a firm positioning is needed Berlin's first reflex seems to be to fold because "power politics is bad" and only dialogue can solve a crisis.



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## It's the economy, stupid!

Part of Germany's Culture of National Security is also a dominance of economic thinking in foreign policy that often takes precedence over a more strategic approach. From this perspective, very often, the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) is blamed for Germany's ambiguity towards liberal world order and accommodating approach towards illiberal great powers derived from Germany's economic and energy interests. It was a recent manifestation of the prevalence of economic thinking when the Social-Democrat chancellor Olaf Scholz called the controversial Nordstream pipeline a "purely private-sector project" and the party's secretary general urged not to mix it up "with responses to Russia's territorial controversies with Ukraine and human rights issues."

The economic mindset is not a one-party problem, however. Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is equally complicit in Germany's flawed Russia (and China) policy. It is worth noting that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was both initiated and finalized under Angela Merkel's chancellorship. Before ending her term in office, Chancellor Merkel made sure the US waived the sanctions, which [shook](#) faith in Germany among the Eastern European [member states](#) and [partners](#) once again. Even after Merkel's departure from CDU the new leadership under Friedrich Merz still sticks to economic foreign policy, describing the potential exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT system as an "atomic bomb for the capital markets". To summarize, while the post-Cold War Russia-biased Ostpolitik was shaped by the SPD, it was equally embraced by the CDU, and in terms of Russia policy, the gap is not that big between the two largest parties of Germany.

Not all parties in Germany follow an economic mindset, however. It is somewhat of a paradox that it is the Greens - a party with progressive and anti-militarist roots - who [defy](#) Germany's cuddly approach towards [the bulwarks of international authoritarianism](#). The Greens have been outspoken critics of the Nordstream pipeline and supported a more hawkish approach towards Russia and China. It was also a Green politician, Robert Habeck, now the vice chancellor and the "superminister" of economy and climate action, who for the very first time broke the big German taboo and [raised](#) the issue of supplying weapons to Ukraine in May 2021. The idea was quickly revoked, however, and the acting Green Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock recently [ruled out](#) arms deliveries to Ukraine.

## Beyond Geopolitics

Germany certainly is a weak actor when it comes to defending liberal world order in the areas of security and military. Yet, Berlin often manages to substitute its lack of agency in these areas by having a more formidable strategy in developmental, economic, trade and other sectoral areas of low-level politics. This dynamic is also replicated in Germany's relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and Central and Eastern European states. Germany has been successfully boosting the state and societal resilience of Ukraine and Georgia - also against Russia's increasing military assertiveness. In terms of financial support only, since 2014, Berlin provided [EUR 1,8 billion](#) to Ukraine, and [EUR 1 billion](#) - to Georgia. Moreover, while Germany indirectly undermined Ukraine's energy transit function by building direct gas pipelines to Russia, [German leadership](#) was absolutely crucial in galvanizing sanctions



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against Russia in 2014. Similarly, the Berlin-backed Normandy Format and the Mink Process, while imperfect, stabilized the conflict in Ukraine at least for some time, and likewise, the Berlin-backed civilian CSDP mission in Georgia has been providing a minimal deterrence against a potential full-scale aggression from Russia. Germany was even more sound in establishing effective deterrence mechanisms in the Eastern NATO member states as Berlin has been leading [NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Lithuania](#) with 620 soldiers stationed as of February 2021.

However, as recent dramatic escalation at Ukraine's borders has revealed, none of this is enough to mitigate the major risks to European security and the principles of liberal world order. Therefore, the question arises whether Berlin is ready to pay higher political and economic costs to defend the liberal world order in Europe.

### **Is Germany committed to a liberal world order?**

Taking cultural and societal limitations into account, one could assume that Germany is not a spoiler of liberal world order by choice. Despite the well-deserved criticism, the political class in Germany does not seem to be interested in undermining the liberal world order and its components. However, German actions unintentionally contribute to dynamics that can result in weakening the liberal order and can embolden the illiberal powers to revamp their key principles. In Europe they can result in weakening multilateralism, undermining sovereignty as a norm, and re-legitimizing the spheres of influence. What is more, Germany's current ambiguity strengthens its image among Eastern European states as an unreliable partner, not only in partner countries but also among EU member states. This would further weaken the actorness of the EU and undermine the already bleak prospects of EU achieving strategic autonomy.

What should Germany do to strengthen the resilience of the liberal order in Europe? This first requires a mental shift in the German psyche by acknowledging the fact that the world has not yet reached [the end-of-history-utopia](#); the arena of world politics is still dominated by great power politics and systemic rivalries, and military power is still the key currency of international relations. On the other hand, while there are a lot of outcries due to Berlin's reluctance to arm Ukraine, there is no need to expose Germany to uncomfortable expectations, such as revamping its anti-militarist identity. Instead, Berlin needs to find its smart specialization niche within the liberal community of Europe to fill the gap left by the US pivot to Asia that seems to be an irreversible process. A good start would be to abandon its compartmentalization strategy and economistic mind-set and instead show readiness to include economic, financial, trade and energy levers into its stick-and-carrot diplomacy against illiberal powers. Let's start by putting the Nordstream 2 and the SWIFT on the table.



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