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**IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN » COMMENTARIES**

## **Merkel and Putin: Ukrainian Diplomacy**

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There is an immense amount of diplomacy going on these days concerning the quasi-civil war in Ukraine. But the only actors who really matter are Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. They are also the only two actors who are really trying to tamp down the conflict and come to some political settlement.

They are both very powerful, both very clearly focused on the real issues, and both working very hard at this difficult task. They are powerful, but not all-powerful. Each has to deal with other actors in Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere who do not want a political settlement but rather are seeking to intensify and expand the conflict, and are therefore trying to sabotage any negotiations between Merkel and Putin.

The first thing to note is that each of them has a bottom line. Chancellor Merkel wants guarantees that the territorial integrity of Ukraine will be fully and permanently honored (with the exception of Crimea). President Putin wants guarantees that Ukraine will never become a member of NATO.

When one analyzes the rhetoric of a public dispute, it is important to notice not only what is said but what is not said. Let us review the public statements of Merkel, Putin, and others in the last ten days of August 2014. On August 23, Chancellor Merkel made her first trip to Kiev to meet with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko and others. She noted that there were to be peace talks in Minsk between Poroshenko and Putin on August 26. This was positive, she said, but she reminded Poroshenko and the world that talks won't produce "one big breakthrough." In an interview with German television's ARD, she observed: "But you have to talk with each other if you want to find solutions." Then she added: "I'm firmly convinced there's only a political conclusion, in which the European Union and Germany want to and should help." Note the "only a political solution" phrase.

She gave a news conference with Poroshenko in which she underlined this further: "Our focus cannot lie with military conflict." Then she added these words that Poroshenko hoped not to hear: "There has to be a bilateral cease-fire." Poroshenko had been calling for a unilateral cease-fire, one solely by the breakaway forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. Poroshenko replied: "Unfortunately, there will always be a military threat to Ukraine."

There were further word games. When, after considerable delay, Russian trucks successfully delivered its humanitarian aid package to Luhansk and then left, Poroshenko called it an "invasion." Merkel joined U.S. President Obama in asserting that the Russian aid delivery was a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, carefully avoiding the term "invasion."

When Andriy Lysenko, a hawkish spokesperson for Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council accused the Russians of taking out military equipment to avoid exposure, Oleg Tsarev, speaker of the parliament of New Russia that unites the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, called Lysenko's charges "stupid" since, he argued, had we wanted to do that, we control less visible sections of the border and wouldn't do it in a "humanitarian aid convoy under the eyes of the world."

Finally note this: When Putin replied to charges by Obama that Russia has sent troops into Ukraine and was fueling an escalation in the conflict, he replied by saying that Russians and Ukrainians "are practically one people." The giveaway is the adverb "practically." It allows Putin to come to a negotiated settlement, which its absence would have barred.

At this point, other voices began to be heard. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Danish outgoing Secretary-General of NATO, and a known hawk, said NATO would decide to deploy its forces in eastern Europe for the first time. Is it so sure that NATO will decide this? The western European members have been strongly opposed to this idea up to now, regarding it as a direct provocation of Russia. This reluctance particularly upsets the Baltic states and Poland. In an op-ed in the New York Times, Slawomir Sierakowski, a well-known Polish analyst, charged this policy with making eastern European states in NATO "second-class members" and is a "weak-kneed stance of older NATO members, in particular Germany."

The military thrust of Ukraine's government into the rebellious regions has faltered badly, exposing its weak military competence. While the further Russian moves in the area have been termed a major new offensive, it is likely that they will incur only some further sanctions. Not only the United States but Great Britain, France, and Germany have made it clear they are not contemplating sending troops to Ukraine for any foreseeable reason. Sanctions, yes, up to a point; troops, no. But it is troops that the Ukrainian government is requesting, as well as an urgent entry into NATO.

The big question today is which side is being more hurt by the sanctions and counter-sanctions. The United States and western Europe hope that they can reduce significantly Russia's real income by curtailing radically its ability to export oil and gas. Russia has in response cut off the sale of agricultural and other products from western Europe to Russia. This not only affects negatively European farmers but risks depriving western European countries, in the longer run, of their investment projects in Russia. Russia has also alluded to a withdrawal of its cooperation in the struggle for oil claims in the Arctic.

Probably, both sides will be increasingly hurt economically by these sanctions and counter-sanctions. In the meantime, Obama will have to decide how badly he needs Russia's cooperation in his newest priority of creating a grand coalition to destroy the forces of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

Will the Ukraine conflict escalate into an actual military conflict based on old Cold War themes? There are predictions that this will happen coming from the left, the right, and the center of the world political spectrum. I do not believe it – precisely because of the efforts of Merkel and Putin, which will persist, even as the rhetoric grows more strident.

Can Merkel and Putin make a deal? In theory this is quite possible. As Henry Kissinger has loudly pointed out in his op-ed in the Washington Post, the key element is Finlandization. “[Finland] leaves no doubt about its fierce independence and cooperates with the West in most fields, but carefully avoids institutional hostility toward Russia.” Finland is a member of the European Union and the Eurozone, but has never asked to join NATO.