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Can Merkel's Diplomacy Save Europe?

By SPIEGEL Staff

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Chancellor Angela Merkel has often been accused of hesitancy. But in Minsk this week, she committed herself to helping find a way to quiet the weapons in Ukraine. The result was a cease-fire. But it is fragile and may ultimately be disadvantageous for Ukraine.

The problem has four syllables: Debaltseve. German Chancellor Angela Merkel can now pronounce it without difficulties, as can French President François Hollande. Debaltseve proved to be one of the thorniest issues during the negotiations in Minsk on Wednesday night and into Thursday. Indeed, the talks almost completely collapsed because of Debaltseve. Ultimately, Debaltseve may end up torpedoing the deal that was worked out in the end.

Debaltseve is a small town in eastern Ukraine, held by 6,000 government troops, or perhaps 8,000. Nobody wants to say for sure. It is the heart of an army that can only put 30,000 soldiers into the field, a weak heart. Until Sunday of last week, that heart was largely encircled by pro-Russian separatists and the troops could only be supplied by way of highway M03. Then, Monday came.

Separatist fighters began advancing across snowy fields towards the village of Lohvynove, a tiny settlement of 30 houses hugging the M03. The separatists stormed an army checkpoint and killed a few officers. They then dug in -- and the heart of the Ukrainian army was surrounded.

The situation in Debaltseve plunged the Ukrainian army into a desperate, almost hopeless, position, as the negotiators in Minsk well knew. Indeed, it was the reason the talks were so urgently necessary. Debaltseve was one of the reasons Merkel and Hollande launched their most recent diplomatic offensive nine days ago. The other reason was the American discussion over the delivery of weapons to the struggling Ukrainian army.

Debaltseve and the weapons debate had pushed Europe to the brink of a dangerous escalation -- and the fears of a broader war were growing rapidly. A well-armed proxy war between Russia and the West in Ukraine was becoming a very real possibility. A conflict which began with the failure of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the protests on Maidan Square in Kiev, and one which escalated with Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of the Crimea Peninsula, has long since become the most dangerous stand-off Europe has seen in several decades. It is possible that it could ultimately involve the US and Russia facing each other across a line of demarcation.

A Success

Given the intensity of the situation, Germany and France together took the initiative and forced the Wednesday night summit in Minsk, Belarus. The long night of talks, which extended deep into Thursday morning, was the apex of eight days of shuttle diplomacy between Moscow, Kiev, Washington and Munich. With intense focus during dozens of hours of telephone conversations and negotiations across the globe, the German chancellor helped wrest a cease-fire from the belligerents. It is a fragile deal full of question marks, one which can only succeed if all parties dedicate themselves to adhering to it. Whether that will be the case is doubtful. The Minsk deal is brief respite. Nothing more. But it is a success nonetheless.

During the 17 hours in Minsk's Palace of Independence, there was much at stake. First and foremost, the focus was on demarcation lines and local elections, it was on ending the killing in eastern Ukraine. But there were several larger questions on the table as well, questions focusing on Russia's relationship with Europe and whether it will be possible to avoid an extended conflict with Vladimir Putin's Russia. They were questions focusing on how to deal with an aggressor: Is it wise to make concessions to Putin? And at what point does compromise become appeasement?

Above all were questions of international diplomacy: What is diplomacy capable of? Is the threat of violence necessary to make diplomacy work? What is the correct path: American weapons deliveries or European diplomacy? And, perhaps most crucial of all, the focus was on European emancipation: Is Europe able to solve its own conflicts without help from the United States?

The exertions of Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier make it clear that Germany has recognized its responsibility in Europe and in the world. One year ago, German President Joachim Gauck demanded that German foreign policy become more assertive in addressing international conflicts. It is a plea that Merkel and Steinmeier have answered in recent weeks.

The Ukraine crisis has changed German politics and it has changed Merkel as well. The German leader used to dither in the face of tough decisions, but now she is making moves she would have

avoided in the past. She has taken the initiative and, contrary to her preferred modus operandi, has embarked on a mission with an uncertain outcome. Her style has also changed. Never before has the chancellor seemed as emotionally engaged as she has in recent days. Her political arguments have rarely been so personal. The Ukraine crisis has changed Merkel's view of reality. Her foreign policy address delivered at the Munich Security Conference earlier this month was a fierce commitment to realpolitik. The foreign policy idealism she used to purvey was nowhere to be seen.

Polemical Battle of Words

The low point of the Minsk negotiations was reached on Thursday morning. At 8 a.m. local time, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) special envoy Heidi Tagliavini climbed into a car at Vajskovy Street 4 to deliver a piece of bad news. The street is located in the heart of the Belarussian capital, just behind Gorky Park, and is home to the event center Dipservice Hall. Tagliavini had been meeting there with the so-called "Contact Group," which includes representatives from Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE. The leaders of the eastern Ukrainian rebel republics Donetsk and Luhansk were also present.

Tagliavini drove to the Palace of Independence, located on Victory Prospect, where Merkel, Vladimir Putin, François Hollande and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko had spent the entire night negotiating. The news that Tagliavini had to tell the leaders essentially destroyed the results of the last 14 hours of negotiations: The rebels no longer wanted to sign the closing document.

The leaders and their delegations had been engaged in talks in the 200-square-meter (2,150-square-foot) ceremonial hall since 6:30 p.m. the evening before. Following their arrival in Minsk, the German and French delegations initially holed up in the German Embassy before then coordinating with the Ukrainians. It is the same pattern that had been followed in the previous days' talks: total consensus between Germany and France followed by close accord with Ukraine before beginning talks with the Russian side.

Talks continued through the entire night, without a break. At times, one of the participants would nod off, head on the table. There was plenty of alcohol available, but Merkel didn't touch it. Participants said that the tone was measured. At one point, it did become loud, with Putin and Poroshenko becoming involved in a polemical battle of words, but they quickly calmed down again. They would occasionally stand up to talk through a particularly thorny issue privately, before coming back and continuing the talks. The personal relationship between the two is a good one and they address each other with the familiar form of "you."

Large groups, smaller groups, two leaders whispering in the corner, coffee, snacks: It went on like that through the entire night. Everyone knew what was at stake and they all, participants reported, seemed to want to reach an agreement.

Protecting the Ukrainians

The Russians took a tough line. They saw themselves as being in a position of strength, partly because of the situation in Debaltseve. The Europeans, for their part, insisted on an immediate cease-fire out of concern for the volatile situation facing the Ukrainian military. The separatists, not surprisingly, wanted to delay the beginning of the cease-fire for as long as possible so as to give themselves time to completely conquer Debaltseve. Poroshenko, too, seemed to prefer a delayed cease-fire -- apparently not fully understanding the situation facing his military. The Europeans were trying to protect the Ukrainians from themselves.

The European duo had already pried an important concession out of the Russian president in Moscow during the week prior to Minsk: The elections in the separatist areas will only be held within those areas behind last September's demarcation line. The hundreds of square kilometers separatists have since taken will not be considered as part of their territory. Kiev managed to assert itself on another issue as well: Direct talks with the separatists, as Moscow had been demanding, will not take place. Putin, though, got the upper hand in a different area: The border between Russia and the separatist-held regions in eastern Ukraine will be observed neither by the Ukrainians nor by international forces. This issue will only be revisited after the elections, if at all.

Even before the arrival of Tagliavini, the talks had already twice threatened to collapse. Particularly contentious is the withdrawal of heavy weaponry. In the end, agreement was reached that all heavy weapons would be withdrawn from the firing lines. For the Ukrainians, the firing line refers to the front where it now stands. For the rebels, it is the front line from last September. The result is a broad buffer zone, a zone that broadens to 140 kilometers (87 miles) for heavy rocket launchers. That means that the separatists will have to withdraw their equipment deep into the territories they hold, in some cases almost to the Russian border.

That is the deal that was presented to the separatists in Dipservice Hall early in the morning. Not long later, Tagliavini returned with their rejection of the agreement. Were the talks all for naught?

The negotiators refused to give up. They returned to the vast hall inside the Palace of Independence and continued talking. Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko and Putin retired to a smaller room off the main hall, where Putin was informed that everything now depended on him. It was a point at which the collapse of the talks was a very real possibility. Putin withdraws to an office that had been set up especially for him on the third floor of the palace to telephone with the separatist leaders waiting in Dipservice Hall. The Germans and French did not learn what exactly he said to the two -- Igor Plotnitsky of the Luhansk Republic and Alexander Zakharchenko of the Donetsk Republic. But two hours later, the pair agreed to the cease-fire. At 11 a.m. local time, the marathon negotiations came to an end.

Two documents were prepared. The first was a declaration from the national leaders present. The other was the Contact Group paper regarding the implementation of the first Minsk Agreement, which was signed five months ago. Even the name of the document was the object of extended and bitter debate. Kiev and the Europeans insisted that it make reference to the first Minsk deal reached last September.

Once the talks were finished, there was no press conference held. Just before noon, Merkel, Hollande, Putin and Poroshenko left the Minsk palace. "We are hopeful," is all the German chancellor would say of the result of the long night of talks.

Indeed, there is nothing left for the world to do but hope that the cease-fire really does take effect along the entire front. The world must hope that this deal lasts longer than the first Minsk agreement did -- forever if possible. The world must hope that the government troops trapped in Debaltseve really do lay down their weapons and don't try to fight their way free. The world must hope that free elections are held in the separatist areas and that the elected politicians negotiate a fair autonomy agreement with Kiev, one that re-establishes Ukraine's unity.

Buying Time

Should both sides adhere to the cease-fire, time will be won. That isn't much, but it is a far cry from nothing. Everyone can get together and work to ensure that the hopes listed above become facts in the near future -- for the people of Ukraine but also for the rest of the world. Overshadowing everything, after all, is a possible conflict between the US and Russia, both nuclear powers.

The Minsk deal also bought valuable time for US President Barack Obama. He recently stood up to the hawks in Washington and rejected the idea of delivering weapons to Ukraine. But during Merkel's visit to the American capital on Monday, he told her that were the Minsk talks to fail, he would no longer be able to contain the weapons delivery discussion. It came across almost as an ultimatum.

Internally, Vice President Joe Biden had previously thrown his support behind supplying Ukraine with weapons, as had Secretary of State John Kerry. Plans for such military assistance had also long since been developed. During a visit to Kiev two weeks ago by Obama advisors, Poroshenko's people presented a list of equipment they wanted, including surface-to-air missiles, radar units and medical equipment. The American NATO General Philip Breedlove believes that missile defense systems are absolutely essential to defend against Russian artillery and also believes Ukraine should be provided with drones.

But the Ukrainians are currently unable to operate such high-tech equipment. They would have to receive extensive training from American advisers. That, though, would essentially make the US a party to the conflict, as Obama well knows. Which is why he was hesitant following his talks with Merkel, saying only that which American presidents always say in such moments: "What I've asked my team to do is to look at all options."

On Wednesday evening, Obama spoke with Putin by phone for 90 minutes. "That really helped," say Merkel's people, adding that they believe it was important to Putin to have the US president take such an interest in the issue.

'Captured Loot'

American weapons deliveries, on the other hand, don't impress Putin one bit. On the contrary: Were US weapons and military trainers to turn up in Ukraine, the Russian people, 85 percent of whom already support Putin, would unanimously stand behind their president, one Kremlin insider, who does not belong to the hawkish camp, says. "Plus, we would be happy to see American weapons quickly fall into the hands of the separatists as captured loot."

Putin, the Kremlin insider says, believes he is in a strong position. "The later the Western states and the Ukraine are prepared to agree to a really stable compromise, the weaker their negotiating position will be," the insider says.

That analysis might not be far off. Ukraine government troops could indeed collapse if the fighting continues. Morale within the army is not nearly as strong as it is among the separatists.

The Ukrainian army was unprepared for the war in the east. Whereas Russia completely modernized its military recently, Ukraine scrapped or sold off much of the equipment it had inherited when the Soviet Union collapsed and radically reduced the size of its military, dismissing two-thirds of its soldiers. The weapons now being used by Ukrainian troops fighting in the east are far inferior to those possessed by the separatists.

At the beginning of the war, the Ukrainian army had some 130,000 troops according to the most optimistic estimates, with half of them fulfilling their compulsory military service. Now, many young men are doing their best to avoid conscription altogether by heading overseas. The National Guard has a further 35,000 men in uniform. They mostly man checkpoints and guard infrastructure.

President Poroshenko is thus dependent on the help of militias, those voluntary units that fight in the service of oligarchs or out of their own interests. But they often don't follow orders from Kiev, making them difficult to control and unfit for use in strategic operations.

According to a report delivered recently to the Chancellery in Berlin by Germany's foreign intelligence service, the BND, the Ukrainian army is slowly disintegrating, demoralized by the separatist advances and short on personnel. Even arms deliveries from the West, the BND believes, would be more likely to overwhelm the Ukrainian army than it would to make it a more effective fighting force.

Increasingly Unsettled

Furthermore, the grim state of the country's economy threatens to destabilize Poroshenko's government. The Ukrainian currency, the hryvnia, fell to a new historic low on Wednesday. Just a few weeks ago, the rate was 18 hryvnia to the euro, now it is 30. The country is increasingly unsettled.

The chief public prosecutor has already fallen. He proved unable to recover the billions of dollars that former President Viktor Yanukovich smuggled out of the country to Switzerland, Luxembourg and the US. Furthermore, reform programs for the judiciary and public administration are making little progress. Frustration among the public at large is growing with

some in Kiev even talking about a "new Maidan," a reference to the protests that drove Yanukovich out of office (and out of the country) one year ago. "If nothing changes in Ukraine, then everything will explode in four to six months," says Mikheil Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia and supporter of the new Kiev leadership.

Aid from the International Monetary Fund and other donors is aimed at preventing such an explosion from taking place. In the next four years, Ukraine is to receive around €40 billion euros -- but the program includes "extremely strict conditions," say senior Berlin officials with concern. Among them is an increase in gas prices for private consumers as well as an unpopular pension reform aimed at cutting government spending. Berlin is worried that support for the government could rapidly disappear should too much be demanded too quickly. Chancellor Merkel has thus charged her economic policy advisor Lars-Hendrik Röller with encouraging the IMF to exercise political caution. "The aid program cannot be allowed to destabilize Ukraine domestically," said one government official in Berlin.

Russia has likely already achieved its minimum goal, that of preventing Ukraine from joining NATO or the European Union. The deal agreed to in Minsk includes a kind of veto right for separatist areas in eastern Ukraine on important fundamental issues. That right would apply to membership in military alliances and to membership in economic blocks such as the EU or Putin's Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, the constitutional reform, as called for by the Minsk deal, can only be undertaken with the agreement of the pro-Russian secessionist areas.

Russia is also hopeful that the agreement reached in Minsk will put an end to the spiral of sanctions that have been imposed on the country by the West. Just on Monday, the EU agreed to intensify the penal measures once again by adding more names to the list of those forbidden from entering the EU and more accounts to the list of those that have been frozen. That idea, though, has now been shelved for the time being. "The Minsk agreement gives us an opportunity to not impose new sanctions," said Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn. He said that removal of sanctions already in place will only be addressed once the cease-fire has proven to be stable and Moscow does in fact withdraw its heavy weaponry.

Global Importance

Indeed, only then will we know if Chancellor Merkel has landed an important diplomatic coup. For her, Thursday morning in Minsk marked the end of eight days during which her diplomatic talent was tested its fullest. They were eight days with little sleep and trips to eight cities: Kiev, Moscow, Munich, Washington, Ottawa, Berlin, Minsk and Brussels. That may sound like global politics, but it was really a last-ditch effort to maintain order in Europe, a mission of global importance.

Last Saturday saw Merkel holding a speech in Munich's Bayerische Hof hotel at the Security Conference. The topic was, of course, Ukraine. Her talk was frequently interrupted by applause - her skepticism of arms deliveries to Ukraine was particularly well received. One person in the audience, though, didn't clap. He sat in the first row with a dour expression on his face, empty eyes and his hands clasped in his lap. It was Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

While his country was being torn apart by war and his soldiers were dying, the German chancellor was explaining to the world why nothing could be done. At least not with force of arms. "I cannot imagine a single scenario in which better equipment for the Ukrainian army would lead President Putin to be so impressed to believe that he might lose militarily," she said. That, she added, was reality.

Reality is a word that Merkel used often while in Munich. Putin's superiority is a reality, she said, and Syrian President Bashar Assad is a reality as well. "You have to deal with reality as it is," Merkel said.

It was a commitment to absolute realpolitik. Merkel has long been considered the queen of pragmatism and she has often been accused of lacking convictions and being willing to sacrifice long-term goals for short-term opportunities and power tactics. But that didn't apply to foreign policy. In that field, people have long said that she was a real idealist. Her commitment to freedom and to a "values-guided foreign policy" seemed credible given that she grew up behind the Iron Curtain.

But in the Ukraine crisis, Merkel is infusing her biography with completely new meaning. She is now drawing parallels between Ukraine and the construction of the Berlin Wall. Until recently, East Germany served as justification for her commitment to freedom and human rights -- a commitment that had to be defended on the battlefield at times. Now, though, East Germany is serving as an illustration that there are situations where nothing can or should be done. Even the Americans weren't prepared to use military means to protect the people of East Germany in 1961, Merkel said in Munich. "I don't blame them," she added. It was simply realistic.

Last Resort

The path from the Merkel who, as leader of the opposition, cited the Western community of values in justifying her support for George W. Bush's Iraq invasion to the Merkel who refuses to supply arms to Ukraine because, as she says, the conflict cannot be solved militarily, is a long one. Merkel's "values-guided foreign policy" also meant that the use of military means as a last resort could not, and should not, be excluded.

"Anyone who rejects military action as a last resort weakens the pressure that needs to be maintained on dictators and consequently makes a war not less but more likely," Merkel wrote in a 2003 contribution for the *Washington Post*, that ran under the headline, "Schröder Doesn't Speak for All Germans." "Responsible political leadership must on no account trade the genuine peace of the future for the deceptive peace of the present."

Now, she is calling for patience and political stamina. Sometimes, her logic would seem to hold, you have to accept present injustices, remain true to your principles and hope for a better future. "Nobody knew when the Cold War was going to end," she said. East Germans had to wait 28 years after the construction of the Berlin Wall for better times to come.

Realpolitik focuses on power and powerlessness. It's about realizing what you can achieve with what means and when it might be smarter to admit your own lack of power. Realpolitik has no illusions, it is bitter and, sometimes, it is brutal.

Some see Merkel as being weak. US Senators in particular have voiced criticism of her approach, even uttering the unflattering word "appeasement," a reference to the Munich Agreement of 1938, which handed part of Czechoslovakia to Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Those who want to avoid war at all costs, make a war not less, but more likely. Merkel's response was the Berlin Wall -- history versus history.

On Monday, Merkel met in Washington with Barack Obama and her message could be summed up in a single word, one which is also a crucial element of realpolitik: patience. She wanted the US to show patience before intervening in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, with arms shipments, for example. You have to keep "trying again and again" with Putin, she said. "That's why we're politicians," she said. And she sounded passionate.

She is afraid of a proxy war over Ukraine between the nuclear powers of US and Russia. To prevent that, she has divided up the conflict into a multitude of technical details, with each appearing grotesquely minimal in comparison with what could ultimately happen. "Where there is a complete lack of trust, you can fight to the death about anything," one of her advisors said during the US trip. Merkel's answer is: Then you have to find a solution to each point of conflict, one after the other.

Taking a Chance

Obama wasn't of a mind to reject her approach. If at all, he only wanted to deliver arms in the eventuality that the Minsk summit failed. Obama told Merkel that he is happy about every problem that doesn't land on his desk. Indeed, he is a president who gives Merkel room, and a chance, to make her own foreign policy, a European foreign policy.

"We Europeans have to take risks sometimes too," she told a small group of reporters during the hectic week. It was, she noted, primarily the Americans who brought the wars in the Balkans to an end, by force of arms.

In Ottawa, Merkel spoke with the Canadian prime minister. Then she flew back to Berlin for the funeral of ex-German President Richard von Weizsäcker, continuing on to Minsk for all-night talks and then to Brussels. Where does she now stand after this week of traveling and talking? She took a chance, she tried something. That, already, is something. She wanted to prevent the war in eastern Ukraine from further escalating. And she resisted American calls for arming the Ukrainian army.

Had the talks in Minsk failed completely, Merkel would not have looked good, particularly from the American perspective. Many in the US would have smiled wryly and said that the Europeans simply can't hack it and that they need their big brother to solve the problem.

After Minsk, though, such a reaction would be out of place, even though things could look very different in a couple of days. For the moment, though, Merkel can celebrate a small success. The weapons are to fall silent.

The Merkel who spent much of last week in the air was a different Merkel from the one who can often be seen here in Germany. It was a Merkel who forges ahead and who risks failure. It was also a Merkel who did exactly what Germans expect from her: Fight for peace, search for compromise with the Russians and resist the Americans. All of that conforms nicely to the present mood in Germany.

Along the way, she also patched up relations with France, restoring the German-French axis by including Hollande. That is good for Europe.

Skill and Persistence

Merkel and Hollande laid the cornerstone for their diplomatic initiative at the end of January in Strasbourg, where they dined together in the restaurant Zuem Ysehuet. They spent over three hours together, over lamb and venison, and spoke about the tradition of German-French friendship, about Ukraine and about new Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Their host at the dinner was European Parliament President Martin Schulz.

The idea for a joint Ukraine mission came from Merkel, but she knew that she could only exert enough pressure on Putin if Hollande joined as well. Still, the world will likely see it as her success. Or her failure.

But the price of the chancellor's realpolitik is a high one, and Ukraine is paying it. Merkel already told the Ukrainian president weeks ago that the West wasn't prepared to go to war for the country. Now, though, it has become clear that the West is willing to accept Ukraine's partition. Ukraine hasn't just lost the Crimean Peninsula, it has now also lost territories in the east.

Officially, Merkel has continued repeating two mantras: The first is that there is no military solution. The second is that Ukraine's territorial integrity will not be sacrificed. They are both lovely sentences, but they are unfortunately not reconcilable. If the West doesn't intend to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity with military means, then that integrity exists only on paper.

The Chancellery has continued to insist that a modern-day Yalta conference -- whereby Ukraine is divided up between Russia and the West -- is not in the cards. And it was conspicuous that Merkel's file folder that she had with her during the negotiations didn't contain a single map. The chancellor, Berlin officials say, is uninterested in taking part in negotiations over the precise route of the demarcation line between the separatist areas and those areas under Kiev's control. But no matter where the line ultimately runs, it will divide a region ruled by Kiev and one under the influence of Moscow. The West will accept that Moscow will define at least part of Ukraine as being within its sphere of influence.

It is always good when the weapons go quiet, but Merkel has achieved little beyond that. Separatist leaders along with a determined Putin, who knows that the West is not prepared to

spill the blood of its soldiers to defend Ukraine's integrity, have shown her the limits of her influence. But the European order is not constructed in Berlin alone. What was achieved in Minsk has little to do with Merkel's power. It has more to do with her political skill and her persistence.