Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was a strategic shock for Germany. Suddenly, Russian aggression threatened the European security order that Germany had taken for granted since the end of the Cold War. Berlin had spent two decades trying to strengthen political and economic ties with Moscow, but Russia’s actions in Ukraine suggested that the Kremlin was no longer interested in a partnership with Europe. Despite Germany’s dependence on Russian gas and Russia’s importance to German exporters, German Chancellor Angela Merkel ultimately agreed to impose sanctions on Russia and helped persuade other EU member states to do likewise.

Nevertheless, the Ukraine crisis has reopened old questions about Germany’s relationship to the rest of the West. In April, when the German public-service broadcaster ARD asked Germans what role their country should play in the crisis, just 45 percent wanted Germany to side with its partners and allies in the EU and NATO; 49 percent wanted Germany to mediate between Russia and the West. These results led the weekly newsmagazine Der Spiegel, in an editorial published last May, to warn Germany against turning away from the West.

Germany’s response to the Ukraine crisis can be understood against the backdrop of a long-term weakening of the so-called Westbindung, the country’s postwar integration into the West. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the EU freed the country from its reliance on the United States for protection against a powerful Soviet Union. At the same time, Germany’s export-dependent economy has become increasingly reliant on demand from emerging markets such as China. Although Germany remains committed to European integration, these factors have made it possible to imagine a post-Western German foreign policy. Such a shift comes with high stakes. Given Germany’s increased power within the EU, the country’s relationship to the rest of the world will, to a large extent, determine that of Europe.

THE GERMAN PARADOX

Germany has always had a complex relationship with the West. On the one hand, many of the political and philosophical ideas that became central to the West originated in Germany with Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. On the other hand, German intellectual history has included darker strains that have threatened Western norms—such as the current of nationalism that emerged in the early nineteenth century. Beginning in the
latter half of the nineteenth century, German nationalists increasingly sought to define Germany’s identity in opposition to the liberal, rationalistic principles of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. This version of German nationalism culminated in Nazism, which the German historian Heinrich August Winkler has called “the climax of the German rejection of the Western world.” Germany, therefore, was a paradox: it was part of the West yet produced the most radical challenge to it from within.

After World War II, West Germany took part in European integration, and in 1955, as the Cold War heated up, it joined NATO. For the next 40 years, the Westbindung, which led Germany to cooperate and pursue joint security initiatives with its Western allies, became an existential necessity that overrode other foreign policy objectives. Germany continued to define itself as a Western power through the 1990s. Under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a reunified Germany agreed to adopt the euro. By the end of the decade, the country appeared to have reconciled itself to the use of military force to fulfill its obligations as a NATO member. After 9/11, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder pledged “unconditional solidarity” with the United States and committed German troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

Over the past decade, however, Germany’s attitude toward the rest of the West has changed. In the debate about the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Schröder spoke of a “German way,” in contrast to the “American way.” Since then, Germany has hardened its opposition to the use of military force. After its experience in Afghanistan, Germany appears to have decided that the right lesson from its Nazi past is not “never again Auschwitz,” the principle it invoked to justify its participation in the 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo, but “never again war.” German politicians across the spectrum now define their country as a Friedensmacht, a “force for peace.”

Germany’s commitment to peace has led the EU and the United States to accuse Germany of free-riding within the Western alliance. Speaking in Brussels in 2011, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that NATO was becoming “a two-tiered alliance . . . between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership, be they security guarantees or headquarters billets, but don’t want to share the risks and the costs.” He singled out for particular criticism those NATO members that spend less on defense than the agreed-on amount of two percent of GDP; Germany spends just 1.3 percent. In the past few years, France has similarly criticized Germany for its failure to provide sufficient support for military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic.

One reason Germany has neglected its NATO obligations is that the Westbindung no longer appears to be a strategic necessity. After the end of the Cold War, the EU and NATO expanded to include some central and eastern European countries, which meant that Germany was “encircled by friends,” as the former German defense minister Volker Rühe put it, rather than by potential military aggressors, and it was therefore no longer reliant on the United States for protection from the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Germany’s economy has become more dependent on exports, particularly to non-Western countries. In the first decade of this century, as domestic demand remained low and German manufacturers regained competitiveness, Germany became increasingly dependent on exports. According to the World Bank, the contribution of exports to Germany’s GDP jumped from 33 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2010. Beginning with Schröder, Germany began to base its foreign policy largely on its economic interests and, in particular, on the needs of exporters.
Increasing anti-American sentiment among ordinary Germans has contributed to the foreign policy shift, too. If the Iraq war gave Germans the confidence to split from the United States on issues of war and peace, the 2008 global financial meltdown gave it the confidence to diverge on economic issues. For many Germans, the crisis highlighted the failures of Anglo-Saxon capitalism and vindicated Germany’s social market economy. The revelations in 2013 that the U.S. National Security Agency had been conducting surveillance on Germans and eavesdropping on Merkel’s cell-phone calls further strengthened anti-American sentiment. Many Germans now say that they no longer share values with the United States, and some say that they never did.

To be sure, Germany’s liberal political culture, a result of its Western integration, is here to stay. But it remains to be seen whether Germany will continue to align itself with its Western partners and stand up for Western norms as it becomes more dependent on non-Western countries for its economic growth. The most dramatic illustration of what a post-Western German foreign policy might look like came in 2011, when Germany abstained in a vote in the UN Security Council over military intervention in Libya—siding with China and Russia over France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Some German officials insist that this decision did not prefigure a larger trend. But a poll conducted shortly after the vote by the foreign policy journal Internationale Politik found Germans to be split three ways over whether they should continue to cooperate primarily with Western partners; with other countries, such as China, India, and Russia; or with both.

THE NEW OSTPOLITIK

Germany’s policy toward Russia has long been based on political engagement and economic interdependence. When Willy Brandt became chancellor of West Germany in 1969, he sought to balance the Westbindung with a more open relationship with the Soviet Union and pursued a new approach that became known as the Ostpolitik, or “Eastern policy.” Brandt believed that increasing political and economic ties between the two powers might eventually lead to German reunification, a strategy his adviser Egon Bahr called Wandel durch Annäherung, “change through rapprochement.”

Since the end of the Cold War, economic ties between Germany and Russia have expanded further. Invoking the memory of Brandt’s Ostpolitik, Schröder began a policy of Wandel durch Handel, or “change through trade.” German policymakers, and particularly the Social Democrats, championed a “partnership for modernization,” in which Germany would supply Russia with technology to modernize its economy—and, ideally, its politics.

These ties help explain Germany’s initial reluctance to impose sanctions after the Russian incursion into Ukraine in 2014. In deciding whether or not to follow the U.S. lead, Merkel faced pressure from powerful lobbyists for German industry, led by the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, who argued that sanctions would badly undermine the German economy. In a show of support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, Joe Kaeser, the CEO of Siemens, visited the Russian leader at his residence outside Moscow just after the annexation of Crimea. Kaeser assured Putin that his company, which had conducted business in Russia for roughly 160 years, would not let “short-term turbulence”—his characterization of the crisis—affect its relationship with the country. In an editorial in the Financial Times in May, the director general of the Federation of German Industries, Markus Kerber, wrote that German businesses would support sanctions but would do so “with a heavy heart.”

Germany’s heavy dependence on Russian energy also caused Berlin to shy away from sanctions. After the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, Germany decided to phase out nuclear power sooner than planned, which made
the country increasingly dependent on Russian gas. By 2013, Russian companies provided roughly 38 percent of Germany’s oil and 36 percent of its gas. Although Germany could diversify away from Russian gas by finding alternative sources of energy, such a process would likely take decades. In the short term, therefore, Germany has been reluctant to antagonize Russia.

For her support of sanctions, Merkel has faced pushback not just from industry but also from the German public. Although some in the United States and in other European countries have accused the German government of going too easy on Russia, many within Germany have felt that their government is acting too aggressively. When the German journalist Bernd Ulrich called for tougher action against Putin, for example, he found himself inundated with hate mail that accused him of warmongering. Even Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany’s foreign minister, long perceived to be sympathetic to Russia, has faced similar accusations. The National Security Agency spying revelations only increased sympathy for Russia. As Ulrich put it in April 2014, “When the Russian president says he feels oppressed by the West, many here think, ‘So do we.’”

That type of identification with Russia has deep historical roots. In 1918, the German writer Thomas Mann published a book, Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, in which he argued that German culture was distinct from—and superior to—the cultures of other Western nations, such as France and the United Kingdom. German culture, he argued, fell somewhere between Russian culture and the cultures of the rest of Europe. That idea has experienced a dramatic resurgence in recent months. Writing in Der Spiegel in April 2014, Winkler, the historian, criticized the so-called Russlandversteher, Germans who express support for Russia, for repopularizing “the myth of a connection between the souls of Russia and Germany.”

In crafting a response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, then, Merkel had to walk a fine line. She sought to keep open the possibility of a political solution for as long as possible, spending hours on the phone with Putin and sending Steinmeier to help mediate between Moscow and Kiev. It was only after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down on July 17, 2014, allegedly by pro-Russian separatists, that German officials felt comfortable adopting a tougher stance. Even then, public support for sanctions remained tepid. An August poll by the ARD found that 70 percent of Germans supported Europe’s second round of sanctions against Russia, which included banning visas for and freezing the assets of a list of prominent Russian businesspeople. But only 49 percent said that they would continue to back sanctions even if they hurt the German economy—as the third round of sanctions likely will.

Popular support for sanctions could slip further if Germany goes into recession, as many analysts say it might. Although German businesses have reluctantly accepted the sanctions, they have continued to lobby Merkel to ease them. And even as its economic efforts come under threat, Germany has made it clear that military options are not on the table. Ahead of the NATO summit in Wales in September, Merkel opposed plans for the alliance to establish a permanent presence in eastern Europe, which she argued would violate the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Put simply, Germany may not have the stamina for a policy of containment toward Russia.

PIVOT TO CHINA

Germany has also grown closer to China, an even more significant harbinger of a post-Western German foreign policy. As it has with Russia, Germany has benefited from increasingly close economic ties with China. In the past decade, German exports there have grown exponentially. By 2013, they added up to $84 billion, almost double the value of German exports to Russia. Indeed, China has become the second-largest market for German exports outside
the EU, and it may soon overtake the United States as the largest. China is already the biggest market for Volkswagen—Germany's largest automaker—and the Mercedes-Benz S-Class.

The relationship between Germany and China grew only stronger after the 2008 financial crisis, when the two countries found themselves on the same side in debates about the global economy. Both have exerted deflationary pressure on their trading partners, criticized the U.S. policy of quantitative easing, and resisted calls from the United States to take action to rectify macroeconomic imbalances in the global economy. Germany and China have, simultaneously, become closer politically. In 2011, the two countries began holding an annual government-to-government consultation—in effect, a joint cabinet meeting. The event marked the first time that China had conducted such a broad-based negotiation with another country.

For Germany, the relationship is primarily economic, but for China, which wants a strong Europe to counterbalance the United States, it is also strategic. China may see Germany as the key to getting the kind of Europe it wants, partly because Germany appears to be increasingly powerful within Europe but perhaps also because German preferences seem closer to its own than do those of other EU member states, such as France and the United Kingdom.

The tighter Berlin-Beijing nexus comes as the United States adopts a tougher approach to China as part of its so-called pivot to Asia—and it could pose a major problem for the West. If the United States found itself in conflict with China over economic or security issues—if there were an Asian Crimea, for instance—there is a real possibility that Germany would remain neutral. Some German diplomats in China have already begun to distance themselves from the West. In 2012, for example, the German ambassador to China, Michael Schaefer, said in an interview, “I don’t think there is such a thing as the West anymore.” Given their increasing dependence on China as an export market, German businesses would be even more opposed to the imposition of sanctions on China than on Russia. The German government would likely be even more reluctant to take tough action than it has been during the Ukraine crisis, which would create even greater rifts within Europe and between Europe and the United States.

A GERMAN EUROPE

Fears of German neutrality are not new. In the early 1970s, Henry Kissinger, then the U.S. national security adviser, warned that West Germany’s Ostpolitik could play into the hands of the Soviet Union and threaten transatlantic unity. He argued that closer economic ties with the Soviet Union would increase Europe’s dependence on its eastern neighbor, thereby undermining the West. The danger Kissinger foresaw was not so much that West Germany might leave NATO but, as he put it in his memoir, that it might “avoid controversies outside of Europe even when they affected fundamental security interests.” Fortunately for Washington, the Cold War kept such impulses in check, as West Germany relied on the United States for protection against the Soviet Union.

Now, however, Germany finds itself in a more central and stronger position in Europe. During the Cold War, West Germany was a weak state on the fringes of what became the EU, but the reunified Germany is now one of the strongest—if not the strongest—power in the union. Given that position, a post-Western Germany could take much of the rest of Europe with it, particularly those central and eastern European countries with economies that are deeply intertwined with Germany’s. If the United Kingdom leaves the EU, as it is now debating, the union will be even more likely to follow German preferences, especially as they pertain to Russia and China. In that event, Europe could find itself at odds with the United States—and the West could suffer a schism from which it might never recover.