

Germany's Strategic Contraction Following American Hegemony in the Context of Offensive Realism Theory

Saldırgan Realizm Kuramı Bağlamında

Amerikan Hegemonyasının Ardından Almanya'nın Stratejik Daralması

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Geliş Tarihi / Submitted:
28.05.2024

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted:
04.12.2024

Abstract

This study examines the position of the European continent within the international system, focusing specifically on Germany, from the years when the future of the global international system began to be debated following the Cold War up to the present day. Since the 1990s, there has been ongoing debate regarding whether the international system will remain dominated solely by the United States (U.S.) as a hegemon or evolve towards a multipolar world. Following the reunification of Germany after the Cold War, Europe and particularly Germany entered a new and notably economically prosperous period. This period has been characterized by the prominence of international organizations and the concept of "soft power". The article's research question is whether Germany's prominence and the concepts of democracy and international cooperation in Europe are related to U.S. hegemony, and if so, which factors can explain this. Considering the current emphasis on the multipolar world and the prevalence of potential conflict areas rather than the functionality of international cooperation and institutions, the article aims to elucidate the systemic reasons for Germany's constrictions vis-à-vis global powers and the options for alleviating this constriction by utilizing Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism.

Keywords: International System, Instability, Germany, Hegemony, Europe

Öz

Bu çalışma, Soğuk Savaş'ın ardından küresel uluslararası sistemin geleceğinin tartışılmaya başlandığı yıllardan günümüze kadar olan süreçte, Avrupa kıtasının uluslararası sistem içindeki yerini Almanya özelinde incelemektedir. 1990 sonrası, uluslararası sistemin, ABD'nin tek başına hegemon olarak mı kalacağı yoksa çok kutuplu bir dünyaya doğru mu evrileceği yaklaşık 30 senedir tartışılmaktadır. Avrupa kıtası özelinde ise Almanya Soğuk Savaş sonrası birleşmesinin akabinde yeni ve bilhassa ekonomik olarak parlak bir döneme giriş yapmıştır. Söz konusu dönem Uluslararası kuruluşların ve "yumuşak güç" kavramının ön plana çıktığı dönemler olarak tarihte yer edinmiştir. Makalenin araştırma sorusu ise; Almanya'nın ön plana çıktığı, Avrupa'nın demokrasi ve uluslararası iş birliği kavramlarının ABD hegemonyası ile ilintili olup olmadığı, eğer ilintili ise bunun hangi faktörlerle açıklanabileceğidir. Günümüzde uluslararası iş birliği ve uluslararası kurumların işlevselliği değil, çok kutuplu dünya ve potansiyel çatışma alanlarının fazlaca gündemde olmasından hareketle, Almanya'nın Küresel güçler karşısında yaşadığı sıkışmışlığın sistemsel nedenleri, söz konusu sıkışmışlıktan kurtulmasının seçenekleri John Mearsheimer'in saldırgan realizm kuramından faydalanarak ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uluslararası Sistem, İstikrarlılık, Almanya, Hegemonya, Avrupa

Introduction: Purpose, Methodology, and Outline

World War II can be defined as the second Thirty Years' War ending on the European continent. It can be described as the twinges of the transition of world hegemony from Great Britain to the United States (U.S.) under the control of the Anglo-Saxons.¹ In World War II, Germany aspired to world hegemony, but having lost the war, it came under the control of the U.S. As commonly stated regarding the founding purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the primary goal was to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down.² Between 1945 and 1990, during the Cold War, Germany was already divided and rendered ineffective, as stated in NATO's objectives. However, the main issue here was what kind of conjuncture would emerge across Europe in general and in Germany in particular after the Cold War and how Germany's reunification after the Cold War would affect the international system. In this regard, one of Mearsheimer's famous observations predicted that a period of instability would return to Europe with Germany's reunification after the Cold War. This prediction was made in his highly debated 1990 article "Back to the Future". In this article, Mearsheimer anticipated that Germany would aspire to its pre-Cold War ambitions and position, subsequently leading Europe into another period of instability.³ Mearsheimer's prediction did not materialize in the 1990s and 2000s. Instead, a world emerged with the brightest economic indicators in the history of the European Union and its institutions, along with a liberal global climate. During the approximately 20-year period from the early 1990s to the 2008 global economic crisis, the international system was in a state of flux. The competition between the U.S. and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War can be likened to competition between partners. For a system to survive, it needs an adversary that sustains it dialectically and legitimizes the system. During the Cold War, this adversary was the USSR. Thus, the brief history and system of the 20th century were upheld by the U.S.-USSR competition, which one can describe as a form of rivalry between partners.⁴

When the competitive system between these partners collapsed, the U.S. entered a period of searching. This search was also prominently reflected in the academic community. In the early 1990s, thinkers like Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington produced works that attracted widespread attention regarding the nature of the new international system. Fukuyama posited that the liberal capitalism established by the U.S. was the ultimate system for humanity and that the U.S. had emerged victorious.⁵

However, the problems produced by American capitalism first manifested economically during the Asian crises in the 1990s and later in the global economic crisis of 2008. These systemic crises, which Wallerstein analyzed from an economic-political perspective, were shown to have emerged much earlier, as seen in his analysis of the 1973 oil crisis.⁶

1 For additional information, see Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2007.

2 Kori Shalke, Erica Pepe, "70 Years of NATO: The Strength of the Past, Looking into the Future", *Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay*, [https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/1097618a-96c9-45b2-89f7-092198f84a7c#:~:text=Lord%20Hastings%20Lionel%20Ismay%2C%20NATO's,%2C%20and%20the%20Germans%20down%E2%80%9D.](https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/1097618a-96c9-45b2-89f7-092198f84a7c#:~:text=Lord%20Hastings%20Lionel%20Ismay%2C%20NATO's,%2C%20and%20the%20Germans%20down%E2%80%9D.,), accessed 26.09.2024.

3 John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security*, 15:1, 1990, p. 56.

4 For additional information see Immanuel Wallerstein, *Friends as foes. The Political Economy: Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy*, Routledge, Oxford, 2021.

5 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, 16, 1989, pp. 3-4.

6 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Entering Global Anarchy", Samir Dasgupta and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *Politics of Globalization*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 147-154.

With the 2008 global economic crisis, the brief discourse on system search gave way to discussions of an international system crisis. Until 2008, the European Union (EU) was regarded as the epitome of global soft power and was admired as a supranational entity. However, in the years following the global economic crisis and up to the present day, it has become an entity whose future is increasingly questioned.⁷ In the EU context, Germany's position is among the most significant. There are two primary reasons for this. First, the unification of the two Germanys resulted in a major economic power emergence, subsequently triggering profound changes that deeply affected Europe's Cold War-era political positions. These changes can be broadly seen in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the division of Czechoslovakia. The second was the rapid economic influence that Germany exerted over the economies of the Iron Curtain countries.⁸ This situation can be explained by the rapid accession of these countries to the EU, which Germany encouraged. John Mearsheimer's prediction that Germany could once again pursue expansionist policies in Europe has been realized economically, if not politically. The concept of "*Lebensraum*", which Hitler used to justify German expansionism, and the implementation of "*Ostpolitik*" have been economically validated by Germany's influence over Eastern Europe through the integration of new member states and economic dominance. Although different individuals and ideological groups proposed *Lebensraum* and *Ostpolitik*, these policies became a geopolitical reality as Germany's overall power increased.⁹

This study's main problem is whether Germany has exhibited its early 20th-century expansionist "offensive" reflexes again after the Cold War. If so, to what extent and in which areas? Have the pragmatic aggressive initiatives of major powers, particularly Germany, been the source of instability in Europe, as Mearsheimer suggested, or could they be in the future? This constitutes our core issue. The question is whether Germany's pragmatic expansionism, partially realized economically, has been interrupted by the Russia-Ukraine war according to the offensive realist approach. The signs of this began with the Anglo-Saxon world establishing its global agenda. How has Germany's position changed as the shift from the Atlantic world to the Pacific world occurs? Evaluating Germany's position within the context of the gripes of this international system change, this study aims to analyze Germany's place in the global system by analyzing historical and current findings methodologically based on Mearsheimer's offensive realism.

1. The Decline of American Hegemony

The 20th century can be defined as the shortest century due to the establishment of American hegemony during this century, which was built around a balance of dread, as explained by the systemic school of thought. The two main actors in this balance of dread were the U.S. and the USSR. This balance of dread can also be likened to competition between partners. However, this balance was disrupted in 1991 when the USSR exited the stage. Consequently, the dialectical counterpart to American hegemony disappeared. The period from 1945 to

7 Patryk Kugiel, "End of European soft power? Implications for EU foreign policy", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 26:1, 2017, pp. 59-72.

8 Arfi Badredine, "State collapse in a new theoretical framework: The case of Yugoslavia", *International Journal of Sociology*, 28:3, 1998, p. 33.

9 Willeke Sandler, "'Here Too Lies Our Lebensraum': Colonial Space as German Space", Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann & Maiken Umbach (eds.), *Heimat, Region, and Empire: Spatial Identities under National Socialism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012, pp. 148-165.

1991, during which American hegemony¹⁰ was established, can be seen as the shortest century, lasting approximately 45 years.¹¹

Since 1945, stability on the European continent was initially maintained by dividing Germany into two and bringing it under control. However, with reunification and the country's integration into the capitalist world, the EU emerged as a successful welfare project that has helped sustain peace and cooperation. Germany was made smaller, more controllable, prosperous, and a substantial industrial base for industrial capitalism.¹² For the U.S., the security of the European continent was too important to be left to the EU alone. Consequently, the U.S. has maintained direct control over Europe's security through NATO.¹³

After 1991, with the USSR withdrawing from the global system, the U.S. fell into a deep void. It is evident in International Relations articles from the early 1990s that the U.S. was searching for a new enemy. For example, alongside popular publications like Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, some strategists believed that Japan, which is still an ally of the U.S. today, would emerge as a future adversary.¹⁴ This notion, which can be explained by reflexes dating back to World War II, also found a place in the studies regarding Germany. One of the most significant analyses in this context came from Mearsheimer. In his analysis, Mearsheimer predicted that after Germany's reunification, it would rapidly attempt to re-establish hegemony in Europe, leading to instability on the continent.¹⁵ We will analyze the current relevance of these predictions in detail; however, it is essential to diagnose that these evaluations were made as a result of the void left by American hegemony.

We can assume that if American hegemony had not declined, there would not have been many publications on the nature of the new international order after the 1990s. While most of these publications and analyses suggest that American dominance would continue in a diminished form, thinkers like Fukuyama posited that American hegemony and its system represented the ultimate point of human progress.¹⁶ Given that this assumption has been refuted today, we must ask: Has American hegemony tangibly declined? If the answer is yes, how has this decline occurred?

The decline of American hegemony can be understood through various indicators. The most concrete and accessible indicators are economic indicators. In the 1950s, more than

10 In modern terms, the concept of "Hegemony" indicates that an element within a system is superior and dominant over others. In Marxist theory, this concept has been used more technically and more specifically. Antonio Gramsci is considered the first person to use this concept in its modern sense. In his works, Gramsci refers to the dominant class gaining power with the consent of the subjugated. In the discipline of International Relations, Robert Cox adapted Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony to the international system. According to this theory, known as the neo-Gramscian approach, hegemony is not established solely through domination and power, that is, through coercion, but also by producing consent and creating voluntary compliance, thus being evaluated as a means of exerting influence alongside the element of power. The article uses the concept of "hegemony" in this regard. Robert W. Cox "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method", *Millennium*, 12.2, 1983, pp. 162-175.

11 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Revolts against the system", *New Left Review*, 18, 2002, pp. 29-30.

12 John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security*, 15:1, 1990, pp. 55-56.

13 Christopher Layne, "US Hegemony and the Perpetuation of NATO", Ted Galen Carpenter (ed.), *NATO Enters the 21st Century*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 59-91.

14 Edward Luttwak, *The Endangered American Dream: How to Stop the United States from Becoming a Third World Country and How to Win the Geo-Economic Struggle for Industrial Supremacy*, Touchstone Books, New York, 2013, p.45.

15 John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security*, 15:1, 1990, pp. 48-49.

16 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, 16, 1989, pp. 3-4.

half of the global trade volume belonged to the U.S. Today, this figure has decreased to less than one-fifth.¹⁷ From a military and strategic perspective, the only rival to the U.S. military with nuclear weapons in the mid-20th century was the USSR. However, today, the number of countries with nuclear weapons is close to ten, while countries like China challenge the U.S. military both technologically and numerically.¹⁸ Moreover, in the mid-20th century, no country could conduct operations without the consent of the U.S. or the USSR in a world practically divided between these two powers. However, since the 1990s, this rigid division has gradually dissolved. For instance, Russia's increased freedom of action in Africa, China's military maneuvers in the Pacific and its economic investments all around the world, and Türkiye's establishment of military bases in countries such as Somalia, Sudan, and Qatar can be cited as evidence of this shift.¹⁹

With the decline of American hegemony, the theoretical evolution of the international system is still debated today. Regarding Germany's role and expectations on the European continent and globally, John Mearsheimer, the founder of offensive realism, made predictions in the early 1990s. Unlike defensive realism, established by Kenneth Waltz, offensive realism posits that great powers will take actions aimed at dominating the international system or subsystems rather than merely balancing. It suggests that great powers will always strive to maximize their own power and will not hesitate to take measures against rival powers. In this context, offensive realism helps explain contemporary American behavior, particularly the foreign policy actions of the Biden administration.²⁰

According to Mearsheimer's theory, hegemonic states or great powers that aspire to be hegemons approach the management of the international system as pragmatically as possible and act in a goal-oriented manner. The fundamentals of offensive realism, pioneered by Mearsheimer, can be summarized as follows: The architects of the international system are the main actors in world politics, and they play a dominant role in an anarchic international system. Despite being commonly referred to as defensive alliances, defense industries, etc., every state possesses offensive capabilities. In this context, states can never be entirely certain of the intentions of other states, and thus, they must always remain vigilant. Additionally, the primary objective of states is survival and they continually focus on developing rational strategies to ensure their survival. Therefore, in offensive realism, unlike defensive realism, the fundamental difference is that regardless of alliances, states prioritize their interests and may opportunistically change their strategies accordingly.²¹

As mentioned above, does the U.S., in line with Mearsheimer's assertions, actually prioritize its interests and not act in concert with its allies? Or, conversely, does it operate under defensive realism, making decisions based on alliances and the balance of power?²² The same questions need to be asked regarding Germany. Given the EU in general and Germany in particular, especially after the Ukraine-Russia war, one can say that a new era has begun concerning the international system, Germany's future, and U.S.-Germany relations. In the

17 Paul Krugman, Richard N. Cooper, T. N. Srinivasan, "Growing World Trade: Causes and Consequences", *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, vol. 1995: 1, 1995, p. 341.

18 Steven E. Miller, Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear power without nuclear proliferation?", *Daedalus*, 138:4, 2009, pp. 7-18.

19 Mohammad Abdelrahman Banisalah and Mariam Ibrahim Al-Hamadi, "The New Turkey: The Spread of Turkish Military Bases Abroad, Role and Indications 2002-2020", *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 50:2, 2023, pp. 553-568.

20 John Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-power Politics", *Foreign Affairs*, 100, 2021, pp. 48-58.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

22 Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Structure, National Force, and the Balance of World Power", *Journal of International Affairs*, 21:2, 1967, pp. 215-231.

case of the U.S., it can now be said that Germany has become a punished ally rather than a straightforward ally.

The reason for this lies in Germany's geopolitics. When Germany regained its dominant position in Central Europe, and its strong industry, the only thing missing was the energy deficit. Germany compensated for this deficit with the energy it supplied from Russia. The energy trade in question also meant that the economies of Russia and Germany complemented each other. If this situation evolved into a capacity that could lead to closer rapprochement in the future, it could pose a danger to the U.S. and the Anglo-Saxon world.²³ In this context, the danger in question was eliminated for the U.S. with the Russia-Ukraine war. This situation shows us that the U.S. is not taking a step in favor of its ally, Germany, but on the contrary, it is taking a step to strangle it economically. A theoretical analysis of the policy implemented by the hegemonic power, that is, the U.S., across the EU and Germany in particular, on a continental basis will further clarify the picture.

2. The Global Role of the European Union and Germany

Mearsheimer argues that Germany will once again seek to become the hegemonic actor in Europe, leading to instability.²⁴ This has been achieved not politically or militarily but economically.²⁵ Therefore, Mearsheimer's claim regarding Germany can be examined under two main pillars.

First, in his article "Back to the Future", Mearsheimer predicts that Germany will revert to its pre-World War II status, with its political ambitions reawakening.²⁶ This resurgence is linked to Germany's large population, its developed industry, and the place of past ambitions in its national memory. After achieving political unity, Germany quickly became the regional hegemonic power on the European continent and fought for global hegemony during the two World Wars.²⁷ The loss experienced in these wars led to the division of Germany and its subjugation to predominantly American control.

West Germany was kept under American control, and the U.S. revived its industry through the Marshall Plan. Integrated into Western capitalism, West Germany became prosperous and economically significant, but it remained a country where American influence was strongly felt militarily and politically. Within this context, the EU (then called the European Coal and Steel Community) became both a central production center and market for the capitalist economic world on the western edge of Eurasia. The concept of

23 Ian Klinke, "Geopolitics and the political right: lessons from Germany", *International Affairs*, 94:3, 2018, pp. 495-514.

24 John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security*, 15:1, 1990, pp. 9-11.

25 "German Revival" refers to the resurgence of Germany as a central power in Europe after the Cold War, particularly following its reunification in 1990. The term comes from American political commentator Charles Krauthammer, who argued that the reunification of Germany and its growing economic and political influence posed significant challenges for Europe and the broader international order. Krauthammer expressed concern that the reunification would lead to a resurgence of German nationalism and a shift in the balance of power in Europe, as Germany would become the dominant force on the continent. He worried that this "revival" could disrupt the peace and stability that had been maintained in Europe since World War II by dividing Germany and bringing it under Western control. His "German Revival" theory reflected anxieties about Germany potentially moving away from its post-war pacifism and becoming more assertive, both economically and militarily. While discussing these concerns, it can be said that although most of Krauthammer's fears did not come true politically, they did come true economically. For more information, see Charles Krauthammer, "The German Revival", *New Republic*, 202.13, 1990, pp. 18-21.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

27 Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, "Germany as the EU's Reluctant Hegemon? Of Economic Strength and Political Constraints", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:10, 2013, pp. 1387-1405.

Rhine capitalism, which has found its place in economic and political literature, also emerged due to Germany's successful economic performance. Through Rhine capitalism, Germany both supported the global capitalist system and became a significant economic power. The contributions of the EU to this economic power cannot be denied. Therefore, during the 20th century, which is defined as the American Century, Germany continued as an essential economic factor serving this hegemony.²⁸

The EU is one of the critical global elements that must be discussed when analyzing Germany. The process of European integration transformed into a structure with direct Anglo-Saxon involvement when the United Kingdom (UK) joined the European Community in the early 1970s. French General and then President Charles de Gaulle, who never wanted Britain to be a member of the European Community, described it as a Trojan horse of the U.S.²⁹ This perspective can be attributed to the French general's desire to maintain a distance from Britain, which he believed served American hegemony. Additionally, France's withdrawal from NATO's military command is another testament to this stance.

Germany, however, was not fully politically aligned with France's vision of continental European unity. One of the main reasons for the difference in this subject was the pervasive American influence on the German political, military, and bureaucratic life.³⁰ A tangible example of this influence is the presence of over 40 American military bases in Germany, with more than 35,000 personnel stationed there. This figure was close to 250,000 personnel in 1985, just before the end of the Cold War. Even today, Germany hosts Europe's largest American military presence, with 11 American bases.³¹

In this context, the resistance against Anglo-Saxon influence on Europe observed in France was not seen in Germany. Throughout the 20th century, Germany appeared more reserved in political decision-making than France and avoided openly opposing American policies.

Mearsheimer's assertion that, following the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, there would be a return to its former political and military ambitions requires a two-pronged evaluative perspective. Considering the presence and influence of the U.S. in Germany, it would be inaccurate to say that this presence ended after the Cold War. Although the number of American military personnel has been reduced, it remains substantial through the American bases mentioned above and also through NATO bases and engagements, indicating that U.S. influence in Germany is still significant. It cannot be said that Mearsheimer's assumption of Germany seeking military and political hegemony in Europe after the Cold War has fully materialized. Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely dismissed either. This assessment can be explained by Germany's economic influence and the structural changes led by Germany within the EU.³²

Germany has been a critical driving force behind the EU's political and economic integration, particularly following the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which laid the foundation

28 Michel Albert, "The Rhine Model of Capitalism: An Investigation", *European Business Journal*, 4:3, 1992, pp. 8-22.

29 Tim Oliver, "A European Union without the United Kingdom: The Geopolitics of a British Exit from the EU", *Strategic Update LSE*, 16:1, 2016, pp.1-19.

30 Damon A. Terrill, "Power and Politics: The New German Question", Gale Maltox, Geoffrey Oliver & Jonathan Tucker, (eds.), *Germany in Transition*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 23-38.

31 <https://www.deutschland.de/en/usa/the-importance-of-american-troops-in-germany>, accessed 04.05.2024.

32 Hanna Ojanen, "EU-NATO Relations after the Cold War.", Jussi Hanhimäki, Georges-Henri Soutou & Basil Germond, (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transatlantic Security*, Routledge, 2010, pp. 180-193.

for a more unified Europe. As the largest economy in Europe, Germany has consistently supported initiatives to deepen economic ties, promote stability, and ensure closer cooperation among the EU member states. Additionally, German leaders made significant decisions that had undeniable economic impacts. Germany spearheaded the introduction of a common currency and the expansion policy towards the East, specifically towards the former Iron Curtain countries.³³ Mearsheimer's claim that Germany has reverted to its pre-World War II reflexes not through traditional military means but through indirect means is embedded here. Germany has utilized its economic power within the EU, which is derived from the Rhine capitalism mentioned earlier. Immediately following reunification, Germany influenced the EU's *Acquis Communautaire* in line with its economic expansionism. As the EU's largest economy, Germany has used its economic clout to promote policies that encourage fiscal discipline, economic integration, and free-market competition. For example, Germany's advocacy for the Stability and Growth Pact,³⁴ which enforces strict limits on budget deficits and public debt, reflects its priority on financial stability, a key element of its economic model. This approach safeguards the strength of the Euro and prevents economic volatility within the EU, ensuring a favorable environment for German exports, which form the backbone of its economic power. With its robust economy characterized by a consistent current account surplus, Germany leveraged the common currency to exert significant economic influence over Mediterranean countries, which generally run current account deficits. Specific examples of this influence can be seen during the 2008 global economic crisis when Germany acquired numerous Greek public enterprises and exerted considerable influence over the Greek economy.³⁵

Germany has also exerted economic and some political influence over the former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe. The reunification of Germany led to shockwaves that caused the disintegration of some countries in Eastern Europe. Shortly after Germany's reunification, its disruptive impact on Yugoslavia became evident. Croatia experienced a heightened desire for independence, ultimately leading to Yugoslavia's dismantlement. Croatia's historical ties with Austria and Germany, particularly beginning with the Habsburg Monarchy era, played a significant role in shaping the political, cultural, and economic dynamics of Central and Eastern Europe. These connections were forged during the lengthy period when Croatia was part of the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Especially after 1527, when Croatia came under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty, the region became politically integrated with Austria. Over the several centuries of Habsburg rule, Croatians developed deep political and cultural relations with Austria and Germany.³⁶ In the 19th century, the growing influence of Germany and Austria contributed to the shaping of Croatian nationalism and its quest for independence. Croatian intellectual and political elites were influenced by developments in Vienna and Berlin and they mainly showed an affinity for German and Austrian cultural and legal models. Consequently, these close ties with Austria and Germany shaped Croatia's political identity and strategic preferences.³⁷

33 Michael J Baun, "The Maastricht Treaty as High Politics: Germany, France, and European Integration", *Political Science Quarterly*, 110:4, 1995, pp. 605-624.

34 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A31997Y0802%2801%29&qid=1728299709948>, accessed 07.10.2024.

35 Ignacio Ramirez Cisneros, "German Economic Dominance within the Eurozone and Minsky's Proposal for a Shared Burden Between the Hegemon and Core Economic Powers", *Levy Economics Institute, Working Papers Series*, 913, 2018, pp.1-23.

36 Stanko Guldescu, *The Croatian-Slavonian Kingdom: 1526-1792*, Mouton & Co Printers, 1970, The Hague, pp.29-30.

37 Stipe Kljaić, "Theories of Central European Integration in Croatian Politics and Culture (1848-1971)", *Great Theorists of Central European Integration. Legal Studies on Central Europe*, CEA Publishing, Miskolc, Budapest,

By the time of Yugoslavia's dissolution, Croatia's historical ties with Germany and Austria had become one of the factors that accelerated Croatia's independence process. During Yugoslavia's disintegration in the early 1990s, both Germany and Austria strongly supported Croatia's bid for independence. Germany was among the first countries to recognize Croatia's independence, demonstrating that these historical ties remained influential in modern political developments. These historical affinities also played a role in Yugoslavia's breakup, which fueled Croatia's pursuit of deeper integration with Western Europe and caused tensions with other federative structures within Yugoslavia. By reviving its historical connections with Germany and Austria, Croatia gained Western support during its secession from Yugoslavia. This secession, in turn, became a crucial geopolitical factor in accelerating Yugoslavia's disintegration. In summary, Croatia's historical relations with Germany and Austria not only provided a historical backdrop but also emerged as a pivotal factor in supporting Croatia's independence claims during Yugoslavia's dissolution and in securing international recognition.³⁸

The fact that only Croatia and Slovenia from the former Yugoslavia are EU members today supports this (Yugoslavia's fragmentation) claim. Additionally, the division of Czechoslovakia and the increasing economic influence of Germany spreading eastwards over the years indicate that the political landscape in Eastern Europe has undergone significant changes due to Germany's reunification.³⁹

Following its reunification, Germany's increasing economic influence and political weight within the EU facilitated the implementation of expansion policies of the union. The Eastern European enlargement was completed in 2004 and 2007, and many new EU members became integral components of the German economy.⁴⁰ This development demonstrates the realization of Mearsheimer's prediction in the economic realm. Germany has emerged as a dominant economic actor within Europe, causing significant difficulties for several EU member states, including France, in coping with German industrial and economic power within the union. This situation can be described as Germany's economic hegemony within the EU. The concept of "*Lebensraum*" (living space), a doctrine of Hitler during World War II, has now been realized through the EU by adding new member states peacefully and economically.⁴¹

Between 1992 and 2008, under Germany's leadership, the EU evolved into a globally admired "soft power" characterized by economic strength and democratic values. However, Germany, heavily influenced by the U.S., did not exhibit the aggressive reflexes seen before World War II. Moreover, NATO's founding rationale was not solely to counter the Soviet Union, but one of its objectives was to keep the Germans "down" or, in other words, under control.⁴² This situation has persisted to the present day. Consequently, while Germany has

2023, pp. 176-183.

38 Sabrina P. Ramet, "The Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Competing Narratives of Resentment and Blame" *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 55:1, 2007, p. 61.

39 Daniele Conversi, "German-Bashing and the Breakup of Yugoslavia.", *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers the University of Washington*, 16, 1998, pp. 7-58. https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/35336/Treadgold_No16_1998.pdf?sequence=1, accessed 20.05.2024.

40 Theofanis Exadaktylos, "The EU Enlargement to the East: Europeanizing German Foreign Policy.", *ECPR 5th Pan-European Conference on EU Politics, 23-26 June 2010*, https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=8002935646448240912&hl=tr&as_sdt=0,5 accessed 30.11.2024

41 Shelley Baranowski, "Legacies of Lebensraum: German Identity and Multi-Ethnicity", *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives*, Manuel Borutta & Jan C. Jansen (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, pp. 35-52.

42 Peter W. Rodman, "NATO's Role in a New European Security Order", Academic Forum Conferences, October

achieved regional economic hegemony in Europe, it has not been able to establish military and political hegemony due to the control mechanisms in place.

3. Germany's Crisis Toward a Multipolar World

“*Ostpolitik*” refers to Germany’s eastern policy from when it established its political unity to the present. *Ostpolitik* also signifies Germany’s geopolitical stance stemming from its fixed geographical necessities. While Germany has shown a tendency and desire to expand eastward, it has continually faced its biggest rival, Russia, in this direction. This desire is strategically important due to the vast and fertile lands of the East being highly alluring to Germany. *Ostpolitik*, in its formal sense, was established most recently by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s desire to normalize relations with the USSR. The main reason West Germany sought to normalize relations with the USSR was to escape the overwhelming and unilateral influence of the U.S. Consequently, West Germany established direct relations with the USSR, initiating the first steps of normalizing relations with Warsaw Pact countries and establishing contact with East Germany, a country not officially recognized. *Ostpolitik*’s declaration can be attributed to West Germany’s attempt to alleviate the oppressive control of U.S. hegemony. This intense control and pressure made West Germany dependent on the U.S. and was the most significant factor triggering the declaration of *Ostpolitik*.⁴³

Since Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* doctrine, Germany has continually sought an “Eastern” expansion in alignment with its geographical imperatives. The first phase of this approach can be characterized by *détente* steps with the USSR. The second phase involved shaping the EU institutions to support Germany’s eastern expansion after reunification. As previously mentioned, Germany’s efforts to swiftly integrate former Warsaw Pact countries into the EU, coupled with its negative contributions to the political instability and disintegration of Eastern European countries after the Cold War, form the second pillar of its eastern policy. The third and final phase can be associated with Germany’s relations with global powers such as Russia and China.⁴⁴

By the end of the Cold War, no state, even Russia or China, was perceived as a potential threat to the U.S. In the 1990s, a potential threat or an enemy necessary for legitimizing U.S. hegemony had yet to emerge. This situation created a dialectical deficiency in terms of U.S. hegemony. Some thinkers speculated that China might become a potential adversary.⁴⁵ Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. attempted to substitute “terrorism” as the sought-after enemy, but it can be argued that this effort was not entirely successful.⁴⁶ Starting in the 2000s, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia began a rapid recovery process and gradually emerged as a global threat to the U.S. Moreover, Russia effectively utilized its hydrocarbon resources for economic development and experienced a swift recovery after the collapse of the Soviet economy. Already possessing a strong military-industrial and technological infrastructure inherited from the USSR, Russia successfully leveraged this foundation alongside its economic improvement.⁴⁷ Germany, the leading economic power in the EU, became Russia’s largest hydrocarbon customer in Europe. Consequently, a win-

1995, <https://www.nato.int/acad/conf/future95/rodman.htm>, accessed 20.05.2024.

43 Sara Lorenzini, “Globalising *Ostpolitik*: *Ostpolitik* revisited”, *Cold War History*, 9:2, 2009, pp. 223-242.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 240-242.

45 Robert J. Art, “The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 125:3, 2010, pp. 359–391.

46 Richard Jackson, “Religion, politics and terrorism: a critical analysis of narratives of ‘Islamic terrorism’”, *Centre for International Politics Working Paper Series* 21, 2006, pp. 1-22.

47 Natalia Morozova, “Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy under Putin”, *Geopolitics*, 14:4, 2009, pp. 667-686.

win relationship emerged between Germany and Russia based on energy trade. The “Nord Stream” projects further developed this energy trade relationship.⁴⁸

China has emerged as the primary global rival to U.S. hegemony in the Pacific.⁴⁹ Since the early 1990s, China’s economic growth rate has been unprecedented. The Chinese economy, valued at \$413 billion in 1991, has now surpassed \$18 trillion.⁵⁰ By rationally channeling this economic growth into technological investments, China has caught up with and, in some areas, surpassed the U.S. in various fields of technology production. This development has jeopardized the U.S.’s global leadership, compelling it to adopt aggressive China-focused policies and strategic measures.⁵¹

The Eurasian plans of the U.S. and China will clearly illustrate this confrontation. China has initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to extend traditional Chinese trade routes from China to Western Europe through three main corridors, establishing new commercial links. This project is largely funded by Chinese state finances, utilizing the trade surpluses China has accumulated over the years. Through the BRI, China has forged significant partnerships in Eurasia, including Russia, Pakistan, and Iran, extending its trade routes to Eastern Europe. This development has seriously alarmed the U.S., as the control of Eurasia has been a central tenet for global hegemony, according to early 20th-century strategists. Geopolitical experts like Nicholas Spykman, Alfred Mahan, and later Henry Kissinger and Alfred Marshall have all emphasized the importance of focusing on this region.⁵²

In order to prevent losing control in Eurasia and hinder China’s advance, the U.S. has initiated a strategic plan directly involving Germany. By putting Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism into practice, the U.S. is perceived to have instigated and encouraged the Ukraine-Russia war. This encouragement and the policies aimed at provoking Russia’s fundamental security boundaries began with NATO expansion following the collapse of the USSR. Although Russia initially remained relatively quiet, NATO’s expansion eventually threatened the security of the Black Sea, prompting Russia to declare certain red lines. This NATO expansion in Eastern Europe has followed a path that aligns closely with the EU enlargement, further complicating the geopolitical landscape and intensifying Russia’s security concerns. The most significant of these security concerns were Georgia and Ukraine. Although Russia managed to maintain its control in the region with the 2008 intervention in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the direct intervention in Ukraine in 2022 have escalated into an ongoing war.⁵³

The U.S. and UK can be viewed as the primary instigators of the Ukraine-Russia war. This claim is supported not only by numerous concrete indicators but also by a strategic backdrop that must be considered. From a strategic perspective, the U.S. has disrupted China’s BRI through the Russia-Ukraine war. One of the most crucial routes for the BRI projects to reach Europe has become a war zone. Germany’s potential future as a global power has been

48 Bjorn Gens, “Germany’s Russia Policy and Geo-Economics: Nord Stream 2, Sanctions and the Question of EU Leadership Towards Russia”, *Global Affairs*, 5:4-5, 2019, pp. 315-334.

49 Randall Schweller, “Opposite but compatible nationalisms: a neoclassical realist approach to the future of U.S.–China relations”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11.1, 2018, pp. 23-48.

50 Worldbank, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/CHN>, accessed 15.05.2024.

51 Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim, “The Innovation Imperative: Technology and US–China Rivalry in the Twenty-first Century”, *International Affairs*, 94:3, 2018, pp. 553-572.

52 Arzan Tarapore, “The US Response to The Belt and Road Initiative: Answering New Threats with New Partnerships”, *Asia Policy*, 14:2, 2019, pp. 34-41.

53 David Matsaberidze, “Russia vs. EU/US Through Georgia and Ukraine”, *Connections*, 14:2, 2015, pp. 77-86.

jeopardized. This has several dimensions. For example, Germany has been pushed back into the U.S. sphere of influence, reminiscent of the 20th century. The U.S. has achieved this pull-back through NATO. The Biden administration, emphasizing the need to revitalize NATO, has declared Russia a significant adversary again and successfully consolidated Europe under NATO.⁵⁴

The Ukraine-Russia war has significantly disrupted hydrocarbon trade between Germany and Russia, bringing it nearly to a standstill. With the start of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia progressively reduced its gas supplies to Europe, culminating in severe reductions by May 2022. This reduction was marked by the cessation of gas supplies to Poland and Finland, followed by the complete shutdown of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline in September 2022. The decline in gas supplies began in 2021, with partial cuts preceding the war and full-scale reductions in 2022. As a result, Russia's gas exports to Europe fell below 20% of its previous levels. Before the conflict in Ukraine, Russia supplied approximately 40% of Europe's natural gas, but this share had plummeted to 15% by the end of 2023. The closure of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines and the Yamal pipeline further exacerbated the situation, dramatically reducing Germany's energy dependence on Russia. This shift was compounded by payment disputes, with Russia demanding payment in rubles—a request that European countries rejected—and prompting Russia to hasten its supply cuts, particularly to Poland and Finland, in May 2022. To ensure its energy security, Germany has been forced to pivot towards alternative energy sources, including liquefied natural gas (LNG). These developments underscore the substantial decline in hydrocarbon trade between Russia and Germany, as well as Europe more broadly, and have necessitated a profound restructuring of Germany's energy strategy.⁵⁵

Consequently, Germany has been compelled to take a strong anti-Russia stance within the NATO alliance system. The previously close relationship between Russia and Germany, based on hydrocarbon trade, has abruptly ended. This ending is evidenced by the sabotage and explosion of the Nord Stream pipeline, severing tangible commercial ties. The disruption of these commercial links has eliminated access to nearby and consequently cheap energy, thereby placing German industry and economy under significant strain in the medium and long term. Finally, Germany has been cornered within the EU.⁵⁶ Germany's greater dependence on Russian gas compared to France has placed Berlin in a politically difficult position within the EU in the aftermath of the Ukraine-Russia war. This energy dependence has constrained Germany's broader role in EU politics, especially when ensuring energy security has been particularly challenging. While France, with its reliance on nuclear energy, has maintained a more flexible stance, Germany has faced significant pressures due to its reliance on Russian gas. During Angela Merkel's tenure as the Chancellor, Germany pursued a more independent foreign policy, particularly in relation to the U.S. Merkel's strategy of engaging with Russia was primarily driven by economic interests, which allowed Germany to maintain greater autonomy in terms of energy policy. The Nord Stream 2 project symbolized this approach. However, the Ukraine-Russia war and the risks associated with dependence on Russian gas have forced Germany to reconsider its energy policy and geopolitical choices. Nowadays,

54 Edmund Li Sheng, "The Reconstruction of the US–EU Alliance in Joe Biden's Administration: The G7 and NATO as Instruments to Contain China and Russia", Edmund Li Sheng, (ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Triangle Great Game of Contemporary International Politics*, Springer Nature, Singapore, 2023, pp. 79-109.

55 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/europes-messy-russian-gas-divorce/>, accessed 26.09.2024.

56 Christian Sellar and Gianfranco Battisti, "A Century of Struggles. A Comparison of Multiple Geopolitical Agendas in Europe, the USA, and Beyond", *Geopolitical Perspectives from the Italian Border*, Springer International Publishing, 2023, pp. 103-119.

German politicians have increasingly turned to the U.S. to address the energy crisis, seeking alternative energy sources, such as LNG. This shift has made Germany more dependent on U.S. leadership. Under pressure from the U.S., Germany has had to modify its energy policies, rendering it more vulnerable within the EU particularly in relation to countries like France. Germany also has had to align itself more closely with U.S. security and foreign policy strategies.⁵⁷

In fact, the events leading up to Russia's direct intervention in Ukraine were foreshadowed by the Brexit process. Following the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, which began in 2016 and was completed in 2020, Britain announced its new foreign policy doctrine in 2021 under the title "Global Britain in a Competitive Age". This doctrine aimed for Britain to strengthen its ties with the Anglo-Saxon world while identifying Russia and China as rivals to be contended with.⁵⁸ For Germany, this doctrine implies that with Britain's departure, the EU, which Germany now leads, has suffered significant global influence loss and has begun to fade from prominence. Additionally, the revival of NATO under U.S. leadership has ultimately thwarted Germany's "*Ostpolitik*" strategy, effectively turning Germany into a satellite of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Here, one can conclude that Mearsheimer's offensive realism, consistent with the spirit of neorealism, has been adopted and implemented by some governments (decision-makers) while not by others. It is possible to assert that the current Biden administration in the U.S. applies offensive realism. In the aforementioned Eurasian strategies, the Biden team has taken measures concerning China, Russia, and Germany, whom they perceive as rivals to the U.S. As is well known, a more isolationist foreign policy was preferred during the Trump administration. Regarding our topic, Trump explicitly stated policies such as NATO having no future and that the U.S. should not spend more money on NATO. Furthermore, he mentioned that the Ukraine-Russia war would never have occurred under his administration, and if re-elected, he would cease aid to Ukraine.⁵⁹ These statements indicate that Trump's approach was more isolationist and defensively realist. Such a sharp foreign policy divide has perhaps never been witnessed to this extent in U.S. history. In this sense, it can be inferred that the Biden administration directly implements Mearsheimer's offensive realism-based foreign policy.

Conclusion

According to Mearsheimer, those who shape the international system constitute the main actors in world politics and take on a dominant role within the anarchic international system. Therefore, analyzing Germany without evaluating the attitudes of the U.S., which has been a dominant power since 1945, is impossible. As mentioned above, Mearsheimer's theory tells us that every state maintains offensive capabilities despite being referred to as defensive alliances or defense industries. However, offensive capabilities should not be understood solely as tangible military capacity. The concept of "keeping down" Germany via NATO, implemented by the U.S., has generally been associated with both NATO and pro-American German bureaucrats and decision-makers within Germany. Consequently, this U.S. influence emerges from within Germany itself.

57 <https://americangerman.institute/2021/09/aicgs-asks-what-is-angela-merkels-foreign-policy-legacy/>, accessed 26.09.2024.

58 British Government, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf, accessed 16.05.2024.

59 Juliet Kaarbo, Kai Oppermann and Ryan K. Beasley, "What if? Counterfactual Trump and the Western Response to the War in Ukraine", *International Affairs*, 99:2, 2023, pp. 605-624.

Moreover, as Mearsheimer pointed out, states can never be entirely sure of other states' intentions, which can be seen as why the U.S. seeks to keep Germany down. Despite being under the same alliance umbrella (NATO), this alliance primarily keeps its members under U.S. hegemony and control. Therefore, the member states must always remain vigilant. Additionally, the fundamental goal of states is survival, and they focus on constantly developing rational strategies to ensure this. The U.S. strategy involves containing Russia and China as much as possible and doing everything possible to prevent the world from becoming multipolar. This means controlling not only its allies (such as Germany and Japan) but also other countries and taking preemptive actions when necessary. In this context, as Mearsheimer's offensive realism suggests, the U.S. prioritizes itself and can opportunistically change its strategies.

One of the most significant recent examples of this opportunistic strategy is Brexit. Through the Brexit process, Britain left the EU to align itself with the U.S. against Russia and China. Continental Europe, particularly Germany, could not prevent a significant loss of prestige for the EU, which had been a prominent political entity for the past 30 years. The reason for the inability to develop a common defense since the founding of the EU was NATO. Through NATO, the U.S. has always managed to control Europe. Today, the prominence of NATO also means the decline of the EU. The EU evolves into an entity with limited political maneuvering beyond economic union. As a result of the disruption of Germany's energy supply, the EU's economy heads into a deadlock in the medium and long term. In this context, it can be said that the concepts of democracy and cooperation within the EU are directly linked to U.S. influence. During times of economic prosperity, these concepts came to the forefront, especially when the U.S. declared "victory" over the USSR. This situation persisted until the 2008 global economic crisis, which revealed the unsustainability of the U.S. system. During this crisis, the German economy did not paint a bleak picture like the other Western economies because, rather than being negatively affected, Germany emerged stronger by purchasing many public assets in Mediterranean countries that had suffered significant economic damage and, thus, increased its influence within the EU. This situation has concerned the U.S. and the UK, which was never a member of the Eurozone. Despite being controlled militarily and bureaucratically, Germany has always posed economic challenges to the U.S.

The U.S. aims to achieve several objectives simultaneously by triggering the Ukraine-Russia war. First, NATO has been reconsolidated, and its influence on the western edge of Eurasia has increased. Second, the U.S. has seized an opportunity to weaken Russia, which has risen primarily through hydrocarbon trade and become a candidate for a global power position in a possible multipolar world. Third, Germany, which needs to be kept "down" but has rapidly risen by using the EU as leverage since the 1990s, has been forcibly brought back under the NATO umbrella. Germany has shrunk economically and strategically, losing cheap Russian hydrocarbons essential for its industry. During the 20th century, the U.S. kept Germany controlled but relatively prosperous. However, in the 21st century, as the world steps into a multipolar era led by China, the U.S. has pressured and constrained Germany, a potential future rival, under the guise of alliance.

Lastly, the question arises of how Germany can strategically respond to this pressure. One can suggest that Germany could overcome this predicament with a similar approach to its "*Ostpolitik*" doctrine. To do this, Germany could maintain its trade with Russia, which was crucial to its economic interests, and remain neutral in the Ukraine-Russia war, similar to Türkiye. If Germany were to adopt such a position and even form a Germany-Russia-Türkiye

triangle, it could escape U.S. dominance. This tripartite alignment would provide economic relief through energy routes and break Anglo-Saxon influence in Eastern Europe. However, Germany does not seem capable of taking such actions due to its internal dynamics, which have been under U.S. control since 1945. In this context, as stated in Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, the U.S. uses its influence to suppress potential actors, like Germany, in a multipolar world. Therefore, if Germany cannot devise a unique strategy from within, it is foreseeable that it will remain a second-tier actor in the new international relations order. Thus, Mearsheimer's predictions from the 1990s that Germany would destabilize Europe have materialized differently, with the U.S. playing the destabilizing role to preserve its hegemony.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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