
MERKEL DEFENDS RUSSIA TIES, RIDICULES TRUMP ON CARS

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Russia could be a Cold War-type "partner" for Europe, German leader Angela Merkel has said.

But US policy on Iran was "depressing" and its claims about German cars were "scary", she added in a speech at the Munich Security Conference, an international congress in Germany, on Saturday (16 February).

Russia had "illegally" annexed Crimea, "attacked" eastern Ukraine, and "violated" a ban on short-range nuclear missiles, Merkel said.

The EU ought to consider extra sanctions on Moscow over its recent naval aggression against Ukraine, she added.

But there was hope of returning to better times via diplomacy, she also said.

"After the fall of the Berlin Wall, we certainly had the hope ... that we could come to a better cooperation," Merkel said.

"Today, in 2019, that seems like a long time ago ... [but] in a few years, it could look very different again," she said.

There was also nothing wrong in Germany's plan to build a new gas pipeline to Russia, called Nord Stream 2, she noted.

"If we got Russian gas already in the Cold War ... and the old German Federal Republic introduced Russian gas on a large scale - then I don't know why times today should be so much worse that we cannot say: Russia remains a partner," Merkel said, referring to the former West Germany.

The chancellor spoke as EU foreign ministers prepared to add names to a Russia blacklist on Monday over its naval skirmish against Ukraine in November.

She has long supported EU and US sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

But she has also defended Nord Stream 2 despite US and wider warnings that it posed a strategic threat to European energy security.

US rift

Merkel spoke amid an EU rift with US president Donald Trump on Iran and on transatlantic trade.

Trump, last year, walked out of an EU-backed nuclear arms control pact with Iran and has threatened European firms with sanctions if they do business there.

He has also imposed tariffs on EU products, including German cars, which his administration described as posing a risk to American "security".

"We have to be careful about this split [on Iran], which is very depressing," Merkel said in Munich.

"Look: We [Germany] are proud of our cars, and we ought to be," she added on the tariffs dispute.

"These cars are also built in the United States of America. South Carolina has the largest BMW plant - not in Bavaria [a German region], South Carolina [a US state]," Merkel noted, referring to a German car firm.

She mocked US justifications of the tariff regime.

"If these cars, which are no less threatening by the fact that they are built in South Carolina than by being built in Bavaria, are suddenly a threat to the national security of the United States of America, that scares us," she said.

The German leader made an impassioned appeal for a return to normal US ties.

"We have to fight for Europe. We have to fight for multilateralism," she said.

Her views were echoed by a senior EU official and a former US one at the Munich event.

"We want to believe it [the EU-US relationship] will be fine again later because we have no alternative," Nathalie Tocci, an adviser to EU foreign relations chief Federica Mogherini, told US newspaper The New York Times there.

"The Europeans are holding their breath and thinking that it's maybe only two more years," Victoria Nuland, a former US diplomat, said, referring to Trump's remaining time in office.

'Bully and bully-er'

But the Western split may be deeper than Trump, according to Norbert Roettgen, an MP from Merkel's centre-right CDU party who chairs the German parliament's foreign affairs committee.

"In the post-Trump era, there is no return to the pre-Trump era ... The status quo was that Europe's security was guaranteed by the United States. That won't happen again," he said.

For his part, Mike Pence, the US vice-president, urged the EU to fall in line on Iran in a speech shortly after Merkel's one in Munich on Saturday.

He also insinuated that EU support for the Iran arms deal was linked to antisemitism.

Europe should react by drawing a line in the sand on Trump's "bullying", Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif said at the German congress.

"If the United States were to come in the course of their fight with China and told Europe to stop dealing with China. What would you do?", he said.

"Whatever you want to do then, do now, in order to prevent that eventuality. Because a bully will get bully-er if you succumb," Zarif said.

Kaynak/Source: