By George Friedman

German Chancellor Angela Merkel went to St. Petersburg last week for meetings with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. The central question on the table was Germany's position on NATO expansion, particularly with regard to Ukraine and Georgia. Merkel made it clear at a joint press conference that Germany would oppose NATO membership for both of these countries, and that it would even oppose placing the countries on the path to membership. Since NATO operates on the basis of consensus, any member nation can effectively block any candidate from NATO membership.

The fact that Merkel and Germany have chosen this path is of great significance. Merkel acted in full knowledge of the U.S. view on the matter and is prepared to resist any American pressure that might follow. It should be remembered that Merkel might be the most pro-American politician in Germany, and perhaps its most pro-American chancellor in years. Moreover, as an East German, she has a deep unease about the Russians. Reality, however, overrode her personal inclinations. More than other countries, Germany does not want to alienate the United States. But it is in a position to face American pressure should any come.

Energy dependence and defence spending

In one sense, Merkel's reasons for her stance are simple. Germany is heavily dependent on Russian natural gas. If the supply were cut off, Germany's situation would be desperate — or at least close enough that the distinction would be academic. Russia might decide it could not afford to cut off natural gas exports, but Merkel is dealing with a fundamental German interest, and risking that for Ukrainian or Georgian membership in NATO is not something she is prepared to do.

She can't bank on Russian caution in a matter such as this, particularly when the Russians seem to be in an incautious mood. Germany is, of course, looking to alternative sources of energy for the future, and in five years its dependence on Russia might not be nearly as significant. But five years is a long time to hold your breath, and Germany can't do it.

The German move is not just about natural gas, however. Germany views the U.S. obsession with NATO expansion as simply not in Germany's interests.

First, expanding NATO guarantees to Ukraine and Georgia is meaningless. NATO and the United States don't have the military means to protect Ukraine or Georgia, and incorporating them into the alliance would not increase European security. From a military standpoint, NATO membership for the two former Soviet republics is an empty gesture, while from a political standpoint, Berlin sees it as designed to irritate the Russians for no clear purpose.

Next, were NATO prepared to protect Ukraine and Georgia, all NATO countries including

Germany would be forced to increase defence expenditures substantially. This is not something that Germany and the rest of NATO want to do.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Germany spent 1945-1992 being the potential prime battleground of the Cold War. It spent 1992-2008 not being the potential prime battleground. Germany prefers the latter, and it does not intend to be drawn into a new Cold War under any circumstances. This has profound implications for the future of both NATO and U.S.-German relations.

Germany is thus in the midst of a strategic crisis in which it must make some fundamental decisions. To understand the decisions Germany has to make, we need to understand the country's geopolitical problem and the decisions it has made in the past.

The German geopolitical problem

Until 1871, Germany was fragmented into dozens of small states — kingdoms, duchies, principalities, etc. — comprising the remnants of the Holy Roman Empire. The German-speaking world was torn apart by internal tensions and the constant manipulation of foreign powers.

The southeastern part of the German-speaking world, Austria, was the centre of the multinational Hapsburg Empire. It was Roman Catholic and was continually intruding into the predominantly Catholic regions of the rest of Germany, particularly Bavaria. The French were constantly poaching in the Rhineland and manipulating the balance of power among the German states. Russia was always looming to the east, where it bordered the major Protestant German power, Prussia. (Poland at the time was divided among Prussia, Russia and Austria-Hungary.) Germany was perpetually the victim of great powers, a condition which Prussia spent the roughly half-century between Waterloo and German unification trying to correct.

To unify Germany, Prussia had to do more than dominate the Germans. It had to fight two wars. The first was in 1866 with the Hapsburg Empire, which Prussia defeated in seven weeks, ending Hapsburg influence in Germany and ultimately reducing Austria-Hungary to Germany's junior partner. The second war was in 1870-1871, when Prussia led a German coalition that defeated France. That defeat ended French influence in the Rhineland and gave Prussia the space in which to create a modern, unified Germany. Russia, which was pleased to see both Austria-Hungary and France defeated and viewed a united Germany as a buffer against another French invasion, did not try to block unification.

German unification changed the dynamic of Europe. First, it created a large nation in the heart of Europe between France and Russia. United, Germany was economically dynamic, and its growth outstripped that of France and the United Kingdom. Moreover, it became a naval power, developing a substantial force that at some point could challenge British naval hegemony. It became a major exporting power, taking markets from Britain and France. And in looking around for room to maneuvre, Germany began looking east toward Russia. In short, Germany was more than a nation — it was a geopolitical problem.

Germany's strategic problem was that if the French and Russians attacked Germany simultaneously, with Britain blockading its ports, Germany would lose and revert to its pre-1871 chaos. Given French, Russian and British interest in shattering Germany, Germany had to assume that such an attack would come. Therefore, since the Germans could not fight on two fronts simultaneously, they needed to fight a war pre-emptively, attacking France or Russia first, defeating it and then turning their full strength on the other — all before Britain's naval blockade could begin to hurt. Germany's only defence was a two-stage offence that was as complex as a ballet, and would be catastrophic if it failed.

In World War I, executing the Schlieffen Plan, the Germans attacked France first while trying to simply block the Russians. The plan was to first occupy the channel coast and Paris before the United Kingdom could get into the game and before Russia could fully mobilize, and then to knock out Russia. The plan failed in 1914 at the First Battle of the Marne, and rather than lightning victory, Germany got bogged down in a multifront war costing millions of lives and lasting years. Even so, Germany almost won the war of attrition, causing the United States to intervene and deprive Berlin of victory.

In World War II, the Germans had learned their lesson, so instead of trying to pin down Russia, they entered into a treaty with the Soviets. This secured Germany's rear by dividing Poland with the Soviet Union. The Soviets agreed to the treaty, expecting Adolf Hitler's forces to attack France and bog down as Germany had in World War I. The Soviets would then roll West after the bloodletting had drained the rest of Europe. The Germans stunned the Russians by defeating France in six weeks and then turning on the Russians. The Russian front turned into an endless bloodletting, and once again the Americans helped deliver the final blow.

The consequence of the war was the division of Germany into three parts — an independent Austria, a Western-occupied West Germany and a Soviet-occupied East Germany. West Germany again faced the Russian problem. Its eastern part was occupied, and West Germany could not possibly defend itself on its own. It found itself integrated into an American-dominated alliance system, NATO, which was designed to block the Soviets. West and East Germany would serve as the primary battleground of any Soviet attack, with Soviet armour facing U.S. armour, airpower and tactical nuclear weapons. For the Germans, the Cold War was probably more dangerous than either of the previous wars. Whatever the war's outcome, Germany stood a pretty good chance of being annihilated if it took place.

On the upside, the Cold War did settle Franco-German tensions, which were half of Germany's strategic problem. Indeed, one of the by-products of the Cold War was the emergence of the European Community, which ultimately became the European Union. This saw German economic union and integration with France, which along with NATO's military integration guaranteed economic growth and the end of any military threat to Germany from the west. For the first time in centuries, the Rhine was not at risk. Germany's south was secure, and once the Soviet Union collapsed, there was no threat from the east, either.

United and secure at last?

For the first time in centuries, Germany was both united and militarily secure. But underneath it

all, the Germans retained their primordial fear of being caught between France and Russia. Berlin understood that this was far from a mature reality; it was no more than a theoretical problem at the moment. But the Germans also understand how quickly things can change. On one level, the problem was nothing more than the economic emphasis of the European Union compared to the geopolitical focus of Russia. But on a deeper level, Germany was, as always, caught between the potentially competing demands of Russia and the West. Even if the problem were small now, there were no guarantees that it wouldn't grow.

This was the context in which Germany viewed the Russo-Georgian war in August. Berlin saw not only the United States moving toward a hostile relationship with Russia, but also the United Kingdom and France going down the same path.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who happened to hold the rotating EU presidency at the time, went to Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire on behalf of the European Union. When the Russians seemed unwilling to comply with the terms negotiated, France became highly critical of Russia and inclined to back some sort of sanctions at the EU summit on Georgia. With the United Kingdom being even more adamant, Germany saw a worst-case scenario looming on the distant horizon: It understood that the pleasant security of the post-Cold War world was at an end, and that it had to craft a new national strategy.

From Germany's point of view, the re-emergence of Russian influence in the former Soviet Union might be something that could have been blocked in the 1990s, but by 2008, it had become inevitable. The Germans saw that economic relations in the former Soviet Union — and not only energy issues — created a complementary relationship between Russia and its former empire. Between natural affinities and Russian power, a Russian sphere of influence, if not a formal structure, was inevitable. It was an emerging reality that could not be reversed. France has Poland and Germany between itself and Russia. Britain has that plus the English Channel, and the United States has all that plus the Atlantic Ocean. The farther away from Russia one is, the more comfortable one can be challenging Moscow. But Germany has only Poland as a buffer. For any nation serious about resisting Russian power, the first question is how to assure the security of the Baltic countries, a long-vulnerable salient running north from Poland. The answer would be to station NATO forces in the Baltics and in Poland, and Berlin understood that Germany would be both the logistical base for these forces as well as the likely source of troops. But Germany's appetite for sending troops to Poland and the Baltics has been satiated. This was not a course Germany wanted to take.

Pondering German history

We suspect that Merkel knew something else; namely, that all the comfortable assumptions about what was possible and impossible — that the Russians wouldn't dare attack the Baltics — are dubious in the extreme. Nothing in German history would convince any reasonable German that military action to achieve national ends is unthinkable. Nor are the Germans prepared to dismiss the re-emergence of Russian military power. The Germans had been economically and militarily shattered in 1932. By 1938, they were the major power in Europe. As long as their officer corps and technological knowledge base were intact, regeneration could move swiftly.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and its military power crumbled. But as was the case in Weimar Germany, the Russian officer corps remained relatively intact and the KGB, the heart of the Soviet state, remained intact if renamed. So did the technological base that made the Soviets a global power. As with Germany after both world wars, Russia was in chaos, but its fragments remained, awaiting reconstruction. The Germans were not about to dismiss Russia's ability to regenerate — they know their own history too well to do that.

If Germany were to join those who call for NATO expansion, the first step toward a confrontation with Russia would have been taken. The second step would be guaranteeing the security of the Baltics and Poland. America would make the speeches, and Germans would man the line. After spending most of the last century fighting or preparing to fight the Russians, the Germans looked around at the condition of their allies and opted out.

The Germans see their economic commitment as being to the European Union. That binds them to the French, and this is not a bond they can or want to break. But the European Union carries no political or military force in relation to the Russians. Beyond economics, it is a debating society. NATO, as an institution built to resist the Russians, is in an advanced state of decay. To resurrect it, the Germans would have to pay a steep economic price. And if they paid that price, they would be carrying much of the strategic risk.

So while Germany remains committed to its economic relationship with the West, it does not intend to enter into a military commitment against the Russians at this time. If the Americans want to send troops to protect the Baltics and Poland, they are welcome to do so. Germany has no objection — nor do they object to a French or British presence there. Indeed, once such forces were committed, Germany might reconsider its position. But since military deployments in significant numbers are unlikely anytime soon, the Germans view grand U.S. statements about expanded NATO membership as mere bravado by a Washington that is prepared to risk little.

NATO after the German shift

Therefore, Merkel went to St. Petersburg and told the Russians that Germany does not favor NATO expansion. More than that, the Germans at least implicitly told the Russians that they have a free hand in the former Soviet Union as far as Germany is concerned — an assertion that cost Berlin nothing, since the Russians do enjoy a free hand there. But even more critically, Merkel signaled to the Russians and the West that Germany does not intend to be trapped between Western ambitions and Russian power this time. It does not want to recreate the situation of the two world wars or the Cold War, so Berlin will stay close to France economically and also will accommodate the Russians.

The Germans will thus block NATO's ambitions, something that represents a dramatic shift in the Western alliance. This shift in fact has been unfolding for quite a while, but it took the Russo-Georgian war to reveal the change.

NATO has no real military power to project to the east, and none can be created without a major German effort, which is not forthcoming. The German shift leaves the Baltic countries

exposed and extremely worried, as they should be. It also leaves the Poles in their traditional position of counting on countries far away to guarantee their national security. In 1939, Warsaw counted on the British and French; today, Warsaw depends on the United States. As in 1939, these guarantees are tenuous, but they are all the Poles have.

The United States has the option of placing a nuclear umbrella over the Baltics and Eastern Europe, which would guarantee a nuclear strike on Russia in the event of an attack in either place. While this was the guarantee made to Western Europe in the Cold War, it is unlikely that the United States is prepared for global thermonuclear war over Estonia's fate. Such a U.S. guarantee to the Baltics and Eastern Europe simply would not represent a credible threat.

The other U.S. option is a major insertion of American forces either by sea through Danish waters or via French and German ports and railways, assuming France or Germany would permit their facilities to be used for such a deployment. But this option is academic at the moment. The United States could not deploy more than symbolic forces even if it wanted to. For the moment, NATO is therefore an entity that issues proclamations, not a functioning military alliance, in spite of (or perhaps because of) deployments in Afghanistan.

Everything in German history has led to this moment. The country is united and wants to be secure. It will not play the role it was forced into during the Cold War, nor will it play geopolitical poker as it did in the first and second world wars. And that means NATO is permanently and profoundly broken.

The German question now turns into the Russian question: If Germany is out of the game, what is to be done about Russia?