

# The Machiavellian Genius of Angela Merkel

by Cameron Abadi | September 22, 2013 The New Republic

To state the obvious: Angela Merkel, who has just won a third term as German chancellor, isn't very macho. Her preferred free-time pursuit is recreational nature walking. (Also, baking: she admitted during the campaign season that her husband was sometimes displeased by the paucity of crumbs atop her cakes.) She hardly ever indulges in public demonstrations of authority; she speaks softly, and mostly refrains from displays of emotion, except for occasional flashes of a nervous smile. As for body language, her signature gesture is the Merkel diamond which seems laboratory-tested to avoid appearing confrontational.

Compare that, for a moment, with the testosterone-soaked state of U.S.-Russian diplomacy, which has devolved in recent weeks into a high-profile pissing match. Vladimir Putin raided U.S.-backed NGOs, while Barack Obama chided Putin's posture; Putin extended asylum to America's most-wanted fugitive, as Obama canceled a bilateral Moscow summit. For a while, it seemed as if the confrontation would have to be settled with a round of one-on-one basketball or some judo sparring. Eventually, they both managed to claim credit for averting war with Syria—Putin from the op-ed page of the one newspaper that Barack Obama professes to care about.

There was something transfixing about the display of presidential one-upsmanship; even Germans seemed more drawn to the Putin-Obama show than their own election campaign. But if Putin and Obama ever do manage to stop their reciprocal bouts of preening, they'd do well to consider cribbing from Merkel's machismo-less political methods. There's an argument to be made that it's Merkel who is the Machiavelli of our day—better, and certainly shrewder, at power politics than any of her peers, including her colleagues in the White House and Kremlin.

Merkel's quiet affect shouldn't obscure her influence. Germany has more power today than at any time since World War II. Merkel is *prima inter pares* in the European Union, capable of determining the shape of the bailout packages given to the continent's ailing economies and, thus, capable of determining the shape of their national economies for years on end. Even the ostensibly independent European Central Bank seems to take its directions from the chancellory in Berlin, afraid to get too far ahead of Merkel's plans.

To witness Merkel's handiwork, one need only survey the austerity regimes presiding over Europe today. The economic pain inflicted on Spain and Portugal and Greece are part of a plan whose outlines aren't often articulated. The goal is to make Germany's export-oriented economy the model for the whole of Europe—and if the attractions of that plan aren't entirely obvious for the rest of Europe, they are probably clear enough for Merkel. In the short term, Germany gains relative power over its suffering neighbors; in the long term, it secures a place for itself as the continent's economic hegemon.

But it's important to note that Merkel's acquisition of this power is directly related to her low-key style. She hasn't held press conferences ordering budget cuts in Greece, or pension reforms in France. She's cut all of her deals in closed-door meetings of the

European Council; the bailouts are presented as the consensus of all European leaders, so they can't be traced back to Merkel individually. In some sense, Merkel has managed to push through her preferred policies, while sending out the leaders of the affected countries to take the fall for them. Angry protesters in Greece and Spain have tried to paint Merkel as a Nazi, but the Hitler moustache doesn't quite stick; mostly they've directed their anger at their own governments. In some sense, Merkel has maximized her power by minimizing the appearance of it.

Compare that with Putin's method when dealing with his own would-be sphere of influence. Coercion has always been a major part of his repertoire in the region; Putin wants his interlocutors to know he's capable of overpowering them. But aside from betraying his own insecurity, Putin's preening usually turns out to be entirely self-defeating. His neighbors think of him as a bully, and that's exactly how they treat him. Eastern Europe has started buying gas from Qatar at a premium simply to end the threat of being cut off by Russia's state-owned energy company Gazprom; Ukraine recently signed an EU association agreement last month against Putin's direct orders; in Georgia, current president Misha Saakashvili has leveraged the memory of a brief Russian military invasion five years ago, and the specter of Putin's personal promise to hang him "by the balls," to stir up anti-Russian populism of his own. If Putin were better able to mask his intentions, like Merkel, he might have had better luck expanding his influence.

Merkel has a few lessons in power politics to offer Obama, too. The first is that demanding the departure of a foreign leader isn't a particularly effective method of pursuing regime change. Unlike Obama, who has mostly failed to follow up on his flat declaration that Bashar Assad "must go," Angela Merkel managed to achieve the ouster of Silvio Berlusconi from Italy's government without even declaring her desire that he depart. In what was maybe the

most audacious chapter of her tenure as chancellor, Merkel engineered Berlusconi's departure by quietly refusing to agree to ease lending conditions to Italy until he was gone. The same option isn't available to Obama, of course; but there's something to be learned in the way that Merkel made sure she'd be insulated from criticism in the event that Silvio stuck around after all.

A related lesson that Merkel can impart is that "credibility" shouldn't be evoked for the sake of protecting one's own vanity. Unlike Obama, who wrestled for weeks with ordering military strikes against Syria to enforce a "red line," Merkel has never let her past statements hold her hostage in the present. Over the course of the euro crisis, Merkel has spoken out against any intervention by the European Central Bank, a permanent bailout mechanism, centralized economic governance for the EU, and a banking union. In each instance, she eventually reversed course, without any evident hand-wringing—and without personally suffering any evident penalty.

Make no mistake: Merkel knows she has power. When she flies to Greece or Spain, she's well aware that she has already pushed those countries to the economic brink, and is even capable of pushing them over if she wanted. But what's all the more impressive is that she seems not to care whether other people know how powerful she is. In fact, it's almost that she'd prefer they didn't.

But only almost. When she was asked a few years ago about the extent of her power to decide German policy, she began by describing the powers available to all the other political actors in the country. But she made sure to add, "In a certain sense, I also have something to say."