



## GERMANY'S STRIKING FOREIGN POLICY EVOLUTION

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When in early 2014 German political representatives announced a greater international engagement of Germany, many international observers remained skeptical. Still prejudices of the “economic giant, but political dwarf”, or the risk-averse country that prefers checkbook diplomacy over decisive action, dominated perceptions of German foreign and security policy. Critics could also point to the German domestic debate with strong majorities rejecting any greater foreign policy role – leaving alone any military engagement.

One year later, the situation had changed profoundly. The public is still hesitant with respect to leaving the convenient position of observing international crises from the sideline, but chancellor Merkel and her government has become the key player in Europe, trying to cope with various international crises. With regard to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Angela Merkel and not US President Obama has been leading international efforts to hedge Vladimir Putin's imperial ambitions. Trying to combat the expansion of ISIS in the Middle East, Germany delivered weapons to Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, thereby crossing a crucial line in German foreign policy. In NATO, Germany reassured the Baltic States against a potential Russian expansionism and contributed significantly to improving NATO's military capabilities. In the EU, Germany tries to bridge the gap between the majority of those who improved their economy by structural reforms and the minority of governments who still believe that economic growth can be ignited by increased deficit spending.

How did this political evolution come about, and what can be expected from Germany as a key member in NATO and EU in the years to come?

For the understanding of Germany's change towards a larger foreign policy role, two events

or developments are crucial: First, the promise of a larger German foreign policy role given by the German President Joachim Gauck and others at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014 and second the Russia/Ukraine crisis

### **The Promise for Engagement**

It is worth noting that the Munich pledge of more international engagement did not come by chance, but had its roots primarily in two experiences. One was Germany's policy prior to NATO's military action in Libya and its consequences. The previous government in Berlin not only decided against a German participation in the military protection of civilians in Libya (and withdrew German soldiers from NATO's AWACS reconnaissance aircraft), but also voted against its allies in the UN Security Council. Only afterwards did the German government realize the dimension of this strategic mistake, and it paid its price for being politically isolated in NATO longer than expected. The consequence was a “never again” among those who were involved in this issue, and this was also present in the follow-on government.

The other wakeup call for Germany was the announcement of the Obama-administration in early 2012 to shift the US political interest and military resources away from Europe towards



the Asia-Pacific region. Even if, in the meantime, the turmoil in the Middle East and Russia's policies forced Washington to partly reassess its idea of focusing more on Asia, Germany well understood the implications of the American initiative. Washington's constant reminder to its European allies to devote more attention (and more funds) to international developments of common concern was no longer a rhetorical attitude but a serious issue. In the future, the US might decide on the military support for common operations in NATO or elsewhere on a case-by-case basis, carefully weighing American interests and benefits. Washington is no longer willing to unconditionally step in for Europe's military shortcomings. Thus, Germany and other allies realized that "the cavalry might not come any more". Washington's "leading from behind" gave a foretaste for the new alliance reality.

### **The Russia Crisis**

The second game-changer for German foreign and security policy was Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It took Germany and other allies a while to understand the historical dimension of this event. Russia has changed its position vis-à-vis Europe and the Atlantic Alliance in three profound ways. First, Russia has positioned itself as an anti-Western power by rejecting European understanding of democracy and by emphasizing an orthodox nationalism combined with a notion of Slavic superiority. Second, it has clearly defined NATO as an adversary and as a threat to its national interest – something NATO has never done with regard to Russia. Even the Washington Treaty – the bedrock of the Alliance – does not mention Russia or the Soviet Union as a threat. Third, and most importantly, Russia has changed borders in Europe by force and has illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula as part of a sovereign country. By doing so, Russia has broken major international treaties it had signed years ago.

It is worth noting, though, that Chancellor Merkel had no illusions about Putin's aggressive

ambitions right from the beginning, and in private conversations she frequently expressed her discontent about how Russia is actively destroying the European post-Cold War peace order. Still, she had to act cautiously not only domestically, but also within the international institutions.

Domestically, the Chancellor was confronted with the fact that even after Moscow had used force to annex Crimea, there was still a hidden support for Putin's actions in parts of the German political spectrum – even in the Social Democratic party as a part of the Grand Coalition government. Some voices on the political Right, as well as on the Left, agreed that Russia's action might not have been legal, but somehow understandable given the Russian-Ukrainian history. Apparently, on the Left, the old reflexes of de-escalation by all means and – on the very Left – of assessing Russia's policies (as the successor of the Soviet Union) as positive by definition, still worked. In contrast, the ultimate Right seemed to be appealed by national and orthodox elements of Putin's rhetoric and by his crusade against the libertarian policies of the "degenerated West". Furthermore, Left and Right agreed in their appreciation for Russia having stood up against NATO's "expansion" to the East and against perceived American bullying of the last two decades. This strange coalition of Left and Right was not only a German phenomenon, but also existed on the European level where France's Marine Le Pen found herself in agreement with post-communist parties in other EU countries.

Internationally, the German government realized that, despite the fact that NATO and EU acted remarkably united in countering Russia's aggression in Ukraine, different perspectives existed in both institutions. In NATO, countries like Spain or Portugal have been much more concerned about the growing Islamic violence in the South whereas Poland or the Baltic states – due to their history and geographic proximity – focus almost exclusively on the threat from



the East. Within the EU, some countries are still struggling to recover from the Euro-crisis and France and Italy seem even further in economic decline. Hence, the need for economic sanctions has been judged quite differently by different countries.

As an important ally in NATO and the key actor in the EU, Germany had a particular responsibility to bridge the divergent approaches and to preserve the cohesion of the institutions. Such an approach by the German Chancellor, however, almost automatically led to criticism from all sides – either for being too compliant to Russia or for risking the economic revival of entire Europe.

The result has been the compromise of NATO taking military action to improve its defense capacities on the one hand, but keeping the communication channels with Moscow open and preserving the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Economically, the EU agreed on sanctions which had some negative effects on Russia, but ranged by and large at the lower end of the economic pressure. Some criticized this approach for being hesitant and half-hearted. But in fact, these were the assumed dosages of “Realpolitik”, the German public and Germany’s allies were ready to accept. Moreover, pressure on Russia can be increased – militarily and economically – if the offer to compromise fails.

### **Where is Berlin Heading to?**

Germany’s course towards a larger foreign policy role is not going to remain a flash in the pan but a lasting development. Except the political extremes left and right, German elites come to grips that one of the most globalized countries on the globe cannot remain in a national niche just focusing on economic growth but not willing to contribute to upholding international order. Large parts of the public, though, are still skeptical with respect to more international engagement which explains why the government has to stick to a very cautious approach, neither offending

the electorate at home nor the allies abroad. Three trends can be taken for granted.

First, Germany will stay firm with regard to Russia’s aggressive course in Eastern Europe. The government has understood that Moscow’s behavior is not an indication of a bad weather period but rather a proof for a fundamental climate change. Even the public assesses Russia’s policies increasingly different. The already described initial backing of Putin’s actions eroded profoundly, particularly after the downing of the civilian aircraft by Ukrainian separatists supported by the Russian military. Only few talkshow-obstinate – lobbyists or retired generals – tried to argue in favor of a “bygones-approach”, accepting that Crimea will be Russian and to restart relations with Russia from a blank sheet of paper. The majority, instead, supported the decisive course against Russia: according to a poll conducted in November 2014, 52 % of the Germans were in favor of the EU policy vis-à-vis Russia, 42 % against – a pretty clear result given that the German society is still often perceived as Russia friendly. At the same time, Germany will not push for Ukraine’s rapid membership in NATO or EU, knowing that the country is close to being a dysfunctional state which had failed to reform for at more than two decades

Second, Germany will not concentrate its international engagement on Eastern Europe alone. The government is well aware of the disastrous consequences the turmoil in the Middle East and in Northern Africa can have for Europe in general and Germany in particular. The sheer fact that about 4000 Europeans are currently fighting alongside Islamic extremist groups in the Middle East illustrates the potential dangers: some of the well trained and radicalized fighters are likely to return in order to execute terrorist actions in their home countries. Hence, there remains the need for a 360° perspective on global developments.

Third, Germany hesitantly realized that the

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widening gap between the rising requirements for security and the shrinking resources needs to be fixed. This is particularly delicate as the international financial crisis and the problems with the Euro put additional pressure on the state budget. Furthermore, the German society has gotten used to generous state support for all kinds of social hardship which has inflated social expenditures tremendously over the last decades.

Still, new security challenges, plus the need to fund military forces which have been strained and worn out by ambitious missions in

Afghanistan and elsewhere, will lead to a slow but substantial increase of the German defense budget. The positive economic development in Germany and low energy prices will help to free funds for the foreign and security policy realm.

This adaptation of Germany's foreign policy course is a lasting development but will not go without disruptions and readjustments. It will also lead to frequent criticism of either "too much" or "too little". However, this is a fact of life larger powers are always confronted with: you are damned if you do and you are damned if you don't.

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The DNAK Security Brief series presents current topics in foreign and security policy in a succinct way. The series was first published in June 2001.

Editor: Audun Reiby  
ISSN: 1502-6361