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NO MORE “SONDERWEG”: GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER CHANCELLOR MERKEL *

Chancellor Merkel has been in power now for less than ten months, but from day one after her election it was clear that she would part ways with her predecessor in terms of foreign affairs. Especially during the second half of his 7 years in power, Chancellor Schroeder had appeared to follow a “Sonderweg”, a specifically German way in foreign affairs: He steered the country away from its old commitments, emphasized national interests over multilateral approaches, and made Germany more or less float between East and West. I will argue that Chancellor Merkel returns to a more traditional German foreign policy. Some characteristics of this traditional foreign policy are Germany’s role as an honest broker and mediator in Europe, its good and respectful working relations with the US, a sound balance between interest-based and value-based policies and, finally, a smoother style. (Transparency: Table of Contents)

I will back up this thesis in the next 35 to 40 minutes by analyzing various aspects of German foreign policy. First of all, I will portray Chancellor Merkel’s foreign policy philosophy and show how her leadership style differs

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from her predecessor's approach. Then I will examine Berlin's relations to its most important international partners, namely the European Union, the United States, Russia and Eastern Europe. Lastly, I will focus on Germany's role in international crisis management and round up this talk with a couple of comments on German-Chinese relations. (T: Determinants of Foreign Policy)

1. Determinants of German Foreign Policy

Before I begin with my actual talk, however, let me briefly lay out the conceptual framework for my later remarks and explain how I am going to approach the analysis of Merkel's foreign policy. I believe that a political leader's foreign policy options are largely determined by structural features. With structural features I specifically refer to a country's *military and economic capabilities* and the *strategic environment* it is situated in. In the German case, I would argue that despite the fact that Germany ranks 3rd among the largest economies worldwide, the country all in all is just a middle power with roughly the same political weight as Japan, Britain or France. Germany has only limited strategic influence outside of Europe and very reduced means to project military might on a global scale. Our army, the Bundeswehr, had to rent Ukrainian transport planes in 2002, for example, to deploy troops to Afghanistan within Nato's ISAF mission. Although Germany has almost 300.000 troops under arms, the participation of more than 8.000 soldiers in missions in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in the

Congo, at the horn of Africa and in Lebanon is already stretching thin its military resources and capacities. Additionally, post-Cold War Germany neither faces direct threats from any of its neighbors, nor does it pose a threat to any of them, which is—I may add—quite unique in the country's history. However, as a country that heavily depends on the import of raw materials and energy, as well as the export of cars, machine tools and chemical products, Germany has a tremendous interest in international stability.

In addition to these structural conditions, other factors influence the specific foreign policy decisions of a German chancellor. First of all, we have the *ideas of the political elite*. There is no doubt that values such as reliability within Western organizations and multilateral leadership in international affairs are core beliefs of Germany's foreign policy establishment. The second factor is the *preferences of the population* that at times completely contradict the ideas of the political elite. Opinion polls clearly show that economic and social concerns, such as the cuts in social benefits or fear of unemployment, rank highest among the political worries of German citizens. Consequently, in 2005, only 34% of all Germans supported an active foreign policy, as opposed to more than 50% in 2001. In no other Western country is the rejection of military action to solve international conflicts as vigorous as in Germany. According to a huge majority of the German people, the only legitimate reasons to commit German troops are humanitarian purposes like disaster relief or peacekeeping. Just 34%

advocate the use of military power to overthrow a dictator who violates basic human rights.¹ All in all, Germany has become a largely pacifist nation that is increasingly willing to incorporate its national sovereignty and identity in international institutions such as the EU and the UN.²

The third factor to influence a leader's foreign policy decisions are the *conditions within the respective political system*. In Germany, for instance, the existence of a free media and competition among political parties guarantee that a multiplicity of voices is heard in public discourse. In addition, the provisions of the constitution, the willingness to adhere to treaties, the orderly succession of leaders, as well as a critical retrospection on our national history make German foreign policy predictable and unsusceptible to dramatic swings. Let me clarify this point with a couple of specific examples. The German constitution, for instance, prohibits the unilateral use of troops with the exception of only one eventuality, namely self-defense in case of an attack on the country itself. For Merkel, something even more important plays a role: She finds herself in a coalition government with the otherwise rival party of her predecessor. Her foreign minister, Steinmeier, even was Schroeder's former chief of staff. Logically, changes in the substance of Germany's foreign policy are slow in coming.

Finally, Germany's strong integration in *international institutions*, which automatically leads to multilateral approaches, must be named as fourth and

¹ The numbers come from a poll taken by the Bundeswehr research institute. Vgl. „Deutschland – ein Hort des Pazifismus?“, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 28.7.2006, 4.

² Vgl. John Hulsman/Nile Gardiner: After Schroeder: US-German relations in the Merkel Era; in: Backgrounder 1907 (11.1.2006), published by the Heritage foundation, 9 S., hier 2.

last factor. The pressures and demands created through these multiple allegiances in the international arena may at times pull Germany in opposite directions. Take the question of European defense cooperation as an example. Germany's leading role in strengthening the EU would mandate Germany's support thereof, yet at the same time, the country's dependence on Nato makes it hesitant to move to quickly down this road.

Now, let me turn to

2. Merkel's foreign policy philosophy and style

There are at least two remarkable things about Merkel's foreign policy philosophy and style. First of all, for 36 years she lived in socialist East Germany, "not as an open dissident, but certainly having rejected the communist regime in her heart"³. Consequently she, like many other Central and Eastern European politicians, often reverts to her favorite themes: freedom, democracy and human rights. At her first major parliamentary speech after her inaugural address, on March 29th, 2006, Merkel set out a foreign policy strategy that she said would be based on the defense of these values.⁴ In contrast to the more tactically calculating Schroeder, who was able to adjust foreign policy decisions according to where political gains could be made, Merkel's approach to foreign affairs seems to be based on core principles. This became clear during her respective visits, when she not

³ Robin Mishra: Merkel's Mission; in: Internationale Politik/Transatlantic Edition (Special Issue), 2006, 40-46, hier 41.

⁴ Vgl. Judy Dempsey: Merkel Lays Out Foreign Policy, Emphasizing Values; in: International Herald Tribune (IHT), 30.3.2006.

only criticized Russia and China for human rights violations and met with representatives of civil society in both countries, but also questioned US-President Bush about the US military prison at Guantánamo.

The second characteristic of Merkel's foreign policy style is that she is not a natural career politician, and indeed she was drawn into politics only in the process of reunification in 1989/1990. Arousing emotions, pressing the flesh, as the Americans say, pandering to the media, rumbling and threatening – all these features usually associated with successful career politicians and taken to an extreme by her predecessor are unfamiliar to Merkel. Under Schroeder, “self-assertion became the watchword of German foreign policy”.⁵ Merkel, as a good student of Helmut Kohl's, promised restraint and modesty. A physicist by profession, she is used to rationality, matter-of-factness, careful analysis, discretion. These are qualities that are extremely helpful in international affairs and have won her high praise abroad and at home during her initial tour of world capitals.

Let me now focus on

3. Germany's Most Important Relationships

3.1. European Union

After the fiasco of World War II, Germany's first chancellor Adenauer decided that the only way Germany could reduce the mistrust of its Western European neighbors and become a player in foreign affairs again was to

⁵ Christoph Bertram: Angela Merkel Meets the World; in: Project Syndicate, 2005.

cooperate closely. Because Germany had the most to gain from European integration, it became its strongest advocate. The underlying bargain of the European project was that Germany always did a little more than the rest in terms of giving up sovereignty, shouldering financial burdens, and abstaining from nationalist rhetoric. This bargain worked splendidly as long as the financial means for such a policy were readily available.

In the 1990s, however, when the German economy was slowing down and costs of rebuilding the East were rising, this deal began to unravel. During his election campaign in 1998 Schroeder found harsh words for the EU, even speaking of ending Germany's alleged role as paymaster of the European integration.⁶ Once in power, he was indeed less willing than his predecessors to use Germany's economic power to push the integration process forward. On the contrary, he insisted that Germany would demand a role commensurate with its size and political weight and that the country would behave no different from other European heavyweights like France and Britain. Schroeder claimed special circumstances when Germany failed to meet the budgetary ceilings of the EU's Stability and Growth Pact, for example, but at the same time seemed to demand that the restrictions be rigorously applied to smaller countries. Also, the unusually close alignment with France against the US in the run-up to the Iraq war divided the new, enlarged Europe. Such behavior first created mere astonishment, later even

⁶ Vgl. Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Boquet: The Grand Coalition and Franco-German Relations; in: Mrco Overhaus/Hanns W. Maull/Sebastian Harnisch (eds.): Foreign Policy in Dialogue. A Quarterly E-Newsletter on German and European Foreign Policy, Vol. 6/No. 18 (April 18, 2006), 15-24, hier 16.

resentment among smaller European countries. When a major initiative for further European integration—the constitutional treaty—failed in French and Dutch plebiscites in the summer of 2005, and EU-leaders appeared unable to agree on a new seven-year budget, it became clear that there were limits to German-French leadership.

As Merkel was elected chancellor in November 2005, a new consensus seemed to arise across Europe that Germany should once again function as the driving force reviving the European project. Indeed, only 4 weeks into her chancellorship, Merkel was instrumental at an EU-summit in Brussels in bringing about a breakthrough in the difficult budget negotiations and immediately established herself as *primus inter pares*, as the first among equals. In an echo of Chancellor Kohl's checkbook diplomacy, she had greased the wheels by raising Germany's contribution by 2 billion Euros. Her exposed position in Europe also derives from a power vacuum. When Merkel appeared on the European stage, the leaders of all major European players were weakened: British Prime Minister Blair by his unconditional support of Bush's invasion of Iraq, French President Chirac by the failed referendum on the European constitution he supported, Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi by personal scandals and a difficult re-election campaign. All three seemed to be lame ducks politically.

In addition, smaller countries hold the rotating EU-presidency in 2006 and are not powerful enough to create a new dynamic for further European integration. Consequently, at the moment all of Europe is waiting for

January 1st, 2007, when Germany assumes the presidency of the European Union. The big question will be whether Berlin can move the EU towards more integration along the lines of the failed constitution by streamlining the decision-making process to finally adjust the Union to a membership of 27 states. Merkel already indicated that she was willing to play a high-risk game and increase pressure on all member states by confronting them with the alternative: Either to move forward collectively or watch a core group of countries go it alone. So far, Merkel's leadership has made Germany a more reliable and effective player in EU politics. The most substantial deviance from Schroeder's EU policy, however, is Merkel's opposition to a possible full membership of Turkey, even though her government did not block the start of negotiations.

3.2. Transatlantic Relations

No other relationship has seen a more dramatic improvement under Merkel than relations with the US, where she had inherited the worst crisis ever. After the dreadful damage caused by the war in Iraq and the frosty personal relation between President Bush and Chancellor Schroeder, both sides were willing to put US-German relations back on an even keel. (T: Bush/Merkel) The motives were obvious: Discredited abroad and at home by his unilateral foreign policy, Bush saw Merkel as a vital player in his attempts to repair the wider relationship between Europe and America, especially since his staunchest allies had either left office, like Spain's Aznar, or were politically

weakened, like Britain's Blair or Italy's Berlusconi. Merkel, at the same time, knows that it is the US that guarantees the stability of the international system, which is of great importance to Germany. Furthermore she realized that many German foreign policy goals can only be achieved with the support of the last superpower and long-time ally and not against it. For example, Schroeder's campaign for a permanent German seat on the UN Security Council was doomed the moment he vehemently opposed Washington's policy in Iraq. Also, good German-American relations can help to overcome the rift between pro- and anti-American countries within the European Union and strengthen Germany's position as an honest broker between Washington and Paris.

The revival of German-American cooperation was facilitated by Merkel's reputation as an Atlanticist politician in the mould of former chancellor Kohl. In February 2003, at the height of the German-American dispute over Iraq, she had written an article for the Washington Post entitled "Schroeder does not speak for all Germans," distancing herself from the government's Iraq policy and defying the prevailing public opinion. In her maiden speech as German chancellor on November 30, 2005, she further proclaimed that "the new government will work with all its strength for a close, honest, open and trusting relationship in the transatlantic partnership."⁷ The most important, substantive change in Merkel's foreign policy toward the US is

⁷ Zit. nach Bret Stephens: Terms of Endearment; in: Wall Street Journal, 15.1.2006.

the strong reorientation toward Nato and the government's belief that the alliance is of key strategic importance for Germany's security.⁸

Despite the rhetorical and practical improvements in German-American relations, the potential for future cooperation is limited. Lacking an overarching common interest such as containing the Soviet Union, the agendas of the two nations overlap only in certain questions. Given that public opinion polls show favorable ratings of the US at 40 percent in Germany, while 83 percent of the German population rejects Bush's foreign policy, Merkel knows that there are political limits to her pro-American instincts. Three days before going to Washington for the first time as chancellor on January 13, 2006, she expressed her own disagreement with the Bush administration's effort to curb terrorism, in particular over the prison camp in Guantánamo.⁹ Demonstrating her political shrewdness, however, she had her principal foreign policy adviser warn his American counterpart about the interview before its release.¹⁰ Furthermore, Merkel simply cannot or will not fulfill American hopes concerning some questions dear to the US, such as sending troops to the dangerous southern border of Afghanistan, weighing in with France to cut EU farm subsidies or admitting the Ukraine and Georgia into Nato and Turkey into the EU.

⁸ Vgl. "Berlin setzt wieder mehr auf die Nato"; in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 10.5.2006, 9.

⁹ Vgl. Richard Bernstein: Merkel, on Visit, Will Try Gingerly to Revive U.S. Ties; in: New York Times, 13.1.2006, A10.

¹⁰ Vgl. Bertrand Benoit: Merkel foreign policy signals warmer relationship; in: Financial Times/Europe, 13.1.2006, 8.

Even over the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the current transatlantic harmony is more diplomatic than substantial, since both sides differ greatly on how Iran should be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons. Germany pretends to be tough for the Americans, and soft for the Russians and Chinese. If the US possibly acted militarily against Iran, it would be a disaster for German-American relations. All in all, no common German-American or European-American project is in sight that would force both sides to work together closely in the future. Cooperation in a reactive way to events like the Hamas election victory or the war in Lebanon is the best we can hope for. There is no denying that in the post-Cold War world, Germany and Europe are simply losing the privileged place they held in America's global strategy from 1947 to 1990. With Washington focusing more and more on the Middle East and Asia, with China, Russia and India emerging as global powers, Germany will lose importance for future US administrations.

3.3. Russia and Eastern Europe

After the end of the Cold War, German-Russian relations have improved dramatically. Germany needed Moscow's goodwill for its reunification and the speedy return of Red Army troops to Russia. Russia on the other hand needed Germany both to smooth its transition from a planned to a more open economy with huge aid programs, and as an advocate in its dealings with the EU, Nato and the G-7. Chancellor Schroeder took cooperation with Russia to a new political and personal level. Male bonding between a

German chancellor and a Russian president has some tradition. Kohl and Yeltsin even sat in the sauna together. However, this happened when Russia was going through a chaotic transformation phase and one could still hope for the establishment of a functioning democracy and market economy. Schroeder also developed an extraordinarily close personal link with Russian president Putin. They celebrated New Years together with their families, and the Schroeders even adopted a Russian orphan. In a widely criticized statement, Schroeder described Putin as an “impeccable democrat,” exactly at a time when the Russian president started to clamp down on the mass media, organized opposition and non-governmental organizations. The former chancellor was also reluctant to speak out about human rights violations in Chechnya and showed little interest in countries of the former Soviet bloc. In his last days in office, Schroeder signed a deal with Putin to build a new gas pipeline between the two countries that runs under the Baltic Sea, thereby bypassing existing pipelines that run through Poland and the Baltic states. Given that this deal creates the potential for Moscow to use its gas supplies for demonstrations of power politics against its former satellites without hurting Germany, the Poles see it as a flagrant violation of the common security zone which Nato and the EU are supposed to provide. One Polish newspaper even called the pipeline deal a new Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact that in 1939 secretly divided Poland between Nazi-Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. To say the least, Schroeder’s buddy-

buddy relationship with Putin destroyed a lot of trust that had been built up before with great difficulty.

After becoming chancellor, Merkel had to convince Germany's sensitive Eastern neighbors that she took their security concerns seriously and would not pass them over on any decisions that affected their interests. To demonstrate her willingness to do so, Poland was her first destination for a state visit to the east in December 2005. When Merkel traveled to Moscow a month later, the German ambassador in Warsaw briefed the Polish Foreign Ministry on what she planned to discuss with Putin.¹¹ In her talks with Putin she touched on human rights and afterwards met with beleaguered representatives of NGOs. Despite all these changes, Merkel did not cancel the pipeline project but rather supplemented it with the creation of a German-Polish committee to discuss energy issues. This reflects the willingness of the chancellor to mend fences with Germany's Eastern neighbors and at the same time acknowledge the fact that Germany is Europe's biggest importer of Russian gas. However, Merkel's support for plans to build a center for the commemoration of European refugees in Berlin creates resentment in Warsaw, because the exhibition project will also highlight the fate of Germans who were expelled from Poland's new-won territories after World War II.

¹¹ Vgl. Judy Demsey: Fulfilling Vows, Merkel Looks East; in: IHT, 2.2.2006.

4. Germany's role in international crisis management

Schroeder's most important legacy in foreign affairs was that his government shed the prior German hesitancy about deploying soldiers abroad. His support for international crisis missions in Kosovo, Bosnia, or Afghanistan required considerable political courage and made Germany one of the major contributors to multilateral stability efforts. It counts as the major achievement of Schroeder's tenure that the issue was removed from domestic political controversy. By now, Germany even leads the two multinational operations in Kosovo and in the Congo.

Merkel wants to build on these achievements, yet fine-tune future engagement, especially as to the question under what flag these missions should take place. While Schroeder had tried to strengthen European security cooperation at the expense of Nato, Merkel and defense minister Jung make clear that only Nato can organize more complex and dangerous out-of-area missions. The organizational difficulties surrounding the EU-Mission in the Congo and the problems of European nations to come up with a substantial UN-force in Lebanon reaffirmed Berlin's view that the EU can only coordinate simple and primarily civil missions. Also, because of financial and capability restraints, the Bundeswehr is only able to provide 10.000 soldiers at the maximum to multinational operations around the globe for years to come. This severely circumscribes the Merkel government's freedom of maneuver in this field. (T: German troops abroad)

Yet these are mostly organizational aspects of Germany's military involvement in international crisis management. The larger problem is that neither the previous nor the current government has developed a convincing political concept to determine under what circumstances German troops should be sent abroad at all. When German soldiers went to Afghanistan in 2002, then-defense minister Struck declared that "Germany's security will be defended at the Hindukush".¹² But as of today, Germany has only done civil reconstruction in the peaceful north and steadfastly refused to commit troops to the more dangerous southern provinces where high-intensity ground combat operations take place. Obviously, Germany's security is not threatened enough to risk losing German lives in Afghanistan. This underlines that German politicians and the German public believe that security has only a financial price and that participation in multinational operations is a value in itself. The same can be said of the Congo mission. Merkel obviously complied with demands to take the lead to not irritate France and further damage the nascent project of a European Security and Defense Policy. It appears that in both cases, Germany did not so much defend its vital security interests as it defended its position within Nato and the EU. In the long run, this will not be an explanation good enough to commit German soldiers abroad.

Finally, let me say a word about German-Chinese relations. Schroeder saw China primarily as a land of economic opportunity and a big market for

¹² Zit. nach Franz-Josef Meiers: The Security and Defense Policy of the Grand Coalition; in: Overhaus u.a. (eds.), 49-59, hier 50.

German exports. As a matter of fact, Germany is China's largest non-Asian provider of goods behind the US. To deepen this partnership, Schroeder together with French president Chirac led efforts to lift the European Union's arms embargo on China. Although Merkel is well aware of China's huge economic potential, she is far less enamored with China than Schroeder was and less willing to separate economic issues and human rights concerns. During her visit to China in May 2006, she met with members of civil society, pointed out the role of religious freedom and addressed the issue of product piracy. She also indicated that she would use Germany's presidencies of the G-8 and the EU in 2007 to forcefully press for the observance of intellectual property rights. Indeed, since the bra-and-textile dispute in the summer of 2005, China's economic impact on Europe has become a matter of acute public concern—as it has been in the US for years. During her visit in China the chancellor also avoided the term “strategic partnership” used by Wen. All in all, Germany under Merkel wants China to meet the global responsibilities that come along with great economic power. This is a veiled criticism of Beijing's foreign policy, which Berlin considers too exclusively focused on securing preferential access to raw materials. In particular, Merkel would like China to more actively support the Western position in trying to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹³ German-Chinese relations in the future therefore will be less based on economic considerations alone.

¹³ Vgl. „Merkel to Press Beijing Over Position on Iran“; in: FT-E, 20.5.2006, 2.

5. Results

To sum up: Under Merkel we see a return to a more traditional German foreign policy that is based on established institutions and principles. Personal likes and dislikes are replaced by a more structural view of Germany's partners and long-term interests. The most significant change we see is the weakening of the Franco-German-Russian axis which Schroeder wanted to develop as a counterweight to the US-British alliance. Merkel does not like grandstanding and offensive assertion of power. She knows that an effective German foreign policy must be embedded in European policy. Merkel even silently buried her predecessor's aggressive push for a permanent seat on the Security Council, and rather focuses on substantial influence in ad-hoc institutions. At the end of the day, with many of its domestic problems unresolved, Germany will not have the resources or the willpower for an overly active foreign policy. For in the end, even in the world of diplomacy, it matters what you can bring to the table: in terms of hard, but also in soft power.

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