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Doing What You Believe Is Right

Germany's New Federal Government Must Close the Gap between Ambition and Reality in Foreign Affairs

[Frank Priess](#)

The end of an era – that, at least, is how Angela Merkel’s 16-year tenure as German chancellor is currently being described in many international accolades – presents an opportunity for sober review. Are Germany and Europe better off now than they were in 2005? Is their influence greater? Do they have more freedom to manoeuvre? In a changed world, is their model robust, or, to use an English word newly popular in German, is it “resilient”? What about the two traditional pillars of German foreign policy, namely the European Union and transatlantic relations? How much weight does the “West” carry in the world? Answers to these questions point toward the challenges that will confront Germany’s new federal government, particularly with regard to foreign affairs.

A critical investigation into these questions does not aim to blame specific persons for the way in which the many crises of the era were handled – the banking and economic crisis that began in the US, the sovereign debt crisis, the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, COVID-19. It is fair to speak of a good 16 years for Germany while still asking whether the country is well-equipped for future challenges. The era began with America’s attempt at “nation building abroad” under the George W. Bush administration – which was justifiably criticised in Germany, even at the time. It ends with a new superpower rivalry involving the rising colossus of China, a United States rattled after four years of Donald Trump and now engaged in the arduous effort to regain trust, as well as a strained European Union, whose lack of impact can be felt even in its own backyard and which is becoming a less significant actor on the global stage.

Over the coming years, one of the first key tasks of German foreign and security policies will be to close the enormous gap between ambition and reality. Or even better: to support the same at the level of the European Union. A moral world power lacking the will and capabilities to play power politics puts itself in danger of becoming a global laughing stock that need not

be taken seriously. And our problem here is not a lack of analyses or clever strategy papers.

German foreign policy – and that of the EU – has been very successful when formulating big ambitions. We aspire to be a player on the global stage, to assume more responsibility – as formulated by the Foreign Minister and Federal President several years ago. And the reality? Germany and the EU had to look on helplessly as they were presented with a *fait accompli* on numerous occasions. Russia annexed the Crimea in violation of international law, destabilised the Ukraine and expanded its own sphere of influence through frozen conflicts. In our immediate vicinity, Syria sank into the chaos of war and Libya became a failed state, while in both countries powers like Turkey and Russia used military force to create facts on the ground. Meanwhile, the European Union tried to cope with the influx of refugees and convince itself that the time would come when it would be needed for rebuilding. Even the actions of autocratically ruled medium-sized states in our own backyard have failed to elicit a response, such as when the dictator of Belarus decided to transport Iraqi refugees to the country’s border with Lithuania and Poland. China and the US are currently embroiled in a new superpower confrontation, and Europeans must be careful not to



Russia's president Vladimir Putin depicted on a mural on the annexed Crimean peninsula: In recent years, Germany and Europe frequently had to look on helplessly as in their neighbouring countries third parties created political and military facts on the ground. Source: © Pavel Rebrov, Reuters.

end up in the crossfire, becoming the victim of extraterritorial sanctions from both sides rather than having their own, independent role to play. Nevertheless, the desire for more “strategic sovereignty” has not been followed up with much action: in terms of security policy, Germany remains totally dependent on the US, whose

interests are by no means always congruent with those of Europeans, and is falling behind technologically. The inglorious end of 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan has once again illustrated the scope of these problems, fuelling the narrative that “the West” is in retreat, despite all rhetoric to the contrary.



The German Public Remains Reluctant

In a first, the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) placed a detailed foreign and security policy at the top of its campaign platform; issues it raised there, however, played no role in the election itself. That, too, is part of the problem. For years, relevant polls have shown that its citizens want Germany to be involved in international affairs, but their eagerness wanes as demands beyond humanitarian aid become more concrete and robust. Intervention in Afghanistan could not be justified militarily, after all – it instead had to be couched in terms of developmental policy that promoted education for girls. Perceived threats? From Russia or China? These do not generally resonate with the public. That, of course, makes it difficult to appropriately increase the defence budget or to press Germany to fulfil its commitments within NATO. Common defence projects in Europe aimed at maintaining – or even simply developing – our own technological capabilities? Sure, but not for export if you don't mind; this attitude makes Germany an unattractive partner for others. A European army? Maybe, but probably more as an appealing vision to distract us from the bleak reality of what our armed forces and long-established common “Battlegroups” cannot do and, most importantly, should not do. While others create facts on the ground with only modest effort and risk, the question of whether to arm drones threatens the viability of a governing coalition here. And it is unlikely to be any easier for new coalitions.

All we have left to leverage is economic might. Yet that power looks increasingly fragile: competitiveness is not exactly increasing, the pressure of demographic problems is growing, and costs are spiralling out of control, in part as a consequence of ideologically motivated climate decisions. And by rejecting free trade – not even our agreement with Canada has been ratified, one with MERCOSUR is on rocky ground, and a deal with the US is hardly on the cards right now – we hamper our ability to stabilise important markets and to influence the development of norms and standards. All the while, other

players are much more skilled at translating their economic influence into political leverage; simply look at China's involvement in Africa and Latin America, continents where Europe actually has a head start. Yet if our economic model has lost its former glory, successfully promoting our values will become increasingly difficult. The rising popularity of more authoritarian models is clear to see in the United Nations and in the decisions made by the UN Human Rights Council.

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Tackling these shortcomings does not mean starting from scratch. A myriad of strategies and priorities have already been formulated – and even sound banal to some. The key issue once again: implementation deficit.

The European Union Remains Our Foundation

Of course, we need a strong European Union capable of action and that must be the focus of every German government. If we want to have a voice in the global concert in future – a voice that is heard – then no European nation state can go it alone. This will require patching the cracks, preventing fractures from becoming any deeper, and reconciling the agendas of East Central, Western and Southern Europe. It will mean ensuring robust German commitment to the security interests of the Baltic States and Poland, and taking on NATO burdens that the US is now less willing to bear – albeit there remains no substitute for the US nuclear umbrella. In Southern and Southeast Europe, it is not least about finding answers to the immigration pressures facing these countries in particular, both by land and sea routes – while this issue has retreated from the headlines somewhat, it has lost none of its weight.

For Germany, this traditionally means actively assuming the role of mediator, rather than being perceived as taking sides. It will nevertheless require structural reforms: the principle of consensus gives veto power to individual countries with all of their special interests, compromising the EU's ability to act, and giving external actors massive opportunities to exercise influence, as well as making all other parties susceptible to blackmail. The alternative is "coalitions of the willing" that boldly lead the way. We will need attractive common projects in all areas from which no one will wish to feel excluded. Here, key technologies and data worlds are crucial fields, especially given that this is where Europe is most at risk of becoming less competitive and being left behind by the rest of the world.

A Look at Our Neighbours

Secondly, the new government will have to focus on having stable neighbours to our east and south, as this is in Germany's and Europe's most direct interests. Our interest in Western Balkan States and in Ukraine could certainly manifest itself in a more active way; our tepid involvement with Georgia and the southern Caucasus region could use an upgrade, too. This is no easy undertaking in light of the well-known differences in interest within the EU, but one in which Germany must play a leadership role.

Offers of economic integration to states south of the Mediterranean still fall far short of what would be needed, what is expected and what is in our interests. Key here are prospects for the younger generation in terms of qualification and job creation – no one wants to risk further destabilisation and radicalisation, the ramifications of which would directly impact Europe. The same holds, but even more so, for the powder keg of the Middle East, with its dangerous competition between regional powers, the instability even in what had been "model countries" like Lebanon, the risk of nuclear proliferation and, not least, the unresolved problem of Islamist-motivated terrorism, which has long been a global phenomenon. And right in the midst of this lies Israel, whose right to exist, according to Angela

Merkel, is a matter of German national interest. Turkey remains a key country here as well. Its Turkish-German minority puts Germany in an excellent position to help strengthen Turkey's relationship with Europe and the EU, and to build bridges in difficult situations; and makes it in Germany's best interest to do so.

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Russia currently represents a much more difficult case. Since President Vladimir Putin's famous conciliatory speech to the German Bundestag in 2001, the relationship has continuously deteriorated and there are few points of departure for a real improvement. Despite there being a great need for credible arms control, Europe plays hardly any role in this. Since it clings to a traditionalist view of superpower relations and sovereignty, Russia is scarcely able to view the European Union as an equal; its negotiating partner is therefore the US. Having said that, the new German government must achieve a balancing act, and it must do so with the EU in tow, since the "special relationships" repeatedly proposed by Russia are out of the question. Our values must be non-negotiable and we must act as an ally to democratic civil society in Russia; at the same time, however, the new German government will have to be pragmatic and work on achieving a balance with this important neighbour wherever common interests demand. A governing coalition that includes both the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens will no doubt generate interesting debates on this subject.

Transatlantic Partnership Will Come at a Price

The cornerstone for this, but also for the ability of Germany and Europe to realise their global interests, remains – and this is the third focus – close transatlantic relations with the United States.





Increasingly impatient: The US may in future estimate the value of the transatlantic partnership first and foremost on the basis of Europe's contribution to the systemic rivalry with China. [Source: © Kevin Lamarque, Reuters.](#)

The Trump years destroyed trust in this relationship, which will be hard to rebuild, especially if the new administration simply replaces “America First” with “Buy American” and with uncoordinated, unilateral decisions, as witnessed in Afghanistan. The Anglo-American AUKUS alliance with Australia and Britain certainly did little to build trust, either. Nevertheless, this clearly demonstrates that Europe has to make itself relevant to the US if it wishes to continue benefitting from vital security guarantees that Europe cannot realistically provide for itself.

Economically, the way forward is clear: a joint free-trade agreement should be an important priority, and the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, established for technological coordination, is moving in the right direction. This must be followed by coordinated action to reform the WTO, even if this is another area in which the US shifts its gaze toward the Indo-Pacific region. Still, the primary means of establishing relevance is to assume more responsibility and more of the burden in Europe's own backyard – NATO's east flank, North Africa, the

Middle East, our overall NATO contribution – and despite all the problems, this should be the easier task. On the other hand, the US increasingly appears to view its relationship with Europe through the lens of its relationship to China and expects Europe to adopt an unconditional stance – yet especially for Germany, strong economic dependence on China makes that problematic. Plus, it remains entirely open whether China is willing to go along with the EU’s tidy compartmentalisation efforts, which aim to view China as partner, competitor, and system rival all in one, reaching for different components of its tool box where necessary. Even at home – not to mention among our partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – many find it hard to fully accept the conceptual framework of the new “Conflict of Systems”. It takes little imagination to identify this as yet another area where the new German government will have its work cut out for it.

It is indisputable, however, that democracies like Germany are being challenged on the global stage, with actors such as Russia and China making robust attempts, even within Germany and the EU, to influence our affairs. Strategies are needed to defend ourselves against cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns that assault and do long-term damage to the substance of democracies and to the trust that they need to function. At the same time, any government that takes its own values seriously is obliged to promote democracy and support players in civil society all over the world. Any new government can be expected to continue a committed international human rights policy.

Seeking Solidarity with Like-Minded Countries throughout the World

A good idea in any case is an “alliance of multilateralists” – and here we can build on existing relationships, seeking partners that, like Germany, favour a values-led, rules-based international order and with absolutely no desire to see a new chorus of superpowers in which only the latter have a say. While the term sounds positive, it alone will not make a difference any

more than Germany’s many “strategic partnerships” – which leave us wondering what is actually strategic about them. In any event, the term is presumably more helpful than rehabilitating “the West” and explaining why countries such as Japan and India are somehow part of “the West”. Both, however, clearly rank among those countries with whom a close alliance should be sought in international organisations, too. That the same applies to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada goes without saying, just as it does to Great Britain, which, Brexit notwithstanding, must remain as closely tied to Germany and the European Union as possible. In all of these cases and more, the use of Europe’s famous “soft power” is especially called for, including a committed expansion of intercultural programmes, from youth exchanges to the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD, from platforms run by the Goethe Institute to media outreach supported by Deutsche Welle. For all its economic power, Germany is much too timid in this regard. There are also many countries in Latin America that have strong historical and cultural ties to Europe but have received too little attention in this area and do little themselves to attract it. It is particularly the major players like Mexico and Brazil, which are natural partners, that punch far below their weight; the ambitions of countries like Columbia and Chile in the OECD context offer promising starting points for partnerships; and we do not yet want to write off MERCOSUR, despite the wealth of disappointments we have experienced there.

The European Union, our immediate European neighbours, transatlantic relationships and NATO, multilateralism – if we leave it at that, there still remain visible gaps. First and foremost is Africa, our neighbouring continent, whose importance for Germany and Europe is beyond any doubt and not just in terms of migration and combating the causes of flight – current migration statistics show that these can be found in Central and South Asia as well. Africa’s young population and spectacular demographic growth, booming megacities, wealth of resources, glimmers of democratic hope,

the weight of its over 50 votes in international organisations, and unfortunately its numerous conflicts make it exceptionally important for Germany. Nevertheless, commitment beyond a focus on development policy has remained modest, with England and France making the most of their head start as the traditionally dominant powers – even though the spectre of colonialism continues to haunt them. In its efforts to address its history, Germany has, at any rate, set an example that can be built upon.

Structural questions remain, and while these arise every four years with comforting regularity, they rarely lead to major reforms in governmental structures – a finding confirmed once more with the recent formation of the new German government. Key voices once again asked whether we need an independent Ministry of Development. Should this be affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or would a better solution be one that more directly addresses foreign trade? Would it even make sense to have a new structure uniting, say, the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development with the Ministry for the Environment, creating a ministry charged with issues of global concern, possibly even in conjunction with agricultural questions? The possibilities are endless, as are the self-interested commentaries. Presumably, however, none of these solutions would have eliminated the problem of silo mentalities, especially given that many other ministries are internationally active as well, not to mention the European level. Whether a federal security council could provide some assistance here or whether it has any chance of becoming reality still remains to be seen. What seems certain, at least, is that the desire for totally uniform international engagement is likely to remain a pipe dream.

- translated from German -

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