

Germany risks becoming the weak heart of Europe

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The recent federal elections showed that the German electorate is tired of the grand coalition between the two major parties. What the future German foreign and security policy will look like depends on the respective outlook of the parties making up the new tripartite coalition. Especially of concern will be their view of the world and Merkel's legacy, which this paper will focus on.

With bated breath, the rest of Europe is waiting to see what the new German foreign and security policy will be: Will Germany provide Europe with a strong centre? Will Germany take a leadership position or rather follow someone else?¹

Little attention was paid to foreign affairs in the German Bundestag election campaign. Yet, in the year ahead, the new government will have to adapt German foreign and security policy to NATO's new Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass. These key documents will mean little without solid German support.² After all, Germany is the largest political and economic power in Europe. Also, from a military point of view, the country is strategically located at the heart of the continent.

Merkel personified crisis management and leadership based on traditional European integration and transatlantic relations.³ Her successor and the rest of the new government will have to adjust to the changing state of world politics, characterised by great power rivalry and successive crises. In 2005, when Angela Merkel first entered the chancellery, security concerns were secondary to international economic issues. Now, it is the other way around: geopolitics often seems to trump economics and globalisation.

MERKEL'S SIGNATURE SKILL: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Merkel was never a visionary. Her position as the undisputed *de facto* leader of Europe rested on her ability to manage crises. It is perhaps ironic that Merkel's brand

of steady-as-she-goes politics has in fact been a continuous series of balancing acts. At home, she has managed a number of government coalitions. In foreign affairs, she balanced a constantly changing guard of leaders.⁴ Her approach rested on the premise that security and strategic issues are less problematic than economic ones, but since she became chancellor, each successive European crisis pushed Germany further and further away from this assumed 'normal' baseline of global politics.

Particularly three crises have shown that Merkel has had a major impact on the direction of Europe. Her first major test was the euro crisis. By 2009, it was make or break for the euro, and perhaps even for European integration.⁵ While she helped save the euro, European affairs became ever more dependent on German leadership. Eventually, this increased expectations from friends and allies that Germany would show leadership not only on economic issues but also on matters of security. This was not welcome news in Berlin. Yet, the second major crisis Merkel faced was a security crisis. Since 2009, the EU has established an Eastern Partnership, which includes Ukraine. However, Russia proved ready to use force to try and prevent Ukraine from establishing closer ties to Europe.⁶ Merkel led Europe's response to the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression against Ukraine, not by saber-rattling, but by engaging in talks with Putin and imposing economic sanctions.

1 Buras, Piotr and Puglierin, Jana, *Beyond Merkelism: What Europeans expect of post-election Germany*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021.

2 See, for instance, Giegrich, Bastian and Terhalle, Maximilian, *The Responsibility to Defend – Rethinking Germany's Strategic Culture*. Abingdon and London: Routledge and IISS, 2021, pp. 11 and 19.

3 Comment by Schreiter, Katrin in Neveit, Joshua, 'Angela Merkel: Four expert verdicts on a contested legacy', *The BBC online*. 23 September 2021.

4 In fact, Merkel was awarded the title, 'Chancellor of the Free World', by Time Magazine. Vick, Karl and Schuster, Simon, 'Person of the Year'. *Time Magazine online* (undated) and Fetterolf, Janell and Schumacher, Shannon, *Germany and Merkel Receive High Marks Internationally in Chancellor's Last Year in Office*. Pew Research Center, 22 September 2021.

5 Schöllgen, Gregor, *Deutsche Aussenpolitik – Von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*. München: C.H. Beck, 2013, pp. 303 and 307 and Zack, Aaron M., 'Eastern Exposure: Germany Looks at Russia', *Survival*, April–May, 2021, p. 38.

6 See Rossbach, Niklas H., *The Geopolitics of Russian energy. Gas, oil and the energy security of tomorrow*, FOI-R--4623--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, 2018).

Despite the Russian aggression, debates in security circles are still concerned with the degree to which Europe is dependent on American capabilities, not about when Europe will stop being dependent.⁷ Regardless of whether the EU or NATO, in a distant future, will have the leading role on matters of Europe's defence, the capabilities as well as the political will of Germany will be pivotal.

That Germany's choices are essential was evident in the third crisis, which was a crisis of European values. By 2015, the civil war in Syria contributed to a wave of refugees. This put pressure on the EU's crisis management system. Initially, Merkel led by example and stated that '*wir schaffen das*', 'we'll make it'. Eventually, however, she and the EU had to turn to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of Turkey, a man with decidedly authoritarian leanings, to stem the tide of refugees. The management of the refugee crisis also contributed to strengthening populist nationalism in Europe. For example, in Germany, the new right wing populist party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), was elected to the Bundestag in 2017, a political sea change in Germany.⁸

In the coming years, Europe is not likely to face fewer crises. Not least, since globally the great power rivalries remain, between China and Russia on the one hand and the US and Europe on the other. During the election, the new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, branded himself as the continuity candidate. However, he has also stated that he wants to be more than a crisis manager. Nevertheless, doing more than stepping into Merkel's shoes is a very ambitious undertaking.

MERKEL'S LEGACY – THE CONCENTRATION OF POWER

A consequence of the constant crisis management is a 'presidentialisation' of German foreign policy, whereby the chancellery controls the country's foreign policy. Another consequence is the so-called 'siloisation', in which ministries separately work with the chancellery to deal with a crisis in their respective policy area, instead of coordinating their activities.⁹

This has led to criticism about a lack of strategic thinking. Hence, the plans that have been around for a number of years to create a National Security Council, *Nationalen Sicherheitsrat*, may now finally materialise. At the very least, the new German government intends to formulate a national security strategy.¹⁰ It will be different from one that would have been produced by Merkel's cabinet. That the new coalition government will consist of three parties will increase the desire for coordination and might therefore necessitate more strategic thinking.

Even under Merkel, Germany began an overhaul of the country's foreign- and security policy. After the 2014 Munich security conference, the German government stated its intention to make Germany take greater responsibility for international security. Later, this was referred to as the 'Munich Consensus'.¹¹ According to the recent 2016 White Paper on defence, Germany intends to adapt its armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) to 'collective and territorial defence'. Yet, at the same time it underlines that the military should support crisis management, at home as well as abroad, and be prepared to assist both military and civilian relief efforts.¹² The scope of these tasks is a sign of hedging rather than decisiveness. Effectively, many experts claim that Germany's efforts at adjusting to the current security challenges have been slow. Whether it wants to or not, the new government has to adapt Germany to the security challenges of the 2020s.

A THREE-PARTY COALITION REQUIRES EVEN MORE BALANCING

Merkel had to balance only two parties at any one time, but Scholz has to balance three: his own, the Social democratic party (SPD); and the two smaller 'niche parties', the liberals, that is, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the Greens.¹³ Each of the three coalition parties have different views on foreign policy as well as security and defence. In fact, the election results show that Germany now has an increasingly fragmented party landscape.

The German electorate has shown itself ambivalent

7 Barrie, Douglas; Barry, Ben; Boyd, Henry; Childs, Nick and Giegerich, Bastian, 'Europe's Defence Requires Offence', *Survival*, February–March, 2021, pp. 19–24.

8 Burleigh, Michael, *The Best of Times, the Worst of Times – A History of Now*. London: Macmillan Pan Books, 2017, pp. 332–335 and 337.

9 Parkes, Roderick, *A geopolitical awakening? The future of German statecraft*. UI Brief No 5, 2021.

10 SPD. Ergebnis der Sondierungen zwischen SPD, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP, 15 October 2021, p. 12.

11 Kiesewetter, Roderich, Nick, Andreas, and Vietz, Michael, 'Erklären, was wir außenpolitisch wollen. Zur Rolle des Parlaments in der strategischen Kultur', *Internationale Politik*, No. 4, 2017.

12 Hagström Frisell, Eva, *Germany's Military Capability 2020*. FOI Memo 7593 (Stockholm: Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, 2021), pp. 1–4.

13 Party names in full: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP) and *Die Grünen/Bündnis 90*.

about the change it wants to see: whether ‘change’ means a new chancellor, or a wish for a new kind of politics, is unclear.¹⁴ The increased support for the niche parties indicates that the desire for change has trumped the desire for continuity, and that Germany has actually voted for political change. The new government has promised a new beginning, a so-called *Neustart*, including for Germany’s role in the world.

In terms of foreign policy, the niche parties are important because they define themselves against Merkel’s policy towards the great powers. Both the FDP and the Greens want Germany to take a tougher stance on Russia and China, with more emphasis on values, even if such policies carry economic costs.¹⁵ This position is integral to the Greens’ ideology, because of the party’s roots in the peace movement and its strong pro-human-rights tradition.¹⁶ Human rights have also become increasingly important to the FDP in recent years, which in a German context might be surprising given the party’s pro-business tradition. However, the German export-focused industry is no longer unanimously positive towards China or Russia.¹⁷ Accordingly, given the strong views of the niche parties, the new government will have to reflect the junior partners’ critique of Merkel’s interest-focused politics towards Russia and China. However, this presents a challenge for the SPD, which after all was part of the previous Merkel government.

Despite the Greens and the FDP’s having overlapping views on foreign policy, there are also a number of contradictions, especially in their view on when to use military means. The FDP wants to pursue a value-driven foreign policy, with the support of the military instrument. However, in 2011, when FDP party leader Guido Westerwelle was foreign minister, Germany refused to support any military involvement in Libya.¹⁸ Neither the Greens nor the SPD agree amongst themselves about

the use of military power. This may hamper a *Neustart* and the willingness of the new government to continue the policies of the defence White Paper from 2016.

All parties agree that the armed forces need more funding, but FDP is the only party that supports the NATO goal of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence. Moreover, the FDP promotes the EU as ‘a real global player’, and supports the creation of a ‘European army’.¹⁹ Of course, the party’s first goal, of strengthening NATO, might contradict the second, of strengthening the EU, but that is a future problem. The SPD and the Greens might cause another dilemma for the government’s foreign and security policy. Both of them probably want to ensure continued strong German parliamentary control over when to use force.²⁰ This is a problem for deepened European defence integration.

Despite the Munich Consensus, German political scientists argue that Germany still identifies as a ‘civilian power’.²¹ Hard power, such as military power, is not something contemporary Germany prefers to employ. Instead, it has pursued ‘politics before force’.²² As a former German ambassador explains it, traditional German foreign and security policy means essentially sanctions instead of soldiers.²³ Merkel could perhaps have said much the same thing.

A problem for the future coalition government is that parts of the Greens and the SPD both underline Germany’s self-conception as a ‘civilian power’. SPD actions during the previous Merkel cabinet do not suggest a willingness to break with this legacy. While in government, the SPD has been reluctant to modernise the armed forces and to have German forces take a more active role in foreign deployments.²⁴

In 2020, representatives from the SPD’s left-wing faction demanded an end to the nuclear sharing arrangement within NATO, after the defence minister, Annegret

14 Der Bundeswahlleiter, *Ergebnisse Bundestagswahl 2021*, 2021, online.

15 FDP, *Wahlprogramm der Freien Demokraten*, 2021, pp. 53–54.

16 Die Grünen, *Bundestagswahlprogramm 2021*, 2021, p. 219.

17 Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie, *Partner and Systemic Competitor – How Do We Deal with China’s State-Controlled Economy?* BDI Policy paper China, 2019.

18 Kraft, Ina. ‘Germany’, in Meijer, H. and Wyss, M. (eds.) *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 57.

19 Franke, Ulrike, *Foreign and defence policy in the German election*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; FDP, *Wahlprogramm der Freien Demokraten*, p. 49.

20 Bunde, Tobias, Defending European integration by (symbolically) integrating European defence? Germany and its ambivalent role in European security and defence policy. *Journal of European Integration*, 43(2), 2021, pp. 243–259.

21 Maull, Hanns W., ‘From ‘Civilian Power’ to ‘Trading State’?’, *Routledge Handbook of German Politics and Culture*, 2014, p. 409.

22 Krauss, Ellis S., & Maull, Hanns W. ‘Germany, Japan and the Fate of International Order’. *Survival*, 62 (3), 2020, pp. 159–178, pp. 161 and 164.

23 Ischinger, Wolfgang. *World in Danger: Germany and Europe in an uncertain time*. Brookings Institution press: Washington D.C., (2021), p. 159.

24 See ‘Wer als Soldat in der SPD ist, muss leidensfähig sein’, *Der Spiegel* online, 1 February 2021, and ‘AKK fordert mehr Auslandseinsätze – SPD und FDP zurückhaltend’, *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland online*, 7 November 2019.

Kramp-Karrenbauer (of the conservatives, the CDU-CSU), suggested replacing Germany's ageing Tornado fighter jets. A decision was put off but is needed before 2023 if Germany is to remain involved in nuclear sharing.²⁵ Now, a decision has to be made by a government led by the SPD.

In fact, in large segments of the SPD the self-conception of Germany as a 'civilian power' is still alive and well. The party is divided between a left-wing faction, striving to pursue a restrained foreign policy, and a more centre-oriented faction advocating a policy based on norms and values.²⁶ The first seeks to avoid confrontation, while the latter does not shy away from using stronger language against authoritarian powers.

Most Greens likewise see the armed forces as something that should only be used as a last resort. This view is also reflected in the Greens' resistance to armed drones and nuclear weapons.²⁷ However, there are also a number of realists, so-called *realos*, in the party, who are more ready to use the military instrument. And, the Greens have changed their position before. The last time was when the party was in government and the party leader, Joschka Fischer, was foreign minister. Germany diverged from its former strict antimilitarism norm by participating in the Kosovo conflict, in 1999, as well as in combat missions in Kosovo and in Operation Enduring Freedom, in Afghanistan, in 2001.²⁸ A crisis would be the most likely reason for the Greens' supporting rapid military action again, when called for.

Crisis often strengthens or breaks governments. Hopefully, it will not require a major crisis to overcome the many divisions between and within the parties. In the new German government's foreign and security policy, domestic politics, what used to be called *der Primat der Innenpolitik*, is likely to be of primary importance, rather than external geopolitical conditions.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S MANY DILEMMAS

The balancing act of the new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, within the coalition will be to find common ground on foreign policy both with the niche parties and within his own party. The outcome may be the least common denominator. But, if he wants a true *Neustart* that builds on the Munich Consensus, he must find a way to make the most of each party's most ambitious changes to foreign and security policy.

The new tripartite coalition intends to pursue a European values-based foreign and security policy. It is unlikely to increase its number of foreign and security policy instruments beyond tough diplomatic language and economic sanctions, and will not include more use of the military instrument. Abandoning Germany's identity as a 'civilian power' has already proven difficult. In other words, the new government will find it easy to agree on when to speak loudly, but not when to carry a big stick. The risk in having a 'civilian power' mind-set and a values-based foreign policy dominate the new German government is that Germany will upset revanchist powers without being able to back its stance with strengthened deterrence or credible deployable forces.

If the new government is fraught by internal disagreements, it will not live up to the desire for change, neither among the electorate nor Germany's allies. Future crises are likely to happen, and these will test the government, as well as its *Neustart*, and also any attempt by the chancellery to focus less on crisis management. If the new government has then also chosen to abandon the Munich Consensus, Germany risks becoming the weak heart of Europe, in terms of security. Depending on the outcome of the 2022 French presidential elections, there might be other contenders for the leadership role in Europe, if the new government chooses not, or proves unable, to fill Merkel's shoes. ■

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25 Mützenich, Rolf, 'Es wird Zeit, dass Deutschland die Stationierung zukünftig ausschließt', *Der Tagesspiegel online*, 3 May 2020; Weigold, Thomas, 'SPD-Spitze startet Initiative gegen Nukleare Teilhabe (Zusammenfassung)', *Augen gerade aus [blog]*, 2 May 2020.

26 Hagström Frisell, Eva. *Tysk säkerhetspolitik i vänteläge*. FOI Memo 7023 (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, 2020), p. 2.

27 Die Grünen, 'Sicherheit, Frieden, Abrüstung', *Die Grünen online*, 2021.

28 Kraft, 'Germany', p. 56.