



Whither Germany? The "German Problem" and its Implications for Today

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"German pride did not die after the country's defeat in World War II. Instead, like Sleeping Beauty in the Brothers Grimm version of the folk tale, it only fell into a deep slumber. The country has now awakened, ready to celebrate its economic ingenuity, its cultural treasures and the unsullied stretches of its history. As Germany embarks on this journey of self-discovery, the question is whether it will leave behind a European project which was built in no small measure on the nation's postwar guilt and on its pocketbook." ¹

Looking at Germany's foreign policy over the course of the past ten years makes many people, Germans and foreigners alike, shake their heads. Gone are the days of the Cold War, when there was a clear German foreign policy strategy committed to an intimately close relationship with the US and a vital interest in further integration in Europe. Or so it seems.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's decisive "no" to German participation in and support of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked the most obvious departure from a foreign policy that followed American leadership. The most recent decision by the Merkel government not to participate in military strikes against Libya and the abstention from a resolution at the UN Security Council seems to support that trend. Likewise, Germany seems to have less interest in the European project as well. Much of the rhetoric about the European Union has changed over the past two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall. National German interests, especially in terms of finances, are gaining weight in determining Berlin's Europe policy. At the same time, a commitment to the idea of European integration beyond pure *realpolitik* calculations is often less

¹ New York Times Online, Country Report: Germany. <<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/germany/index.html>> [last accessed 5 June 2011].



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evident. As a matter of fact, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble is seen by many as the last true European à la Helmut Kohl. This generation of politicians saw European integration as such a vital mission that it had supremacy over all other national interests, no matter the cost. This attitude was obviously informed by the experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath. But to the new generation of political leaders, those are less immediate recollections. Their experiences were shaped by the 1970s, 1980s and the two decades of a unified Germany, periods in which Germany had gained new weight in international politics. For them the legacy of World War II matters less.

To many observers it seems as if Germany has lost direction. German foreign policy appears unstructured, without a clear leitmotif and lacking coherence. But is this change only due to domestic reasons - a failure of the German government to develop a reasonable foreign policy? Or is it perhaps even symptomatic of a deeper change in the international environment that resulted in a reopening of the German Problem?

A short historical assessment of the situation will help to understand the issues at hand today.

The German Problem

The German Problem basically refers to the difficulty of finding Germany's place in the international system. It has two dimensions: on the one hand it alludes to the struggle of German politicians in the past to determine the direction of German foreign policy. Ruling a somewhat young country, new strategies had to be developed. The most essential question posed was: where should Germany exert its (rather important) influence? On the other hand, the German Problem also refers to the uncertainties of Germany's neighbours. For them, having a country of considerable political, military and economic power at their borders, a country struggling to find its place, meant confusion at best and insecurity at worst.

For many centuries, the problem was mostly a concern for the Germans themselves and not so much for their neighbours. Until 1871, Germany was only a loose territorial entity - first the Holy Roman Empire, then the German Confederation and finally the North German Confederation - with no significant central power and it consisted of a plethora of princedoms and independent entities. This division and separation made it, more often than not, a chessboard for other bigger powers - especially Sweden and France - exemplified by the 30 Years War of the 17th century. Yet, with the movement for unity gaining ground in the mid-19th century, the German Problem suddenly emerged in its full complexity. The Germans had to decide on what kind of Germany they wanted: a small German state including Prussia plus some other smaller German princedoms, or a



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Great Germany including Austria and other German speaking parts of Europe. The latter option would have had significant repercussions on the European order, as it would have thrown off the extremely fragile balance of power. Finally, in 1871, the smaller German solution was implemented. For Germany's neighbours, this small German solution was the lesser of two evils, but still a new big country had emerged at their borders, creating uneasiness and concerns.

The newly unified Germany became the economic powerhouse of continental Europe and had a huge military at its disposal. It was a young and emerging country, eager to exert its influence and new power. But where should it exert this power? Three options presented themselves: first, the Germans could seek further territorial aggrandizement in Europe. This idea became particularly popular during the First World War and was put forth by the leading political circles around Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. They coined the concept of *Mitteuropa*, which was supposed to be a central European realm controlled - directly or indirectly - by Berlin. However, the notion of *Mitteuropa* appeared already prior to the war. But seeking hegemony in central Europe would obviously bring Germany into conflict with other great powers, such as Russia and France. Second, Germany could join the club of colonial powers, exerting its influence beyond the seas. Yet the big cake of "unowned" territories to be turned into colonies became smaller almost by the day and any partaking in the colonial struggle would lead to conflict with other big colonial powers, such as Great Britain. The third option was the least confrontational one: Germany would simply focus on exerting economic power and increasing markets without territorial aspirations. For most of his rule, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck chose the last option. Germany declared itself a satiated power and Bismarck tried to keep it out of the colonial business, though only with limited success.

However, once the Iron Chancellor left office, Germany started to pursue all three options simultaneously. Kaiser Wilhelm II declared that his country would seek its "place in the sun," and implemented a new policy of global power beyond its immediate spheres of influence - *Weltpolitik* - and exerted its influence much more aggressively. This was a disastrous policy that led to several critical diplomatic crises and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the two World Wars. Consequently, the lack of a functioning international system that managed to integrate and accommodate Germany - and keep it in check - led to terrible results as the German Problem was not contained. The same applied to the situation prior to the Second World War. Infuriated by the so-called "Dictate of Versailles" - the peace treaty that ended World War I and placed the blame for the war exclusively on Germany, cutting it down to a second-rank power - Germany became revisionist and tried to upset the international order that it considered unfavourable. This led to the rise of Adolf Hitler's National Socialism and the Third Reich's quest for new power and territories - *Lebensraum*. German revisionism, an aggressive, militant foreign policy as well as the failure of



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the international community at large to integrate and check Germany resulted in the outbreak of World War II.

After the total defeat of 1945 and with it the creation of the two German states within an inflexible Cold War environment, the German Problem was suspended. The Federal Republic of Germany simply did not have a choice. Within the rigid Cold War system it only had one option left to pursue: the third one, focusing on its building up its economy. West Germany, being rid of any serious means to seek more influence through military power in Europe or the world, engaged in becoming one of the leading economic powers of the world again.

Moreover, Germany was a divided nation, a pariah of the international system and a country subjected to allied special rights. Consequently, West German policy in the decades to come focused on overcoming these problems. The Germans were busy regaining unity and sovereignty, and simply had no means to reopen the issue of the German Problem. European integration and excellent transatlantic relations – the policy of *Westbindung* – aimed at securing West German safety and were meant to help regain sovereignty, and even – eventually – unity.

The horrors of World War Two, the tremendous suffering Germany had brought to Europe and the wish to re-enter the club of “civilised” European nations led West German politicians starting with Konrad Adenauer to embrace the idea of promoting European unity. The European Communities were designed to ensure peace in Europe by overcoming the Franco-German enmity and by promoting economic recovery and well-being. They were also meant to integrate West Germany firmly into the European system as binding the Federal Republic to Europe would reduce the risks of a repetition of the post-1871 dangers and hence, a re-opening of the German Problem. Moreover, during these times, the German-French relationship was essential to Bonn as France was one of the four occupying powers and only with French support could reunification be achieved. West Germany therefore became a fully integrated member of Europe; it had found its place, and limits. The same applied to the transatlantic relationship: the Federal Republic needed the US for reunification but also for the mere protection of its territory in the age of nuclear weapons. Through NATO, the US provided security for West Germany – but it also provided security for West Germany’s neighbours.² NATO hence offered the West Germans a place in the system but also some security mechanisms to keep them in check. This policy complemented the integration of the Federal Republic into the European system by binding it also to the international, or at least Western, system. Likewise, East Germany became an important member of the Warsaw Pact and remained under strong Soviet tutelage. An independent foreign policy upsetting the international order was hardly possible. Besides, East Germany recognised its borders

² As NATO’s first Secretary-general, Lord Ismay had so eloquently put it: “[NATO’s goal is to] to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”.



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and was thus not revisionist. Hence, the Cold War environment and the integration of both Germanys into the international system – although on different ends of it – prevented a revival of the German Problem.

During the Cold War, West Germany became an economic giant and a political dwarf. It was a second-rank power that finally knew its place and limitations. The Germans grew progressively accustomed to it; they even started to like it. Germany found its niche in what N. Piers Ludlow refers to as the cocoon of US security guarantees.³ Thus, the only field in which Germany could excel was the economic one, and they did indeed excel, becoming one of the leading economies in the world.

Much changed, however, with 1990 and Germany's reunification. The country regained full sovereignty, the rights of the four occupying powers were suspended and the newly unified state in the centre of Europe emerged as the biggest economy with a considerable army and the largest population. The situation did not differ too much from the first unification in 1871. In both cases, a country existed in the heart of Europe that had the potential to upset the balance of power and to pose a direct threat to its neighbours due to the means at its disposal. Yet that is where the similarities ended. Unlike in 1871, the reunited Germany would clearly not use its army for political purposes. As a matter of fact, after 1990, the size of the army was reduced. Moreover, the country accepted its borders as final. Most importantly, though, a reunited Germany had its place in the international system. Unlike 1871, it knew the operating procedures, possibilities and limits of the international system, and it was part of this system. In stark contrast to 1871, Germany now had accepted a set of rules and a framework in which it could work. Yet some smaller problems remained: where would the new Germany exert its new influence? Germany was simply too big and had too many interests beyond its border to allow it to just become a big Switzerland.

This realisation was at the core of the dilemma for Germany and its neighbours throughout the 1990s and remains today. Clearly, through the opening of markets in Eastern Europe, German influence expanded into a region that was historically prone to German influence. But that was where German foreign policy stopped for most of the 1990s. Germany was not willing to assume more responsibility internationally. The Bonn Republic was comfortable in its niche and not at all willing to shoulder a greater burden, for instance by means of military engagements abroad. Instead it continued its chequebook diplomacy, refraining from participating in military operations but sending money to the partners instead.

³ N. Piers Ludlow, "European Integration and the Cold War," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 191.



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That era came to an end with the war in Kosovo, which was the first time that German soldiers participated in a military conflict after 1945. This was the beginning of the Berlin Republic in terms of foreign policy. Germany took a more pronounced stance on international issues, it joined the war against terror in Afghanistan and at the Horn of Africa in 2001, it resisted participating in the intervention in Iraq in 2003 and it joined international efforts to stabilise situations in East Timor, Africa and the Middle East. Germany was beginning to step up to broader international responsibilities. But it exerted this new influence within the functioning international system of European integration and the transatlantic alliance. Germany did not become a revisionist power.

Nevertheless, priorities shifted and old pillars of German foreign policy lost importance. The Franco-German relationship, while still essential to European integration and French power, had become less vital to Berlin. France's cooperation was no longer needed for reunification, the Franco-German enmity - with all its terrible effects - had been overcome and the offspring of *l'amitié Franco-Allemande*, the European Union, was providing an economic framework beneficial to Germany's export-led economy. Consequently, the *status quo* was sufficient for Berlin, the need for further integration less pressing and the imperative of closer French-German cooperation was vanishing. Moreover, the patterns of this cooperation changed too. During the Cold War, France played the dominant role in the couple. With Germany's reunification, this changed. France now needed Germany at least as much as vice versa. With a growing European Union extending further East, Germany suddenly became the geographic centre of the Union. In addition, it was the leading economy of the continent. To cope with declining French power, Germany's cooperation was vital for Paris.

Changes also extended to the transatlantic relationship: the US, while still an important partner for Germany, was becoming less vital. German security no longer largely depended on American nuclear defence guarantees. Moreover, the Americans themselves had shifted attention to other parts of the world, away from Europe. It is against this backdrop, that German foreign policies today have to be understood.

Whither Germany?

The frustration that German foreign policy is causing today is as much a result of the lack of a coherent foreign policy strategy as of a changed international environment that Germany has not yet fully adapted to. The Germany of today is no longer the divided country of the Cold War. It is still an economic giant and still somewhat of a political dwarf. But the external factors have changed. Germany is coming to terms with its global responsibility and beginning to step up to it; despite minor moments



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of irritation as recently seen in the Libya resolution case. The German Parliament recently abolished military conscription and approved plans that will most likely increase German military operations abroad, not just for purely defensive purposes but also to fulfil other international responsibilities. In fact, the Germans are doing what they have been asked to do for a long time: play a bigger role in the international field. This obviously extends to economic fora such as the G8 or G20. But as with many changes that concern core areas of politics, they take time. Contrary to post-1871, however, German politicians and the population at large know their place in the international system and are satisfied with it. Unlike in the late 19th century, they do not want to upset the international system; they want to operate within it. Moreover, because of a deep-rooted scepticism to the use of military means permeating broad parts of society, Germany will not seek to promote its interests with military means, as opposed to the pre-World-War era. Add to this the shifting of priorities – away from a “primacy of foreign policy” to a primary preoccupation of Germans with domestic issues. Public opinion and debates are centre upon possible nuclear catastrophes, diseases, climate change, and the construction of train stations. This makes any serious threat to international security deriving from this situation even less likely. At the latest with the fall of the Berlin Wall, foreign policy has lost in importance for Germans at large.

As for the European project, German strategies have changed too. Naturally, Berlin will remain committed to the integration project, for purely economic interests, but will no longer do so at any cost. As for all of the other European states, the balance between the commitment to Europe and national interests has to be adjusted time and again. In the future, for Germany, European integration may be less of an end in itself but a vehicle for other interests, be they economic or political. Moreover, domestic considerations of a progressively more Europe-sceptical population will matter more, too. It will be difficult to achieve significant further steps in integration against this backdrop. That will mean the end to the almost religiously justified Europe policy and the beginning of a more *realpolitik* approach to Europe, but it will not be the end of European integration. The achievements reached so far, a common currency, and an incredible freedom of movement within Europe as well as an overwhelming level of societal exchange, will not be seriously challenged or questioned by any German government despite some occasional debates about it. They have become a cornerstone of German identity and life. This new stance on Europe, in the end, will make Germans more like their neighbours and European partners; it will make the country more “normal”. It also testifies to the fact that Germany is no longer an outsider, no longer a special case. Contradictory as it might sound now, in the long run, it will make Germany a more predictable country.

In sum, the German Problem is still there. But today it is rather one-dimensional. It is less of a problem to its European neighbours than to German policy-makers and



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strategists. They still have to define the national interests that will guide policies. They have to draft and implement a coherent foreign policy agenda for the post-Cold War era that is long overdue, taking into account the new international environment and domestic interests. In doing so, other areas of the world will gain importance for Berlin. Rising powers in the Third World, such as China, India, Brazil and others will become more interesting to Germany to work with and to talk to. Germany has no choice but to engage more on the international arena. That is a dictate already of its export-led economy. And yet, there is no need to worry in other European countries or the US. Germany will remain committed to the European Union and to the transatlantic partnership. This is not only a function of interests, although already those are important enough. But it is also a consequence of shared convictions, histories and experiences as well as of an incredible network of contacts on all levels of society. Germany has its place in the international community and is satisfied with it; this is the basic difference to the pre-1945 situation. It needs a stable and peaceful international environment, especially in Europe, to prosper and this will translate into a remaining commitment to the project of the European Union. At the same time though, within this set framework, Germany will pursue a more independent foreign policy on certain issues, much like France or the UK. This will continue to lead it into occasional disagreements with its European and transatlantic partners. But they will be restricted to certain aspects of the complex European and transatlantic relations; these moments of contention will not threaten the basic fabrics of those relationships. In the end, Germany is becoming more "normal"; more like other big European countries that sometimes pursue their own interests within the limitations they are under. Consequently, the German Problem today is no longer a threat to European security. German foreign policy may occasionally remain an issue of contention - especially for German politicians - but it will no longer be a nightmare for Europe or the world.

Further Readings

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