

Germany's Balancing Act in Foreign Policy

Gunther Hellmann

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's blunt refusal last fall to send soldiers or money to support any American invasion of Iraq stunned many observers. After having pledged "unlimited solidarity" with the United States in fighting terrorism in the wake of 9/11, in his re-election campaign one year later Schröder clearly dissented from the policy of President George W. Bush. Not even a United Nations mandate for military action would induce Germany to participate in a military ouster of Saddam Hussein, he declared. Apparently Schröder's anti-war strategy worked, since he defeated challenger Edmund Stoiber.

Given the chancellor's reputation for pragmatism, German-American relations might now be expected to return gradually to normal. Yet both the immediate irritation his campaign triggered in Washington and deep-seated structural forces make it likely that German-American relations will remain strained (or even get worse) in the months and years to come.

The reasons for this are to be found in the post-World War II history of the Federal Republic of Germany. Today's Germany is more powerful and more secure than ever before since the end

of World War II. During the cold war the two central objectives of West-German foreign policy—the immediate aim of maintaining the country's territorial integrity, and the long-term aim of reuniting the two Germanies—were not attainable by this country acting alone. The Federal Republic was dependent on others for its security; legally, it exercised only limited political sovereignty.

Following reunification and the end of the cold war, the two most important international institutions for Germany, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, continued to exist. However, their function changed. "Exporting stability" replaced physical survival and maintenance of economic well-being. For the first time, Germany was able to shape actively, rather than simply react to, the demands of others. What was surprising was not that German foreign policy shifted as a result, but rather how long it continued to operate under the name of continuity.

Talk about the continuity of German foreign policy sounded convincing because the legitimization of the new direction was couched in the tried and true vocabulary of the old West Germany. "Responsibility" was the watchword of what Chancellor Schröder has called the necessary "repositioning of Germany in the international community." A quick look at two typical ways of operating at the

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beginning of the 1990s and then again a decade later illustrates this point.

In 1991 Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher specified that “Germany’s increasing weight” had to be clearly distinguished from previous “power politics.” He declared that “a European Germany would take on responsibility for greater freedom, democracy, and human dignity, ideals that the nation-state oriented thinking of the past slighted.” The concept of a civilian power strikingly embodies this idea of special, largely non-military, responsibility.

Just how much the connotation of “responsibility” has changed since then can be seen in Schröder’s demand a year ago for “a new way of looking at German foreign policy.” In a speech to parliament after the terror attacks of 9/11 the chancellor dismissed the foreign policy that was pursued above all by Genscher, as mere “secondary assistance measures.” He added, “This stage of German post-war policy is now gone forever.” Germany must “comprehensively meet its new responsibilities,” which, the chancellor calculated, would require “removing the taboo surrounding military matters.” In short, Berlin would have to live up to the expectations of “a great power.” Under the rubric of Germany’s “new responsibility” the “militarization” of German foreign policy that was once so demonized by Schröder’s Social Democrats and the Greens was accepted by their own coalition government. Nothing else demonstrates so dramatically how far German foreign policy has come since 1990.

New Multilateralism

The term “militarization” could, however, be justifiably applied to Germany’s new foreign policy only if it were to be defined in terms of the systematic employment of military instruments in pursuit of international objectives and not (as it is usually interpreted) in terms of a subordination of foreign affairs to the dictates of the military. The situation in Germany today is a far cry from this. Within the innermost ranks of the “red-green” government, it is not the militarization of foreign policy that is viewed as the problem, but the steady reduction in military capabilities as available resources are stretched beyond their limit. German forces no longer engage in maneuvers and simulations to prepare for the unlikely worst-case scenario of homeland defense. Instead, they actively participate in longer-term deployments far away from German soil in Afghanistan and elsewhere in order to bolster fragile political systems that are supposed to guarantee a modicum of rule of law. Thus, the armed forces have become a non-partisan symbol for setting new priorities and bringing stability and peace to far-away places within multinational coalitions, rather than securing national territory within the NATO alliance.

With this far-reaching change of emphasis, one of German foreign policy’s key concepts, multilateralism, can be seen in a new light. Timothy Garton Ash observed that the old “attritional multilateralism” that functioned in the slipstream of the major powers and in

the fora of the east-west conflict was the obverse of the West German policy of protecting its security in such areas as arms control, the Conference/Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (C/OSCE), and the two-plus-four talks that led to German unification. By the same token, the new German multilateralism increasingly pursued within fluid ad hoc coalitions of international crisis diplomacy is the obverse of Berlin's new policy of balancing leadership and restraint, as in Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's concepts of peace and development in Kosovo and the Middle East, Macedonia, and Afghanistan, and as pursued in the Bonn conference of 2001 establishing the interim Afghan government.

In this fashion Germany's new foreign policy takes into account the wide-ranging changes that have occurred in international affairs. The international system limned by the coordinates of East and West has been replaced by a new arrangement that supersedes the clarity of the old bipolarity with a confusing new uni/multipolarity.

The "world community based on the rule of law" that was so enthusiastically supported in 1991 by both Genscher and then US President George Bush, has not, however, taken the place of the rigid and predictable system of firmly established bloc structures. Instead, flexibility of alliance arrangements and an accompanying rise in unilateralism are ascendant.

In the wake of these structural changes, the nature of diplomacy has also changed. Bipolar multilateralism

is different from uni/multipolar multilateralism. West Germany before unification had been socialized into the old system. More than any other state it profited from the system's advantages—and solved the century-old "German problem" of finding a peaceful place in Europe. When the old cold-war system dissolved, Germany was forced to reorient its strategy. Twelve years after unification the question remains as to whether the new multilateralism can accomplish more than a modern version of Bismarck's 19th-century diplomatic balancing act and go beyond mere ad hoc inter-state cooperation.

Paradigm Shifts

At first glance the prerequisites for such a shift might seem to be present. From a German perspective the two core institutions, NATO and the EU, represent alliances of mature democracies that provide what similar institutions of earlier times lacked, namely, the necessary ability to adjust to a changing international situation. If membership applications and international mandates are a measure of attractiveness, then NATO and the EU rank at the top of multilateral organizations, even ahead of the United Nations. Moreover, it is quite an achievement for German foreign policy that what seemed unimaginable at the end of the 1980s is so firmly anchored in both institutions that no one wishes it to be otherwise.

A deeper look reveals a more disturbing state of affairs, however. The new flexibility in international rela-

tions that can be observed in recent US-Russian arms control agreements, for example, has also engulfed NATO. With little debate, the number of applicants for the forthcoming round of enlargement was expanded—and many regard this less as a signal of the continuing vitality of the alliance than as a token of its dilution and declining importance. In private, German diplomats already describe NATO as little more than an open and flexible framework for the coordination of global military actions that involve both members and non-members like Russia.

Even though Berlin may regret the downgrading of NATO to the status of an “OSCE with a military arm,” this evolution would seem to be inevitable in view of recent changes in US foreign-policy priorities. Europeans hear in policy statements from the Bush administration an American judgment that the mutual defense guarantee binding America and Europe—and NATO’s prior function of providing for reassurance against residual fears of a too powerful Germany—is increasingly anachronistic.

With Europe sliding downward in Washington’s scale of priorities, the foundations of one of Germany’s two pillars of foreign policy has collapsed. The US, which was once godparent to West Germany and best man to German reunification, is now indifferent to Europeans in general and Germans in particular. And American and German positions in international affairs are increasingly diverging.

Thus, while the 9/11 attacks led the US to seek the greatest possible free-

dom of maneuver in world affairs, they have not weakened the German political elite’s preference for further expanding the network of international agreements on rules in global affairs. In such key issues as Iraq and the International Criminal Court the two most important members of NATO are heading in opposite directions.

Foreign Minister Fischer has always emphasized (and continues to emphasize) the importance of German-American relations. However, foreign ministry officials too express frustration over the Bush Administration’s single-minded campaign against Saddam Hussein. Moreover, the worry is spreading in foreign ministry circles that Iraq may only be the beginning of a systematic American effort to eliminate one odious regime after another. In an emotional outburst, one unnamed high-ranking foreign ministry official was recently quoted in the center-right *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* as saying that some of the key decision-makers in the Bush Administration are “madmen.” And Berlin’s new vocabulary of “unlimited solidarity,” “no adventures,” and “the German way” are signals pointing toward an uncharted terrain.

None of this means that Germany and the US are on an unstoppable collision course. But a successful working relationship requires the kind of mutual regard that both sides increasingly find difficult to muster. This was apparent even before Chancellor Schröder lashed out at the Bush Administration’s policy toward Iraq.

With luck, the US and Germany, operating essentially within the

framework of the EU, will be able to agree on coordinated responses to international challenges. Given the accumulated power of the transatlantic community, the combined influence of Europe and America certainly continues to be the best hope for meeting the many challenges in international politics at present. In today's less favorable circumstances, however, the threat of alienation or even of increasing rivalry looms large. Increasing instability could be the price the international community will have to pay.

In any case, one of the two pillars German foreign policy rested on in the past must be rebuilt—preferably on new foundations, since the old ones are becoming ever weaker.

The EU Pillar

The other traditional pillar of German foreign policy—the European Union in general and the Franco-German partnership in particular—has been under reconstruction ever since German reunification. With NATO becoming more like the rather ad hoc OSCE, the EU has been propelled into picking up more of the additional burden that was previously divided between the transatlantic and European pillars.

In Europe, the tremors of a shaking transatlantic pillar could already be felt in the launch of a common European defense policy in the aftermath of the 1999 war in Kosovo. The terror attacks of 9/11 further weakened transatlantic cohesion, but they also induced a recognition that all EU

members face a common threat. In coming years terrorism could well spur further EU integration of eastern neighbors, much as the wars of the 17th and 18th centuries accelerated the spread of the modern nation-state.

Since Berlin will profit most from these changes and since it would also have most to lose if EU reform and enlargement were to fail (especially if, in parallel, NATO recedes further into the background), Germany's European neighbors expect that Europe's "central power" (Hans-Peter Schwarz) will continue to bear a disproportionate amount of both old and new financial burdens. However, the growing domestic problems of unemployment, budget deficit, and near-stagnation in Germany, its waxing power, and its increasing confidence as an international player make for an explosive mix. In some areas a detonation has already occurred, as in Chancellor Schröder's initial protest against the European Commission's intent to send a "warning letter" about Berlin's imminent breach of stringent European Monetary Union "stability pact" rules). Should Berlin make further attempts to wield German power for national advantage (by putting a ceiling on Germany's contribution to the EU budget, for example), this might not only hold up EU enlargement and institutional reform, but also undermine major bilateral relationships, especially in the duel with France over the EU's huge farm subsidies).

On the other hand, while EU reform and enlargement present the greatest challenges to German foreign

policy, they also promise the greatest return in serving German interests. If both can be successfully accomplished, the division of Europe will finally be overcome, and with it the difference in status between Germany's eastern and western neighbors. Germany would then find itself in the center of a dense network of democracies. For the first time in its history, it would enjoy a measure of security in all directions.

Yet since the nation-state will not be submerged and vanish in the EU, Germany's role as the "central power" of Europe will be accentuated all the more if NATO continues to totter. From Berlin's point of view, such an imbalance could even change the nature of the EU. In the past European integration was conceived of primarily as a way to resocialize Germany, to bind Western Europe's states closely together, and to increase their common wealth. But some of the grander schemes currently discussed envision the Union as a liberal security community of post-sovereign nation-states, as once advanced by Karl Deutsch. In this context some German designs might well be interpreted as a modern-day version of imperial rule adapted to the requirements of democratic governance. Power would be exercised by a comparatively strong center (the institutions of the EU in Brussels as well as the leading EU states). It would spread out in surrounding concentric circles in diminishing degrees of integration.

Whichever of these scenarios (liberal security community or modern empire) materializes, Germany's Eu-

ropean role will clearly be different in the 21st century from what it used to be in the past. And this will place greater demands on Berlin's ability to lead.

Leadership vs. Restraint

The German jargon of foreign-policy normalization and national self-confidence deflects attention from the issue of just how much the new orientation of Berlin's foreign policy is, and must be, geared to the role of a civilian power as well as that of a great power. If power is understood to mean the ability to pursue one's ends successfully, then without a doubt Germany is more powerful today than it was 15 years ago. This has at least as much to do with the changes in the international situation and Germany's altered aims as with the country's growth in material and non-material power resources.

Today Germany finds itself in the center of a Europe that is growing closer together. No longer is it situated on the explosive political dividing line between East and West. It has become bigger, if not wealthier. It has until now made good use of the enormous political capital inherited from its four peaceful decades as the "Bonn Republic." What is more, the children of Hitler's children have, in recent years, even gained moral capital. The increasing exposure of murky chapters in the histories of neighboring countries (in contrast to what many observers regard as the exemplary frankness with which the Germans have dealt with their own inglorious

history) and the simultaneous discovery that the Germans also suffered in the exodus and expulsions following World War II have put Germans, for the first time, in a position in which they appear no less moral than others. Thus, both hard and soft power resources have grown in the past decade. For this reason more nations than ever expect the new Germany to take a leading role. It is perceived to be powerful—and because of this alone, it is.

Power, however, is a precarious good. As the old saying goes, all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Precisely because German foreign policy and great-power status have, historically, seldom brought benign consequences for either Germany or its neighbors, the call for German leadership is always accompanied by a parallel insistence that it remain firmly anchored in the tradition of “restraint” of the Bonn Republic. Therefore great power and civilian power must go hand in hand.

International Law

Civilizing international relations by spreading the rule of international law remains an overall objective of German foreign policy that all parties subscribe to. This evolution will not occur, however, without the determined application of German power in support of a world that rewards those who keep to the rules and punishes those who don't. Such policies will encounter more opposition whenever the proven Bonn Republic

style of restraint is replaced by “normal” *realpolitik* as traditionally practiced by other great powers. Prime examples may be found in the temptation to stress the differences between “national” and “EU” interests in the case of Germany's net EU contribution and the Union farm-subsidies budget or in the undercurrent of a sense of moral superiority in propounding a special “German path.”

Reconciling a determined effort to strengthen international law with a sense of restraint and consideration for the interests of others will be the main challenge for German foreign policy in years to come if it is to maintain the success achieved by the Bonn Republic. This requires walking a tightrope; strong leadership can just as quickly conjure up suspicion of hegemony and provoke opposing forces as weak leadership can result in instability. Moreover, accentuating one or the other of these dimensions in the day-to-day business of foreign policy could turn out to be counterproductive. The hasty renunciation of any leadership role could induce others who harbor suspicions of German hegemony to seek their own advantage at the expense of Berlin. Conversely, the forceful pursuit of German interests could lead to the kind of anti-German coalition that in the past was the reflex reaction to (real or imagined) German efforts for domination.

Modest reserve on the one hand and determined single-mindedness on the other are the two qualities that German foreign policy must balance if it is to succeed.