

Why Germany is not becoming Europe's hegemon

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»» Berlin's central role in the EU's response to the euro crisis is widely seen to represent a sea change: an assertive Germany has become Europe's leading power. Former French economy minister Thierry Breton insists that Franco-German leadership is now dead and 'Berlin is alone in the cockpit'. Financial Times columnist Philip Stephens writes that 'the continent's agenda is now set in Berlin'. There is much talk of German hegemony in Europe. Some even mutter about an emerging 'Fourth Reich'. Federalist-leaning analysts insist the only solution to the EU's woes is for Germany to move the continent forward to a significantly closer union.

Not so fast. The view that Germany is becoming a hegemonic power in Europe, ready to translate its economic power into actual European pre-eminence, is tempting. But a closer look at German political mentality and strategy belies the idea that the country has the will or capability to lead in Europe. Despite taking centre stage in the euro crisis, it is far from becoming Europe's hegemon. Even Germany's leadership of the eurozone economy is fragile and limited. More broadly, Germany has only very modest foreign policy ambitions, rendering it unfit to lead Europe on foreign policy and security. Germany's new influence in Europe is highly specific to the resolution of the euro crisis. It does not reflect a more general rise in German power in Europe.

LIMITED LEADERSHIP

Germany has dominated the EU's response to the euro crisis not because it strives for power and domination, but because the German

HIGHLIGHTS

- Germany's new influence in Europe is specific to the resolution of the euro crisis.
- While France and Britain remain modern powers, Germany has developed a post-modern attitude to security and defence.
- Neither German elites nor the broader public have any appetite for leadership in international affairs.

»»»»» economy is currently strong while the French is weak and Britain remains outside the eurozone. Therefore, any response to the crisis had to be largely shaped by Berlin, though France's ability to modify German plans in significant ways should not be underestimated.

Germany's pre-eminence is amplified by divisions inside the EU over how to respond to the euro crisis. A North-Eastern camp arguing for discipline and austerity opposes a Southern camp calling for a growth-oriented stimulus. The Southern camp emerged in a particularly weak position because it needed support from the more affluent EU member states, especially Germany. At the same time, Germany appeared reluctant to put its full weight behind the euro. The more Germany seemed at least willing to consider abandoning the euro, the more other players fell into line with German conditions. This put Germany in a position of control, suspending the usual power balances in the EU. And strong players such as Britain and Poland were not involved in a decision-making process that was largely limited to eurozone members.

Germany's leadership has been limited in scope. Despite speculation that a fiscal union might take shape, which in turn would lead towards a fully fledged political union, Berlin's response to the euro crisis has been focused on the much less ambitious fiscal compact. This is in essence a revised version of the Stability and Growth Pact - which in the past failed to ensure fiscal discipline. The new compact is built on member states' commitment to accept peer supervision of their budgets. But a coalition of member states mustering a qualified majority will be able to overturn penalties proposed by the Commission.

The political dimension of the fiscal compact and political will in Berlin to move the EU towards a fundamentally deeper level of integration have been overestimated. This is in part because the German government has spread the message that it has discovered its European vocation. But critics hold that Berlin's calls for a closer union are not backed up by a strategic roadmap for the

EU's future or by Germany's geo-strategic ambitions. Instead, they see Berlin's ostensibly new EU-enthusiasm as a tactically expedient response to market pressure against the euro.

German leadership in the euro crisis has been temporary and limited to specific strands of economic policy. Berlin has no open or hidden agenda to become Europe's hegemon, as a closer look at German foreign policy culture shows.

LOW-PROFILE FOREIGN POLICY

Germany remains true to the features that have guided its foreign policy since 1949. After the Second World War, the Bundesrepublik was founded as the very antithesis to the Nazi empire; 'never again' became its founding motto. Checks on the new state's power were introduced at every level, from the local to the international. West Germany's security was embedded in the Nato alliance to which the newly built West German army was required to make a contribution. And the process of European unification was meant to ensure that Germany's well-being was systematically linked to the prosperity of its neighbours. Germany's Westbindung turned out to be an enormous success. It brought the Bundesrepublik back into the ambit of civilised nations. Germans enjoyed more peace, freedom and prosperity than ever before. The 'German question' that had fomented two world wars appeared to be resolved.

German unification in 1990 reasserted that formula. The larger, sovereign Germany has not questioned integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. On the contrary, Nato is still seen as fundamental to German security - even if security has lost its primacy, as the threat of a nuclear war on German soil vanished with the breakdown of the Soviet Union. And the progress in European integration in the last twenty years has embedded Germany in EU structures and institutions.

The fundamental orientation of German foreign policy, its nesting within international and supra-

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national structures, has not been challenged by any relevant political actors in Germany. The conviction that Nato and the EU are essential for German interests commands consensus among all political players and experts. In Germany there are no hard-core defenders of sovereignty like in France and there is no hostility to the EU as among British conservatives. One of the reasons why Chancellor Angela Merkel wins high marks in the polls is that she keeps German foreign

policy true to the fundamental orientations of post-war Germany: on security stay close to Washington, on everything else to Paris and the EU.

These circumstances have shaped German foreign policy. While France and Britain remain modern powers, willing to and capable of

using military force to achieve foreign policy goals, Germany has developed a post-modern attitude to security and defence. Germans are reluctant to accept the use of military force, a view that is rooted in the 'never again' motto: never again should Germany act as an imperialist, violent power, submitting others to its will. Germans tend to identify with actual or potential victims of military strikes, as this reminds them of the bombing of German cities during the Second World War.

Around the year 2000, Germany's participation in the Kosovo airstrikes and decision to send troops to Afghanistan seemed to shake the pacifist consensus. But a decade later these experiences, justified not by national interests but noble humanitarian goals, have reinforced traditional German mistrust in everything military. Berlin's decision to abstain on the vote on Libya in the UN Security Council is emblematic of this return to the traditional pacifist position.

Public interest in military affairs remains low in Germany. The downsizing of the German army has not engendered public debate or soul-searching about military strategy as in Britain. Capturing the mood, when the current foreign minister Guido Westerwelle looked for a signature project to start his tenure, he honed in on the removal of American nuclear weapons from German soil.

While they profoundly dislike hard power, Germans are enthusiastic about multilateralism. The UN and the EU are widely perceived and praised as international legal and political structures that frame German statehood and foreign policy. And the Nato alliance is still seen as the key provider of German security. Germans are deeply afraid of going it alone, abhorring international isolation. They seek approval from other players, especially multilateral bodies and institutions. Being a good international citizen, in line with key partners, is a goal in itself.

These attitudes restrict German diplomats' room for manoeuvre. Political leaders of all parties are keen to stay in line with this consensus, and governments avoid challenging it. If they do decide on an unpopular course of action they try to keep it away from the eyes of the public - often successfully, as German public opinion and the media are very much centred on domestic issues.

Neither German elites nor the broader public have any appetite for leadership in international affairs. Accordingly, Berlin rarely takes the lead on EU foreign policy. It is not keen to develop strategic initiatives or push others to follow it. The European Council on Foreign Relations' 2011 Scorecard claims that Germany has become a leader on EU foreign policy 'in more areas than any other country'. But it reaches this conclusion only because of the study's expansive and vague notion of 'leadership', which is taken to mean little more than an active interest in a particular issue. On most foreign policy issues, Germany eschews any strong stance. It is keen to avoid conflict and usually goes with the Western mainstream.

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»»»»» What are Germany's priorities in foreign policy? Germany seeks a harmonious relationship with the US – as a security-provider of last resort – and with the EU – as the structure that embeds German statehood. Beyond this, Berlin wants to maintain smooth relations with major power centres outside the EU, especially Moscow and Beijing – important economic partners. Another main interest is Israel's security which Chancellor Angela Merkel described as 'never negotiable'.

In the neighbourhood, Germany prioritises good relations with South Eastern and Eastern Europe for economic and security reasons. Merkel has mediated between Serbia and Kosovo and recently made efforts to solve the frozen conflict in Transnistria. But even in its backyard, Central and Eastern Europe, Germany is far from a hegemon. Poland is much more active than Germany in shaping the EU's role towards Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Germany has established itself as a global economic power, but it resists using its international economic profile as a basis from which to advance strategic interests. Nor does it invest much effort in leading debates over EU external commercial policies. Given its economic weight, it is remarkable how lightly it wields its geo-economic power.

Germans are happy with their risk-averse, passive foreign policy. German foreign ministers usually enjoy very high approval rates. Berlin's low-profile foreign and security policy also has the major advantage that it usually does not interfere with German businesses and their extensive international interests. Being embedded in Euro-Atlantic structures eases the foreign policy burden for German leaders. The de facto delegation of a large part of foreign and security to EU and Nato structures enables German governments to focus their energy mainly on domestic issues.

IS IT SUSTAINABLE?

The key question is whether Berlin can continue to act so passively on the international scene. Can

Germans afford to stick to a rather isolationist political mentality? Or will these features have to change, as the global context changes and Germany gains more international weight?

German foreign and security policy faces two new challenges. First, the security framework within which German statehood is embedded - Nato and the US security guarantee - is weakening. Washington is cutting down its military presence in Europe and is likely to continue to do so, given budget pressures in the US and the low priority that concerns over European security have in Washington today. The second, related change is that the EU and Germany will feel more pressure to become a stronger foreign policy actor as the US becomes less willing and less able to bear the burden of upholding the liberal international order. The EU and Germany will need to take more responsibility for security in the neighbourhood and help make rising powers stakeholders in the international system.

At the moment, Germany does not perceive any major security threat and is therefore likely to continue to downsize its military. There is no indication that Berlin plans to push for the EU to develop a serious hard power identity and become a more active security provider. Such an initiative would certainly not be popular in Germany. Germans will continue to count on Nato to underwrite European security. Berlin will support some EU and UN missions abroad, but only with very restrictive caveats.

On foreign policy, the gap between Germany's strength and its unwillingness to take the lead is likely to widen. There might be more pressure on Germany to support an upgrading of EU foreign policy and to play a more active role in the EU's bilateral relations with rising powers. But Germany will probably use its growing weight not to lead new initiatives but to fend off such pressure. Unlike France and Britain, who have kept a global perspective and continue to play a global role, Germany is quite happy to play in the regional league. It has no ambition to use German power in the world strategically.

Inward looking if not isolationist, lacking strategic will and without real military muscle, Germany is currently neither willing to nor capable of leading the EU to become a more effective global power. Germany might downgrade rather than upgrade EU foreign policy, by blocking the ambitions of France, Britain and others such as Poland.

CONCLUSION

Germany is not becoming Europe's hegemon. But the euro crisis has revealed a leadership vacuum at the top of the EU that Germany has tried momentarily to fill, after much hesitation and with a lot of unease. This leadership-by-default has been circumspect and there is no sign that it will extend beyond economic policy, especially not to foreign policy. Germany has gained more weight in Europe, but it has little will to lead. The entire setting of Germany's post-war institutions and of its political culture is opposed to moving the country into a position of exerting power over others. Instead, Germany is likely to use its influence to scale down the global ambitions of other member states and Brussels institutions. Germany is essentially a negative or veto power.

Germany is unlikely to ruffle its American and European partners, as it wants to remain a good international citizen. Berlin has neither the will nor the ability to become an independent player. While good relations with Eastern power centres like Moscow and Beijing are seen as important, Berlin has no ambition to become more like a BRIC. Retaining Nato as the umbrella for German security remains the key goal of German defence policy. And while there is adversarial debate about how best to handle the euro crisis, all relevant political players agree that being embedded in EU structures is a pre-requisite of Germany's economic and political success.

Germany is interested in keeping the status quo in Europe and the transatlantic alliance, not in change. The current strategic constellation fits its

needs. Being embedded in alliances of friends and partners, keeping a low profile in world affairs in order to prevent unwelcome confrontations, trying to abstain from everything military, focusing on the economy and a fair redistribution of wealth between Germans - these remain the guiding tenets of German politics. In taking the lead in the euro crisis, Berlin's intention was not to change but to retain the status quo.

The idea that Germany could or should become a more active and stronger force on the international scene remains an anathema in Germany. Germany's ambition is still to be a non-power or even an anti-power, in a post-modern setting. But international developments may slowly begin to force Germans out of their comfort zone.

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