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The New German Foreign and Security Policy: More than a Change in Style

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It was a picture full of symbolism with which the governing coalition of conservatives (CDU) and social democrats (SPD) began their cooperation after the Bundestag election in November, 2005: the designated chancellor Angela Merkel and the chairman of the social democrats Matthias Platzeck clinked glasses of mineral water in hopes of a successful Grand Coalition for the coming four years. The signal was unmistakable: the two representatives of the new generation of politicians from eastern Germany were preparing the national citizenry for a new political practice of frugality and restraint. Away from the custom-made suits of ex-chancellor Schroeder and the media productions of the former foreign minister Fischer, and towards the tedious and austere steps on the path to reform of the state and politics.

Observers tied this symbolic change in politics primarily to the field of domestic politics. In the realm of foreign and security policy a period of continuity seemed likely. Certainly, the new government wanted to improve relations with the USA, adjust the relationship to France and again devote greater attention to the smaller neighboring states. All of this seemed, however, to be more a change in atmosphere and less a change in political substance.

Now that the new administration has been in office for one year, the contours of the new German foreign and security policy have become far more apparent. Most importantly, it has become evident that in a number of policy areas, the initiated changes in atmosphere have clearly led to significant changes in substance as well.

Which changes have already transpired? Where can we expect to see new initiatives in security policy and in what areas are coherent concepts still missing? These are the questions, which, on the basis of six central fields in German foreign and security policy, are considered in this paper.

A New Beginning in Transatlantic Affairs

Already long before Election Day, the then-opposition leader Angela Merkel had announced her intent to focus on improving transatlantic relations should the outcome be a change in government. This policy area would receive a privileged position in the foreign policy of the new government for three reasons. First, no foreign policy issue had suffered more damage in the previous years than the U.S.-E.U. relationship. Therefore, the need for reconciliation was nowhere as obvious as in transatlantic relations. Second, a new beginning for German-American relations seemed to be particularly easy. The personal relationship between the American

president and Chancellor Schroeder had been completely ruined since the Iraq crisis. From the U.S. perspective, a new beginning could only happen on the basis of a change in personnel at the head of the German federal government. After the election, the covert American wish “ABS” (Anyone But Schroeder) was fulfilled. Third, the reason for the importance of Euro-Atlantic relations can be sought in the personal biography of the new chancellor herself. As a committed *Transatlantikerin*, the role of the USA as a power for international order is uncontroversial. International problems or challenges can, from her perspective, nearly always be confronted in concert with the USA. Rarely can problems be tackled without the U.S., and never in defiance of Washington.

Notwithstanding all of this, Merkel’s wish for a new beginning in transatlantic relations carried with it a double danger. On the one hand, a too-cozy relationship with America could prove to be a burden during the election campaign. This was especially true given the fact that Gerhard Schröder had brazenly tried to win votes by picturing himself as the “peace chancellor”. On the other hand, the Bush administration had learned from the debacle over Iraq and was searching for a reliable ally in Europe. After Tony Blair had loosened the too-tight connection to President Bush, Jose Maria Aznar was out of office, and Jacques Chirac not coming into question as a close partner anyway, the hopes of the American president seemed to concentrate on a regime change in Germany. Thus Angela Merkel was threatened, should she win the election, by nearly impossible American expectations. Therefore she sent, shortly prior to the Bundestag election, one of Germany’s most skilled foreign policy experts, Wolfgang Schäuble, to the U.S. Schäuble was quickly invited to an appointment with the president. In this meeting, hardly reported by the press, the German envoy was able to make clear that Germany wanted to have a good relationship to the USA, without having to become the American agent on the Continent.

This course was held after Angela Merkel’s victory in the Bundestag election. Thus the chancellor expressed heartfelt wishes for a most cordial German-American relationship during her first state visit in Washington in January, 2006, but also did not refrain from critical words concerning the American treatment of prisoners at the detainment camp at Guantanamo Bay. In the time since then, Germany has formulated strong criticisms of U.S. policy on Iran, on Washington’s nuclear treaty with India, or the acrimonious American Russia-bashing. These critical remarks are not, however, proclaimed in the public sphere, but rather take the form of private telephone conversations with the president or personal meetings between political leaders of both countries. Herein lies a central difference with the previous administration.

The still critical distance – despite a decidedly pro-American basic orientation – of the Merkel government to the Bush administration is due to two considerations. For one, the example set by the British head of government Tony Blair during the Iraq war demonstrated that unconditional support for the U.S. president does not automatically translate into commensurate influence over American policies. For another, there has been in Germany (as in the majority of European allies) a strong anti-American mood in the public sphere, both before and after the war. Even if this sentiment seems to be concentrated on the policies of the given president in office, it is difficult to measure which parts of German anti-Americanism can be ascribed to the phenomenon of “anti-Bushism”. Herein lies one of the prime pitfalls for the new German administration. Should the American administration once again defy the misgivings of its closest allies and, similarly to the Iraq war, implement policies virtually incomprehensible in Europe, this would lead to a resurgence in anti-American tendencies. The strictly pragmatic former chancellor Gerhard Schroeder had no problems with such a situation; he would exploit the public’s rejection of American policy to make it part of his election campaign strategy, becoming a leading protagonist of America-criticism. For a dyed-in-the-wool proponent of strong transatlantic relations such as Angela Merkel, such a tactic would be neither possible nor credible. Instead, a large segment of the public criticism would be directed at her. During an election season, this could quickly develop into a significant danger.

A Modified German NATO Policy

Closely tied to a redefinition of transatlantic relations is the question of Germany’s future NATO policy. Here too there has been a significant change, not only in style, but in substance as well.

The clearest expression of Germany’s vision for a new NATO can be found in the speech of the chancellor at the Munich security conference in February 2006. With her unequivocal pledge to the principle “NATO First”, Merkel ended, at least for the German federal government, the long debate over the preeminence of either NATO or the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in questions of security policy. According to the German perspective, a consensus on all transatlantic security problems should first be the goal of the North Atlantic Alliance. Only if this fails should autonomous action by the E.U. come into consideration.

Indicators of the impending and meaningful shift in German NATO policy towards the primacy of the Atlantic Alliance were certainly observable from an early stage. When

a designated key advisor of the new administration made disparaging comments in an interview about NATO prior to the formation of the new government, Merkel herself called upon him to qualify his statements. The new German chancellor also made a clear sign by visiting NATO headquarters in Brussels during her first trip abroad – something none of her predecessors had ever done. Thus the traditional inaugural state visit to Paris lost its exclusivity and sent a strong transatlantic signal that was well understood abroad.

For the foreseeable future Germany will work to wield more influence on shaping the development of the North Atlantic Alliance. Already in Munich the chancellor encouraged the development of a new strategic concept for NATO. Admittedly this initiative has not been acknowledged to the degree with which her statement about the precedence of NATO was received; still, its effects have been at least as influential. With an open strategy debate within NATO, not only the conceptual development of the Alliance will be moved forward. The Alliance will also benefit by becoming, once again, a central forum of the transatlantic security dialogue – a function it has, in the recent past, partially lost.

The German wish to exert more influence on the evolution of the Alliance can in individual cases lead to exclusion of American positions. A potential bone of contention is the question of NATO enlargement. Germany sees no hurry, for example, in admitting the three candidates Albania, Macedonia, and Croatia. As to enlarging NATO with the admission of Georgia and Ukraine, promoted by Washington, Berlin has responded with a simple 'no'. The German federal government is similarly skeptical about the idea, promoted by the Bush Administration, of a "Global Partnership". The covertly expressed U.S. wish to incorporate countries such as Pakistan in the circle of NATO partners has been particularly controversial.

A New German E.U. Policy?

Similar challenges to those already outlined under the rubric of transatlantic relations face the new government for another traditional playing field of German foreign policymaking, German E.U. policy. As the new administration took office, the state of European integration resembled a pile of rubble. Between the French and Dutch 'no' to the E.U. constitutional contract, the deep-seated differences between the member states over budget financing, and the disputes over the future enlargement of the Union, there was and is little opportunity for optimism regarding Germany's upcoming presidency of the E.U. Council, slated to start in January, 2007.

The coalition contract of the new German government contains not more than a vague reference over three pages to Germany's commitment to the guiding principles of its traditional E.U. policy, that is, that the deepening integration of European structures lies at the core of Germany's interest, a principle which has guided German foreign policy since Adenauer. Two points do, however, stand out in this brief passage. For one, there is an emphasis placed on close relations and cooperation between Paris and Berlin in order to drive forward common integration projects. This corresponds to Germany's view of Franco-German relations. It is clear that the Franco-German tandem will have to be extended to include other states, but it remains unclear which states these will be. The coalition contract neglects to mention whether the Franco-German duo should lead the way within the extended core as the motor of innovations within the common E.U. institutions and in E.U. policy, or whether the pair should play less of a leadership role.

The second point of interest concerns the coalition's view on the future of the constitutional contract. The ratification process should, notwithstanding the double 'no', carry on. The E.U. itself should, it is conceded in the coalition contract, become more democratic, in order to win more acceptance from the European citizens. Only a few days after passing the coalition contract, Angela Merkel weakened this passage by saying that while she viewed the constitutional contract as a positive step, its ratification by the member states was a long-term prospect. With this statement she took for herself and for her government negotiating pressure for the upcoming presidency.

The stance of the new government concerning the possibility of additional E.U. enlargements is clearly articulated. Enlargement should be contingent on fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria; only when all conditions for membership – set forward by the EU - have been completely satisfied can the E.U. accept a new member state.

The accord reached between the SPD and the CDU/CSU concerning the possibility of Turkey joining the E.U. is a classical compromise. The accession talks are described as an "open-ended process without automatism and whose conclusion is not pre-determined."

Should the E.U. prove unable or Turkey not in the condition to completely fulfill all of the responsibilities associated with E.U. membership, then Turkey should be integrated to the greatest possible extent in the European institutions so as to allow the country to further develop its privileged relationship to the European Union. Because the question of Turkish membership in the E.U. has been left open, the coalition has been cleared of one potential bone of contention. It remains to be seen, however,

whether the coalition partners will not evaluate the forthcoming progress reports of the E.U. Commission differently, and whether this then leads to tensions.

Since accession talks with Turkey have already commenced, there is for the moment no need to make the question of a possible Turkish membership the subject of conflict within the coalition. Both sides can hold on to their essentially irreconcilable positions (the CDU with the privileged partnership, the SPD with full membership) without letting this degenerate into a load-bearing test for the coalition. The ball, after all, is in Brussels' court.

Just as in the field of transatlantic relations, in European affairs Germany would like to play the role of intermediary and balancing influence at the same time. The first opportunity for Germany to demonstrate her mettle in this regard came at the E.U. summit on the difficult and controversial topic of the E.U. budget from 2007-2013, held on December 16-17 in Brussels. In the press the success of the summit and the fact that an agreement was reached after tenacious negotiations was ascribed to the German chancellor's skill as an intermediary and broker. A closer look, however, reveals the difficulty of such an evaluation. While it is true that Angela Merkel functioned as the force driving the search for a compromise acceptable to all parties, it must also be seen that she fulfilled this function as part of a broader Franco-German understanding, which had the ultimate goal of making the sum of E.U. funds flowing back to Great Britain smaller than that aimed at by Tony Blair.

All in all it can thus be concluded that the contours of a new German E.U. policy are not (yet?) visible. Germany has still not developed any new impulses for the continuation of integration, and it may be doubted that they will emerge as Germany assumes the E.U. presidency for the first half of 2007. The outlook for the German presidency is on the whole – this can already be seen today – inauspicious. France will be preoccupied with an election season, Tony Blair is already now virtually powerless in his own parliament, and the new Polish government has not distinguished itself by showing much enthusiasm for Europe.

But perhaps the time for great visions in European politics is a thing of the past, and the new German chancellor's preferred pragmatic approach, which she has called a "process of projects," is more fitting for the new situation.

Insofar as this is the case, one can certainly argue that the 'new' German E.U. policy has become more British, because it no longer sees the European project as Helmut Kohl still did, as a project to guarantee peace and freedom on the Continent. The

dominant approach today seems to be to focus problem-solving resources on concrete cases, and to refrain from developing European visions broad in scope. Staying away from “the vision thing” also carries with it a key, rational calculation given the possibility of additional, future E.U. enlargement. These enlargements will, according to the German position, only take place when the potential candidates are economically and politically ready for accession. “Europe,” Chancellor Merkel has said, “has borders.” To be aware of these borders and to pull out the consequences for the future development of European integration can possibly also contribute to making the project of integration believable for the citizens of Europe, and to help in the formation of a European identity.

Vital But Less Emotional: Franco-German Relations

If Franco-German relations have always stood side by side with the transatlantic relationship and European integration, this has only become truer in the aftermath of the Iraq crisis. In connection with the transatlantic row over a military approach to Saddam Hussein, the old federal government had adopted a fundamental change in German foreign policy. The classic German dilemma between siding with America or France was clearly decided in favor of the latter partner. The result was not just a transatlantic break, but a crisis within the European Union as well. The Schröder administration had completely misjudged what sort of catastrophic memories the popular word of “German-French-Russian axis” would have in the ears of Polish citizens or those of the Baltic States. Thus observers predicted “more Washington and less Paris” in the case of a Merkel victory. Such an oversimplification does not, however, do justice to the special character of Franco-German relations, as closer cooperation between these two countries is indispensable. Thus the goal is not a turning away from France, but rather a new interpretation of the bilateral relationship. Necessary is a return to the “foot in both camps policy”, which must, however, take into account the changes over the past years.

A precondition for this is the sober recognition that Franco-German relations have long been stuck in a rut of ritualized fawning over one another. Differences in interest have often been ignored and varying opinions veiled with the rhetoric of unity. Even with the tight network of common institutions and organs of consultation, there were even during Helmut Kohl’s chancellorship numerous cases where important decisions were reached by one side and without informing the partner on the other side of the Rhine.

A prime feature of the new federal government will therefore be to remain informed of the Franco-German differences, in order to build on the existing commonalities. The most important difference is certainly the relationship to the USA. Germany will not endure any policy that tries to construe the E.U. as a counterweight to the U.S. The political, economic, and military dominance of the USA simply makes this impossible. It would also not work within the E.U. and would contradict fundamental German interests. This does not mean that Europe must refrain from creating independent strategies for action, such as the common European Security and Defense Policy. But the ESDP must be understood as a possibility for transatlantic synergy, and not as a vehicle for European emancipation. Any independent security policy or military action of the E.U. will only be able to deal with conflicts on the lowest end of the intensity scale. For any greater military crisis, the support of the USA remains indispensable. This simple fact cannot be erased by the French rhetoric of European “autonomy”.

How Will the Relationship with Russia Develop?

While policy changes in the transatlantic area, the new valuation of the Franco-German relationship, or the steps to revivification of NATO have been well thought through and conceptually solid, coherent strategies are missing not only in Germany's E.U. policy. The future German policy on Russia, too, exhibits a conceptual hole. Though the relationship with Russia is still declared to be a “strategic partnership”, this concept is often left bereft of content. Thus it remains unclear how this “strategic” partnership is different from the “normal” or “special” partnerships (which Germany maintains with Israel or France, for example).

The inflationary use of the strategic partnership concept does not serve to solve the dilemma which has faced German and European policy for several years now: on the one hand, Russia is due to its vast size, its energy resources, and its influence in the post-Soviet states of enormous strategic relevance. A stable, democratic, and prosperous Russia is therefore of vital importance to Europe. On the other hand, President Putin has been transforming Russia step by step into an autocratic state with the apparent goal of restoring Russia's erstwhile power to the greatest extent possible. The domestic political environment is increasingly characterized by repression and antidemocratic tendencies. Energy supply is used as a sanction tool for intractable neighboring states. Any potentially sustainable, positive economic development (beyond the energy sector) is prevented from taking shape due to broad lack of enforcement of legal norms and overblown statism.

The principle of “buddy-buddy” adopted by Chancellor Schroeder has only served to strengthen the dilemma over Putin. Because Schroeder ennobled Putin by characterizing him as a “spotless democrat”, every possible criticism of the domestic situation in Russia has had the rug pulled out from under it. Angela Merkel, however, sent a clear signal by meeting with civil rights leaders during her first state visit to Moscow in addition to her meeting with President Putin.

Cautious criticism of the Russian President and the general wish for good German-Russian relations does not serve to replace a coherent strategy for dealing with Russia. It also will not suffice to merely speak about perceived grievances with Russia; it is necessary as well to consider what should be done when simply pointing out an undemocratic behavior on the part of the Russian government bears no fruit. On this question there is a broad spectrum of opinion within the Grand Coalition. It ranges from optimistic voices, which even see Russia as a future “partner in values” for Europe, to those who question how any sort of sustainable relationship can be built under such confrontational circumstances. First conceptual papers written in Foreign Ministry try to bridge the gap but mostly end up in communiqué-language describing the lowest common denominator of the various schools of thought. Thus, Germany’s Russia policy will be an evolutionary one, combining readiness for close cooperation with a grain of salt with regard to the future democratic developments and the performance of President Putin.

Challenges of a New Asia Policy

Similar conceptual weaknesses can be seen in Germany’s Asia policy. Germany’s relationship to the Asian continent has not just since Schroeder’s tenure been dictated by the relation to China, and here largely over economic concerns. During Helmut Kohl’s chancellorship, too, there was the justified accusation that Germany was sacrificing China’s blatant human rights abuses on the altar of *Realpolitik* and bilateral trade agreements. Even if such a policy was then highly successful from a pragmatic perspective, basic strategic changes in this region have made a new approach to policy a necessity.

China is no longer just an aspiring market for German and European products; it has become an increasingly sharp competitor for raw materials and energy resources. With its goal-oriented pursuit of long-term resource security, China has become a player in regions previously dominated by Europe or the USA. At the same time, due

to growing internal social tensions and dramatic environmental damage, China holds a crisis potential extending far beyond its own region.

Parallel to this development it has become apparent that German and European policymakers have neglected India for too long. It, too, exhibits a high economic growth, which, in contrast to China, receives less fanning from foreign investment and has more to do with internal strength. India is also, as the world's largest democracy, a politically decisive anchor of Western-style politics in a region that has received too little attention in the past.

Furthermore there are crises and conflicts smoldering on the Asian continent which have gone off the radar due to the current focus on the Near and Middle East. In any case, the effects of a nuclear North Korea are potentially just as devastating as those of a nuclear Iran. In addition, the tendency of Western policymakers to concentrate on fighting terrorism has caused them to lose sight of the possibility of conflicts between major states – a problem that could especially spell danger on the Asian continent. In that sense, the nuclear test explosion by North Korea in October has been a wakeup call for Germany and its allies to pay greater attention to the developments in the region.

Germany's Grand Coalition still is lacking any conceptual answers to all of these questions. The development of a coherent Asia strategy is therefore not just overdue, but will eventually lead to the renunciation of previously held positions.

A new player in the Middle East?

The Lebanon War of 2006 caught the German government and probably everyone else by surprise. Although the Middle East – in the light of Germany's past and because of the large Muslim community living in Germany – is a geographical region that has always been of interest to German foreign policy it has never acquired as much importance as Eastern Europe or Asia. And since former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer failed in 2002 to get an agreement on his Middle and Near East peace plan, the region has been considered in a kind of bipartisan consensus as one where German foreign policy could only get its fingers burnt. To remain equidistant from the conflict parties, to give the U.S. the lead and to act within the EU has always been considered as Germany's preferred strategy. However, the outbreak of violence between Hezbollah and Israel in June 2006 after the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers has changed Germany's attitude to the Israel-Arab conflict. For the first time in

history the German government, in agreement with the other G8 countries, sided with Israel in accepting the three preconditions laid down by the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on July 13th to end the military campaign against Hezbollah. Further to this, after a short period of discussion the new German government declared its willingness to send troops to Lebanon within the framework of a multinational force to implement UNSR 1701. Since October 4th more than 1,000 German Navy personnel have been patrolling the coast of Lebanon in order to interdict vessels that are suspected of smuggling arms into Lebanon, and the total number of Navy personnel is expected to rise in due course to 2,700.

Critics of the German engagement who have argued that Germany has chosen the easy part in the multinational missions, since arms smuggling into Lebanon usually takes place not via the Mediterranean sea but by land, especially from Syria, overlook the fact that a deployment of German forces into the Middle East is – given Germany's history – in some ways a historical turning point.

Whether Germany will also be able to capitalize on this engagement in political terms is doubtful. For the time being there are no plans for a major EU initiative for the Middle East. The upcoming EU presidency might provide a good opportunity for Germany to launch such a plan, but one has to be skeptical about its chances of being implemented, since other major EU powers (France and Great Britain) are in a state of political turmoil due to upcoming elections or transfers of power.

Conclusion

After one year, the new German federal government has already initiated significant changes in Germany's foreign and security policy. This is remarkable given that a large number of the members of the Grand Coalition were also responsible for the policies of the previous administration.

The positive conceptual developments in the area of NATO or in transatlantic relations, for example, cannot erase the fact that in other crucial policy fields there are only vaguely formulated wishes, and nothing like a coherent strategy. Also problematic is the fact that the material prerequisites for a powerful German foreign and security policy have still not been created. Necessary are more than just the often-repeated appeals for an increase in defense spending. Rather, Germany's foreign policy as a whole is underfinanced – and has been for a decade and a half. While 21.5 percent of the entire federal budget in 1990 was devoted to the three “foreign

policy ministries” (Federal Foreign Office, Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Development), by 2006 the number had been halved to 12 percent, and this ignoring the fact that the expectations and demands on unified Germany’s foreign policy have as a whole been growing.

Whether the new government has the power to change this is questionable. It will only become more difficult as the conservative-social democrat coalition butts heads in the coming months over the great domestic policy reforms. Already now it can be observed that only with supreme effort and intense conflict has it been possible to make limited progress in the area of health insurance or fighting unemployment. There will therefore only be limited political energy to take on the great challenges outside of Germany’s national borders. Germany’s allies already realize this mismatch between the superb start in the foreign policy field and the decreasing trend of putting the deeds where the words already are. Particularly with regard to Germany’s NATO-policy US officials wonder whether the initial dynamics of the “NATO First” policy has been lost in the routines of the day-to-day coordination between Berlin and Brussels. The idea of a new strategic concept for NATO – magniloquently announced by the Mrs. Merkel early 2006 – has not been translated into action so far.

Only the chancellor herself can take care that the new beginning in foreign policy does not get bogged down in the quagmire of domestic policy discord. The chances for her to be able to accomplish this are less than stellar. Mrs. Merkel, on the other hand, has always been underestimated by her critics, as well as members of her own party.