

German Security Policy under Chancellor Merkel

Both before and after Germany's snap federal parliamentary elections of September 2005, foreign and security policy analysts predicted that a CDU-led government would bring more a change in style than in substance. The transatlantic relationship might turn somewhat friendlier, German-Russian relations might suffer a bit without the close personal friendship of Chancellor Schroeder and President Putin, and a little greater attention would be paid to the smaller partners in EU and NATO – but that would be all.

In the meantime, however, it has become obvious that shifts in style are leading to changes in substance – at least in some areas. The changes can be observed in three areas: in transatlantic relations, first and foremost, but also, as a result, in NATO policy and in European foreign and security policy.

Transatlantic Relations

It was clear from Chancellor Angela Merkel's first day in office that her CDU government would expend significant effort to improve the German-Atlantic relationship. This was due to three reasons:

- First, no foreign policy issue had suffered more damage in the previous years than the transatlantic relationship. Therefore, the need for reconciliation was nowhere as obvious as in transatlantic relations.
- Second, in no other foreign policy area was there as much to gain, since the American administration was eager to improve the relationship as well.
- Third, the biography of the new chancellor was also an indication of a shift in transatlantic perspective. In her view, the US role as the guarantor of the international order is indisputable. International challenges can – if at all – only be tackled together with America – not without and definitely not against the US. This differentiates her thinking from the pragmatic orientation of her predecessor Gerhard Schroeder.

Having said all this, it was also clear right from the beginning that Merkel was anxious to avoid the impression of being Washington's proconsul or even servant in Europe. This would have been politically suicidal in a country which still harbors significant anti-Americanism

(and where it is still difficult to distinguish between anti-Americanism and anti-Bush sentiment). Thus, Germany's new transatlantic policy is not simply "more Washington and less Paris," as some pundits have put it. The policy might be more accurately described as that of being a critical friend, one who expresses criticism not publicly in a grandstanding fashion, but discreetly, in private conversations and at the appropriate levels.

NATO

The question of Chancellor Merkel's approach vis-à-vis the North Atlantic Alliance is closely intertwined with the broader transatlantic policy arena, and is one of the areas in which changes in style can lead to changes in substance. Chancellor Merkel's most obvious expression of that change came during her speech at the 42nd Munich Conference on Security Policy in early February, 2006. With her unequivocal statement, "NATO first," Merkel terminated, for the German government at least, the incessant debate on the primacy in importance of either NATO or the EU for security policy. According to her position, the Euro-Atlantic community should attempt to achieve a consensus on security challenges within the framework of NATO first. Only if such an attempt fails should the EU be regarded as an option. Angela Merkel's firm stance on this question superseded Helmut Kohl's less certain approach, not to mention that of Gerhard Schroeder.

Chancellor Merkel's speech was not a complete shock, however, given prior hints towards such a shift towards the Alliance. Merkel was the first German chancellor to visit NATO headquarters in Brussels as part of her first journey abroad – a trip which traditionally has been limited to Paris. This not only detracted from the exclusiveness of the France visit, it also served to signify her transatlantic orientation.

The German government under Merkel intends to exert a greater influence on shaping the further evolution of the North Atlantic Alliance. A second key message of her speech in Munich – which unfortunately came after other important topics of her talk – was her suggestion for starting new strategic concept. Taking into consideration the widespread complaint that the Alliance had lost its role as the key forum for transatlantic security consultations, Merkel was the first NATO head of government to propose an update of NATO's strategy of 1999. It remains to be seen whether the ambitious schedule of having such a strategy by 2009 can be met. It is worth noting that the new German Minister of Defense Franz Josef Jung also puts a greater emphasis on NATO than did his predecessors.

The German desire to play an active role in NATO might not always be compatible with the transatlantic orientation of Chancellor Merkel, however, since it could lead to confrontation

with positions of the Bush-administration. One recent point of disagreement has emerged over the question of which partners should be included in the next round of NATO enlargement. While Washington has been actively lobbying for Ukraine and Georgia, Germany and other European allies consider Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia to be the next in line for NATO membership. Germany is particularly skeptical with regard to Ukraine, claiming the country is not yet fit for NATO.

European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP)

Merkel's categorical assertion of a "NATO-first" policy should not be equated with a Germany rejection of the common European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). However, Merkel's policy without doubt differs significantly from that of her predecessor Chancellor Schroeder, who tried, together with France, to utilize the EU as a tool to outweigh American "hyperpuissance." For the new German government, ESDP is relevant only as far as it can be employed as a means of *synergy* for cooperation in transatlantic security efforts, and not as a mechanism of *emancipation* from the United States.

Still, one can assume that Chancellor Merkel has spent significantly less time shaping her position on the EU and on ESDP than on NATO. This is problematic in two respects.

First, like all of her predecessors, Merkel appears to have no qualms concerning the contradiction of pushing the need for common European security and defense efforts on the one hand, and depriving the EU of the necessary financial means on the other. Hence, Merkel will not likely reverse the conventional German trend of cutting spending on foreign policy. It is worth noting that in 1990, the expenditures of Germany's triumvirate of "foreign policy ministries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Ministry for International Development) still accounted for 21.5 percent of the total budget. In 2005, it had been cut to a mere 12 percent.

Second, the government appears to devote only limited energy to thinking through the consequences before committing itself to a military engagement within the EU-framework. Germany's leadership participation in the EU mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was first and foremost a concession by Merkel to the French president Chirac. The political justification for that engagement was handed in late and could basically be reduced to the point that Germany could not disappoint international expectations – or, to paraphrase her position, "we could not say no." Such a line of reasoning will cause severe problems for the government, should the Congo operation lead to casualties in the German military.

Notwithstanding the current German preference for NATO over ESDP, Chancellor Merkel can by no means be considered a Euro-skeptic. Merkel has been actively championing the resuscitation of the EU constitution. Whether she realistically believes in this treaty, rejected by the citizens of two key EU states and hardly understood by the public in most other countries, is open to debate. One can argue, however, that her engagement within and for the EU results from three sources: her own political pragmatism, her realistic assessment of the current “Euro-sclerosis,” and her current unique position in the European constellation:

- Merkel’s support of the EU-Constitution is pragmatic because the document itself was drafted by conservative allies and was endorsed by the European Peoples Party in Brussels. Hence, it would be unwise for a German conservative chancellor to speak against the constitutional treaty.
- Merkel has assessed the problems of the current “Euro-sclerosis” and concluded that there is no alternative to EU moving forward – not for Europe and particularly not for Germany. Hence, the current disunion between the public in many EU countries and what is perceived as “Brussels” is of particular concern. Because EU integration is no longer connoted positively in the minds of many EU citizens, the entire project has suffered a loss in legitimacy. This trend could fundamentally erode the EU in general. Since there is no panacea in sight, Merkel has supported the project of building a European identity – and a constitution-revitalization process is regarded as one tool in that project.
- With respect to her own position, Chancellor Merkel is well aware of the fact that for the years to come, she does not only speak for Germany but for the EU in general, since all other key players are currently unavailable or otherwise occupied. France has been lamed by a president confronted with the ruins of his own policy foibles. Tony Blair is trying to deal with the tripwires of the final phase of being prime minister. Italy has been in a state of political upheaval of late. Poland estranges even well-meaning partners with its government. Therefore, Merkel is the only European leader left standing to forge a consensus and push the EU forward. Activity at the European level is one way for Merkel to establish and maintain her leadership profile even in the face of difficulty at the domestic level.

So far, her strategy has been successful. The new German government, half a year old, has had a very good start in foreign policy. If only the domestic policy were half as good, Germany might be back on track towards becoming a leading player in Europe. But even optimists concede that this might take a decade or more.