

# The next German government's foreign policy

When it comes to foreign policy in Germany, the differences between the mainstream political parties are few and the level of public interest low. Foreign policy barely featured as an issue in the recent federal election campaign or in the televised debates between the three leading candidates for the chancellorship. It will not be a showstopper in the negotiations to form the next government, either.

Those negotiations have just started. A three-party coalition will be required and the two smaller parties, the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), have begun by talking together bilaterally before engaging with the Social Democrats (SPD), who are now the largest party in the Bundestag. It is not a certainty that a coalition of these three parties will be formed and the FDP, in particular, will want to keep open the possibility of an agreement with the Christian Democrats instead. But initially at any rate the momentum is clearly with the so-called 'traffic light' option.

It will be an unusual coalition: partly because it will, for the first time, involve three parties, but also because the party providing the chancellor will represent only around one-quarter of the vote and the two other parties jointly about the same. If the two smaller parties are able to combine together, as they are currently trying to do, their influence will be significantly stronger.

This will have consequences for the new coalition's position on some foreign policy issues. Both the Greens and the FDP take human rights more seriously than the mercantilist SPD and will wish the next government to be more robust in its criticism of Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC). They will not, in either case, go as far as to demand trade boycotts or sanctions, but they will expect Germany to speak up more on the Uyghurs' plight and perhaps put pressure on German companies with investments in Xinjiang to do more to combat forced labour.

They will however face a dilemma over Nordstream II, the new pipeline bringing Russian gas across the Baltic to Germany, which is about to start operating. Both parties expressed opposition to it during the election campaign albeit without

specifying what exactly they would do once it was built. The SPD will be reluctant to see it mothballed, so the chances are that it will go ahead as planned.

But it will not be just Russia and the PRC whose domestic policies will cause difficulties with the new German government. Turkey's too will come under increased scrutiny, as will those of some of the European Union's (EU) Central and Eastern European members, notably Hungary and Poland. An SPD/Green/FDP German government will not be shy of linking EU countries' adherence to the rule of law with the disbursement of EU funds.

There will also be tensions in the field of defence. The FDP is in favour of increasing defence expenditure, while the SPD and the Greens are not. Germany is in theory committed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) target of spending 2% of national income on defence. NATO estimates that Germany will spend 1.53% in 2021; the last government planned to gradually increase this figure. It seems improbable that an SPD/Green/FDP coalition would actually hit 2% - flat-lining at around 1.5% seems more likely.

More difficult though will be the decision on whether to maintain United States (US) nuclear weapons on German soil; and whether to equip the Tornado replacement aircraft with the capability for delivering free-fall nuclear bombs. Nuclear burden-sharing has been a key element in NATO's deterrent strategy and if Germany were, as the Greens and some in the SPD want, to try to opt-out of direct involvement in it, this would put additional strain on the transatlantic alliance.

What will not change under any new German government will be a purported enthusiasm for more European defence. There will be frequent calls for a European army, for a European 'defence union' and for European 'strategic autonomy'. But, as in the past, there is unlikely to be much clarity over what these terms mean or what concrete policies would be required to achieve them. This is an area where there has long been a marked contrast between what German politicians say about the EU and how they actually behave within it.

Another issue to be resolved in the coalition negotiations will be who gets what job. For the last 50 years, the German Foreign Minister has been a member of the minority party in a coalition government (there has not been a Christian Democrat one since 1966); for much of this time, the Foreign Minister was also

the Vice-Chancellor. But it is not now a priority for either the Greens or the FDP. The latter want above all the Finance Ministry and a veto right over economic policy. The former want the Environment and Transport ministries.

Annalena Baerbock, the Greens' candidate for the chancellorship, is widely tipped for the Foreign Ministry. But it is her co-party leader Robert Habeck, who is expected to be Environment Minister and Vice-Chancellor. The only former Green Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, was a notable success in the role and was personally responsible for getting his party to endorse Germany's participation in NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Whether Baerbock would have the same clout is unclear.

And what of the next German government's attitude to the United Kingdom (UK)? Initially at any rate it will probably be benign neglect. Interest in Britain in Germany is declining and the commercial relationship is fading: by the end of the year, Britain will not, according to some forecasts, any longer be among Germany's top ten trading partners. Olaf Scholz as Chancellor is unlikely to find Boris Johnson a congenial partner: their political styles are diametrically opposed and his priorities will be to establish relationships with Emmanuel Macron and Joe Biden. The German government will also be suspicious of any attempt by the UK to use bilateral contacts to bypass the EU.

At the working level however cooperation will continue, including in defence. The British Army retains a small residual presence in Germany in the form of a joint river crossing unit. The German Navy might in due course be tempted by the idea of participating in a British carrier strike group deployment, as the Netherlands is currently doing. But the performance of the British economy will be the key factor in determining the nature of the future UK-German relationship. Fuel shortages and empty supermarket shelves currently dominate German perceptions of Britain. But if the British economic recovery continues and the UK finds a successful role for itself outside the EU, then Germany, for all its regrets about Brexit, will treat Britain as a serious partner.

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