Time to Define European Autonomy

No matter who succeeds Angela Merkel in the chancellery, Germany will need to focus on building stronger European strategic autonomy in order to be a strong and valued partner to the United States—and to other liberal democracies around the world.

Angela Merkel's foreign policy did not stretch Germany. It inspired and disappointed its allies in equal measure. She was tough on her most indebted eurozone partners during the financial crisis of 2010–12, as most German voters demanded, but Germany backstopped a massive increase in the ECB's financial commitment to those countries, as most outsiders recommended. She championed the plan for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States but did not try to force it through overgrowing popular hostility in the European Union. She stood up to Russian President Vladimir Putin after his annexation of Crimea and orchestrated the EU sanctions that continue to affect the Russian economy, but she supports the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

She spoke out boldly against former US President Donald Trump's values-free America First philosophy when he took office but avoided a rupture in the transatlantic alliance. She has championed the Paris Agreement and the green focus of the NextGenerationEU recovery fund, but Germany's transition away from high-carbon electricity generation remains slow. One of her boldest moves—opening Germany's borders in 2015 to someone million migrants fleeing Syria and other conflicts—was forced on her by circumstance, and she then balanced it by negotiating a tawdry deal with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to staunch the flow.

Avoiding Risks

In many ways, Merkel's foreign policy record encapsulates the outside view of Germany as an international actor. It is a powerful country that lies at the intersection of many of the world's most significant fault lines—geographically and thematically. It has the means to tilt the balance of European foreign policy in its preferred direction, but it often avoids the burdens and risks that such overt leadership would entail.

In which direction might German foreign policy turn after Merkel's departure? Will it continue to reflect her deft balancing act, keeping Germany safe, but pushing difficult decisions into the future? Will it become more inward-looking, especially in a post-COVID-19 context, if German voters demand a clearer prioritization of their national interests? Or will it build on the many positive aspects of Merkel's legacy and strengthen German support for a more collective and, potentially, powerful European voice?

Choices Are Limited

The future course of German foreign policy does not lie in its own hands. The changing international context will have a strong bearing on the choices future governments will make.

There is no more important bellwether for future German foreign policy than the policies of its principal global ally, the United States. Even an internationalist Biden administration is unlikely to recover America's role as global leader, despite President Joe Biden's proclamation that his foreign policy will "place the United

States back at the head of the table." The US faces huge internal challenges, and many of its allies remain wary of America's longer-term reliability. As EU Council President Charles Michel put it on January 20, 2021, the same day as Biden's inauguration, "the EU chooses its course and does not wait for permission to take its own decisions."

Nevertheless, the United States will remain the most powerful, well-resourced democracy in the world, and the indispensable guarantor of Germany's and Europe's security. With President Putin planning to extend his presidency into the 2030s, Russia will remain a "spoiler" country across Europe and the world. Without US support, the threats it poses to the security of individual European states could become more pronounced. In this context, Washington will continue to demand that Europeans share a greater burden of Euro-Atlantic security, and Europeans, Germany included, will have to meet the challenge.

Absent some 1930s style financial collapse, China will become ever more powerful, especially across Asia Pacific, Africa, and parts of Latin America. Germany and Europe will be unable to counter-balance China's growing influence alone, including the spread of its authoritarian security structures and opaque political and economic approach to governance. They will need to coordinate closely with the US and other like-minded countries and put flesh on the bones of some sort of European Indo-Pacific strategy. Failure to do so would have negative impacts on European economic interests in the region and on rules-based multilateralism.

An Unstable Environment

Europe's southern and Mediterranean neighborhood will not stabilize any time soon. Governments in North Africa and the populous Gulf and Arab states will struggle to deliver hope and opportunity to their growing young populations, given the entrenched failings of domestic governance. Turkey's future is uncertain, as hopes for democratic renewal could be overwhelmed by the populist lure of neo-Ottoman rule. These nearby challenges will pale into insignificance if Africa's fast-expanding populations fail to enjoy economic opportunity and continue to be ravaged by violence and the effects of accelerating climate change. Future German governments would do well to sustain Merkel's investment in Africa's future, which may prove to be one of her most important European legacies.

The EU itself faces multiple internal challenges: a significant minority of voters are

increasingly skeptical of the process of European integration; economic divisions between and within European countries are being deepened by the COVID-19 crisis. And a sometimes defensive, sometimes belligerent UK is cutting at the economic strings that inevitably bind it to its EU neighbors—disrupting EU politics and business. The bulk of Germany's foreign policy attention will be spent managing relations with its European neighbors and EU institutions, irrespective of the major challenges beyond.

The "How," Not the "What"

The focal areas of Germany's future foreign policy are fore-ordained; they will not be "new," whoever enters the Chancellery later this year. What will matter will be the "how," not the "what" of German foreign policy. Some of the "how" will be tactical—how much more German and EU money to deploy on stabilization efforts in the Sahel? How quickly to raise defense spending toward agreed NATO targets? Which Chinese investments to welcome and which to block? Whether to leave Nord Stream 2 "dormant" if it is completed. Each tactical decision will signal how seriously Germany takes the new international context and its support for a unified European response.

But there is a bigger "how" question that will define the character of Germany's future foreign policy: it concerns where Germany stands on the question of how to build European "strategic autonomy" and "sovereignty" to deal with the new strategic context. Germany's political influence, financial means, and market power will be central to deciding how this plays out.

Understandable Ambivalence

There has been an understandable ambivalence toward European strategic autonomy under Merkel—born of the suspicion that it might leave Europe in a strategic limbo between America and China and weaken the transatlantic alliance which remains so central to German and European security.

This ambivalence is well-placed. France's President Emmanuel Macron's view that Europeans, "cannot accept to live in a bipolar world made up of the US and China" presents Germany and Europe with a false choice. Because there will not be a bipolar world. China does not have the allies to build its own pole, and America's

allies—in Europe as in Asia—would not follow the US to such a destination if the Biden administration were to try to make it a reality.

Moreover, there is no third-way option for Europe. The citizens and polities that together comprise Europe—EU members and non-EU alike—are intrinsically part of the world's liberal democratic camp, notwithstanding some recent, marginal back-sliding. The growing global assertiveness of China and Russia creates a congruence of interests among the liberal democracies across the Atlantic, and with other US allies—Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, among others—that is systemic, not temporal.

A Strong and Valued Partner

This is reflected in the way that France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries are developing Indo-Pacific strategies that will complement the heightened US focus on the region. It also applies to those policy areas which are most symbolic of European strategic autonomy—over data governance and trade, for example. In both areas, there is more that unites German, European, and US approaches than divides them, given the potential spread of Chinese state surveillance into global data governance and the economic threats posed by state-dominated economic systems.

This all means that the EU cannot be truly sovereign or autonomous, even if it were to overcome the perennial difficulties of trying to exercise collective action among 27 member states with very different external priorities and cultures. Europe's strategic autonomy is conditional on the existence of a strong and sizeable community of other states, indispensably including the US, that share its commitment to liberal democratic systems of governance.

So, Germany's future foreign policy needs to focus on building European strategic autonomy not for its own sake, but to enable Europe to be a strong and valued partner to the US and to other liberal democracies around the world which share the same core commitments to open societies, respect for individual and minority rights, the rule of law, and separation of powers. Germany's indispensable new role should be to help the EU commit to inclusive forms of autonomy built around these principles.

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