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Berlin's Foreign Policy Dilemma: A Paradigm Shift in Volatile Times

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Introduction

Germany's foreign policy over the last decades has been a paradox. An economic powerhouse with the potential for a key leadership role in Europe, Germany has often been accused of being too cautious or uncooperative in addressing European and transatlantic challenges. At the same time, expectations for German leadership have only grown as numerous internal and external crises plague the continent. In response, Germany has significantly stepped up its foreign policy posture, providing new leadership in European affairs and reliable partnership in transatlantic endeavors. From the Ukraine conflicts to the refugee crisis, even Berlin's harshest critics concede that there has been a notable change in Germany's policy.

However, the context in which Germany operates has dramatically changed within the past several months. The Brexit referendum and the election of Donald J. Trump as 45th

President of the United States have reinforced an almost tragic dilemma for Germany. After decades of caution and restraint, German political elites are mostly converging on the need for a stronger German leadership role in foreign and security policy. Yet, the institutional order in which Germany can exercise leadership is at risk of crumbling away. The EU, with centrifugal and populist forces on the rise, has become an increasingly fragile and contested architecture. And now, following the U.S. elections, the transatlantic space appears to be in danger of its liberal hegemon abandoning its long-held role as the guarantor of the existing order.

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This poses a host of new questions for German leadership and the U.S. commitment to Europe—the backbone of the Euroatlantic security architecture. While it is unclear how exactly the Trump presidency agenda toward Europe will unfold, some of the campaign and transition rhetoric suggests that the approach of a Trump Administration could be very different from that of its predecessors, effectively calling into question the commitment of the U.S. to the continent and to the transatlantic partnership.¹ The new Administration will in all likelihood demand that Europe “take on its fair share of the burden,” maybe even to the extent of tying the U.S. commitment to NATO’s Article V to its allies’ levels of defense spending.² This will put pressure on Germany to seek more proactive (and European) solutions to security challenges. Analyzing and understanding the potential challenges and limits for German foreign policy leadership is therefore more critical than ever. Is Germany ready and able to take on a greater leadership role for Europe even under these new circumstances? How substantial and how sustainable is Germany’s new foreign policy course, in particular given that Germany faces a populist challenge in the September 24 elections this year?

This paper argues that Germany has undergone a significant change in its foreign policy toward a stronger leadership role in Europe,

exemplified by Germany’s policy toward Russia and reinforced by changes in its security policy. Both are key areas of strategic importance, relevant to both Germany and Europe. Moreover, they provide evidence that Germany’s new willingness to take on “more responsibility” in foreign and security policy is not just talk, but includes a paradigm shift from a “culture of military restraint” (*Kultur der militärischen Zurückhaltung*) to a more pragmatic use of military instruments.

Nonetheless, Germany’s leadership potential is subject to external and internal constraints. In Europe, desire for German leadership is tempered by a continuing fear of German hegemony. German capabilities remain limited, and will largely restrict it to a European role: Germany will never mimic the U.S.’ unparalleled ability to deploy and project power on a global scale. Finally, there is a real risk that expectations from European partners and the U.S. may outpace the ability of the German public to adapt to Germany’s changing role. German policymakers need to be careful not to overstretch their public support, and to make sure that it remains sustainable beyond the upcoming parliamentary elections in the fall of 2017 against a backdrop of rising right-wing political forces. Germany’s metamorphosis³ from a problem-maker in the 20th century to a problem-solver in the 21st century—“from a consumer to a

¹ Geoff Dyer and Demetri Sevastopulo, “[Trump brands NATO ‘obsolete’ ahead of tough Wisconsin primary](#),” *The Financial Times*, April 3, 2016; William James, “[Trump says NATO is obsolete but still ‘very important to me,’](#)” *Reuters*, January 16, 2017.

² “[Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey’s Coup Attempt and the World](#),” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2016.

³ Liana Fix, “Eine deutsche Metamorphose. Vom unsicheren Kantonisten zur europäischen Führungsmacht,” *Internationale Politik* 6 (November/December 2015): 56-9.

provider of collective good"⁴—should not be taken for granted.

The Paradigm Shift

When former Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski famously stated in November 2011 that he feared “German power less than... German inactivity,”⁵ his remarks resonated powerfully with the political class in Berlin. Spoken by a Pole, these words encouraged German policymakers—many still haunted by the memories of the past—to step up their role in Europe and the world. Moreover, the speech contributed to a future narrative of German foreign policy engagement based on the concept of “responsibility.”⁶ This idea would be formally introduced by Federal President Joachim Gauck in his 2014 Munich Security Conference speech, and reinforced in subsequent speeches by the foreign minister and minister of defense. But apart from a new discourse on German responsibility in international affairs, what exactly has changed in the substance of German foreign policy?

Continuity and stability have been core values of German foreign policy after 1945. In his authoritative work, *The Long Road West*,⁷ the

German historian Heinrich August Winkler traced the belated development of Germany as a modern nation state since 1789. He argued that German “exceptionalism”—the pursuit of a “special path” (or *Sonderweg*) in international politics without regard for international norms and the interests of partners or neighbors—unfailingly resulted in a catastrophe for both Germany and Europe. In contrast, he argued, the continuity of post-World War II Western integration represents the golden age of contemporary German history. Understanding the importance of continuity is therefore key for understanding German postwar foreign policy. Conversely, volatility and change are considered to be a potentially dangerous deviation from this path.⁸

The fall of the Berlin wall brought this tension back to the fore, with fears that a reunified Germany might be tempted to claim a hegemonic position in Europe.⁹ Contrary to the worst predictions, however, post-Cold War Germany demonstratively continued the triad of a normative, civilian, and multilateral foreign policy, summarized in the phrase “never again Auschwitz, never again war,” and “never again alone.”¹⁰ Unified Germany has proven to be a reliable member of the

⁴ Charles Kindleberger, “Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2 (1981): 242-5.

⁵ Radek Sikorski, “[Poland and the Future of the European Union](#),” (speech, Berlin, November 28, 2011).

⁶ Hanns W. Maull, “What German Responsibility means,” *Security and Human Rights* 26:1 (2015): 11-24. See also “[New Power, New Responsibility](#),” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik and The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, Berlin, 2013.

⁷ Heinrich August Winkler, *The Long Road West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Volume I; Heinrich August Winkler, *The Long Road West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Volume II.

⁸ Sebastian Harnisch, “Change and Continuity on Post-Unification German Foreign Policy,” in *New Europe, New Germany, Old Foreign Policy. German Foreign Policy Since Unification*, ed. Webber, Douglas (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 35-60.

⁹ Gunther Hellmann, “Fatal attraction? German foreign policy and IR/foreign policy theory,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 12: 3 (2009): 257-92; Volker Rittberger, ed., *German Foreign Policy since Unification. Theories and Case Studies* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “The Test of Strategic Culture: Germany, Pacifism and Pre-emptive Strikes,” *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 3 (2005): 344.

European and Western world. Still, the path forward has not been without complications. The conflict in Kosovo, which marked the first time that German soldiers “shot in anger” in active combat operations since 1945, posed a serious dilemma to German policy-makers. It revealed that these three paradigms could be mutually contradictory: the use of military force might be necessary to prevent genocide. The coalition government of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens fought an uphill battle to convince their electorate of the necessity of military intervention. Then-Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer exhorted his party members to have the “strength to accept responsibility, as difficult as it may be.”¹¹

The roots of today’s debate on German responsibility hence go back at least a decade and a half.¹² The crucial difference to nowadays, however, is that in the discussions of the 1990s and 2000s, breaking the taboo on the use of military force was always framed as a compelling consequence of external constraints (such as alliance obligations, or preventing genocide).¹³ This has changed into a more deliberate, voluntarist, and strategic approach that posits a need for the use of military instruments out of choice and na-

tional interest instead of external constraints. Germany has made a paradigm shift from caution and military restraint to a more engaged and forward-leaning security posture. It will continue to prefer civilian power,¹⁴ but is willing to use military instruments, if it deems it necessary.

The contours of this paradigm shift to a more “responsible” foreign and security policy were translated into departmental policy through the Foreign Ministry’s Review¹⁵ and the Defense Ministry’s new “white book.”¹⁶ Both policy reviews stressed that Germany would not depart from its post-war principles—the commitment to peace and international law¹⁷—but that it will take on greater responsibility by stepping up the scope of its engagement and wielding its toolkit in a more flexible way.¹⁸

¹¹ Joschka Fischer, “[Rede Joschka Fischers auf dem Außerordentlichen Parteitag in Bielefeld](#)” (speech, Bielefeld, May 13, 1999).

¹² See also: Volker Rühle, *Deutschlands Verantwortung, Perspektiven für das neue Europa* (Ullstein, 1994); Josef Janning, “A German Europe – A European Germany? On the debate over Germany’s New Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 72 (1996): 33-41.

¹³ As Constanze Stelzenmüller has pointed out, this binary paradigm became a trap, making it nearly impossible to argue a case for the use of the military instrument in cases other than the prevention of genocide; see “Germany’s Russia Question: A New Ostpolitik for Europe,” *Foreign Affairs* (2009): 89-100.

¹⁴ Civilian power implies: “a) the acceptance of the necessity of cooperation with others in the pursuit of international objectives; b) the concentration on nonmilitary, primarily economic, means to secure national goals, with military power left as a residual instrument serving essentially to safeguard other means of international interaction; and c) a willingness to develop supranational structures to address critical issues of international management.” Hanns W. Maull, “Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1990/91): 92-93.

¹⁵ German Federal Foreign Office, “[Review 2014 – A Fresh Look at Foreign Policy](#),” Paderborn, 2015.

¹⁶ German Federal Ministry of Defense, “[The 2016 White Paper: On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr](#),” Paderborn, June 2016.

¹⁷ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “[Gastbeitrag von Frank-Walter Steinmeier: Deutschland muss Verantwortung übernehmen](#),” *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, July 5, 2016.

¹⁸ Patrick Keller and Gary Schmitt, “[Germany and the Spider-Man Doctrine](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2014.

How are these shifts in Germany's strategic thinking—significant in themselves—now reflected in policy? Two key policy areas provide concrete evidence: Germany's relationship with Russia and its security policy.

“U-Turn” on Russia

The Ukraine conflict has led to a fundamental change¹⁹ in Germany's traditionally Russia-friendly foreign policy and a deep rupture with the old German *Ostpolitik* (literally: Eastern policy). For the first time, Germany has taken a leadership role in a conflict situation involving Russia. It is holding together an increasingly contested sanctions consensus in Europe, leading the Minsk negotiations, and providing substantial military reassurance measures to Eastern NATO members. This makes Germany's Russia policy the most visible, but also the most volatile test case for the general shift in German foreign policy from restraint to engagement.

Germany and Russia have long been key geopolitical actors on the European continent, bound by historical, cultural, and economic ties dating back for centuries.²⁰ After the end of the Cold War, Germany was the leading advocate of an inclusive approach toward Russia in the European security order. The friendship between Germany's former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the beginning of the 2000s represented the heyday of Berlin-Moscow ties and resulted in some notable

policy alignments, such as the joint Franco-German-Russian “no” to the U.S.-led war against Saddam Hussain's Iraq.

Subsequent governments headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel, whether in coalition with the Liberals (2009-2013) or the Social Democrats (2005-2009 and 2013-2017), followed a less cordial, but in substance similar approach toward Moscow. Rooted in the paradigm of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, Berlin's Russia policy traditionally prioritized economic ties, arguing that a change in Moscow could be achieved through intensified trade relations and people-to-people contacts (*Wandel durch Annäherung*, or change through rapprochement). Then-Foreign Minister, now President and Social Democrat Frank Walter Steinmeier—formerly Gerhard Schröder's *chef de cabinet*—modified this approach into a neo-*Ostpolitik* narrative of a globalized, interdependent relationship seeking rapprochement through interlinkages (*Annäherung durch Verflechtung*). This idea was based on the assumption that mutual interdependence would decrease the risk of conflict.

The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev raised hopes that the new Russian leadership could provide a direly needed impetus for the modernization of the Russian economy and a renewed cooperation with the West. Despite the shock of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, Brussels and Berlin therefore quickly returned to business-as-usual with Russia. Through bilateral and multilateral “Modernization Partnerships” as an instrument of “interlinking” Russia, Germany aimed to prove to its European partners that Russia was able and willing to modernize not only its economy, but also its politics. Both turned out to be an illu-

¹⁹ Tuomas Forsberg, “From Ostpolitik to ‘Frostpolitik’? Merkel, Putin and German Foreign Policy Towards Russia,” *International Affairs* 92, vol. 1 (2016): 21-42.

²⁰ Christopher S. Chivvis and Thomas Rid, “The Roots of Germany's Russia Policy,” *Survival* vol. 51, no. 2 (2009): 105-122.

sion, as the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency, coupled with Duma election protests in 2011, abundantly demonstrated. In consequence, criticism of Russia's increased authoritarianism and bleak human rights situation grew in the German public discourse.

Although Germany was becoming increasingly disenchanted with Russia, the *Ostpolitik* policy framework of “change through rapprochement” remained in place. The “U-turn” in German thinking occurred only in March 2014, after the shock of the annexation of Crimea, which took most German policy-makers by surprise. Berlin became the most important advocate for a common sanctions policy on Russia. By the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine on July 17, trust in the Russian leadership among German policy-makers was at an all-time low. The idea that Russia could be changed through rapprochement disappeared from government speeches, as well as the label “strategic partner.”

Replacing Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, the new-old reference point for Germany's Russia strategy became NATO's Harmel Report of 1967, which had sought to balance and reconcile deterrence with détente.²¹ It was repurposed to reassure Germany's domestic audience that dialogue with Russia would not be abandoned while Germany at the same time advocated for an economic sanctions regime and significantly stepped up its efforts on defense, deterrence, and reassurance for Eastern European member states. However, many Germans continue to

²¹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “[Rede von Außenminister Steinmeier bei den 12. Petersberger Gesprächen zum Thema Sicherheit](#),” (speech, Königswinter, October 8, 2016).

feel reluctant about deterrence as a concept. A fear of ‘sleepwalking’—the term used by the historian Christopher Clark to describe how Europe's great powers slid into the first World War²²—into an open conflict with Russia is still shared by many in Germany, in particular among those with memories of the Cold War.

The turnaround in Germany's Russia policy was accompanied by a significant increase in Germany's level of engagement. Germany has always been a key player—next to France and Poland—in shaping European policy toward Russia. However, until the Ukraine crisis, it generally shied away from taking an exposed role in cases of conflict, often preferring to leave these fights to Brussels or other member states. During the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, French President Sarkozy took on a leadership role and used France's EU Council presidency to shape a common European response.

The Ukraine conflict in 2014 saw a role reversal. Germany is now leading the diplomatic response within the main negotiation platform, the “Normandy Four” (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France). France, under President Hollande, has been in the back seat in these efforts. This has contributed to raising Germany's leadership profile in Europe. However, the absence of EU institutions and mechanisms in these attempts to mediate the Ukraine conflict is also symptomatic of a more problematic recent trend in Germany's relationship with the EU. Within Europe, Germany increasingly tends to create ad hoc intergovernmental coalitions for crisis management, leaving at best a coordinating role

²² Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

for EU institutions. Merkel has described this approach elsewhere as the “new Union method,”²³ arguing that this is the only realistic way to lay the foundations for consensual Europe-wide policies within an increasingly fragile and fragmented EU political landscape. However, while having the weight of Europe behind its back has bolstered Germany's clout in negotiations with Russia, this has not strengthened the power of the EU as an institution.²⁴

Some critics have argued that Chancellor Merkel's rejection of the idea to send lethal military aid to Ukraine in February of 2015 demonstrated that nothing has really changed in Germany's unwillingness to use military instruments.²⁵ But, as the chancellor emphasized at the 2015 Munich Security Conference, her position was not based on traditional German pacifism, but on pragmatism: “The problem is that I cannot imagine any situation in which improved equipment for the Ukrainian army leads to President Putin being so impressed that he believes he will lose militarily.”²⁶ From her point of view, weapons deliveries by the West could have very likely led to a further escalation of the conflict without a significant boost for Ukraine's military capabilities. Another reason for her reluctance to use the option of mili-

tary assistance may have been a fear of undermining European and transatlantic credibility in case rhetoric was never matched by action. Lastly, such assistance might well have led to a backlash in German public opinion. Although 46 percent of Germans supported a sanctions policy in 2016,²⁷ a majority continues to prefer dialogue and economic exchange with Russia.²⁸

Despite Germany's reluctance to supply lethal military aid to Ukraine, it has contributed substantially to the new NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and will lead a battalion of combat troops in Lithuania. Both these moves would have been difficult to imagine before the Ukraine conflict. However, Berlin insisted on two qualifications: First, troop stationing would be “rotational” rather than “permanent,” and secondly, the resumption of political dialogue within the NATO-Russia Council. Both conditions were based on the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which in 1997 established a working relationship between NATO and Russia on the basis of respect for the European security order and under the condition that NATO would not station permanent troops in any former Warsaw Pact countries. Critics of Russia's actions in Ukraine—e.g. in Poland and in the U.S. Congress—have argued that the NATO-Russia Founding Act should be considered invalid, because they say Russia's actions have violated European security agreements like the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Germany disagrees, because it sees the docu-

²³ Angela Merkel, [“Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Opening Ceremony of the 61st Academic Year of the College of Europe in Bruges,”](#) (Bruges, November 2, 2010).

²⁴ Liana Fix, “Leadership in the Ukraine Conflict: A German Moment,” in *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's Role in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy*, ed. Niklas Helwig (FIIA Report 44, 2016), 111-131.

²⁵ Ulrich Speck, [“Stopping Putin: Can Merkel Succeed Without Force?”](#) *Newsweek*, April 2, 2015.

²⁶ [“Merkel Says ‘Weapons Won't Help’ Resolve Eastern Ukraine Crisis,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, February 7, 2015.

²⁷ [“Partnerschaft unter Spannung. Wie die Deutschen über Russland denken,”](#) *Bertelsmann Stiftung Institut für Öffentliche Angelegenheiten*, April 2016.

²⁸ [“Annäherung oder Abschottung? Repräsentative Umfrage in Russland und Deutschland,”](#) *Körber-Stiftung*, April 2016.

ment (and the NATO-Russia Council) as an important instrument to avoid a Cold War-style estrangement and block-building between Russia and NATO, and to maintain a dual strategy of dialogue and deterrence toward Russia.

Germany's unprecedented recent military contributions to deterrence and the reassurance of NATO's Eastern member states demonstrate that the country has become far more willing to use the entire gamut of its foreign policy toolbox in its neighborhood. Furthermore, Germany has been willing to stand up to Russia, its former "strategic partner," over its violations of the European security order at no inconsiderable cost to its business interests. Both Merkel and Steinmeier have reined in German lobby organizations critical of the sanctions against Russia by reminding them of the primacy of politics.²⁹

However, the Nord Stream II pipeline project—which, once completed, would convey additional Russian gas directly to Germany through the Baltic Sea, thus circumventing transit countries as Ukraine—undermines the credibility and legitimacy of Germany's new posture on Russia. The German government argues that Nord Stream II is a private business project, which has nothing to do with politics. Its critics in NATO—and increasingly within Germany³⁰—point out that this means turning a blind eye to the geopolitical implications of this extension to the existing Nord Stream I pipeline: increased dependency on Russian gas in contradiction to EU diversifica-

tion policies which Germany helped design and implement.

Nonetheless, and contrary to many predictions, Germany has not been a gateway for Russian influence and attempts to divide the European Union over the Ukraine conflict. Instead, it has become the organizer and guardian of European unity on a common policy toward Russia, including economic sanctions which come with real costs for EU member states. Germany's Russia policy 'U-turn' shows that Germany is willing to lead the defense of the European project with toughness and resolve. In the future, Germany's new Russia policy and leadership role might be put to the test if the United States, under its new President Donald Trump, should decide to break with the current transatlantic status quo and the coordinated sanctions regime. Not only will it be more difficult for Germany to keep Europeans united, but domestic pressure from business associations and the public might increase out of a fear of being outrun by the U.S. in a rapprochement with Russia.

Re-conceptualizing Germany's Security

Distinctive as the 'U-turn' in Germany's relations with Russia is, the shift in its overall security and defense policy in recent years has been no less important. Germany has revised its fundamental defense policy documents, and become much more willing to provide military support through deployments, training, and assistance to alliance and coalition efforts. It is reversing its shrinking security budget and dwindling military resources. While some contributions may seem small relative to its peers, an examination of the path that Germany's security and defense policy has traveled shows they are indeed significant.

²⁹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "[Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier anlässlich der Eröffnung des east forum Berlin](#)," (speech, Berlin, April 9, 2014).

³⁰ Judy Dempsey, "[The \(German\) Politics of Nord Stream 2](#)," *Carnegie Europe*, November 3, 2016.

Germany's historically motivated obsession with stability has meant that changes in its security and defense policy have traditionally been the subject of much national debate and anxiety. During the Cold War, Germany's security policy centered on its contributions to deterrence and territorial defense within the NATO Alliance, as well as limited humanitarian assistance missions. Following reunification, Germany was asked by its Western allies to begin shedding its self-restraint, and to move toward greater military engagement abroad, namely in the first Gulf War. At the time Germany possessed the largest European army in NATO (apart from Turkey), but that was due to its near-exclusive focus on land-based defense of the intra-German border, and to the initial merger of the West German federal armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) and East Germany's Nationale Volksarmee (NVA). It was in no way suited for expeditionary warfare, much less outside of Europe.

Equally important, the deployment of German combat troops beyond alliance territory ("out of area") was generally held to be unconstitutional, as the federal supreme court, in a landmark 1994 case, agreed in principle. Yet the court also, and for the first time, clarified conditions under which an "out of area" deployment might be in accordance with the Basic Law: a UN or NATO mandate, coupled with parliamentary approval. As a result, Germany's refusal to participate in the U.S.-led coalition to liberate Kuwait (it backstopped NATO operations in the Mediterranean instead) set in motion a slow and incremental, but ultimately significant evolution of its security policy. Helmut Kohl, Germany's Chancellor at the time told his country: "we

have to face up to our responsibility, whether we like it or not."³¹

Germany subsequently sent troops to UN-mandated missions in Cambodia, Somalia, and Bosnia. Yet the most significant next step came in 1999, when it deployed the *Bundeswehr* on its first active combat mission in the air war against the Republic of Yugoslavia, which was attempting to forcibly prevent the independence of its Kosovo province. Three years later, in 2002, Germany joined the U.S.-led coalition "Operation Enduring Freedom" to combat terrorism at the Horn of Africa and at the Hindukush. Shortly thereafter, it also joined NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Both decisions forced the governing SPD-Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer into difficult confrontations with the German public.

Participation in the war over Kosovo nearly brought down the government, with entrenched opposition coming from pacifists in both parties. As for the mission to depose the Taliban in Afghanistan, which had been authorized by the UN Security Council and the North Atlantic Council as a measure of legitimate alliance self-defense, several members of the red-green coalition announced that they would veto German participation. In response, Gerhard Schröder—who had promised the United States Germany's "unlimited solidarity" on the day after the 9/11 attacks—put his own chancellorship on the line and called for a vote of confidence on his decision to send 3,900 German troops to Afghani-

³¹ Stephen Kinzer, "[War in the Gulf: Germany, Germans are Told of Gulf-War Role](#)," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1991.

stan. He won, but barely, with 336 to 326 votes—just two more than required.³²

Pacifist reflexes, the concepts of *Zivilmacht* (civilian power), and military self-restraint remain powerful factors in Germany's security culture even today. However, Germany's strategic community—security experts in think tanks, academia, and the media, as well as many policymakers—had in recent years increasingly criticized this framing as misguided, hypocritical, or at least no longer adequate given the proliferation of new security challenges. Part of the debate centered on the fact that Germany, alone among major Western powers, does not have a national security strategy process. Some argued that its policies and strategic relationships lacked coherence, while others pinpointed the lack of capabilities (institutional, civilian, and military) for dealing with new threats and risks.³³ The annexation of Crimea, the wars in eastern Ukraine and Syria, and the refugee crisis, as well as increasing tensions within Europe, have catalyzed a consensus that Germany's security policy will have to evolve, as well as take on an increased share of Europe's leadership burden. In President Steinmeier's words, "Germany has not aspired to be Europe's indispensable nation, but circumstances have forced it into a central role."³⁴

NATO continues to be Germany's essential military alliance, and Berlin has been quietly expanding its contributions in recent years.

³² Bettina Luscher, "[Schroeder wins key confidence vote](#)," *CNN.com*, November 16, 2001

³³ "[New Power, New Responsibility](#)," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik and The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, Berlin, 2013.

³⁴ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Germany's New Global Role," *Foreign Affairs* (2016): 113.

After the conclusion of the ISAF stabilization mission for Afghanistan in 2014 (to which Germany was the fourth-largest troop provider),³⁵ Germany joined NATO's follow-on Resolute Support Mission, deploying 980 troops to provide training, advice, and assistance to Afghan forces. The mission's renewal and expansion in 2015 passed with a broad majority and mostly without popular opposition—in marked contrast to earlier deployments of the mid-2000s.

In addition, Germany contributed to the implementation and initiation of NATO's Rapid Reaction Force (VJTF). It has pioneered the Framework Nations Concept in NATO, which aims to group the development of joint forces and capabilities in the Alliance to increase real burden-sharing capacities among European allies. Conceptually, this represents a lesson drawn from the Libya intervention experience in 2011, where Europeans were shocked to learn how dependent they were on U.S. assets, and how powerless they were without them. Practically, it attempts to design and develop force constellations for small to medium-sized operations that would be undertaken using few or no U.S. assets, with a large "framework nation"—such as Germany—supplying most of the operational backbone and allowing smaller partners to focus on specialized capabilities.³⁶ Finally, Germany will lead the aforementioned battalion-sized combat-capable force in Lithuania to bolster the credibility of NATO's deterrent in the Baltics.

³⁵ "[International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\): Key Facts and Figures](#)," *NATO*, November 7, 2014.

³⁶ Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, "[The Framework Nations Concept: Germany's Contribution to a Capable European Defence](#)," *SWP Comments* (52), December 2014.

Europe—more precisely, the European post-war project of peace, stability, prosperity and democratic transformation—has been essential to Germany’s security posture for more than seven decades. Trade with its European neighbors is the source of much of Germany’s wealth. The enlargement of the EU after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union meant that Germany—the front state of the Cold War—suddenly became “encircled by friends” (as then-Defense Minister Volker R  he famously put it), thus greatly increasing its security.

Now, with conflicts multiplying east and south of Europe, German security policy is increasingly focusing on strengthening not just its own capabilities, but those of the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) as well. Both President Steinmeier³⁷ and Defense Minister von der Leyen—echoing the views of a number of their continental European counterparts—have emphasized the importance of greater European defense and security integration, to the point of suggesting that a European defense union might be a “logical consequence of European integration.”³⁸ The motives behind these initiatives are complex: concern that the United States and the United Kingdom might become less committed to the defense of Europe, recognition that European attempts to make defense budgets go farther through pooling and sharing are limited by defense technology costs; and, finally, a desire to reassure European voters unnerved by a recent spate of terrorist attacks and a historic influx of refu-

³⁷ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Germany’s New Global Role,” *Foreign Affairs* (2016): 113.

³⁸ Valentina Pop, “[German Defense Minister Supports Calls for EU Army](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2015.

gees that European governments are in control of national and border security.

Germany is currently participating in four EU missions, including the anti-piracy Naval Force Operation Atalanta off the horn of Africa, and EUNAVFOR MED/Operation Sophia, which is combatting human smuggler networks in the Mediterranean. Germany has also deployed troops to assist with the EU training missions in Somalia and Mali—stability and governance in sub-Saharan Africa are seen in Berlin as an important factor in checking migration flows to Europe. While a *Bundeswehr* contingent has been in Mali as a part of the MINUSMA mission since 2013, the German government decided in January 2016 to deploy up to 650 additional soldiers to Mali following the tragic attacks in Paris, in order to free the forces of its close partner France for the fight against the Islamic State.³⁹ In January 2017, it expanded the upper limit of forces to 1,000.⁴⁰

Germany has recently also become somewhat more willing to venture beyond the traditional frameworks of the UN, EU, and NATO. The German government decided in late 2014 to train and equip Kurdish Peshmerga fighting Islamic State forces in Northern Iraq.⁴¹ Since no UN mandate was involved, some critics argued that this deployment was unconstitutional. The fact that the measure

³⁹ “[Bundesregierung will bis zu 650 Soldaten nach Mali schicken](#),” *Spiegel Online*, November 11, 2015.

⁴⁰ “[Auslandseinsatz der Bundeswehr: Mehr Soldaten nach Mali](#),” *Die Bundesregierung*, January 26, 2017.

⁴¹ This includes, “anti-tank rockets, thousands of assault rifles, mine-clearing equipment, hand grenades, night-vision goggles, field kitchens, and tents;” Justine Drennan, “[Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?](#),” *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2014.

nonetheless passed a vote in the *Bundestag* by an overwhelming majority may be due to reports of an impending Islamic state genocide against Yazidis.⁴² Following the terrorist attacks in Paris, the *Bundestag* voted in late 2015 to join the U.S.-led anti-IS mission, again without a UN Security Council mandate. Since the vote, it has been an active contributor, providing refueling and reconnaissance aircraft.

Finally, Germany has reversed the near quarter-century trend of cutting military budgets and reducing the overall size of the armed forces. From 2016 to 2017, Germany will boost defense spending by 8 percent.⁴³ Germany also plans to add 11,400 armed forces personnel and civilian military jobs by 2023.⁴⁴ Citing Europe's current security concerns, von der Leyen remarked that "the armed forces have in the past few months been put under pressure as rarely before," recognizing that Germany must spend more to modernize its armed forces.⁴⁵ Chancellor Merkel herself—in a rare comment on defense policy—told a youth congress of her own Christian Democratic Party in October 2016 that Germany would finally have to honor its commitment to NATO to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense (it spent nearly 1.2 percent in 2016).⁴⁶

⁴² "[Ausbildungsmission im Irak beschlossen](#)," *Deutscher Bundestag*, January 29, 2015.

⁴³ "[Acht Prozent mehr für die Verteidigung](#)," *Die Bundesregierung*, November 23, 2016,

⁴⁴ Anton Troianovski, "[Germany Plans Modest Boost in Size of Its Armed Forces](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2016.

⁴⁵ Stefan Wagstyl, "[Germany to Boost Troop Numbers for First Time Since Cold War](#)," *The Financial Times*, May 10, 2016.

⁴⁶ "[Bundeswehr soll mindestens 20 Milliarden Euro mehr bekommen](#)," *Zeit Online*, October, 15, 2016.

Germany's July 2016 defense and security "White Book" is the country's key government defense policy document, ordered by von der Leyen and the first of its kind to be published in a decade. It offers a blueprint for future strategy, and sets out some benchmarks for future performance; not least, it fleshes out the elements of the "greater responsibility" narrative set out in the Munich speeches of January 2014. It underscores that Germany will contribute "early, decisively, and substantially" to the protection of Western security. It affirms Germany's commitment to the security of Europe and to NATO. It states that Russia "will constitute a challenge for the security of our continent in the foreseeable future."⁴⁷ The document also recognizes that the threats faced by Germany and its allies are broad and varied, including cyber-attacks, propaganda, economic pressures, and political destabilization,⁴⁸ as well as transnational terrorism.⁴⁹

In sum, Germany has made a major effort since the Munich speeches to set out the elements of a more robust and responsible security policy, and to match its actions to its words.⁵⁰ However, policymakers and experts in Berlin alike are keenly aware of the difficulties of overcoming the *Bundeswehr's* existing weaknesses—and of the immense risks posed by a potential deterioration of Europe's security environment. A Brexit might well lead to a

⁴⁷ German Federal Ministry of Defense, "[The 2016 White Paper: On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr](#)," Paderborn, June 2016, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁰ Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, "Von Libyen nach Syrien. Die Rolle des Militärs in einer neuen deutschen Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (2016), 28-29.

highly ambivalent security relationship between the United Kingdom and continental Europe, adding to Germany's burden. The U.S. election in November 2016 has, for the first time since 1945, raised the possibility that the White House may no longer be firmly committed to the transatlantic alliance and to the defense of Europe. Any and all of these factors may propel the evolution of Germany's security and defense policy even farther along the course it chose in 2014. But they could also simply overwhelm it.

How Sustainable? Government policy and public opinion

Is this shift in Germany's foreign and security policy based on a cross-party consensus and will it remain sustainable beyond the next elections? How are other elite groups responding to the shift and what divisions are visible? Recent polls suggest that attitudes do not divide neatly along party boundaries, but rather cut across them. Moreover, differences are pronounced along generational lines.

It was Angela Merkel's second grand coalition government that set the shift in Germany's foreign and security policy in motion. On key decisions—e.g. sanctions against Russia or arming Kurdish Peshmerga fighters—the chancellor, former Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Defense Minister von der Leyen (often seconded by President Gauck) have acted in close coordination. Parliamentary debates and votes have shown broad support for these developments. But there are important divides within parties and parliamentary groups. Within the Social Democratic Party leadership, former Foreign Minister Steinmeier played an essential part in advancing the “Munich consensus” on the need for a more forward-leaning and engaged German for-

ign policy in 2014 and 2015,⁵¹ as well as in crisis-management efforts during the Ukraine conflict. However, he drew widespread disapproval for his comments deploring NATO ‘saber-rattling’ on the eve of the 2016 Warsaw Summit,⁵² which seemed to contradict his approval of NATO's response in the previous year. In addition, Social Democrat and new Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel flew to Moscow in October 2015 in the spirit of traditional *Ostpolitik* to encourage unilateral economic rapprochement.⁵³ Similar positions can also be found within the Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party the CSU: Bavaria's Minister-President Horst Seehofer also undertook a much-criticized trip to Moscow in early 2016.⁵⁴

Interestingly, attitude splits on the official government line on Russia and NATO are much clearer along generational lines. Some of the strongest resistance to Berlin's stance on Russia's actions in Ukraine came from Cold War-era experts and officials, many of whom signed an open letter titled “War again in Europe? Not in our name!”⁵⁵ The list included Chancellor Helmut Kohl's former national security adviser Horst Teltschik and former German President Roman Herzog, alongside Social Democrats like former

⁵¹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, [“Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 51st Munich Security Conference,”](#) (speech, Munich, February 8, 2015).

⁵² [“Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Relations between NATO and Russia,”](#) German Federal Foreign Office, June 19, 2016.

⁵³ Friedrich Schmidt, [“Sigmar Gabriel besucht Putin,”](#) *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 28, 2015.

⁵⁴ [“Seehofer übt Schulterchluss mit Putin,”](#) *Spiegel Online*, February 3, 2016.

⁵⁵ [“Aufruf: Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen!,”](#) *Zeit Online*, December 5, 2014.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Erhard Eppler, as well as representatives from the Liberal and Green parties. A counter-letter, “Securing peace instead of rewarding expansionism”,⁵⁶ has been initiated by academics and experts on Eastern Europe, and was signed and supported by younger representatives across party lines.

Within the Green party, a part of the leadership and base has—mainly because of its strong traditional focus on human rights and liberal values—actually been ahead of the major parties in its criticism of Russian actions, well before the outbreak of the conflict over Ukraine. Green party leader Cem Özdemir and parliamentarians such as Marieluise Beck have been outspoken regarding Germany’s new responsibility in confronting Russia over Ukraine or Syria. Özdemir has not ruled out using German military options to help implement a no-fly zone over Syria, even without a UN mandate.⁵⁷ On the other hand, a strong pacifist wing within the Green Party⁵⁸ continues to fear a potential militarization of Germany’s foreign and security policy. *Die Linke*, Germany’s left wing party, is consistent in its NATO-critical and anti-interventionist positions; many of its members advocate the dissolution of NATO and a new security alliance including Russia;⁵⁹ some have openly sympathized with Russia’s actions in Crimea. The

⁵⁶ [“Friedenssicherung statt Expansionsbelohnung: Aufruf von über 100 deutschsprachigen OsteuropaexpertInnen zu einer realitätsbasierten statt illusionsgeleiteten Russlandpolitik,”](#) *change.org*.

⁵⁷ Annet Meiritz, Roland Nelles, [“Interview mit Cem Özdemir: Assad und Putin bomben Syrien in die Steinzeit,”](#) *Spiegel Online*, October 15, 2016.

⁵⁸ [“Katrin Göring-Eckardt: Die Grünen waren nie eine pazifistische Partei,”](#) *Zeit Online*, October 24, 2014.

⁵⁹ [“Programm der Partei, Beschluss des Parteitages der Partei DIE LINKE,”](#) *DIE LINKE*, October 2011.

right-wing “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), founded in 2013, is also critical of the government’s stance on Russia and calls for a withdrawal of all U.S. troops and nuclear weapons from German territory.⁶⁰

Should either the Christian Democrats or Social Democrats be in a position to form a coalition with a smaller party after the fall 2017 elections, the only available candidates at this point are the Greens and Die Linke. It is not clear whether the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), which failed to reach the entry threshold of 5 percent of the vote at the last election in 2013, will be able to make it back into the *Bundestag*. All of the mainstream parties have said that the right-wing AfD is unacceptable for them as a coalition partner. A follow-on grand coalition would likely continue Germany’s new foreign policy course, but there is little appetite in either the CDU or the SPD for a third round of governing together.⁶¹

Beyond the political elite, how has the traditionally risk-averse German public reacted to Berlin’s more forward-leaning foreign policy? Is it just an elite project, or does it have popular support? And what potential has the right wing “Alternative for Germany” to alter the popular mood in 2017 elections?

Recent surveys and polls show a mixed picture. Germans seem to be well aware of Germany’s increased power and its standing both globally and within the European Union. According to a recent survey by the Pew Re-

⁶⁰ [“Programm für Deutschland,”](#) *Alternative für Deutschland*, May 2016.

⁶¹ Merkel’s CDU and the SPD governed together 2005-2009 and 2013-; in between (2009-2013), Merkel governed with the liberal FDP.

search Center,⁶² a majority of Germans think their country plays a greater role in the world today than it did a decade ago. The survey also shows that Germans are outward-looking and committed to multilateralism and engagement in the world economy. A poll conducted in October 2016 by the Körber Foundation⁶³ found that 59 percent of respondents agreed that Germany should expand its leadership role in the European Union.

Clear continuity is found in German views regarding the normative dimension of their foreign policy, and it is still considered to be a key distinguishing characteristic by the majority of the German population. Sixty-two percent of respondents agree in June 2016 that human rights should be one of Germany's most important foreign policy goals.⁶⁴ A survey from April 2014 demonstrated that among younger and more highly educated respondents, there is less hesitation about military engagement, Germany's historical past, and increased international engagement. These respondents support military interven-

tion for humanitarian reasons even without a UN mandate.⁶⁵

However, asked if they prefer more international engagement or rather restraint in April 2014, at the height of the Ukraine conflict, 60 percent of respondents advocated for restraint and only 37 percent for more international engagement, with a particularly critical view of the deployment of German soldiers.⁶⁶ In a follow-on Körber Foundation poll conducted in late 2016, a small shift toward more engagement can be observed. Forty-one percent of those questioned support more international engagement, but a majority of 53 percent still prefers restraint.⁶⁷ Respondents in former East German states are more skeptical about German international engagement.

These and other polls suggest that Germany's new foreign policy line is not driven by domestic public demand, but by elites from the political center. Nevertheless, public attitudes seem to be slowly catching up—particularly among voters affiliated with the main political parties who have already been in power within federal government coalitions (SPD, CDU/CSU, Greens, and the FDP) as well as among younger and more educated voters. Support for stronger engagement is the lowest among respondents who prefer the left and right-wing populist parties.

Consequently, ensuring sustainability beyond the next elections in September 2017 remains

⁶² Fifty-three percent of respondents thought Germany should help other countries deal with their problems, 67 percent believe that foreign policy should take into account the interests of Germany's allies, 70 percent see global economic engagement as 'a good thing,' and 62 percent believe that Germany plays a more important role compared to 10 years ago. For more results, see Bruce Stokes, Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, "[Europeans Face the World Divided](#)", Pew Research Center, June 2016.

⁶³ "[Die Sicht der Deutschen auf Europa und die Außenpolitik: Eine Studie der TNS Infratest Politikforschung](#)," *Körber-Stiftung*, October 2016.

⁶⁴ Stokes, Wike, Poushter, "[Europeans Face the World Divided](#)," 2016.

⁶⁵ "[Die Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik: Eine Studie der TNS Infratest Politikforschung](#)," *Körber-Stiftung*, May 2014.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ "[Die Sicht der Deutschen auf Europa und die Außenpolitik: Eine Studie der TNS Infratest Politikforschung](#)," *Körber-Stiftung*, October 2016.

a challenge. After the surprise outcomes of the Brexit referendum as well as the U.S. elections, the obvious question is whether the AfD might do far better in the September 24 national elections than its current polling levels suggest.⁶⁸ Founded three years ago as a euro-skeptical party, the AfD has firmly established itself as a right wing populist force in the German political party landscape⁶⁹ and is now represented in 11 out of 16 state parliaments (with especially good results in Germany's East). The party has thrived specifically on anti-refugee sentiments among the larger population. Even if the AfD does not win significant majorities, the experience of the past years has shown that they are able to force a topic on the national debate agenda and put the main political parties on the defensive.

Conclusion

Amidst multiple external and internal crises in Europe—from Russia's new assertiveness to the threat of internal disintegration—Germany has been vaulted into a foreign policy leadership role. Berlin's policymakers have worked hard to adapt and built a solid basis for advancing strategic thinking regarding Germany's role in Europe and the world. These changes indicate that Germany is becoming the long-anticipated partner the US foreign policy community has been looking for since the end of the Cold War—a partner that is able to take on a greater leadership role and responsibility in addressing regional security issues in Europe. U.S. politicians have

⁶⁸ At the end of 2016, it was polling nationally at 13 percent; See "[ARD-Deutschlandtrend](#)," *tagesschau.de*, December 12, 2016.

⁶⁹ "[AfD-AnhängerInnen](#)," *DIW Wochenbericht* 34 (2016): 711-724.

long yearned for such a "normalization" of German foreign policy, having been frustrated by what they saw as German "freeriding." As a former American official said more than two decades ago:

"It was much easier, after all, for Germany to be 'responsible' during the Cold War, when others—notably the United States—were willing to do most of the 'dirty work' of international security...In the future, Germans themselves will doubtless be confronted by some of these same unsavory but necessary dilemmas in the post-Cold War world, and they may be no better than the United States at confronting them."⁷⁰

But will President Trump look to Germany for partnership in the same way that that his predecessors George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama did? All indications are that his position might be more ambiguous, and the feeling might be mutual. If so, the transatlantic partnership may enter a troubled new era—and Germany's position might become much more difficult and lonely.

In a 1994 *Foreign Affairs* essay, Timothy Garton Ash argued that Germany had four options for developing its post-unification foreign policy.⁷¹ The first would be a "Carolingian empire" or essentially a United States of North-Western Europe with a deeply integrated political and monetary union. The second was a "wider Europe," integrating

⁷⁰ Philip H. Gordon, "Berlin's Difficulties: The Normalization of German Foreign Policy," *Orbis* 38, vol. 2 (1994): 225-243.

⁷¹ Timothy Garton Ash, "Germany's Choice," *Foreign Affairs* 73, vol. 73 (1994): 65-81.

Germany's central and east European neighbors into the European Union, and the third, a "Moscow first" option pursued at the expense of its neighbors in east and central Europe. The final and fourth option: Germany could aim for "world power" status, overtaking Britain as America's key partner in leadership. This would include a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council and being "captain" of a European trading bloc.

Looking back two decades later, it is clear which of these options has materialized. Through a "wider Europe" approach—the option Garton Ash preferred—Germany has invested its political and economic clout to build a "ring of friends" through EU and NATO enlargement in its immediate Eastern neighborhood – setting limits, however, in Georgia and Ukraine. The "Carolingian empire" and "Moscow first" options can be dismissed given Germany's recent "U-turn" on Russia and the looming British exit from the EU, which could be accompanied by additional fragmentation in Europe; the "world power" scenario is even less likely. Yet even as Germany takes on more responsibility in a "wider Europe," much of the protest against Germany's leadership role by other European countries has recalled its difficult history—a history shaped first by hunger for power (*Machtversessenheit*) and then by negligence of power (*Machtvergessenheit*).⁷² Against a backdrop of uncertainty regarding the US commitment in Europe and with an impending Brexit on the horizon, the line for Germany to walk between dominance and leadership has become even thinner. And yet, the need for

⁷² This dichotomy was famously coined by the historian Hans-Peter Schwarz, in "Die gezähmten Deutschen. Von der Machtversessenheit zur Machtvergessenheit" (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995).

Germany to lead the European project forward has become greater than ever.

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