

Germany's world: power and followership in a crisis-ridden Europe

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EUrope and Germany face unprecedented crises. Given its role as EUrope's "central power" the article explores how Germany looks at its environment and how the world looks back. I offer five cuts of Germany's world, that is, how its power, place and ambition might be described from different angles. First, I examine a "structural" interpretation of EUrope's setting which shows a certain affinity with German visions of a rules-governed world. Next I reconstruct how Germany's changing role is described from the outside and the inside. The stark contrast between images of overbearing "hegemony" and facilitating German "leadership" lay the ground for a third cut which examines how German leadership has fared in three recent EUropean crises. In a fourth cut I analyse Germany's leadership challenges against the foil of US leadership globally. The difficulties highlighted in Germany's world of "shaping powers" and tough love diplomacy, my fifth cut, leave it, and EUrope, in an unenviable position indeed.

Keywords: European Union; German foreign policy; Germany; hegemony; leadership; tough love diplomacy

The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right! (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

Twenty-five years after the end of the division of Germany and Europe, the illusion of the "end of history", of a linear progression towards liberal democracies, no longer holds. The Ukraine conflict has brought war back to Europe. In Iraq and Syria the IS terror group is on a killing spree and is obliterating humanity's millennia-old cultural heritage. In Libya, state structures are eroded, and in Nigeria Boko Haram is on the rampage. Crisis mode seems to be the new standard for now. The world is out of joint, in the broader sense too, as it is no longer "joined up" in the way our thought patterns expect. (Steinmeier, 2015a)

EUrope and Germany are in real trouble.¹
You realize this, at the very latest, when *The*

Economist's "Charlemagne" column is entitled "The dispensable French" in one and the same issue which sells under the cover of Chancellor Merkel, "The indispensable European" (2015). When some of the most astute observers of international politics diagnose, with some justification, French dispensability and German indispensability in European matters at the same time anyone with some knowledge of European history understands that EUrope's crisis must be serious indeed. For historically grounded reasons the project of European integration would have been inconceivable if France and Germany, after WWII, had not sought and, over subsequent decades, steadily pushed a revolutionary political design for international reconciliation and supra-

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national political and economic institutionalization. EUrope was, by necessity, a comprehensively *multilateral* project and the “Franco-German tandem” was both its fountain and indispensable engine. Notice the sequence: Franco-German, not German-French! For France to be in the lead was politically necessary, morally justified and dutifully acknowledged by German elites. Helmut Kohl’s dictum that he would bow at least twice to the French flag when bowing once to the German flag was a symbolic expression of German recognition of France’s privileged status.

Today the overwhelming majority of observers argue, again with some justification, that the balance of power and status has tilted towards Germany.² That may be so. But what precisely does it mean? Among others it means that Germany’s constructive engagement with the European Union (others prefer to speak of “German leadership”) is more than ever a *necessary* condition for the EU to meet current challenges. In spite of the seemingly increasing power gap between Berlin and the rest of the European capitals, however, German engagement is *not sufficient* – and even less so than a few years ago due to the proliferation of interconnected crises which are perceived to affect increasingly incompatible core “national interests” of numerous EU member states.

Given Germany’s central role it is important to understand how Germany looks at its environment and how the world looks back. In the following pages I will offer five cuts of Germany’s world; that is, how its power, place and ambition might be described from different (internal and external) perspectives. I will start off with a “structural” interpretation of EUrope’s setting by two well-known International Relations (IR) theorists whose recent theorizing of EUrope’s “Kantian” peace does not only show a certain affinity with German visions of a rules-governed world but which had surprisingly converged right before European crises began to proliferate. Next I will reconstruct in summary fashion how Germany’s changing role and position in EUrope

are described from outside and inside Germany. The stark contrast between images of overbearing “hegemony” on the one hand and facilitating German “leadership” on the other will lay the ground for a third cut in which I examine how German leadership has fared in three recent EUropean crises (Ukraine, Greece, refugees). In a fourth cut I will step back and analyse Germany’s leadership challenges more systematically against the often implicit foil of US leadership in securing a “liberal world order”. This comparison will show that the leadership challenges Germany faces are similar to the challenges the USA faces in some respects, but significantly more demanding in others. Some of these difficulties arise from a world which appears to be “out of joint” especially against the background of “thought patterns” – of which German foreign minister Steinmeier speaks in the initial epigraph – which envision an “open global order” (Gauck, 2014). A fifth cut will, therefore, examine one of the “thought patterns”, the world of “shaping powers”, which guided German diplomacy recently in some detail. It will also provide an ideal-type sketch of Germany’s overall approach to tackling foreign policy challenges which I call the diplomacy of tough love. I will conclude with summary reflections about why Germany’s increasingly unenviable position is not likely to improve much in the foreseeable future.

Europe’s not so boring Kantian culture of anarchy

A first cut of Germany’s world which draws on IR theorizing would come up with a picture which would suit classical “Bonn Republic”-type visions of Europe at peace and “Normative Power Europe” (Manners, 2002, 2013) acting as a global force for the good. This is the post-Maastricht European Union which, if you believe in teleological theorizing, had reached what Alexander Wendt, in an article published a bit more than a decade ago, called the fourth (and next-to-last) stage – that is, the stage of a

“Kantian culture” of “friendship” – in a “progressive” historical process which will “inevitably” lead to a “world state” (Wendt, 1999, pp. 297–308, 2003).³ As Wendt (2003, pp. 494–503) himself acknowledged few IR scholars actually believe in teleology as a basis for theorizing. Yet it is ironic indeed that it was Kenneth Waltz, the grand old man of realism and Wendt’s preferred sparring partner in “grand theorizing”, who came as close as ever in making his peace with Europe’s “Kantian culture of anarchy” in what seems to be his last interview before he died in May 2013.

In an interview in March 2013 (Waltz & Simón, 2013) Waltz was asked to analyse the contemporary global political order. The interview ended with a discussion of “the issue of rising powers” in the context of Europe. Waltz summarized his main thesis right at the start: “[w]hen major powers decline they become uninteresting. Just like Athens and Sparta after the rise of Rome, Germany and France are uninteresting now.” He then poked fun at “people [...] arguing how wonderful it is that Europe has become pacific” while not “know(ing) any history”. Where Wendt saw the world state as “inevitable” Waltz believed that “an inevitable consequence” of former “great powers heading towards decline” would be “that they become more peaceful. We should expect nothing less of them.” The interview then closed with the question whether the European Union would “represent the end or mitigation of anarchy in Europe” or whether we should “expect the return of power competition in Europe”. Unsurprisingly, anarchy for Waltz remained “the basic cause and condition of international politics and so it is present in Europe”. Yet in an indirect bow to Wendt he also granted that “it does not have the same implications” there as in other regions where competition prevails:

In any case, who cares about anarchy in Europe? What is there to mitigate? It has already been mitigated. Countries fight, decline and become more peaceful. In any

case, Europe is not controversial. It will only become interesting when it forms a genuinely unified sovereign country, but this is not going to happen any time soon. Europe is boring and affluent. It is in a happy position, so enjoy it.

Again, this analysis stems from early 2013. Three years is a long time in politics. In “structural” or “systemic” theorizing it is just a flash. On that the “realist” Kenneth Waltz and the “constructivist” Alexander Wendt would have agreed, whatever other disagreements they might have had. In that sense the irony of a parallel reading of the “contemporary” writings of what are arguably the two most influential scholars in IR debates during the past three decades yields a stunning level of convergence right at a time when other observers were starting to wonder whether the “irreversible” European project which former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had proclaimed in 1991 after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (Kinzer, 1991; Kohl, 1991) might actually just begin to unravel.

Europe’s state and Germany’s position

The second cut looks more closely at the configuration of power in Europe and how Germany fits in. This is against the background of the observation that Europe’s state has for some time been characterized in terms of a quasi-hegemonic constellation. Such a state always has two sides – some actor (usually in the singular) dominating and some (usually in the plural) being dominated. In the following I will mainly focus on the former.

As far as the dominating side is concerned the main narratives currently figure Germany as the “inevitable” (Schönberger, 2012, p. 1) “unacknowledged” (Crawford, 2015, p. 340) and/or “reluctant” (Paterson, 2011) hegemon. Of course, as with other essentially contested concepts hegemony in general and Germany’s alleged contemporary hegemony in the EU in particular means different things to different people.⁴ Yet for many non-German experts

German hegemony seems to be clearly and overbearingly present today.⁵ What was only a *possible* German-European future right after unification – that is, “that deutschmarks *might* go much further than panzers in extending German power” (Markovits & Reich, 1993, p. 272, emphasis added) – has become a reality for many. When a sophisticated sociologist like Anthony Giddens writes in 2014 that “Germany seems to have achieved by pacific means what it was unable to bring about through military conquest – the domination of Europe” (2014, p. 9) the emphasis is obviously on “domination” and not on the unspecified *probability* of Germany “seeming” to have achieved it.

One of the ironies here is that it is not “deutschmarks” but “Euros” which have presumably become Germany’s most effective “weapon” to dominate Europe – the irony, of course, being that the German “Gulliver” (Carr, 1989, p. 13) was *pushed* by others (and willing to *concede* under Chancellor Kohl) to accept a common currency and, thereby, be “tied” down.⁶

Of course, a balanced account of Germany’s image abroad must also include those assessments where admiration for German culture and achievements outshines German hegemony. Stephen Green’s (2014) “Reluctant *Meister*” is a case in point. Yet even here the admiration for German achievements remains ambivalent at best. After publication Green said he chose the German word “Meister” (the English word most closely approximating its core meaning being “master”) precisely because of its multi-layered meanings in German, especially its “connotations from the crafts and apprenticeship world, from the musical world, latterly from the football world”. However, he also pointed to additional connotations which recall the dark sides of German history and culture which go along with the “*Meister*”-notion, as for instance a poem by Paul Celan with the refrain “*der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*” (“death is a master from Germany”) (Green, 2015, p. 3).

The “roles” states play are always the result of ascriptions by “Self” and “Other”. In this perspective the changing images of Germany’s role circulating outside Germany are doubtlessly significant. Yet in a longer perspective the still more interesting discursive changes have taken place inside Germany itself. Whereas mainstream narrative constructions of a German “Self” in foreign policy discourse had, during the first decade after unification (Hellmann, 1996), concentrated mostly on the continuity of the “success story” of westernization, European integration and multilateralism in the era of the “Bonn Republic”, Gerhard Schröder’s chancellorship after 1998 set clear markers early on from the very top that Germany should finally act like a “normal” and “self-confident” power (Hellmann, 2011a).⁷

More recently the “hegemony” (or “half-hegemony”)⁸ vocabulary has also reached the mainstream of foreign policy discourse within Germany. To be sure, a similar discursive trend was visible already in the immediate aftermath of unification when Germany was projected by a few observers to become Europe’s “central power”, a notion which linked up with the concept of Germany as Europe’s “central state” by the diplomatic historian Arnold Heeren from the early nineteenth century (Baumann, 2007, pp. 62–63; Schwarz, 1994). Yet in the 1990s a German “hegemony” was widely considered by the overwhelming majority of German observers to be a chimera of stubborn realists (references in Hellmann, 1996, pp. 20, 22). Only rarely did the phrase “German hegemony” actually pop up – and if so, it was framed in terms of looming dangers for Germany itself.⁹

This is different today. While there are still a few voices who deny (in building on the notion of hegemony by the German historian Heinrich Triepel) that Germany will ever be able to exercise “decisive influence” (Triepel’s (1961 [1938]) core criterion for “hegemony” (p. 40)) due to the institutional mechanisms of the EU (Link, 2015, pp. 290–295) others argue that German

hegemony is obvious, if somewhat lacking. In this view it is desperately needed either because it is the necessary “price” to be paid for a “federative structure” built around a strong “intergovernmental core” of EU member states (Schönberger, 2012, pp. 7–8). Alternatively German hegemony is considered to be vital for the EU’s future because only Germany can supposedly muster the necessary resources in order to “tame” the centrifugal forces operating within the Union (Münkler, 2015a; see also 2015b, esp. pp. 146–149).

In other words, the interesting discursive shift that has taken place within Germany over the past decade or so is both an increasing realization *and* acceptance of the fact that Germany is Europe’s “leading” power. Given the “*Machtstaat*”-notions which link up hegemony-talk with pre-Federal Republic times Germany’s diplomatic vocabulary scrupulously avoids any reference to hegemonic leadership. However, when the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, announced in early 2015 that “Germany will seek to play an efficient role as Europe’s ‘chief facilitating officer’” (Steinmeier, 2015b; see also 2015c) the play with CFO and its standard reference “Chief Financial Officer” was not only a clear indication that Germany does no longer want to be reduced to the kind of “cheque book diplomacy” which Chancellor Schröder (for whom Steinmeier had earlier served as head of the chancellery) had despised. It was also an expression of the fact that Germany’s key foreign policy personnel was self-confidently asserting the position of the “chief” – or “key player”, to use a football analogy (see also Hellmann, 2015) – in *some* field.

Thomas Bagger, one of Steinmeier’s closest advisers who also serves as Head of the Planning Staff in the Foreign Ministry, prefers to speak of “negotiated leadership” or “network diplomacy” when he characterizes Germany’s role in Europe and beyond (Bagger, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). Whatever new terminology is chosen, though, it is clear that Germany has finally shed what

Willie Paterson in the 1990s called Germany’s “leadership avoidance reflex”.¹⁰

German leadership in practice

Leadership rhetoric and “hegemony” discourses notwithstanding, it is obvious that German leadership has remained contested overall although contestation has varied and shifted over time as Germany’s rise in power and influence has gradually (if often grudgingly) been recognized. My third cut will, therefore, examine three recent examples of German leadership in practice. The first looks at Germany’s “chief facilitating” leadership in collaborating with EU partners in a serious external crisis (Ukraine), the second one focuses on German “facilitating” efforts among EU partners in a tackling a serious internal crisis (Greece). The third one (the huge influx of migrants since the summer of 2015) deals with what is now widely considered to be the most serious and long-term domestic challenge with major ramifications for the European project.

First, in the crisis which erupted in the aftermaths of the annexation of Crimea by Russia and after the breakout of heavy fighting by Russian-sponsored separatists in Eastern Ukraine German diplomacy in general and Chancellor Merkel in particular took the lead in both coordinating sanctions within the EU and in negotiating a ceasefire with Russian President Putin. In stark contrast to the brief war in Georgia in 2008 when French President Sarkozy seized the opportunity of his EU-Presidency single-handedly to negotiate a much hailed diplomatic deal with Russian President Medvedev (Hughes, 2008), French President Hollande looked as if he was included in the deal making in early 2015 largely in a supporting role of Chancellor Merkel. Still Franco-German “embedded bilateralism”¹¹ still seemed to work – among others because Merkel went out of her way to keep Hollande on board.

Cooperative partnership (or even “co-leadership”) was less visible, though, as far as

the third axis of the so-called “Weimar Triangle” is concerned. “Weimar” stands for the triangular relationship between Germany, France and Poland which has, for good reasons, been conceptualized by German strategists right after unification as the core (and *by necessity* trilateral) relationship of Europe’s “central power” on the one hand and its most important strategic partners to the West and East – both of whom had been victimized in special ways by German power.¹² In the early stages of the escalating crisis over Ukraine, Poland, alongside Germany and France, had been part of a Troika arrangement which played a key role in mediating the crisis. In the second half of 2014 and in the run-up to the Minsk deals, however, Poland felt largely sidelined (Buras, 2014), possibly as a result of Russian preferences and pressures to deal with the crisis among the “major” powers. Still, overall Merkel’s leadership role in brokering the Minsk deals received widespread praise – among others because she and her diplomats skilfully avoided Sarkozy-style deal making over the heads of fellow EU partners (disregarding a more privileged role for Poland).¹³

Praise for German “facilitation” in tackling the Greek/Euro-crisis after the January 2015 election victory of Alexis Tsipras, my second brief example, has been much more limited. Once again, German decision-makers had been far from passive in managing the crisis. To the contrary, Finance Minister Schäuble and Chancellor Merkel succeeded early on in securing and maintaining an unlikely power constellation almost until the very end. Given the signs of support which Tsipras had received among Southern European EU members few would have expected that Germany – by pushing much disliked “austerity” recipes from an increasingly powerful position – would largely get its way while the underdog, crisis-stricken Greece, was all but isolated. Yet it did.

Germany’s “substantive relentlessness and constant readiness to talk” despite

repeated Greek backtracking was hailed among German analysts as a “recipe for success” for Germany, the “negotiation world champion” (Rinke, 2015). Outside Germany, however, the dominant narrative was much less pleasant, especially after the final round of negotiations in mid-July 2015 when Prime Minister Tsipras had to swallow Chancellor Merkel’s bottom line which was presented to him with an acquiescing French President in “take-it-or-leave-it” fashion. Even former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer saw a “return of the ugly German” (2015; see also Faiola & Kirchner, 2015). The economist and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman (2015) was still harsher, associating Germany’s demands with “pure vindictiveness”, a “complete destruction of (Greek) national sovereignty” as well as “a grotesque betrayal of everything the European project was supposed to stand for”.

My third example deals with the increasing wave of refugees since the summer of 2015. Just a few weeks after the climax of the Greek crisis Germany’s (and Chancellor Merkel’s) image switched around once again as a result of Germany’s “welcoming culture” in the face of steadily swelling numbers of migrants from Southern Europe. This new crisis further highlighted Germany’s “central” role due to the sheer numbers of refugees which the country received, at least initially, largely with open arms while much of the rest of Europe (with a few exceptions such as Sweden) either closed its borders or passively stood by.

Still, whereas some now wondered how quickly the “ugly German” which had reappeared during the end-game of the Greek crisis had now put on a “friendly face”, many others just thought that this new twist was merely an expression of German naiveté.¹⁴ Moreover, since Chancellor Merkel pushed hard for European “solidarity” by forcing a vote over the distribution of refugees (Traynor & Kingsley, 2015) the exposure to German pressure which

especially Berlin's eastern neighbours Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary felt was largely reinforcing the image that Germany was trying to once again mould European institutions, processes and decisions to serve its interests and preferences. Berlin did not gain credibility for being an "honest broker" or a "chief facilitator" even among Germany's closest allies because its fixation on abiding by rules – which presumably had guided its policy vis-à-vis Greece – was pushed aside when it came to applying the rules of the Schengen regime in the context of the escalating refugee crisis (Wiegel, 2015, p. 3).

Situating German leadership

The three short examples in the previous section have highlighted the possibilities and the limits of German leadership. If one takes Heinrich Triepel's key criterion for hegemony, that is, "decisive influence", as definitional yardstick it is, therefore, at least contentious whether Germany might rightly be called Europe's "hegemon". The same applies to the criterion of hegemony being "freely acknowledged" by the hegemon's

followers (Triepel, 1961 [1938], p. 141). *Willing followership* was visible in Merkel's management of the Minsk accord negotiations, but Germany's room of manoeuvre was already much more narrowly circumscribed by key allies, such as France, in the negotiations with Greece. In the ongoing refugee crisis Germany has thus far largely failed to mobilize any willing followers.

In a fourth cut it might, therefore, be useful to step back once again and analyse Germany's leadership challenge more systematically. US leadership comes to mind as a potentially useful comparison because Germany's leadership challenges in Europe often seem to be treated as a small version of the USA's leadership challenges in managing a "liberal world order" globally. However, despite a few similarities the analogy with the USA ignores the fact that the structural conditions and constraints are markedly different if one compares the leadership challenges which the two states face.

First, and most obviously, American power (and thus leadership potential) differs not only in terms of composition but also reach. Due to the size of American military and economic power the USA obviously

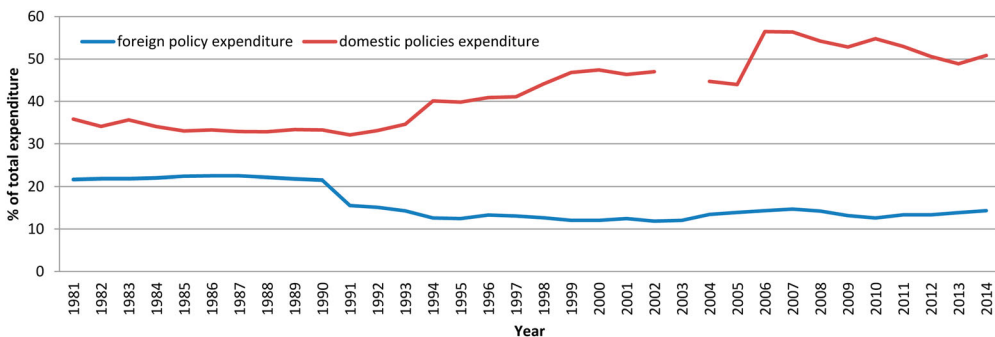


Figure 1: Federal Budget, 1981–2014 Expenditure for "Foreign Policy" and Select "Domestic Policies" in comparison

* The curve "foreign policy expenditure" consists of the individual budgets of the Federal Ministry of Defense, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Foreign Ministry. The curve "domestic policies expenditure" consists of the budgets of the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure. No data were provided for 2003 as the expenses of the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs were not made available. In 2004 and 2005 the composition of "domestic spending" changed due to a change in the institutional structure of the respective ministries. However, this change does not affect the overall trend.

plays in a league of its own. Even if one grants “embedded hegemony” for Germany (Crawford, 2015) and recognizes that the budgetary resources which have been made available by the German parliament for international engagements have, in recent years, reversed earlier downside trends (see Figure 1) these resources are quite limited if measured against what is required, especially in the light of the proliferation of external and internal crises within the EU and in Europe’s “neighbourhood”.

Second, geopolitically German leadership is situated quite differently from the USA: it is (still) in the centre of Europe, a continent which – despite a deteriorating security situation to its east and south – still disposes over a high, if somewhat waning, concentration of (military and economic) power. At the same time it is at the centre of a European Union where a “Kantian” “culture of anarchy” continues to reign – again: despite worrying signs that fundamental notions of solidarity and collaboration in tackling common crises are waning. Even if one has to grant that the EU currently faces the most serious accumulation of deep crises since the beginnings of the European integration project it still remains a highly institutionalized setting of collective decision making based on specific rules which highly constrain the kind of free-wheeling power politics in which US leadership can indulge in its largely “Hobbesian” and/or “Lockean” global environments as, for instance, in contemporary Asia.

Third, and related, these differences in power, global/regional reach and geopolitical location also yield a different structure of incentives for *followership* – the necessary flip side of the “leadership” coin. Germany simply cannot lead via command (as the USA still can under certain circumstances). Berlin’s leadership crucially depends on coalition-/majority-building – which (even in a rules-based decision-making system such as the EU) often involves decision making by consensus. The crises in Ukraine and Greece and the recent decision by

majority voting to enforce a certain distribution of refugees even among unwilling EU member states illustrate this structural condition.

Fourth, the history of previous exercises of German and US “leadership” obviously adds further constraints. Where the USA can build on a rather stable reservoir of leadership experience which has accumulated over the past decades (including the *willing* followership of significant others) Germany has only started, in the past few years, to navigate these uncharted waters. What is more, when leadership pops up in a German context, the “Führer” is always close by. The Greek crisis and the “return of the ugly German” have provided ample evidence of that.

Moreover, the standard quote by the former Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, which proponents of German leadership usually draw on when they want to argue that German leadership is not only *increasingly accepted* but actually *called for* almost always ignores what followed Sikorski’s main line. Sikorski’s standard quote started as follows: “I will probably be the first Polish foreign minister in history to say so, but here it is: *I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity*. You have become Europe’s indispensable nation” (2011, p. 9). Yet immediately after that Sikorski continued in the following (almost never quoted) words: “[y]ou [Germany, GH] may not fail to lead. Not dominate, but to *lead in reform*. *Provided you include us in decision-making*, Poland will support you” (Sikorski, 2011, pp. 9–10, underlined passage in the original, italics added).

This is the typical pattern which shows up when German leadership is called for: Germany should “lead” as *potential* follower X prefers – and it can count on willing followership *on the condition* that X is “included in decision making”. Such qualifications almost always accompany calls for German leadership (see also Rachman, 2012, p. 14)¹⁵ and they will, predictably, almost

always produce two contradictory effects: they condition commitments to followership on Germany leading *in specified ways* which, in turn, will predictably arouse fierce opposition from other, equally necessary, followers which have not been similarly included in decision making.

In large parts this leadership experience is shared by all potential leaders counting on willing followers. The USA is no exception. One crucial difference is, however, that the USA can still draw on the “cultural capital” of “liberal world order” leadership among a significant segment of western states even if followership might be exercised grudgingly. In contrast (and as the past few years have amply proven) *grudging followership* vis-à-vis German leadership almost instinctively brings back the pre-1945 “ugly German” – confirming the historian Gordon Craig’s observation from 1989 that Germany’s “history” will most likely be used by others “like a big wardrobe to scabble about in order to find what suits one’s purposes” (1989, p. 185). Thus, where the USA can still rely on assertive leadership due to accumulated cultural capital, Germany largely has to confine itself to the cultural capital of the Federal Republic’s “culture of restraint” (Hellmann, 2015, pp. 478–479; Ischinger & Bunde, 2015) which, in the old days, has often been linked to German “cheque book diplomacy”.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier’s emphasis on the *facilitating* role of German diplomacy is an expression of this realization. It also marks a new type of humility¹⁶ in the face of increasing resistance from unexpected sources, especially if one compares it to the assertiveness which Federal President Gauck and Steinmeier had jointly proclaimed at the Munich Security Conference 2014 when they declared, in almost identical words, that “Germany should make a more substantial contribution” in “the crises afflicting distant parts of the globe”, and that “it should make it earlier and more decisively if it is to be a good partner” (see Gauck, 2014; see Steinmeier, 2014a).¹⁷

Dwindling shaping powers and the limits of tough love diplomacy

When Steinmeier emphasizes Germany’s limited means today and when he acknowledges that the world in which Germany has to operate “is no longer ‘joined up’ in the way our thought patterns expect”¹⁸ he is also admitting that German diplomacy may not yet be sufficiently well equipped mentally to deal with the multiple new challenges it faces. Against this background I will, in a fifth cut, try to shed some light on the “thought patterns” which have shaped Germany’s outlook in the recent past. I will start out with a brief look at how Germany’s official diplomacy had envisioned a world of “new shaping powers” in 2011/2012 followed by an ideal-type sketch of how German diplomacy approaches the world more broadly which I call *tough love diplomacy*.

“New players” or “shaping powers” are the (semi-)official translations for the utterly German (and very telling) neologism “Gestaltungsmächte” which forms the core of a “strategy paper” which the German government adopted in 2012, that is, at a time when intra-European crises were limited to Greek debts and a struggling European currency and when the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) seemed to mark the wave of the future. In this strategy paper Germany positioned itself vis-à-vis “countries that are able and willing to play a decisive role at regional and international level”, countries whose “influence is reflected in structures and decisions, enabling them to steer developments in the direction they want – not least by convincing partners of the value of their ideas and influencing international agendas”. Since these were “countries with which Germany does not already cooperate within the European Union (EU), the G8 or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)” (German Government, 2012, p. 5)¹⁹ it essentially boiled down to a list of (unnamed) countries which one would

normally rank in the “medium” or “great power” league. Here, however, the term “shaping powers” concentrated on what (in Germany’s diplomatic world) would only be the *positive* attributes of “great powers” or “middle powers”.

Literally, “Gestaltungsmacht” or “shaping power” (see Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik & The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2013, among others pp. 14–16)²⁰ is a pleonasm since “power” is normally defined in terms of a “capacity to shape” (or “gestalten”) something. However, given the peculiarities of Germany’s official foreign policy discourse (where concepts such as “Großmacht” (“great power”) or even simply “Macht” (“power”) are scrupulously avoided in favour of concepts such as “new partners” or “responsibility”)²¹ the concept “Gestaltungsmacht” has established itself in official discourse since 2012 when the accompanying “strategy” (the so-called “Gestaltungsmächtekonzept”) had been adopted.

The dual purpose of inventing the new concept *and* strategy was to (1) identify an open-ended group of “new players” which fulfil certain criteria in “shaping globalization” for the good while at the same time inventing a new word which (2) avoided the use of either “great power” or “middle power” in German. None of these terms appear in the official English translation of the “Gestaltungsmächtekonzept”, nor does it include any references to “rising power(s)”, the word usually used outside Germany to name precisely this group of states. Instead the official German diplomatic semantics knows only “emerging” “players” or “new” “partners” – a world where Germany would “share equal responsibility” among the leading group of states as “partners in leadership”.²² This is the opposite of the “patterns of behaviour from the nineteenth and twentieth century” which Chancellor Merkel castigated when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 (Merkel, 2014, p. 8).

Germany’s semantic diplomacy has thus far painstakingly avoided any use of “Gestaltungsmacht” for purposes of self-description.

Still, the whole discourse surrounding the “Gestaltungsmächtekonzept” makes it plain that German foreign policy elites see their country precisely in that league today.²³ When foreign minister Steinmeier points to “unjoined” thought patterns he probably refers, among others, to the idealizing vision of a world of “shaping powers” which the German foreign ministry had sketched in 2011/2012. Yet *the ambition to shape* developments in Europe and beyond in line with German interests has certainly not decreased since. It is an increasingly resistive world, though, in which Germany has to operate and certainly one out of joint with Germany’s envisioned world.

If one wants to make sense of how German ambitions have recently been pursued and (partially) realized in this disjointed world one of the best ways to do so is to build on the concept “tough love” from the realm of education which has popped up in at least two instances when professional foreign observers were characterizing German diplomacy to the point. Wikileaks revealed a few years ago that a Berlin stationed US diplomat expected the then incoming foreign minister Westerwelle to practise “tough love diplomacy” vis-à-vis the USA.²⁴ Yannis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister and sparring partner of German finance minister Schäuble, is the other observer who characterized German “austerity” as “an exercise in ‘tough love’” (Varoufakis, 2015).

In education “tough love” is a reference to a particular parenting style which is differentiated from alternative styles – such as “laissez-faire”, “authoritarian” or “disengaged” parenting – by attributing to it a combination of “a warm and responsive approach to child rearing with consistent enforcement of rules and clear boundaries. Parents are assertive without being aggressive or restrictive and the aim of their disciplinary methods is to reason with and support their child rather than to be punitive” (Lexmond, Bazalgette, & Margo, 2011, p. 55). While there are also more robust versions of

“tough love” (Szalavitz, 2006) the overall idea in many ways fits Germany’s diplomatic approach in a very general sense.

German tough love diplomacy did not start with the escalating Greek debts crisis but as the proliferation of statements from Berlin after 2009 about the Greeks not “doing their homework” showed, it reached a new height during that crisis. As Benjamin Herborth (2011) has aptly observed, the language tellingly separated unruly Greek “schoolchildren” from German “parents” or “teachers” who had to look after the consistent enforcement of EUropean rules and the observation of clear boundaries.

The EU’s sanctions policy vis-à-vis Russia in response to the annexation of Ukraine is another instance of Germany’s diplomacy of tough love: no punishment of the harsh sort – as Russian President Putin, for instance, practised when he battered Turkey and President Erdogan after the downing of a Russian airplane. Rather the unruly child which was not playing by the rules was sent a clear message of love deprivation along with a few hints of what was required to once again receive loving parental care and recognition.

In a larger picture it is not all that astounding that Germany prefers to practise this kind of diplomacy. It is in line with the rules-based images of (or “prejudices” about) Germans in general and it nicely complements Germany’s “anti-militarist” inclinations. Tough love diplomacy faces at least two problems, however. First, it communicates a relationship of formal inequality between the one who is presumably entitled to discipline and another one who is the target of this disciplining, thereby establishing a similar kind of inequality as the one which characterizes relations among great powers and minor powers in a Hobbesian world where the threat and/or use of violence reigns. Second, tough love diplomacy comes to nothing when it faces an opponent who could not care less about German diplomatic attention or neglect. Today when Germany is ever more confronted with “patterns of behaviour

from the nineteenth century” (Merkel) rather than the kind of “shaping powers” it had hoped for the reach of tough love diplomacy is much more limited.

German diplomats are not worse off in adjusting to a changing world compared to their colleagues in other services. However, they will get to these worlds from a farther distance. Reconciling the instincts of diplomatic disciplining via tough love diplomacy with the requirements of formal equality in Europe as a whole and a European Union in particular in which, in former times, special recognition was paid in particular to the smaller members – and particularly so by Germany – is not an enviable position to be in. Yet it is one of the challenges which German diplomacy must meet if it is to succeed in its ambition of securing an “open global order” (Gauck, 2014).

In conclusion: “O cursèd spite ...”

It is not known whether German diplomats were aware of the full version of Hamlet’s deep-drawn sigh when they started to add the Shakespearean line about a “world out of joint” to foreign minister Steinmeier’s speeches in the fall of 2014.²⁵ Be that as it may, Hamlet’s grievance of a time or world “out of joint” – which, “o cursèd spite”, he was “born” to “set right” – perfectly fits how many German foreign policy decision-makers today look at the world surrounding them – and the contradictory expectations directed at Berlin.

The manner in which many of these crises are inextricably interconnected poses major challenges to the skilled negotiator even in normal times. Yet these are not normal times: a precarious cease-fire in Eastern Ukraine is linked to Russian participation in managing the Syrian quagmire and EUropean sanctions; a reduction in (or, at a minimum, a coordinated management of) the steady stream of refugees from the Mediterranean is deeply entangled with necessary but insufficient Turkish cooperation, an unstable political situation in Greece and the increasingly unwilling

followership of EUropean governments – old (as in Paris and Vienna) and new (as in Warsaw and Madrid) – which are not shy in expressing their reservations about German “welcoming cultures” or “austerity”; and this proliferation of external crises is ever more deeply intertwined with steadily increasing domestic pressure on chancellor Merkel (the “indispensable European”) within Germany to more forcefully push German national interests: Europe’s “central power” which stood as a bastion against right-wing populism is all but certain to experience its own right-wing backlash in the upcoming state elections this year. Polls show that the “Alternative für Deutschland” (AFD), a party which openly agitates in the vocabulary of right-wing extremism and which has even radicalized its position in the last year, is destined to enter the state legislatures of Rhineland Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg, two major states in Germany’s south-west which used to be solid strongholds of middle-of-the-road policies.²⁶ This will undoubtedly leave its mark on the broader political scene in Germany. Rumours spreading at the time of this writing that Chancellor Merkel might possibly be toppled by conservative segments within her own party if she does not push for a more rigid stance vis-à-vis refugees are harbingers of uncertain times ahead.

All this boils down to a projection of likely developments in the months and years ahead which may well find Germany increasingly in an unenviable position. This is no longer Europe’s “central power” which is “encircled by friends”, as descriptions from a few years ago pictured it. Rather, as the chief foreign policy correspondent of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Klaus Dieter Frankenberger (2015) put it a few months ago, “Europe and the world” are now increasingly exposed to a Germany “which plays in an entirely different league politically compared to the Germany which celebrated its reunification 25 years ago” (p. 1) – and which sees itself increasingly unable and/or unwilling not to relay these pressures to its EUropean neighbours.

This explicit acknowledgement of Germany’s new power cannot ignore the fact, however, that the world which surrounds Germany is also ever more becoming an inhospitable place because the gap between expectations from German leadership on the one hand and deliverables in terms of both successful German “taming” of Europe’s centrifugal forces (Münkler 2015a) and willing EUropean followership on the other hand will almost certainly widen. As pressures increase simultaneously from within (in the aftermaths of a right-wing backlash in German elections) and from outside (with continuing old crises and the possible addition of a few new ones) tough love diplomacy may soon be viewed nostalgically as an expression of a more “friendly” German face from the past.

Gloomy visions such as this one certainly cover only parts of a future which always offers, by definition, a horizon of possibilities in the plural. When staunch EUropeanists, such as Germany’s finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, hint at the potential of forgotten schemes of ever closer union in “core” configurations of a “Carolingian” EUrope (Schäuble, 2016, p. 6), alternative futures become visible. Yet the future is never “open” in an unconditioned sense. Path-dependency currently translates into a structural setting which, on the one hand, still displays some of the features of a Kantian culture of anarchy.

On the other hand, however, the Wendtian distinction between (mere) “ally” and (real) “friend” – that is, that EUropean “friendship is temporally open-ended” and thus “qualitatively different from being ‘allies’” (Wendt, 1999, p. 299) – becomes increasingly murky because fundamental beliefs in stable and “open-ended” collaboration within a European Union have been shattered. Diffuse reciprocity, one of the key characteristics of any *genuinely* multilateral arrangement (see Ruggie, 1992, pp. 571–572),²⁷ is no longer as much part and parcel of daily practices of multilateralism in the European Union as it used to be. Complaints about

lacking European “solidarity” emanate from Greece to Germany and from Spain to Poland. They are expressions of the frustration about the double bind in which the European Union’s nation states find themselves: by bidding good-bye (in the context of the Lisbon Treaty, at the latest) to the federal EU which early Europeanists had envisioned and which former German Chancellor Kohl still hoped for right after German unification they have manoeuvred themselves into the quandary of seeking “national” or “intergovernmental” solutions which, ironically, depend ever more on German power and, as a consequence, produce precisely the kind of “German EUrope” which presumably no one wants. This is not, however, a EUrope “dominated” by Germany in the sense that Berlin ever more often gets its way. Rather, what looms at the horizon is a weak European Union in Hannah Arendt’s political vocabulary. It is weak in the sense that it lacks the ability to “act in concert”. This is how Arendt (1958, p. 200) defines power – and power of this type is actualized

only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.

In principle, this type of political theory could be part of the dictionary of Germany’s world of shaping powers. If power of this sort does not resurface in German (and the EU’s) diplomacy it is difficult to imagine how Europe’s worlds should fall into place again.

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Notes

1. It has become a common practice to speak of “Europe” referring both to the EU and the European continent as a whole. However, at least geographically the European continent includes, among others, Ukraine, Belarus, parts of Russia and South-Eastern Europe. Even official EU documents often take the EU pars pro toto for the whole continent. Since obviously not all European states belong to the EU I will use “EUrope” and “EUropean” to clarify when I am only referring to the EU part of Europe.
2. Subtle recognitions by astute French observers of Franco-German relations are fashioned by Bozo (2016) and Le Gloannec (2015). For an exception see James Poulos’ view right after the November 2015 terrorist attacks from a Paris angle (Poulos, 2015).
3. For a somewhat more cautious response to the “question about the inevitability of ‘progress’” see Wendt (1999, pp. 311–312). Whereas he sees “no guarantee” there “that cultural time in international politics will move forward” he does see reasons to argue “that it will not move backward, unless there is a big exogenous shock. Once a Lockean culture has been internalized there is little chance of it degenerating into a Hobbesian one, and similarly for a Kantian into a Lockean.” In other words, “the history of international politics will be *unidirectional*: if there are any structural changes, they will be *historically progressive*” (all emphases added).
4. For a detailed discussion of the multiple meanings of “hegemony” see Clark (2011, pp. 15–33).
5. For overviews see Crawford (2015) and Paterson (2011); see also “Germany and Europe” (2013). Some observers, however, refuse to grant “real” hegemonic status to Germany “because it is not willing or capable to make the sacrifices which are essential for a hegemon” (see Kundnani, 2012, p. 24).
6. On the history of the Euro and Germany’s role in it see Marsh (2011). On the metaphorical play with a German “Ulysses” being “tied to a mast” in order to withstand the

- “sirens of power” see Hellmann (1997) and Keohane and Hoffmann (1993, p. 389).
7. More detailed discussions in German are provided in Hellmann (2004, 2011b).
 8. “Half-hegemony” is a notion introduced by the German historian Ludwig Dehio (see 1955, p. 15); for current uses see Habermas (2014, p. 88) and Wirsching (2013, p. 184).
 9. In a book that was read by many as his bid for the German foreign ministry Joschka Fischer warned in 1994 that Germany’s debate about new military engagements in NATO’s “out of area” operations might be the first steps on a trajectory which might eventually lead to a “hegemony of the *Machtstaat Deutschland* under modern conditions” (1994, pp. 229–230).
 10. Paterson coined the term in the early 1990s (see Paterson, 2015, p. 316). For more recent German discussions of the notion of leadership see Harnisch and Schild (2014) and Lübke-meier (2007). Lübke-meier currently serves as German Ambassador to Abu Dhabi.
 11. For a systematic exposition of “embedded bilateralism” as “a robustly institutionalized and normatively grounded interstate relationship” which, in addition, constitutes and structures broader European politics see Krotz and Schild (2013, pp. 8–11).
 12. As former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (2015, p.11) put it in an interview: “[o]ne must not condone discord between the French and the Germans – and the Poles. Germans do not sufficiently take the Poles into account. But geo-strategically Poland is enormously important for us; it comes right after France – and this for the past 200 years”.
 13. On Germany’s “Ostpolitik” see Forsberg (2016, pp. 29–31).
 14. For a detailed assessment of foreign reactions to Germany’s refugee policy see Konrad Adenauer Foundation (2015).
 15. See also the assessment of Luxembourg’s foreign minister Asselborn in Möller and Tempel (2012, p. 10).
 16. See also Steinmeier’s recent statement in the context of the Syrian crisis that Germany’s “means must not be overestimated” (2016, p. 2).
 17. On the detailed coordination between Gauck’s and Steinmeier’s offices in preparing both speeches see Bittner and Nass (2014).
 18. See the epigraph at the beginning.
 19. The significance of this roughly 70-page document for German foreign policy is underlined by the fact that it has been translated (besides English) into French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese and Arabic (though not Russian!), see Federal Foreign Office https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Broschueren/Uebersicht_node.html?https=1https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Broschueren/Uebersicht_node.html?https=1 (accessed 3 December 2015).
 20. Although this is not an official document of German diplomacy the translation of the document (and especially of the word “shaping power”) has been coordinated with the German foreign ministry.
 21. On the significance of “Verantwortung” (“responsibility”) in Germany’s foreign policy discourse see, among others, Urrestarazu (2015).
 22. See the last (“Outlook”) chapter of the “Gestaltungsmächtekonzept”: “[t]ogether with our European and transatlantic partners, we want to confront the global challenges in partnership with the new players. In our partnerships and in our international cooperation, we want to foster constructive shaping of globalization on the basis of shared responsibility. We are partners in shaping world politics, sharing equal responsibility for global issues in our globalized, interdependent and multipolar world” (see German Government, 2012, p. 59). In that sense “Gestaltungsmächte” assemble all the positive attributes which, in an Anglo-Saxon context, would be associated with “leadership”. For such a positively connoted understanding of “leadership” see Nye (2014, ch. 1).
 23. Prominent illustrations of this assessment are provided by Sandschneider (2012) and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik & The German Marshall Fund of the United States (2013).
 24. “If Westerwelle becomes Foreign Minister, we can expect tough love diplomacy from someone who prides himself in being our ‘close’ friend, but who in reality remains skeptical about the U.S. and its foreign policy objectives. Westerwelle will be a friend, but he will not hesitate to criticize us if vital German interests are at stake or being challenged. Westerwelle’s prickliness toward the United States would likely be neutralized by the long-sought attention from Washington he would receive if he becomes foreign minister” (Glass, 2009).
 25. One of the first speeches in which the line shows up at least in the German original

was Steinmeier's address to the UN General Assembly in 2014 (see Steinmeier, 2014b); however, at that point the official English version translated "Welt aus den Fugen" in terms of a world which "seems to be unravelling" (see Steinmeier, 2014c).

26. See also my discussion of multilateral fatigue among western democracies in Hellmann (2013, pp. 103–110).
27. For overviews of the most recent data from different opinion polls see <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/sonntagsfrage-umfragen-zu-bundestagswahl-landtagswahl-europawahl-a-944816.html> (27 January 2016).

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