

German Foreign Policy and the Grand Coalition

The foreign policy of Germany under the Grand coalition is marked by the continuity of major policy trends that had already evolved under the red-green coalition. Yet, the country needs a profound discussion about the future of its foreign policy if it wants to face up to the challenges of the future.

Stefan Mair

Assuming the German chancellorship in November 2005, Angela Merkel had an excellent start in foreign policy. Inexperienced as she was, expectations were low as to what she could achieve in this area. But within weeks of her chancellorship she mended fences with the United States and President Bush in particular and restored trust among her European partners in Germany's European policy. Commentators were seeing Germany's foreign policy heading back to the future: a future in which Germany again plays the double role of bridge builder between the two sides of the

Atlantic on the one hand and engine for European integration on the other.

However, these expectations seem to be based rather on Merkel's style of leadership than substantial changes in Germany's foreign policy. Merkel's ability to moderate and facilitate as well as her cautious approach contrast very much with Schröder's preference for personal relations, publicity and posturing as the alpha male. The positive perception of Merkel's attitude towards foreign policy making certainly got reinforced by the personality of the new foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier. He prefers to keep a low profile but is certainly one of the most efficient managers of political power Germany has.

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Though style certainly matters in foreign policy, it should not be mistaken for substance. Here, a continuity of several trends which have started to change German foreign policy as far back as the early 90's and got accelerated during the red-green coalition can be discerned.

Loosening the ties with the U.S.

So, what are these trends? The following paragraphs will focus on three of them. The first trend is a further loosening of the close partnership with the United States. The image of the United States in the German public has massively changed. During the Cold War, the dominant perception of the United States was the one of an indispensable force in Europe, which ultimately guaranteed Germany's security. According to opinion polls, currently the German public perceives the United States more and more as an international trouble-maker who pursues its interest without taking the interests and needs of its partners into consideration. This perception was certainly reinforced by the Iraq war but – due to resentment concerning the United States' positions regarding the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court – it had already evolved beforehand.

Even if the foreign policy community does not fully share this perception, it does not leave it unaffected. Within this community, the dominant position is certainly that an effective management of the global order still requires a close partnership between Europe and the United States – however, not at any cost. And while a change in government in the United States in 2008

will almost certainly result in a change of style in foreign policy, it is dubitable whether it will lead to a change in substance in this case.

The EU: A new pragmatism

The second trend in Germany's foreign policy that should be highlighted is the increasing pragmatism in its European policy. Since the Treaty of Rome and up to the end of Kohl's chancellorship, Germany's European policy was marked by reconciliation and - later on - friendship with France, the pursuit of ambitious visions and the willingness to carry substantial financial burdens to achieve these visions. This has changed in the late 90s. Schröder's European policy was more an expression of this change than its cause. There are three underlying reasons for the increasing pragmatism. The first one is a matter of generational differences. For the eight years of Schröder's chancellorship, Germany was governed by representatives of the post-war generation, which does not directly link European integration and peace and security on the continent in the same way as their predecessors did. Secondly, the prolonged economic crisis in Germany combined with the rigidities of the European Stability Pact has increased sensitivity regarding Germany's perceived role as a European paymaster. And finally, the German public widely shows the same assessment as the people in other European countries that "Brussels" has degenerated into an overregulated, intransparent and insufficiently democratic bureaucracy. General mood is certainly in favour of 'less' rather than 'more' Europe –

with one exception: CFSP is the field in which 'more' Europe is wanted.

A more active international role

This leads on to the third significant trend is discernable in Germany's foreign policy: the increasing willingness to take on international responsibility; not only by providing development aid and engaging in multilateral organisations, but also by deploying troops to remote regions. The main reason for this trend has been the rising awareness among foreign policy makers that in a globalised world welfare and security of Germany can be immediately affected by developments in remote regions. September 11 and the emergence of international terrorism certainly promoted this awareness. Foreign and security policy makers realised that dealing with new risks cannot be left to development and economic cooperation, but requires the application of the full range of foreign and security policy instruments, including military means. It also became clear that a more proactive and visible stance in international affairs is needed. The claim to have a say in the shaping of the global order can only be upheld if one is also willing to contribute to the costs of it. And Germany increasingly does so, as its deployment of troops in Afghanistan, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and at the coast of Lebanon shows.

The combination of these three trends – the loosening of close relations to the United States, pragmatism in European policy, and more international responsibility – has one unavoidable effect: the diminishing of cer-

tainties in Germany's foreign policy and the growing necessity of a thorough debate on its principal directions. This means that the times in which the German government could afford a more or less bureaucratic management of its external relations are gone. More political leadership and a more strategic orientation are needed.

And this leads on to the upcoming tasks for the current and probably for the next government. The first one is to involve the German public more in foreign policy issues in order to overcome the manifestly unenthusiastic attitude of the German public towards foreign policy. On the one hand, it supports a greater international role of Europe and Germany, but on the other hand it shies away from the costs of such a role, especially if it means military engagement. This mismatch must be addressed by the political leadership. The need to take on international responsibility and for international burden sharing must be explained more convincingly and more emphatically. Secondly, Germany must revise its system of foreign policy making. It is marked by political incoherencies, competition or non-cooperation between government departments and slow decision making processes rather than by effectiveness and efficiency. If the grand coalition achieved both – more public support for bearing the costs of foreign policy and a more effective foreign policy management - it would really change German foreign policy for the better.