Finally grown-up?

Germany’s changing role in the world

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Despite its political and economic weight, Germany plays a relatively minor role in international security affairs. It is reluctant to take on its “responsibility” that comes with its size. The rise of ISIS leads to more German military engagement in the Middle East, such as weapons deliveries to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Is Germany changing its posture in foreign affairs? How did this process unfold itself?

On the occasion of the 51st Munich Security Conference, held in February 2015, Germany’s Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, made a confession: Her country only recently had broken some taboos. Referring to the crisis of the Yezidi minority in Northern Iraq the Minister admitted that “in addition to humanitarian relief we provided weapons and ammunition to the Peshmerga forces [...] and the Bundestag decided to send troops to Northern Iraq for a training mission.”1 The average (non-German) listener might have wondered what kind of taboo actually had been broken. However, the German public, political establishment and strategic community very well understood the Minister’s deliberations: the delivery of weapons to a zone in conflict presented a major departure from Germany’s traditional foreign policy posture.

To grasp this substantial change in the country’s foreign policy parameters one had to be familiar with the national discourse on Germany’s (self-restricted) role in the world. In February 2015, this debate was in full swing: only a year earlier Federal President Joachim Gauck had added the latest chapter to it with his landmark speech at the 50th Munich Security Conference. The President had called on Germany, the “reluctant hegemon”2, to become more engaged internationally — including, if necessary, with military means. The speech met with tremendous resonance within the political establishment as well as in the public sphere. It stirred well-known reservations about Germany’s international engagement and led to the oft-repeated plea for self-restriction and warnings against an over-confident Germany that might (again) bring misery to the world. However, the German strategic community applauded, having demanded for a long time that Germany should accept the logic of the so-called “Spiderman Doctrine”3: that with great power comes great responsibility. Hence, the wish that Germany should no longer appear like, as the Minister put it in her speech, “an adult who refuses to accept that along with increased strength and maturity comes responsibility.” Thus, the question that came with the break of the taboo was: “Had Germany finally grown up?”

A difficult walk along a winding road

Given where Germany had started, it was clear that the country in fact already had come a long way: from holding a strictly non-interventionist position after World War II and mainly pursuing ‘checkbook diplomacy’ until the 1990s, it had turned into a country that in 2001 deployed troops to the Hindukush, being the third-largest contributor to the overall ISAF-
operation in Afghanistan. As German President Joachim Gauck stated in his speech: for Germany this process had not been a given but rather “a difficult walk along a winding road.”

Accordingly, as the reactions to the President’s speech clearly showed, the Afghanistan engagement did not equal a general departure from the skepticism vis-à-vis international military endeavors. Rather, after ten years of engagement at the Hindukush, Germany seemed further off than before to take over international responsibility again. The Afghanistan years had contributed to a fair amount of disenchantment with the perception of what — if anything at all — could be achieved by military interventions. Thus, among the German political establishment the upholding of a huge amount of skepticism vis-à-vis any sort of international military engagement had become part of the proper general attitude. With it came the resurgent spreading of neorealist ideas about world politics and the necessity of interests dominating over values in foreign policy strategies.

This neorealist attitude probably became most obvious during the ‘Libyan episode’: in March 2011 Germany abstained from the UN Security Council’s vote on military intervention in Libya. The reasoning was clear: the experience of Afghanistan where an apparent stabilization mission had turned out to be a de facto counterinsurgency operation that did not seem likely to achieve the goal Germans had hoped for: a Switzerland at the Hindukush — or at least a stable and peaceful Western ally in this regional hotspot. Thus, the Afghan experience was proof to the German political establishment that the West was in fact unable to pursue political goals — let alone to spread universal values — by military means. Rather, it was suggested, Afghanistan demonstrated the limits of steering political processes and promoting peace and democracy by military engagement. Hence, the conclusion that you should better not try at all.

Along came Syria

Things changed when in the summer of 2014 the so-called ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’ (ISIS) created its ‘Caliphate’. With breathtaking speed the Islamists overran towns and villages in Syria, smashed the Sykes-Picot borderline between Syria and Iraq, advanced towards Baghdad and took even cities in Kurdish-held territory like Kirkuk and Sinjar, taking on the famously well-trained Kurdish Peshmerga forces. It was then when the world learned about a small minority of Yezidi people who worshipped seven gods and who were at the center of ISIS’ slaughtering campaign in Northern Iraq.

When ISIS made its advancements their fighters committed massacres among the Yezidi population that amounted to attempted genocide. The surviving inhabitants of the Sinjar region sought refuge on the vast mountain complex of Mount Sinjar. The world stood by and watched in horror the tragedy that enrolled on the top of the mountain among the refugees who did not have any food or water and who were encircled by ISIS fighters. It was this situation the Minister referred to in her speech when she said that “indifference is and will not be an option”. Within a few days the German government decided to deliver arms to the Peshmerga forces in order to enable them to fight ISIS, to defend their own territory, and to recapture and liberate the Sinjar area.
The delivery of weapons started in September 2014 and was supplemented by a training mission of the Bundeswehr that in January 2015 was deployed to Erbil, the seat of the Kurdish Regional Government. Never before had Germany delivered weapons to armed groups in a conflict zone — let alone trained them. It had been one of the basic mantras of the foreign policy discourse of the past 60 years because it was believed that the delivery of arms would further contribute to an intensification of any given conflict. Hence, the new policy was indeed the break of a taboo. What was maybe more astonishing still was the lack of public outcry following this move: there hardly seemed to be any one among the German public who criticized the decision or contested the necessity to act. The usual invocation of the imminent threat of a resurrection of Nazi Germany was not heard. So, what was different this time?

**A moral impetus**

The question as to why exactly this departure from the traditional policy posture happened specifically with this conflict, and not earlier, has often been posed. There seem to be multiple answers: maybe neighbors and allies had pressured Germany enough to give up its reluctance and to take on responsibility — bearing also in mind the decreasing willingness of the US to fill the security gap in Europe. It also seems that interest in a stable Kurdish region attributed to the new stance in foreign policy. Moreover, — and maybe more important still — after all this time of deliberations about Germany’s role in the world maybe the time was ripe. The sowing of the seeds of a responsible foreign policy posture by having an intensive and lasting strategic debate over the past few years has seemingly had an impact. Neither the political establishment nor the German public have — or likely ever will — become pro-interventionist. Yet, they seemed to have become accustomed to the idea that there could be a responsibility on the part of Germany to engage in times of crises and in the face of human catastrophes.

There was the sense that, as President Gauck had stated it in his speech, “he who fails to act bears responsibility, too”. In this regard, the case of the Yezidi people left no options for interpretation: it was clear to the outside observer that a human catastrophe was about to unfold. Historically, Germany was reluctant to take sides for fearing it might be the morally wrong one and she could find herself on the evil side of history again that she herself had represented for so long. However, this time the reluctance to take sides did not fit: having a non-armed religious minority fleeing to the top of a mountain, being chased by well-armed, unscrupulous and decapitating Islamist fanatics left few questions unanswered. The need to act was apparent.

Therefore, within a period of few days Germany made a huge step forward on the path to leave its special status behind. Germany needed a few security guarantees, however: adhering to international law made the whole endeavor much more comfortable — after all, the Iraqi government had asked for support to combat ISIS. Moreover, the UN Security Council had declared that ISIS presented a threat to international peace and security, allowing member states to act. In Germany this was utilized as an additional legal basis, since Article 24 of the German constitution, the Grundgesetz (Basic Law), provided for the Bundeswehr to be engaged internationally within a system of collective security. Going along with the anti-ISIS coalition of more than 60 countries presented such a system of collective security and assured Germany of not pursuing any German “Sonderweg” (going its
own way). Also, the training mission of the Germans was indeed only a training (and not a combat) mission that was to take place in the — still stable — Kurdistan region of Erbil.

Another legal hedging was the incorporation of the Iraqi government in Baghdad: it was decided that each and every cartridge had to be delivered through Baghdad and checked by local security officials, now and then causing quite significant delays in the timetable of the whole undertaking.

The question, however, is: was this a singular event or did this represent a departure from former foreign policy posture for good? The latter seems probable. The reason seems to be the changing nature of conflict in general the West is confronted with and of which the plight of the Yezidi people was a symbol for.

**The changing nature of conflict**

For the past 70 years the world — and especially Europe — became accustomed to conflicts that had some sort of cognitive rationale. Often, it was interstate conflict over power and interests. If it were intrastate conflicts, e.g. in the Balkans, it usually was about minorities wanting to have their own say or a bigger share in national politics. In any case, the warring parties were — at least in some sense — rational and therefore open to negotiations. Even with terrorist groups like the Irish Republican Army a peace agreement was possible. Europe — and Germany in particular — was happy to act as a mediator seeking to convince all sides of the conflict to come to the negotiation table.

However, the conflicts the world faces today are obviously different. With groups like Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and most notably ISIS, negotiations seem to be in vain. This has become most obvious with the latest developments in Europe, and foremost with the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13 2015. When the mass killings started it soon became clear that the attackers did not take hostages, that they had no demands. There were no requests French authorities could have negotiated on in order to save the lives of their citizens. The attackers did not have a political goal nor did they want to bargain, the only aim was to kill as many people as possible.

It did not need this attack to remind the West of the substantial challenge it is confronted with: the goals ISIS pursues are diametrically opposed to what Western nations would ever be willing to concede. Suddenly, these conflicts have become antagonistic: they offer — as for now — no options for negotiations or for compromise. They are in a way a black and white that Germany (being always eager and willing to have differentiated and nuanced views) has not known for long. Therefore, if the West does not want to give in, it has to defend itself and its way of life. There is no alternative available.

It is difficult to ignore the bit of irony that comes with this: for a few years now the neorealist imperative of pursuing a rather interest-based and not values-driven foreign policy has been dominating the strategic debate in Germany. This had become most obvious with — and may have had its climax in — the abstention of Germany in the Security Council’s vote on Libya. Yet, suddenly the West finds itself at the core of a struggle for its way of life — and thus its values — that has been forced upon it by ISIS and the like. In that sense, values have become core interests that have to be defended.
**Values as core interests**

The changing nature of conflict, hence, will affect the discourse as well as policy strategies even further. This has been shown on November 26, when Germany announced that it will join France in the fight against ISIS. It will increase its engagement from Northern Iraq to Syria (self-evidently without being asked to do so by the regime of Bashar al-Assad). By doing so, Germany proved it was ready to take over the fair share of responsibility in the common endeavor to contain and hopefully defeat the ‘Caliphate’. The overall change in Germany’s foreign policy posture has been recognized by other European partners as well: the United Kingdom, for example, has mentioned Germany for the first time as one of its three partners (apart from the US and France) in the newly published British White Paper.

As a matter of course, expectations should not be placed too high in terms of what Germany is actually willing and capable to do in the near term. As has become obvious over the past 25 years, the German foreign policy debate is evolving slowly since well-held convictions and firm beliefs, rooted in the historic past, are not easily left behind. Consequently, the German public is adjusting only gradually to these new expectations. It still has a public opinion that is predominantly not in favor of international engagement.

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5. This conclusion was not limited to the German public discourse but expanded a few months later to other European countries and most notably the US after the Libya’s crumbling into chaos.
6. Critics point out that the ‘Caliphate’s’ ideology will survive. However, there is no doubt that the conquest of the territory will destroy logistical structures and sources of income that very much enable ISIS to strike with complex operations in Europe. Moreover, it will deplete ISIS of its attraction for foreign terrorist fighters (many of them Europeans) to offer a place and a community to become part of and it will deplete it of its nimbus of being invincible. Yet, most important of all it will put the leadership so much under pressure that it will be very difficult for it to focus on any other activity than its own survival.
7. A poll conducted for the Munich Security Report found that 34% of Germans are in favor of a stronger international engagement of Germany. “A significant majority of Germans remain sceptical of adopting a more active global stance, suggesting that any effort to assume an international leadership role remains an uphill battle.” Wolfgang