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## Germany's Role in a Multipolar World

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Helga Haftendorn\*

## GERMANY'S ROLE IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

### Abstract

The paper argues that Germany's role in the world has changed significantly; it is now a country that tries to cope with its international responsibilities. This process of growing up started with the unification of Germany in 1989/1990 and was speeded up by the move of the capital to Berlin. Germany's new self-reliance has been greatly helped by its flourishing economy. Currently, the Ukrainian War is the most dangerous crisis Germany has to struggle with. Its strategy has three facets: 1. strict solidarity with its European partners; 2. stark opposition to Russia, economic sanctions and efforts to strengthen NATO's deterrent posture; 3. open censure of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its support for the Separatists while keeping open diplomatic channels with Moscow. However, Merkel is no "Putin Whisperer", she believes that for the foreseeable future there no longer any strategic relationship with Russia exists.

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### Keywords

Germany, International role, Europe, War in Ukraine



International attention was focused on the German Chancellor when in February 2015, on the height of the Ukrainian War, Angela Merkel together with French President François Hollande went to Moscow to reach a cease-fire in talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Why was it that a German leader started a diplomatic initiative and not, as

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\* **Helga Haftendorn** – professor emeritus at the Free University of Berlin (FUB); until 2000 she held a chair in international relations and was director of the Center on Transatlantic Foreign and Security Policy Studies. Professor Haftendorn received her Dr. phil. 1960 from the University of Frankfurt, her Habilitation (*venia legendi*) 1972 from the University of Hamburg, and in 2013 a honorary doctorate from the Helmut-Schmidt-University. Before joining the FUB she had taught among others at the University of Hamburg and held several fellowships and visiting professorships at American, European and Scandinavian institutions. Further, she has received many prizes and honors, such as Max-Planck Research Prize and the Officer's Cross of the FRG's Order of Merit. She served in various functions at German and international institutions, such as the IISS and SIPRI Boards. Professor Haftendorn has published widely on foreign and security policy. One of her major books is *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945*, Rowman & Littlefield, published 2006.

in the past, an American, British or French politician while Berlin was standing by and paying later?

Significant changes in Germany's self-conception have taken place. Instead of abstaining as in the conflicts caused by the "Arab Spring" movement – most noticeable was Berlin's abstention in the 2011 Libya vote in the UN Security Council (LSE, 2011) – the German Chancellor had taken the lead in finding a solution, however temporary, to stop killing in Eastern Ukraine. In Europe's banking and budgetary crisis it was again Germany that was at the helm. The country now looks to be more than ever prepared to shoulder international responsibilities for guarding security. The government seems to be heeding the admonitions of Federal President Joachim Gauck which he expressed at the 2014 Munich Security Conference (Bundespräsident, 2014). Gauck had argued that because of its new political and economic power, Germany has commensurate responsibilities of contributing to a stable international environment. It had been Germany that in the past profited so much from a stable situation. Free riding and hiding behind the back of U. S. power and performance were no longer any options. Gauck said:

...Germany has embarked on a new course. Step by step, our country has transformed itself from a beneficiary to a guarantor of international order and security. First of all, I want to mention international cooperation. Germany is investing large sums in this sphere because it wants to help build stable and secure societies. Second, Germany is doing much to take the world into a resource efficient future. And third, few other countries are doing more to promote international institutions. Fourth, Germany has on occasion participated in military missions. Fifth, what the Federal Republic has done to help Europe grow together and overcome the recent crisis is truly impressive (Bundespräsident, 2014).

The Federal President's call for more German initiative and action was met with much praise by Germany's political class, though different aspects of his speech were applauded or criticized. "More international responsibility" has since been the leitmotif of numerous papers published in 2014 and 2015 by Berlin think-tanks (SWP, 2013; Review, 2014; Hellmann et al., 2015). As a result, there is a very different feeling about Germany's political role in the world. The country has moved a long way from self-doubt to self-esteem and self-reliance. How did this change come about?

It has been a slow evolutionary – and winding – process that started with the unification of Germany in 1990 and accelerated with the government's and the capital's move to Berlin nine years later. When the Government of Helmut Kohl had assured its partners that its policies would be marked by a great continuity and Germany would remain an

accountable partner; this to a large part was a defensive action, to placate partners' concerns that Germany might overstep its newly acquired rights and irresponsibly use the political and economic powers that it had gained through unification. This process was also greatly helped by a thriving economy, by low unemployment rates and soon a strong entrepreneurial spirit among its young people. In parallel, however, nationalistic sentiments were getting stronger, as is evidenced by the Pegida Movement<sup>1</sup> that initially mobilized thousands of people – mainly in Eastern Germany – to rally against Muslim and other foreign immigration. But their marches have soon been countered by an increasing number of citizens from all quarters of life.

The first visible break with the past happened in 1988/89 when Germany – the government was still in Bonn – joined its NATO partners in military actions against Serbia in the Kosovo war – without a UN mandate. This happened in a difficult domestic situation: right after the 1998 Federal elections and during the transition from Kohl's CDU/CSU-FDP government to a SPD-Green coalition. The decision thus bound all political parties.

In a changed post-Cold War environment and as a reflection of the stark personalities of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens), the new Government announced that it would pursue a more self-reliant policy. Its bluntest political evidence was Germany's abstention from the Iraq war. It was a message to the SPD electorate that Germany would be best off by staying apart. One may sympathize with Schröder's step as far as it meant keeping the country out of the Iraq military adventure, but should criticize his argument that from now on Germany would follow its own interests and walk a German way<sup>2</sup>. With his statement, Schröder overlooked the basic German rational that in a globalized world the country can only be effective and its policies credible when Germany acts in a multilateral environment. Schröder's "Basta-Politik"<sup>3</sup> was neither right for the moment nor did it serve Germany's interests.

Schröder's unilateral approach was taken aback in 2005 by the Grand Coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier tried to better balance initiative with caution. This changed somewhat when in 2009 Guido

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<sup>1</sup> Pegida = „Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes“, is a grass roots movement that started in Dresden in October 2014, protesting Muslim and other foreign immigration.

<sup>2</sup> Address by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in Goslar on 21 January 2003, cited in: Birnbaum 2011.

<sup>3</sup> „Basta Politik“ = a policy of „that's that“.

Westerwelle from the liberal FDP became Steinmeier's successor in the Foreign Office. Germany's abstention on the Libya UN vote was largely due to Westerwelle's political ambitions and his aspiration to imitate former Foreign Minister Genscher's policy of *détente* – though in a very different international situation. The “culture of restraint” (Westerwelle 2013) he promulgated became a stumbling block for a more active German foreign policy – and contributed to strong disagreements with Germany's partners. When in 2013 his predecessor Steinmeier became his successor as foreign minister, he replaced Westerwelle's “culture of restraint” with a “culture of European responsibility” (Steinmeier 2014).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Germany together with its partners was faced with the challenge of restructuring the European political system and to assist its existing institutions such as the European Union (EU) adapting to the new realities. A prime goal was extending the European zone of peace and democracy east- und southward by inviting its neighbor countries to join the EU. Their transformation to the West European model was, however, only partly successful and in all cases costly. Due to the economic strength and its readiness to pay cash for the advancement of European integration, Germany grew into Europe's “benevolent hegemon” – a role that in the past had been performed by the United States. But times have passed that the U.S. could be trusted to safeguard Europe's military security and economic wellbeing. When the Germans were acting as a “benevolent hegemon”, they experienced the same ambivalence as America did before. Any dominating country is criticized because of its power; but if it does not lead forcefully, other states will complain about its indecision and lack of leadership. According to most political observers Germany has profited much from its “embedded hegemony” – leadership that has been embedded and safeguarded by acting multilaterally (Mützenich 2015: 273-287; 279).

The world banking crisis and the financial plight of the EU member states put the German Government into a pivotal role. In cooperation with partners and institutions Angela Merkel became Europe's dominant crisis manager working closely together with France and Poland. She had to find solutions for Europe's ailments: the political bankruptcy of a number of EU countries, their desolate budget situation and their host of domestic challenges. Her quiet action brought her much praise from international statesmen – and criticism from others who like Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras and some of his country's tabloids compared Merkel to a recent dictator and pictured her in a Nazi uniform. But these were overreactions from a frustrated nation. A much

more relevant concern was whether Germany's insistence on budgetary discipline – though correct in principle – was also politically wise. Very likely, German austerity policy could widen the gap between an affluent North and a poor South in Europe; a risk that was cautiously recognized by Chancellor Merkel herself (Merkel 2015).

Like its partners, Germany has been deeply engaged in fighting terrorism. The attack on the editors of "Charly Hebdo" in Paris (BBC, 2015) has aroused deep sympathies for the victims and a great feeling of solidarity with the affected communities. In implementing anti-terrorist actions, however, the German government has to walk a fine line between guarding the privacy of its citizens on the one side and safeguarding security on the other. The Government needs to know where terrorists are and what they are up to. With great sensitivity, the public watches all official information gathering and data retention (Malte Spitz, 2014), even more so by foreign intelligence services.

An uproar erupted when it became known that the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) and the British Intelligence Service were spying on their German ally and even had tampered with the Chancellor's cell phone. This revelation seriously burdened transatlantic relations. Though U.S. spying had been an open secret, it took several months before the uproar died down, especially when it turned out that it was not possible to conclude a deep German-American "No-Spy Agreement". One reason for this special apprehension about information gathering stems from the negative experiences of many German citizens with the Nazi's Gestapo and GDR's Stasi<sup>4</sup>.

The current Ukraine crisis is one of the most difficult challenges the German Government is confronted with. Faced with the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Moscow's military support for the East Ukrainian Separatists, Berlin has supported several sets of economic sanctions against Russian and East Ukrainian politicians. It may not have done so with loud fanfare, but to make sanctions acceptable to German industry and farmers and protect them domestically, it had sought political support at home before agreeing to them.

As a second step, the German Government in NATO advocated various activities to bolster deterrence against Russia and to strengthen reassurance for its East European NATO partners. Berlin supported substantial new temporary military deployments, large field exercises in the Baltics and the creation of new headquarters in the East. Along with these steps, NATO adopted a new Readiness Action Plan (RAP)

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<sup>4</sup> The "Gestapo" ("Geheime Staatspolizei") was the Third Reich's secret service, while the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) service was called "Stasi" ("Staatsicherheitsdienst").

and created a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) to make the NATO Response Force more effective. Germany will contribute to all of them. The existing German-Dutch Corps HQ in Münster (Germany) will be expanded and the joint Polish-German-Danish HQ in Stettin/Szczecin (Poland) strengthened and transformed into the regional NATO Headquarter North-East. The usually spend-thrift German Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, has promised a substantial rise in the defense budget from 2017 on – from 8 bill. Euro to 32 billion (Reuters, 2015). With 1.4 % of GNP German military expenditures continue to be low in comparison to Germany's economic strength.

A third element of Germany's Ukrainian policy have been the diplomatic activities of Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Chancellor Angela Merkel. While fully supporting the restrictive joint Western approach regarding Russia, Germany has explored solutions to the Ukrainian war by using various multilateral diplomatic channels. One result was the September 2014 "Minsk Protocol" on a cease-fire in the Donbass brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (MFA UA, 2014). It soon broke down when Russia intensified its military assistance to the Separatists – with Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms "spending their vacation" fighting alongside the Separatists, with military hardware consisting of heavy artillery, tanks and anti-aircraft missiles, also with food, medical supplies and other goods in sealed "white trucks" under the pretext of a humanitarian action.

To get diplomacy out of the deadlock, in February 2015 Chancellor Merkel together with French President Hollande went to Kyiv and Moscow, taking with them a new 10-point peace plan for Eastern Ukraine. After discussing their plan with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and getting his consent, they sought Russian President Vladimir Putin's personal support for it and a cease-fire in the Ukraine. A week later, after lengthy discussions, the members of the Trilateral Contact Group signed another "Minsk Agreement" on a cease-fire in Eastern Ukraine, a disengagement of forces, and by the end of 2015 a sealing off of the Ukrainian-Russian border (Financial Times, 2015).

Thus Merkel's courage and stamina had finally paid off. For the German Chancellor it had taken quite some courage to travel to Moscow in face of an uncertain outcome and against much international disapproval. Their agreement, however, did provide some breathing space, especially for the distressed people in the Ukrainian war zone. Minsk II, however, has brought no solution to the general conflict. On the contrary, the West has to be careful not to allowing Russia and the separatist forces to redeploy their forces and gear up to a future attack on Mariupol that would enable Russia to open a direct land



passage to the Crimean Peninsula. Nevertheless, there is no military solution for the Ukrainian conflict. Europe is faced with an asymmetric, hybrid challenge that involves political action and propaganda as well as military assistance to a separatist movement. For countering it, the Ukraine first has to reform and stabilize its political system, and the Western societies have to strengthen their resilience to these kinds of hybrid threats.

When in the middle of the crisis German politicians rejected American plans to send military hardware and weapons to the Ukraine for strengthening its self-defense, Berlin was heavily criticized by U.S. politicians. Senior Senator John McCain decried as “silly” Merkel’s efforts to keep open a diplomatic channel to Putin and compared these efforts to Chamberlain’s appeasement strategy in 1938 (Zeit, 2015). Actually, Angela Merkel is not known as a German “Putin Wisperer”, or “Putin sympathizer”, as has been known of former Chancellor Schröder. Several times the Chancellor has publicly stated that for the foreseeable future Germany’s strategic relationship with Russia is over.

Though being exposed to heavy criticism that it were looking for a rapprochement with Russia, the German Government has been convinced that its best course of action was a twofold approach of engagement and dissuasion. Just as in the 1969 “Harmel Report” (NATO, 2009) which enabled East-West détente, Berlin combines diplomatic activities and strengthened military resolve. Germany has backed NATO’s efforts to strengthen both deterrence and reassurance by temporarily deploying substantial military forces in Poland, the Baltic States and the Balkans. On German urging, however, the alliance has avoided violating the 1997 NATO-Russia Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, though Moscow had broken a number of its commitments, like the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which the Ukraine, in exchange for relinquishing its nuclear weapons, had received security guarantees from the West and Russia, relating, among others, to the inviolability of its borders (NATO, 1997; CFR, 1994).

Germany’s increased political and economic might has strengthened its sense of identity from which its new policy flows. Germany has become a “central power in the middle of Europe” (Schwarz 1998). But her foreign and security policy activism might not be stable enough to weather all future challenges. A core precondition is continued domestic support. In its foreign and security policy making, the government has to be careful of involving the German people and taking it along. This has been done through the Foreign Office’s “Review 2014 process” (Review, 2014) and by the Department of Defense’s work on a new “White Book”. In both projects a broad set of German



and international experts have been involved and all recommendations published.

A recurring criticism from the German public has been the Chancellor's practice of a "wait and see" attitude before she takes action. Often she does not elaborate much on her decisions, thus leaving room for interpretations. Merkel strongly dislikes big words and rhetorical fanfare. Nevertheless, Merkel and Steinmeier in surveys receive very high rates of public approval. But it should not be overlooked that the German body politics abhors everything military. According to a Koerber Foundation public opinion poll, only 37% of respondents support a stronger international commitment if it involved military forces, and 60% are against it (Koerber Stiftung, 2014). In the German Bundestag, however, usually all major parties except the Left – that is CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens – support measured military deployments. Heeding the constitution's mandate to promote world peace, Germany always tries putting an emphasis on crisis management and conflict prevention.

Very remarkable has been a statement from former Polish Foreign Minister Radislav Sikorski that he was more concerned about a Germany that was too weak than about one that is too strong (Sikorski 2011). In the European context, though, a Germany perceived as too strong would be just as dangerous. Instead of inviting other countries to follow the German leader, it would stimulate coalition-building against Germany in order to balance its overweight and to reign it in. Thus, Germany is well advised to heed the following advice: "Walk the walk, and not just talk the talk, but do not to walk it alone."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See address by the author at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 24 March 2015 (manuscript).

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**Helga Haftendorn** – profesor emerytowana na Wolnym Uniwersytecie Berlina (FUB). Do roku 2000 przewodniczyła tamtejszemu wydziałowi stosunków międzynarodowych i była dyrektorem Centrum Badań nad Transatlantycką Polityką Zagraniczną i Bezpieczeństwa. Doktoryzowała się w roku 1960 na Uniwersytecie im. Johana Wolfganga Goethego we Frankfurcie nad Menem, zaś habilitację ukończyła w roku 1972 na Uniwersytecie w Hamburgu. W 2013 otrzymała doktorat honoris causa od Helmut-Schmidt-Universität. Przed dołączeniem do kadry FUB uczyła między innymi na Uniwersytecie w Hamburgu oraz uczestniczyła w różnych wymianach i programach dla profesorów wizytujących w amerykańskich, europejskich i skandynawskich instytucjach. W kolejnych latach została wyróżniona wieloma nagrodami takimi jak międzynarodowa Max-Planck Research Prize czy Krzyż Oficerski Orderu Zasługi Republiki Federalnej Niemiec. Sprawowała wiele funkcji w różnych niemieckich i międzynarodowych instytucjach, w tym w Międzynarodowym Instytucie Studiów Strategicznych oraz Sztokholmskim Międzynarodowym Instytucie do Badań nad Pokojem. Profesor Haftendorn jest autorką wielu publikacji z zakresu polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa. Za jedną z jej najważniejszych książek uważa się *“Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945”* wydaną przez wydawnictwo Rowman & Littlefield w 2006 roku.

## Abstrakt

W artykule autorka stawia tezę, że międzynarodowa rola Niemiec mocno się zmieniła i że są one obecnie państwem, które przede wszystkim stara się wywiązywać ze swoich międzynarodowych obowiązków. Opisywany proces wzrostu Niemiec rozpoczął się wraz z ich zjednoczeniem w latach 1989/1990 i uległ przyspieszeniu po przeniesieniu stolicy do Berlina. Dużą rolę we wzmacnianiu pozycji i samodzielności Niemiec odegrała prężnie rozwijająca się gospodarka. Obecnie największym wyzwaniem, któremu Niemcy muszą stawić czoła, jest wojna

na Ukrainie. Niemiecka strategia w obliczu tego niebezpiecznego konfliktu ma zasadniczo trzy główne wymiary: 1. solidarność z europejskimi partnerami; 2. całkowita opozycja wobec Rosji; 3. ostra krytyka aneksji Półwyspu Krymskiego przez Rosję i wsparcia udzielanego separatystom oraz jednocześnie utrzymanie kontaktów dyplomatycznych z Moskwą. Angela Merkel nie jest jednak „Zaklinaczem Putina” i uważa, że w najbliższej przyszłości Niemcy i Rosję nie będą łączyły żadne strategiczne relacje.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Niemcy, rola międzynarodowa, Europa, wojna na Ukrainie