

## Normatively Disarmed, But Self-Confident

German foreign policy 20 years after reunification

Gunther Hellmann | **Germany's self-conception has fundamentally changed—and with it Berlin's relationships to its allies. After decades of allowing its foreign policy to be subsumed under its Europe and Western partners, Germany is reasserting its power. There is a new Berlin Republic foreign policy, despite all denials, and it is not a boon for Europe.**

Last year brought a number of perceptible shifts in Germany's image. The German tabloids discovered an "iron chancellor" who suddenly said "no" to Europe's entreaties. The new Germany is "no longer the paymaster, no longer the favorite of Europe," commented the German mass-circulation tabloid *BILD* in March 2010. But even the international media claimed to see a lot that was "unfamiliar" in Angela Merkel's outward posture. The *New York Times* saw the German chancellor as a "naysayer" in presenting a new Germany that fights hard for its interests, "shocking" partners in Europe and throughout the world. Even those who defended Angela Merkel, like the commentators at the conservative daily *Die Welt*, spoke of "a new German self-confidence."

### A Transformed Self-Image

The term "self-confidence" is really the key to understanding Germany's new foreign policy. It marks a funda-

mental shift in Germany's role in both Europe and the world, articulated through a sharpened awareness of power and status. These foreign policy self-image changes are extensive and profound, and pertain not only to the self-image of a small foreign policy elite, but that of the German public in general. And we are not talking about simply style and rhetoric but also substance or, in other words, changes in the goals of German foreign policy.

There are two reasons that these changes have been ignored. First, the concept of self-confidence is still part of a familiar, trusted vocabulary from the Bonn years, which conceals how profound these changes actually are. The same is true for the concept of "responsibility," as well as "multilateralism," or the "culture of restraint." Some of these concepts now mean the opposite today. In a speech before the German Bundestag in September 1990 for instance, Hans-Dietrich Genscher assured that Germany was not striv-

ing “for more power,” but “understands the larger responsibility that comes with power.” Now when German diplomacy describes its “readiness to assume more responsibility,” one can assume it has to do with desiring a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Second, the furtive reinterpretation of these valued concepts, and the reluctance to be clear about what is new in German foreign policy, comes from the fact that we lack a complimentary contrast for the new Berlin foreign policy. The Bonn Republic had a clear idea of what they wanted to avoid. “Never again Weimar” was their credo in the beginning. Achieving this came comparatively easy. For the “self-confident” Berlin Republic, it

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is considerably more difficult to contrast a new, positive foreign policy with the past. Self-confi-

dence cannot alone be the marker as it harkens associations that bring back bad memories of Germany in the build-up to World War II. In addition, “Bonn” (in comparison to “Weimar”) cannot serve as the bad guy. According to experts and the wider public, the Bonn Republic was the most successful phase of German history.

### The New Self-Confidence

In the fall of 1990 *Der Spiegel* offered Joschka Fischer the chance to write an essay on German reunification. Rather than penning an “Ode to Joy”

on October 3, he asked if Germany actually “has to become one fatherland again?” The reunification rallying cry “We are one people” disquieted him. He could not conquer his doubt that “the Germans could now limit themselves through democratic means in light of their undoubted strength.” When he retired as foreign minister 15 years later, he was singing a different tune. In an interview with *Die Tageszeitung*, he said that under the Red-Green government, Germany “became a different country,” which was “more open, more free, and a self-determined nation...Today it is clearer what we Germans actually are...When seen collectively, Germany is a wonderful country. That someone with my history would say this says something.”

These two quotes, and the transformations in Fischer they reflect, highlight Germany’s shift in the last two decades. Above all, the positive connotation of national self-determination from the most prominent Green illustrates the remarkable history of the term “self-confidence” in the new foreign policy vocabulary. In the beginning of the 1990s, the only people calling for a “self-confident nation” were a scattered group of intellectuals from the “new democratic right” who bemoaned Germans’ “broken” national consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The term first emerged at the center of political discourse under the chancellorship of Gerhard Schroeder, when he outlined the “self-confidence of a grown-up nation” in his first state of

<sup>1</sup> Heimo Schwilk & Ulrich Schacht (eds.), “Die selbstbewusste Nation. ‘Anschwellender Bocksgesang’ und weitere Beiträge zu einer deutschen Debatte,” Berlin, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Ullstein GmbH 1994.

the nation address. In a speech before the Bundestag at the end of his term, he again claimed to have made Germany “outwardly more self-confident.”

The self-confidence postulated in this context really refers to a growing awareness of power. Germany has not just, as *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas Kulish recently wrote, “increasingly come to terms with itself.” Rather, it has again allowed itself to “flex its muscles” in matters both “big and small.” The Greeks are by no means the only ones to feel the effects of this. Allies Portugal and Canada, who gave notice of their candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for 2011/2012 in 2000 and 2001 respectively (and thus well before the previous non-permanent membership of Germany), have known at least since the disclosure of a new German candidacy in 2006 that Berlin is willing to fight more aggressively than was previously the case. Germany’s tough stance on its candidacy is not only noteworthy because it was announced with full knowledge of the candidacies of its NATO allies, but also because, as opposed to Canada and Portugal, Germany claimed a right to be in the security council only eight years after its previous stint. The time gap between the last non-permanent membership and the current attempt for both Canada and Portugal would actually have been longer than previous gaps, making both countries’ claims to a Council seat all the more legitimate.

This example is one of many that can be put forward to illustrate the new consciousness of power in German foreign policy. Other examples

include Germany’s participation in the so-called “P5 plus Germany” group, which consists of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany and addresses questions like the potential nuclear arming of Iran. There is also the widely accepted informal EU-3 constellation of Great Britain, France, and Germany, which takes up questions regarding security policy in the European Union. Berlin’s place in these groups demonstrates its confidence but also others’ recognition of Germany as a key player in certain fields and with certain partners. In these contexts,

“power” is still not mentioned. But Germany’s growing self-confidence has to do with a new consciousness of power. When the federal government goes to Brussels and “confidently” defends German interests or explains its “readiness to take up more responsibility” internationally, it is clear to everyone that, at heart, they are talking about power.

### A Proud Germany

How deeply these changes run and how much these status questions are perceived as questions of power to the German public were reflected in different polls from the Allensbach Polling Institute in recent years. For example, the number of Germans who answered yes when asked whether Germany has become “a different republic” has doubled since the 1990s. These polls also demonstrate a noticeable increase since the late 1990s in associations with the Berlin Republic that highlight self-confidence: in 1998, 39 percent of respondents associated “prestige” with the term “Berlin Re-



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Taking to the world stage: German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle addresses the UN Security Council on security and development on February 11, 2011

public,” (other association choices included “success” or “social democracy”). By 2007, 50 percent connected prestige to the Berlin Republic. This pattern continues (1998/2007) for “size” (37/48), “power” (42/47), and “patriotism” (41/43).<sup>2</sup> The assertion that Germany acts “self-confidently in its relations with other countries” was met with a 59 percent approval rate in 2009, over 10 percent more than in 2002. This coincides with a larger consensus on the question of whether one should have national pride, or whether national pride is “unimportant.” While only 54 percent of Germans saw national pride as important in 1993, the number had grown to 73 percent by 2006. This new self-confidence is further complemented by the assessment that Germany’s popularity is global. While only 39 percent of

Germans thought that they were “popular in the rest of the world” in 1991, that number had risen to 56 percent by February 2009 (45 percent of Germans saw themselves as “unpopular” in 1991; only 21 percent agreed in February 2009). Coupled with the results of a 2010 BBC World Service poll that found Germany’s influence in the world receiving the best rating out of a total of 29 countries, one can assume that German self-confidence is only going to grow stronger.

In short, the self-conception of the German foreign policy elite, alongside that of the wider public, has fundamentally changed. Today, who “we” are and what “we” are (supposedly) entitled to is defined differently by Germans today than 20 or 40 years ago. Germany has assumed “leadership responsibility,” whether in the context of

<sup>2</sup> More detailed citation of these poll results and many other footnotes left out of this version can be found in the online version at [www.ip-global.org](http://www.ip-global.org).

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Schlie, “Deutsche Sicherheitspolitik in Fesseln?” A reply to Constanze Stelzenmüller, *Internationale Politik*, May/June 2010.

the European Union or in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The “culture of restraint” that was associated with the Bonn years is no longer compatible with today’s increased responsibility in foreign policy. The term is increasingly seen as a synonym for “diffidence” and “as an argument for comfortably sitting on the sidelines.”<sup>3</sup> “Normalcy,” a term that was unusable in the Bonn vocabulary because so much about German foreign policy appeared atypical, has also become a new standard. For example, in 2002 then SPD General Secretary Franz Müntefering called Germany a “normal country in Europe.” When combined with the term “national interests,” which the generation of Brandt, Genscher, and Kohl always saw as identical to “European interests,” a new notion of German autonomy is articulated, one that sees normalcy as a benchmark. Gerhard Schröder bluntly set this new benchmark in an address to the Bundestag in 1998 when he suggested that “Representing and understanding Germany’s national interests is not in conflict with the interests of Europe, but the opposite. Just as others do this, we are entitled to as well.”

### Normal as Failure

Not everyone shares the positive connotations that usually accompany this new foreign policy of self-confidence. In an article written in May for the weekly *Die Zeit*, Jürgen Habermas harshly criticized these developments. While others see a self-confident foreign policy, he refers to a “new German obdurateness.” He argues

that Germany is a “self-centered colossus in the middle of Europe,” displaying no creative power whatsoever, distinguished by a “self-absorbed and normatively bankrupt mentality.” Although the deep roots of these changes can be traced to immediately after reunification, Habermas considers “the mentality shift that came about after Helmut Kohl” as “more important.” “Apart from Joschka Fischer, who gave up his reservations too easily, a normatively disarmed generation has governed since Gerhard Schröder entered office.”

This critique was in line with earlier warnings in which Habermas connected “new German uncertainty” to the “normalcy of a future Berlin Republic.”<sup>4</sup> According to Habermas in the mid-1990s, the old federal republic “developed a kind of dialectic of normalcy—so that only by avoiding an awareness of “normalcy” can halfway-normal relations develop.” There is no trace of this today. “Today,” Habermas writes in *Die Zeit*, “the German elites are enjoying their re-found nation state of normalcy.” The accusation he levels of a “normative disarmament” is actually a complaint that today’s Germans failed to live up to original hopes. Instead of taking “concerted action” and “pursuing the republican legacy on a European level,” Germany is once again acting as a sovereign supremacy.

It seems that for Habermas the

Germany’s “confident” pursuit of national interests can hardly be written off as a mere question of style.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “1989 im Schatten von 1945. Zur Normalität einer künftigen Berliner Republik,” *Die Normalität einer Berliner Republik, Kleine politische Schriften VIII*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1995.

“normative disarmament” goes to the foundation of foreign policy—the general goals. In this way his critique goes well beyond general assessments among experts: that change in German foreign policy is largely a matter of rhetoric, or a change in style as opposed to substance in German foreign

The European Union and the alliance with the United States remain at the center of German foreign policy.

policy. In this perspective, shared for example by Hanns Maull, a confident demeanor is merely a question of style that only marginally affects the actual goals of German foreign policy. This distinction between style and substance is problematic first of all because talking is already a form of action. The “confident” pursuit of national interests (and, as a rule, a power-political assertion of these interests is implied) can hardly be written off as a mere question of style. In any case, the Greeks, Italians, Portuguese, or Canadians are bound to focus on power when standing across from a “confident” Germany.

Of course, this does not mean that all of the coordinates of Bonn foreign policy have been abandoned. Just as before, the European Union is at the center of German (foreign) policy, and the alliance with the United States (especially with regard to NATO) remains preeminent in terms of big, international conflicts, despite some calls to prioritize relations with Russia. Regardless of these stable Western ties, Berlin continues to foster close relations with Moscow. There was indeed no reason to expect a radical break from the past. Bonn foreign policy was highly successful, and Ger-

mans promised continuity in 1990. Furthermore, this level of continuity is hardly surprising since it is hard to identify a plausible alternative, a deviant “Grand Strategy.” When such alternatives are suggested, they mostly foresee an (even) stronger accentuation of national power (for example, through a more intergovernmental orientation of EU politics, as practiced by Great Britain) or even—as John Mearsheimer suggested in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* in 2001—open, militarily supported aspirations of dominance over the European continent. That such options cannot be given any serious practical consideration is clear, especially in light of general developments in Germany’s neighborhood (such as the Western-orientation of central and eastern European states) and the expected reactions of Germany’s neighbors to open renationalization.

### New Goals

All the more important, then, are changes to the core areas of German foreign policy. They are all in line with a central, substantial change in Germany’s view of itself and the role it should play in the world given its increased power. What is most striking in European politics is Germany’s earlier preference for supranational solutions giving way to rules that strengthen the influence of the biggest states—from a strong consideration of demographic complaints during majority polls in the Lisbon Treaty, to the expansion of majority decision making in the Council, to the clear preference for intergovernmental solutions in general and especially in informal leadership circles. In the case

of relations with the United States and Russia, this new self-confidence is expressed in a strong bilateralization of relations, with less regard for other European allies than in the Bonn years. Security policy has, of course, seen the most drastic changes. But it is worth remembering that the fundamental paradigm-shift of foreign Bundeswehr operations occurred during the Red-Green government of Gerhard Schröder. In the 2003 defense policy guidelines, the mission of the Bundeswehr was redefined: their “top priority” was no longer the defense of the country, but to guarantee Germany’s “capacity to act abroad.” In the foreign policy culture of the Bonn Republic, such an objective, which is clearly much more than a mere change in style, would have been unimaginable.

### Redefining a Great Power

An enumeration of changes in foreign policy goals could go on and on. The core message remains the same: in all central fields of German foreign policy, substantial changes can be identified that are both consequences and expressions of changes to Germany’s self-image. Germany and its foreign policy elite still see themselves as a European nation—that is to say, as a country in the middle of Europe and, even more so, a country deeply embedded in the structures of the European Union and dependent on the success of the whole European project. But Germany is also conscious of its post-1990 increased power in a new way. To the extent that international policies are shaped by power and status, this new position is crucial. The estimation by Berlin, its

partners, and competitors of Germany’s legitimate power-political entitlements influences their cooperation and relationships. Think of the United States during the Iraq crisis, Italy with regard to UN reform, or Greece during the financial crisis to see that the assessment of standards of acceptable German foreign policy between Germany and its partners has noticeably shifted. This shift may eventually lead to adjustments and accepted new power-balances, but it could also create or exacerbate structural conflicts. The Greek financial crisis or Berlin’s aspiration for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council are examples of this.

Germany’s willingness “to take on more responsibility” could be demonstrated differently, such as by heeding the advice given by former German deputy foreign minister Wolfgang Ischinger, who addressed Russia on July 2, 2000. Ischinger proposed a new definition of the term “modern great power” according to which strength is no longer measured “by size, but on the power to shape: it is more important to convince than to threaten, it is more important to integrate than to command, it is more important to win partners than to constrain enemies. These are the dictates of the 21st century.” Germany should assert its new strength and confidence in such a direction.



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