

Analysis

Grand coalition, small ambition?

Foreign and security policy of the new German government

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That book is a big one, and no easy read. The coalition agreement¹, over 180 pages, of the projected Grand Coalition is out after weeks of negotiation between the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The paper sketches the guidelines of government policy, with many question marks about how the adopted measures will be paid for. Conflicts had circled around the details of a country-wide minimum wage, retirement age, motorway tolls for foreigners or dual citizenship. Foreign policy was not contentious, simply because it was not really important for the negotiators.

Since continuity and a broad common ground among the leading parties have been features of German foreign policy for decades, one should not expect disruptions or ideological discontinuities under the new government. A look at the coalition agreement and the foreign policy debates around the negotiations allows for some early assessments of coming trends: What is the nature of the government's strategic consensus? How will the Grand Coalition put principle into action? What might the new government do to improve transatlantic relations?

Sitting on a fence

German foreign policy is in a transitionary phase with little indication where it might be headed. That situation is puzzling for the Germans and for the European partners as well. As the most powerful country in Europe, the decisive actor in shaping the outcome of the Euro crisis, and a sought-after partner by the leading economies outside Europe, there is no question that the demand for German leadership role is growing.

Two years ago, the Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski pointed out in a lecture at the German Council on Foreign Relations: "I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity. You have become Europe's indispensable nation."² The German Federal President, Joachim Gauck, has recently urged Germany to take on greater international responsibilities and to be aware of risks and alliance solidarity. "Our country is not an island. We should not cherish the illusion that we will be spared from political and economic, environmental and military conflicts if we do not contribute to solving them", he said in a speech commemorating the Day of German Unity.³

In spite of such declarations, the German political elites find it difficult to handle that opportunity, to fill the leadership role with means proportionate to those that other major powers apply, or to see legitimacy in its own interests. There lingers in German foreign policy culture the multilateral embedding that was designed to tie down the largest nation in Europe and connect its interests with those of its neighbors. To underline that multilateral orientation, Germany stresses its willingness to take on more responsibility in international

affairs in all public representations of its foreign policy principles. Yet there seems to be little understanding that the responsibility of a stronger state grows from action and non-action alike.

The Germans' cautious attitude towards the use of force has historical reasons, but the anti-militarism of the Germans presents itself today as a deeply felt skepticism regarding the effectiveness of military instruments in solving political conflicts. The German unwillingness to send its forces into battle, therefore, rests in its strategic culture, but it is fueled by two other more recent trends — on the one hand, by the frustrating experience that years of operations in Afghanistan could not bring about political stability, and, on the other, by the severe budgetary cuts and downsizing forced on the *Bundeswehr*.

Add to these factors the thrifty caution of a country that only ten years ago was seen as a drag on the European caravan, with dismal economic figures of unemployment, national debt, and laggard growth. Even if the Germans were to accept the position as European lead nation, they would no longer agree to be limited to the role of the benevolent donor. So any guarantee given to the weakest states in the eurozone will be accompanied by harsh demands regarding economic and political reform.

Germans do not want to lead, but they also do not want to be pushed. The louder the allies, first of all the Americans but also the French, call on Germany to take more responsibilities in the international operations of NATO or the EU, the more stubbornly the Germans insist that their foreign policy is characterized by military restraint and the understanding that sovereignty includes the right to say no.

Berlin needs to find ways to respond to both the demands for leadership and its cautious reflexes. German initiatives for a more civilian evolution of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), like the Enable and Enhance Initiative (E2I), would be examples of such a compromise. E2I represents the idea to enable and enhance partner nations in conflict regions to take care of crisis response.

While these loosely sketched out strands in German strategic culture consolidate, Germany has only modest means at hand to deal with the growing deterioration in its relations with some of its closest allies and partners. The United States, asking for an end of German complacency and frustrated about its dodging in military crises, today finds itself in the position of the bad guy, after the revelations of the NSA's eavesdropping on German communications, including Angela Merkel's party cell phone. France has to cope with its growing political and economic weakness, and directs some of its anger towards its eastern neighbor (that finds it hard not to lecture). The relationship to Russia has not become easier for Berlin since President Putin tightened domestic pressure on the opposition and expressed fundamental resistance to the international handling of the Syria crisis. Russia further strained the relationship with its recent pressure to keep Ukraine away from the EU.

With so much of the most important foreign policy networks in disarray, one might expect Germany to roll up its sleeves and take a more prominent role in international relations. The coalition agreement, however, does not indicate that any such steps are imminent.

The coalition agreement

While it is surely too early to tell what the foreign policy parameters of the new German government will be, and especially how the leading personalities will react in international crises, the first agreement in the coalition negotiations offers a sobering insight into German strategic decision-making culture.

The working group on Foreign and Security Policy rather early produced a first “cornerstone paper” for the final negotiation of a comprehensive coalition contract that came out on November 27. The chairmen of the Foreign Policy working group, Thomas de Maizière and Frank Walter Steinmeier, had both been chief of staff in the chancellery and Minister at times in their career. They knew the territory, enjoyed good working relationships and installed a structured process of decision-making with few discussions left for the Plenary. The segments, starting with a strong, short preamble about the responsible role that Germany will be seeking, outline the large common ground of German foreign policy: awareness of responsibilities, multilateral, cooperative and partner-oriented and always value-based.

Transatlantic relations and the friendship with the U.S. take a prominent role as well as the cooperation with France, while Russia, China and India are seen as partners in varying degrees of importance but all figuring at least in Germany’s strategic interest. The consensus on principle is the strength of Germany’s foreign and security policy, building a basis for credibility and persistence. However, if everything is important, nothing is. Greater prioritization would have been welcome. The agreement is rather noncommittal when it comes to putting principles into proposals for action.

Any overview will be sketchy, but a look at some compromises in the agreement might be interesting, in the chapters on Europe, multilateral security organizations and arms control.

Cautious policy on Europe

EU policy has its own chapter, but from the outset it seemed telling that the EU dossier was handled not in the Foreign and Security working group but by a subgroup of the working group on Finances. The CDU/CSU supported a stricter handling of the Euro crisis, whereas the Social Democrats (throughout Europe) had asked for more attention for financial assistance for ailing economies in order not to suffocate them through budgetary rigidity. The positions had drawn closer over the past year so a compromise was possible. The new government will be looking for a “comprehensive political approach that can link higher competitiveness and a strict sustainable consolidation of budgets with future investment in growth and employment, in a socially balanced way.”⁴ SPD demands for a fund to nullify national debts, proposals for dealing with state insolvency or an exit procedure from the eurozone are not in the agreement. “Any form of collectivization of state debt would jeopardize the necessary orientation of national policies in every single member state,” according to the agreement, clearly a CDU/CSU position. One of the first agreements between the two parties was to work for a new tax on financial transactions.⁵

The language on new members and old partnerships of the EU is not surprising either. The EU is open for new members, but under strict conditions. Western Balkan countries are welcome. The new government will seek a gradual reduction and eventually a termination of

KFOR. In an earlier draft, it had demanded a Europeanization of the mission. That proposal was deleted.

Turkey's EU membership is traditionally a contentious point with the CDU opposing and the SPD supporting it. The negotiations over Turkish accession to the EU should go on, the agreement says, but as open-ended progress without precluding a solution. A mere "privileged partnership" of Turkey is always an option for the Germans, as invented by Merkel some years ago.

The partners in the Mediterranean are mentioned only briefly as the EU's neighbors — however, later in the document, the extension of the comprehensive transformation partnership is elaborated. A growing concern for Christian Democratic foreign policy is the deteriorating security of the Christians in the Arab world. Under the agreement it is now an issue for government policy. The support for plural societies in the region includes the affirmation of the rights of Christian minorities.⁶

Responsibilities in multilateral security organizations

Germany has proposed an initiative to create clusters of member states to cooperate in military procurement within NATO. "Germany is prepared to contribute as framework nation, together with other NATO-Partners, to build up capabilities for the alliance."⁷ The so-called "Framework Nation approach" is designed to organize pooling and sharing among European nations around a stronger nation that will keep up its capabilities. The German initiative met a mixed response: some members, like France, were concerned that it would fragment NATO; some asked for a cooperation that would not only help building capabilities but also deploy troops in operations.⁸ The German initiative's context is NATO's Smart Defence Initiative. The force-planning processes in NATO are more binding, which is why the German government chose this path, but better European armies will make the EU more capable as well — provided the governments decide to move in that direction.

Slowly, the German security elites seem to have noticed that a policy of military restraint may contradict Germany's multilateral principles. German abstention in 2011 regarding the UN Security Council's Libya Resolution 1973 or the modest *Bundeswehr* contribution to the EU's operation in Mali in 2013 have isolated Germany and have not bolstered Germany's position in NATO or the EU. The coalition agreement contains hints on how Germany plans to find a more positive narrative for its civil-oriented agenda.

Firstly, the reference to a "Culture of Military Restraint" that some in the SPD wanted to include in the document is gone. That absence does not mean that the Merkel-led Grand Coalition will be more forthcoming when it comes to deploying troops: the chancellor is careful not to be seen as war-monger.

Secondly, even if Germany wants to develop the capabilities that CSDP can bring into the field, the civil prerogative will remain. Germany has urged a better integration of civil elements in the CSDP in a non-paper to the EU this year.⁹ Part of that proposal is a modification of the yet unused EU Battle Groups, to allow for a more flexible structure and to include a larger array of the EU's instruments and make them more deployable. That idea is not in the coalition agreement, but the demand for a more functional European External Action Service, in closer coordination with the European Commission, and a new focus on

strategic debate in Europe should establish better coordination and integration of the civil and military elements of crisis response.¹⁰

Thirdly, part of that approach is the idea to build up partners outside Europe to take care of crisis response themselves. The Enable and Enhance Initiative (E2I) will allow the EU to assist in building up capabilities for crisis response. Operations outside of Europe's neighborhood "should be handed over to regional partners and organizations."¹¹

Fourthly, facing the growing concern that Germany's strict parliamentary co-decision for sending troops abroad might hamper multinational defense cooperation, the governing parties will create a committee that examines, within a year, how to adapt the German Military Dispatch Act to the new conditions: German soldiers in integrated structures and staffs would need to be available for joint operations.¹²

To be sure, the problem for the smaller partners is not the German *Bundestag*. More often, the unwillingness of the Government is the key reason why German troops stay home.

Arms and procurement

Arms control will always take a prominent position on the foreign policy agenda in Berlin although the Germans themselves have not much to disarm anymore. The withdrawal of U.S. sub-strategic nuclear weapons had been one of the demands of the conservative-liberal coalition, an issue dear to the FDP and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. The Coalition will postpone the issue by promising to wait for negotiations on tactical nukes between Russia and the U.S. For the Social Democrats, the demand is still on the table, but for the CDU/CSU, the nuclear participation of the *Bundeswehr* remains valid for the time being.

On arms exports, the coalition partners re-iterated the strict procurement guidelines that are less compelling when governments' strategic or industry interests come into play. Germany is the third largest arms exporter, with about seven per cent of the global arms export market. Its main profits come from submarines and frigates. In case of a sensitive export, the *Bundestag* will be informed — after the decision has been made. No additional transparency here either. There is reason to believe that the SPD would have liked tougher language, given its opposition to exporting tanks to Saudi Arabia agreed upon in 2012. Note: E2I has an element of enabling partners' military capabilities, so there compromises will need to be made on delivering arms to states that are supposed to help in crisis regions of which they are part.

The new government will postpone the decision to procure unmanned, armed aerial vehicles. The SPD had a demand to renounce armed UAVs in its election program, but Defense Minister Thomas De Maizière had indicated intentions to procure weaponized drones eventually. The coalition agreement makes a reference to the dangers of the weapons but avoids expressing a clear no. Germany is against illegal targeted killings and will work to include UAVs in arms control regimes, and will examine all legal and political implications before buying any themselves.¹³

Partner in its own way

Given the current frictions between Germany and the U.S., it is good to see that the new German government will attach high value to the transatlantic relationship. The coalition agreement commits the government to NATO and ties no conditions to the project of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment partnership, as some had demanded during the NSA crisis.¹⁴ In the aftermath of the scandal, the U.S. needs to rebuild the trust it has lost. But Germany needs to create the confidence that it is a valuable partner for security cooperation, in America and Europe.

Despite its scrupulous attitude toward the use of military force, Germany can be a useful partner for the U.S. in crisis operations. The haggling over the purpose of the mission in Afghanistan had been a burden on the bilateral relationship. But with the greater coherence of the NATO members' positions after 2008 and after more of the insurgency landed in Regional Command North under German command, U.S.-German cooperation in the Hindu Kush has gone more smoothly with a revised strategy under Obama. Germany was the first ally to offer a contribution of 600-800 troops for ISAF's follow-up after 2014.

For the time being, the U.S. is shying away from larger, complex operations as, for instance, any involvement in Syria would entail. Even if such an option were under consideration, Germany would no longer be the prime partner as could be seen when America was searching for coalition partners for punitive action against Syria's chemical weapons program: political support was welcome from Germany, but no military contribution was expected.

In the Asia Pacific theatre, the U.S. is compelled to show force from time to time, but knows well that European or German navies have no plans to directly support their strongest ally in the containment of China. And when it comes to targeted strikes by drones or special forces against Al Qaeda chieftains, the U.S. has been doing this alone for a long time. So, as of now, a direct U.S. demand for help from Berlin in high-end operations is not very likely. That situation will hardly change, especially given the more civil profile Berlin has in mind for the CSDP and the military outsourcing of E2I.

But first, the U.S. and Germany have to find a way out of the NSA crisis. The relationship with the U.S. needs the rebuilding of trust through appropriate measures on the side of the American administration. The new German government would like a legally binding agreement with Washington to protect German citizens against limitless digital spying. It will also increase its vigilance and cyber protection.¹⁵ That would touch only the surface of a very complex relationship since outside influence on U.S. practices is limited, and the German intelligence services have benefited from data uncovered by their powerful American counterparts. A larger share of that information and some closer coordination might be the best result that Germany can get.

German-American friendship, it seems, will be defined differently in the future: less emotional, more interest-based. That development might be a good thing, since newer generations of politicians in Germany did not experience U.S. assistance and protection during the Cold War, and fewer U.S. defense personnel are currently deployed in Germany.

Any new deal must be based on interests and on the idea of a joint direction. Closer ties in reconnaissance cooperation might be a small element of that development.

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1. At the time of writing, the SPD membership still had to give final approval to the coalition agreement. Decisions on the division of government positions were yet to be made.
2. "Poland and the future of the European Union" Radek Sikorski, Foreign Minister of Poland, German Council on Foreign Relations Berlin, 28 November 2011, <https://dgap.org>.
3. Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck, to mark the Day of German Unity, Stuttgart, 3 October 2013, www.bundespraesident.de.
4. All quotes are translations by the author from *Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, 18. Legislaturperiode*, www.cdu.de.
5. See "Union und SPD wollen Finanzsteuer", *Tagesspiegel*, 30 October 2013, www.tagesspiegel.de.
6. *Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten*, p.172.
7. Ibid. p. 169.
8. See "Nato-Reform. De Maizièrè will deutschen Sonderweg beenden", *Spiegel-online*, 22 October 2013, www.spiegel.de.
9. See "Bolstering the European Union as a full-fledged Crisis Management Actor", *Fondation de Recherche Stratégique*, Seminar Report, High Level Seminar in Preparation of the December 2013 European Council 12 July 2013 www.defense.gouv.fr.
10. *Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten*, p. 166.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, p. 177. See for a pragmatic discussion Ekkehard Brose, "Parlamentsarmee und Bündnisfähigkeit. Ein Plädoyer für eine begrenzte Reform des Parlamentsbeteiligungsgesetzes", *SWP-Studien 2013/S 18*, September 2013. www.swp-berlin.org.
13. *Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten*, p. 178.
14. Ibid. p. 168.
15. Ibid. p. 149.