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Crisis – Order – Europe: Germany Steps Up

by Gary Soroka
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POLICY PAPER

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► **Executive Summary**

Germany recently issued the results of a year-long review of foreign policy titled “Crisis – Order - Europe”. The principal conclusions are: crises - unpredictable and dangerous - are the new norm; the multilateral system is unable to meet the demands placed upon it; and Germany’s relationship with Europe has to be factored into every major policy discussion. The German Foreign Ministry will be restructured to improve policy development and delivery in these three areas.

The wider context for the review is that the traditional foreign policy heavyweights within Europe - France and Britain - are not able or willing to play the role they used to, while the USA is overstretched in a number of global hot spots and so Germany must assume greater responsibility. The German population, however, fears that deeper engagement on “hard” security issues could drag the country into foreign conflicts, and so a major effort will be made to build public support for a German international role commensurate with its growing economic and political power.





We know the conventional picture. Germany is an economic powerhouse with a stable and admirable democracy. It is anchored in a Europe that it has helped bring into being and, for the first time in its history, it is at peace with all its neighbours. Internationally, it stands for the rule of law and strong multilateral institutions. When, in Kosovo and Afghanistan, it has deployed troops to war zones, it has done so behind U.S. leadership, nestled safely in a group of like-minded nations.

It was a comfortable place to be, until it began to unravel. One after another, crises erupted: Ukraine and the critical relationship with Russia; the Eurozone problems and the prospects of a deflationary spiral; Ebola; war in Gaza; the collapse of Syria, Libya and Yemen; the flows of refugees from the Middle East and Eastern Europe; the continuing threat of the EU falling apart with a U.K. withdrawal (Brexit) and the “Grexit” (Greece leaving the Eurozone).

At the same time, the traditional political context for German action is slipping away. The European Union is grappling with so many problems - economic, political and social - that there is little energy left for major foreign policy initiatives. The situation is particularly acute in France where economic stagnation and high unemployment, terrorism, the rise of anti-Semitism and other threats to France’s secular traditions, and a deeply unpopular President have shaken French self-confidence. The country seems unable to provide the leadership in Europe that it has exercised for decades. Britain, though not as important to Germany as France, is still a valued partner and yet appears disinterested in playing a larger international role. All three countries face political challenges from xenophobic far-right parties that are stirring up anti-European sentiments, but the German government seems to have the situation in hand while the other two are scrambling. The United States, with its bruising experience in Iraq and harshly partisan politics, is less willing and able to lead on every international crisis. On Ukraine, for example, it clearly wants the Europeans to be front and centre not only on the immediate crisis but also on international efforts to bring a measure of prosperity and political stability to that country.

Germany is, therefore, at a crossroads in its post-war history. The world needs more leaders, and Germany is a natural candidate. Does it take on the burdens of leadership that its strength makes possible? Or, does it seek to tread water, take few chances and hope that other leading nations will recover enough for it to slide back comfortably into the pack?

Most nations, despite some misgivings, are looking to Germany to do more, but the Germans themselves have been reluctant to rise to the challenges. The question, however, can no longer be avoided: What kind of Germany do the Germans want?

A FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier initiated a review of foreign policy as soon as he was back in office after a four-year gap. His main question was: what is wrong with German foreign policy? After twelve months of reviewing and debating foreign policy with outside experts, the German public and his own diplomats, he presented the results in a Report titled “Crisis—Order—Europe”.¹

¹ See <http://www.review2014.de/en/topics.html>



His was a provocative question that only heightened the problems inherent in any public review of foreign policy. Consider the difficulties: though aimed at generating support among the public for new foreign policy directions, most of the public know little of the subject and care even less; of those who do care, most will judge the success or failure of the review by whether their particular interests receive the prominence they feel they deserve - if they don't, you will hear about it. To be realistic, a review has to talk honestly about the world in front of the world, which is a little like saying what you really think of the neighbours while they're still sitting in your living room. A review that is too abstract will be unreadable but, if it aims for timeliness, it can be overtaken by events before the ink is dry. Finally, the curse of all foreign policy - governments must pursue policies in an international environment over which they have little effective control, an almost certain recipe for disappointment if not outright failure. Despite the risks, Steinmeier clearly felt there were compelling "external" reasons to examine what Germany could do to more effectively meet its international responsibilities, especially given its rising power in the world.

There were also domestic reasons, including the stated need to strengthen public support for an expanded international role. Unstated, however, was the perceived need to move the Foreign Ministry back to the centre of the Government's policy-making machinery. Chancellor Angela Merkel's aversion to getting out front on issues - domestic or international - is well known, even admired, in Germany where caution and careful consideration before acting is considered an asset. In recent years, however, she has become more visible on international affairs and this has served her well politically; one consequence has been the perception that the Foreign Ministry was being sidelined.

These perceptions deepened during the years of the last governing coalition between Merkel's Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), where the latter's Guido Westerwelle served as Foreign Minister. He was not especially well-regarded by the public and the pundits and, within the government, the Foreign Ministry was seen to lose ground to both the Chancellor and other Departments. Steinmeier's Social Democratic party may be the junior partner in the current coalition but they are no strangers to power, and the foreign policy review can be seen as an effort to recapture lost ground.

THE EXPERTS SPEAK

Phase one of the review involved Steinmeier inviting over fifty foreign policy experts from around the world to address the following question: "What is wrong with German foreign policy and what, if anything, needs to be changed."

It was not meant rhetorically; there was a genuine desire to hear new ideas, to initiate discussions, to generate public controversy and interest. But it was also risky. No person has been more identified with German foreign policy over the last sixteen years than Steinmeier and so if there were to be sharp criticism, he would bear the brunt of it. He clearly was willing to run that risk.

The critics turned up: there were charges of "unscrupulous realpolitik" alongside accusations of "naiveté" and "idealism", a lack of strategic thinking, an overemphasis on German economic interests at the expense of shared European positions, slow reactions to crises and similar complaints.



There were also a number of helpful proposals. Most of all, one very important theme emerged from the submissions, and that was probably what Steinmeier was hoping for all along. It can be summed up in one word: More!

More German leadership on international issues. More German political engagement with Europe. More German preparedness for crises. More effort to rebuild international systems that seem to be coming apart at the seams. More imagination and policy innovation. More strategic focus. More willingness to establish priorities and jettison some issues. And not just more, but smarter. As Michael Ignatieff said in his highly-regarded contribution, the “real challenge for Germany is triage: choosing where not to lead, leading where German leadership will make a real difference and staying out of situations where the German contribution will either be marginal or actively unhelpful.”

CONSULT THE PUBLIC

So the experts agree that Germany has to exert greater leadership. That may seem obvious to people around the world, but it is not at all obvious in one very important country – Germany itself.

This is the partly a reflection of the pacifist convictions of a nation that has been at the origin of two world wars and unprecedented death and destruction. It is also the easier choice.

In Germany a great premium is placed on building a broad consensus on important public policies, and so a poll was commissioned to see where people actually stood.

The initial results were not encouraging: thirty-seven per cent of Germans favoured greater German foreign policy engagement, while a full sixty per cent were opposed. As the questions became more detailed, however, the answers became more discriminating. When asked about humanitarian assistance, arms control, disarmament, and strengthening civil society, strong majorities favoured greater engagement. A majority voted for increased aid to poor regions and even accepted taking in more refugees, a controversial issue in Germany. “Hard” security issues like military deployment abroad or arms shipments on the other hand, received very little support; over eighty per cent of Germans do not want more recourse to such instruments. It was clear that a lot of work had to be done to build public support for a more vigorous foreign policy.

“Phase Two” of the review began; it involved more than sixty public forums, panel debates and simulation workshops. Steinmeier participated in a number directly, while others were led by senior officials from the Foreign Ministry. Unimaginable today in Canada, German Ambassadors led “how would you decide” sessions where participants would be given the parameters of the problem, the competing interests, the perspectives of other countries and were then required to decide what to do under intense time pressure. For the participants in the room, it was an enlightening experience. Foreign Ministry officials also benefited, saying they got a better sense of how to “sell” policies, how to elaborate the interests that have to be balanced and the choices that have to be made.

Steinmeier had help. German President Joachim Gauck bluntly asked at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 whether Germany was doing enough. He directly challenged those who argue that “more responsibility” means “more trouble” and made a strong case on moral grounds for a greater German role. Another German political heavyweight, Defence Minister



Ursula von der Leyen, spoke of the need to consider more deployments of German troops to the world's trouble spots to deliver humanitarian assistance, to help keep the peace and to support German allies as required. Although reluctant to speak publically on the issue, Chancellor Merkel has in recent months played a much more prominent role in the crises in Ukraine and in the Eurozone to considerable public acclaim. The time has come for greater German leadership. To quote Foreign Minister Steinmeier: "We do not want more responsibility, we have it."

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

No lofty title full of grand allusions or illusions in this paper. Crisis. Order. Europe. Plain speaking. Three priorities presented in non-bureaucratic - almost conversational - language, easily accessible to any reader that wants to give it a go. This directness and clarity is deliberate; the Review promises that consultations with the public will become a constant feature of foreign policy. The consensus-building has begun and will continue.

On substance, there is little analysis of the international environment, and virtually no effort to list the many areas of importance to Germany. The Review is selective in its approach, and avoids posturing on issues over which it has no control or authority. In fact, Steinmeier has said that the review "was conducted during a time of acute crises," and lists events such as Russia/Ukraine, the spread of Ebola, and the ascent of ISIS that threaten international order. He is self-critical, citing the example of Ebola, where Germany took far too long to recognize the full political and economic consequences of the outbreak for the affected areas of Africa.

Crisis, in fact, becomes the leitmotif of the entire exercise. After the review had actually begun, the Foreign Ministry decided that crises were likely to be a permanent feature of the international environment for years to come, and this determination changed the review substantively.

i. Crisis

The Report states that crises are becoming "the new normal" in international politics, but foreign ministries are not well equipped to deal with them. The key recommendations aim at strengthening the Government's capabilities in the areas of prevention, early warning and crisis management. Foreign Ministries tend to function in vertical silos – bilateral, multilateral, economic, cultural, legal and so on. A major crisis, however, demands that many different instruments come into play at once. The Foreign Ministry will, therefore, create a new Directorate-General to pool the resources they have and to develop new capabilities for the future. It will bring together experienced negotiators, conflict mediators and reconstruction experts. It will manage the money that can be disbursed rapidly to German diplomats in crisis regions to shore up existing state structures and help build new institutions as necessary.

The emphasis will be on speed and flexibility, and people will be made available to be sent quickly abroad or to special task forces or project teams dealing with particular crises. They will look at Government-wide resources that could support UN peacekeeping operations and invest in improving the deployment of German civilian crisis workers to international missions. Although highly operational, the new unit will also be expected to develop new foreign policy tools to improve German capabilities during a crisis.



ii. Order

The review states unequivocally that no nation is more dependent on being connected and invested in the world than Germany with its globally-oriented economy. No nation has more interest in a stable international order under the rule of law, and Germany has worked hard to strengthen the UN, OSCE, NATO and other organizations in the political and economic spheres.

The current state of affairs, however, is not reassuring. The multilateral systems in place are under strain and need help if they are to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances around the world. The new Directorate-General will bring together the principal issues relating to multilateral institutions, including responsibility for arms control and disarmament. As well, the Foreign Ministry will recommend the formation of a government-wide Committee of State Secretaries (Deputy Ministers in Canada) to look at issues relating to international order. Foreign policy instruments such as international legal cooperation and the promotion of rule of law will feature more prominently in German foreign policy.

iii. Europe

“Poor old Germany,” Henry Kissinger famously remarked, “Too big for Europe, too small for the world.” The Review’s identification of Europe as the third priority is designed to address both sides of the problem. Within Europe, there is unease among some that Germany is throwing its weight around, more on economic issues than political, but the distinction is not hard and fast. Chancellor Merkel has been compared to Hitler, and *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s leading weekly magazine, recently ran a cover story discussing European fears of a Fourth Reich. German demands for strict austerity measures in countries with serious financial troubles and anemic growth are seen by many outside Germany as too harsh and, ultimately, wrong-headed. Merkel herself, having grown up in East Germany, is not seen as sharing the same instinctive commitment to Europe as her West German predecessors.

The Review takes a subtle approach: while talking of Germany’s “present strength” and the special demands made on it, it also states that “recognized leadership is built on trust, the power of persuasion and generosity.” It talks of anchoring the “European reflex” in Germany’s foreign policy and pledges to consider the impact of German policies on its EU partners. The language is clearly intended to reassure EU member-states, to make the new, powerful Germany a little “smaller” in Europe. As for the world, the review notes that German influence is greatly enhanced if it is part of a unified European position. Effective leadership in Europe, in concert with other countries but most especially France, gives Germany the heft it needs to help shape the international environment - it makes Germany considerably “bigger” in the world than if it stood on its own.

COMMENT

The Review is a curious document: certainly not your usual big picture foreign policy “Gesamtkonzept” where all possible subjects are addressed regardless of whether the government can actually do something about them. It is candid about what priorities truly matter and ambitious in its determination to make a difference.

The recommendations are limited and their “bureaucratic/organizational” appearance makes it easy to miss what is going on. It is easy to overlook what is truly innovative when compared to



similar reviews, and what is genuinely interesting in the way that Germany now sees itself in Europe and the world.

It is not a primer. It is written for the person who is not a specialist but does have an interest in the world. If you don't know that disorder is increasing ("crisis"), that international institutions are not working terribly well ("order"), or that the Europe which Germany has worked so hard to build up is under serious stress ("Europe"), not least because of anxiety and occasionally anger about Germany itself, then this review is not going to mean much to you. The Foreign Ministry will intensify its outreach programs, but it has some clear priorities to establish in the minds of the public — and not just in Germany — and will get on with the job. As an example of the business-like attitude, the Ministry has given itself a year to implement the proposals and has created a unit reporting directly to the State Secretaries that will make sure the timetables are met.

A key feature is the sharp emphasis on priorities, and its corollary that some other worthwhile objectives may have to take a back seat. The attention they receive will be directly related to how they impact the search for order in a world that seems to be falling apart.

Finally, the Review marks a new departure for modern Germany. If they had wanted a more abstract title, they could have chosen "Responsibility and Capability". There is a very clear sense that Germany is firmly in the major leagues and that its foreign policies have to move up as well. With greater power comes greater responsibility, and the Review is remarkable for its confidence that the country is up to the task. It doesn't bury itself in pious calls for concerted international action; rather, it focuses on how Germany can better deploy its own resources to help shape the international environment in positive ways. Better ideas on crisis prevention and management? Let's see what the Germans can come up with. The multilateral system needs support and renewal? Perhaps the Germans have some creative proposals. Europe? The German "weight" is resented/welcomed/feared and so the onus is on Germany to reassure its partners that it shares their aspirations and is willing to work cooperatively to achieve them.

The review sets a cautious but positive tone; it establishes guidelines for how Germany will judge different priorities, but it also gives the rest of us standards by which to judge German performance. That is a bold step. They are starting at the right place - at home, with the development of new capabilities to meet their increasing responsibilities in the world. If they succeed, if they manage to exercise leadership through ideas, innovation and commitment, then that would be a development the whole world should welcome.

► About the Author

Gary Soroka was educated in Canada and the University of Edinburgh where he received his PhD in Political Philosophy. He joined the Department of External Affairs in 1976, and served at Headquarters in the Political and Strategic Analysis Division, the Cabinet Liaison Division, the Policy Planning Secretariat, the Personnel Bureau and the Consular Policy Division.

He became Director of Political and Security Policy in the Policy Planning Bureau in September 1993, and senior policy advisor in 1995.

Dr. Soroka has served abroad in Canadian Embassies and Consulates in Washington, New Delhi, London, San José and Berlin. In 1986-87, he was the Canadian Exchange Officer in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra, Australia.

Dr. Soroka spent most of his career within the Department as a specialist in the area of foreign policy: he worked on four major foreign policy reviews during his career as well as on many specific policy issues. In 1990, he was brought back from India on special duty to develop the central concepts for a major review of Canadian security policy. In 1993, he was brought back from London on special duty to work on a task force looking at the role of, and appropriate structures for, a forward-looking, relevant and adaptable foreign ministry. In 1993, he was awarded the first ever Minister's Award for Foreign Policy Excellence.

Dr. Soroka was one of the Department's lead foreign policy speechwriters, and he has written many speeches for Canadian Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, Ambassadors and senior officials on diverse foreign policy subjects.

Dr. Soroka is married to Sabine Sparwasser, a member of the German Foreign Service, and they have two children. He currently divides his time between Berlin and Toronto.



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