



Germany's Geopolitical Role in an Age of Great Power Rivalries

I. Strategic foreign policy

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- › In an age of great power rivalries, Germany needs to demonstrate that it is a principled pragmatist. Such pragmatism is needed to uphold democracy, human rights, and rule-based multilateralism.
- › The basic strategic orientation of German foreign policy in terms of a principled pragmatism entails setting priorities in three areas: its orientation towards Europe, multilateral institutions, and internal resonance.
- › It is worth investing in maintaining the liberal world order. A strategic approach in the context of great power rivalries requires three kinds of action. Firstly, filling the vacuum left by the US, together with other countries. Secondly, the creation of platforms for dialogue that facilitate, maintain and strengthen ongoing communication between the major powers. And third, preventing the major powers from blocking multilateral mechanisms.

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Germany and the EU increasingly find themselves in a world of great power rivalries and systemic competition. This is affecting almost every aspect of international relations – hampering multilateral cooperation, impacting world trade and technology policy, and having an effect on conflict situations linked to security and defence policy. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated and intensified the global power shifts and tensions that have been observed over recent years and that posed a challenge to Germany even before the current crisis. This is especially true of the rivalry between the US and China. Germany and Europe cannot remain neutral in this respect. The transatlantic alliance has to remain a cornerstone of German foreign policy. Nevertheless, Berlin will have to find its own way of working with its European partners to find answers to the immense challenges they face in this age of great power rivalries.

In three related papers, members of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Working Group of Young Foreign Policy Experts address the question of how Germany can assert itself in a world where competition between the great powers is on the rise. The papers are divided into three areas: strategic foreign policy (I), economic and technological policy (II), and security and defence policy (III), and come up with recommendations for action for Germany's policymakers.

Background

For many years, Germany's foreign policy has been accompanied by a debate about greater responsibility and strategic capability. This debate on the country's policy position is, of course, important, but it is not always conducive to achieving results. All too often, it simply leads to unrealistic expectations. This paper does not set out to identify strategic objectives, nor to provide a detailed outline of how they should be implemented. Instead, it reduces the strategic orientation of Germany's foreign policy in the current global political situation to one fundamental decision and three key fields of action that are derived from this.

The rivalry between the great powers poses a threat to many of Germany's strategic interests, whether with regard to the multilateral, rule-based order, global free trade, or the peaceful coexistence of states. Therefore, Germany has to make a fundamental strategic decision on how to position itself in the midst of this competition: should it be a loyal ally to one great power, should it shift its loyalties between the two poles depending on its own short-term interests, or should it act as a principled pragmatist? Because Germany is not a great power, and for all its economic importance it lacks the foreign and security policy resources and political clout to become one. Similarly, in the absence of a coherent policy, the EU is currently unable or unwilling to act as an independent great power between the power blocs that are emerging in the 21st century.

Great power rivalries
threaten Germany's
strategic interests

In this paper, we make the case for principled pragmatism. It is ultimately in Germany's interests to act as a global defender of democracy, human rights, and rule-based multilateralism. In light of growing nationalism and isolationism around the globe, this basic foreign policy orientation – which is also enshrined in the constitution – does not (any longer) necessarily lead Germany to line up with certain other “supporting powers”, but rather requires pragmatic opportunities to exert influence on as many countries as possible. Pragmatism serves to enforce these principles.

The need for pragmatic options for exerting influence

This basic strategic decision involves prioritising the following three areas: First, as a status-quo power in the midst of great power rivalries, Germany can gain maximum stability and influence if it formulates its foreign policy in European terms (European orientation). Second, principled pragmatism calls for the strengthening of multilateral action beyond Europe's borders within the framework of existing institutions, and particularly within the United Nations (UN) (institutional orientation). Third, effective strategic positioning is only possible if Germany and Europe attract maximum public support for its foreign policy (resonance orientation). This applies all the more because great power rivalries go hand in hand with increasingly open conflict between political systems.

1. European orientation: German foreign policy is European foreign policy

“European integration and the European Union provide the framework and direction for German foreign policy.” This is how Germany's Federal Foreign Office formulates the objective of a resolute German approach *through* European cooperation as a key instrument in the competition with other major world powers.

European cooperation as a key instrument in the competition with other major powers

However, achieving the objective of European cooperation is easier said than done. For example, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic put the whole of Europe's problem-solving capacity to the test. The (renewed) return of strong nationalism in Europe is a very problematic trend. At the same time, however, the pandemic also highlights the importance of subsidiary measures when it comes to handling crises – not everything can or should be approved at the supranational level within Europe. Germany should, therefore, push for European foreign policy cooperation at two levels.

At the supranational level, there is a lack of willingness to pool capacities and thus relinquish national sovereignty, and for actions to be bound by consensus within Europe. During its Presidency of the EU Council, Germany has an opportunity to play a key role in shaping future foreign policy decision-making processes. In the short term, this relates to imminent bilateral and multilateral meetings. In the long term, the Conference on the Future of Europe may provide a forum for discussing the following issues: (1) the areas in which the EU should take concrete action in terms of external policies (identifying flagship projects); (2) which instruments should be available; and (3) whether EU treaties should be changed to bolster the effectiveness of EU foreign policy.

There is a lack of determination to pool capacities and relinquish sovereignty

The second level concerns the coordinated cooperation of European states in parallel with and/or (if necessary) in place of the EU27 (for example, the Normandy Format). Acting in accordance with European values does not automatically mean action on the part of the EU. Instead, Germany could also involve other European third countries in such initiatives, such as key partners like the UK, Norway and Switzerland. European foreign policy as a whole should be less about institutional coherence and more about improving the effectiveness of European action.

Improving the effectiveness of European cooperation

2. Institutional orientation: German foreign policy must use the multilateral order to its own advantage

Rule-based multilateralism is alive – for the time being. Not a single state can totally bypass multilateral mechanisms and institutions in order to draw global attention to its own position. It is the essence of multilateralism that different ideas find their way into the political process. Therefore, a constructive approach to multilateralism also presupposes realistic expectations of its capabilities and limitations.

It is the essence of multilateralism that different ideas find their way into the political process

Despite this, the emerging rivalries between great powers represent a particular threat to the multilateral order – but also an opportunity. The major powers – above all the US and China – are trying to move their conflicts out of the multilateral framework which would contain these rivalries. They are doing so in different ways, with the US withdrawing from multilateral organisations and treaties. China, on the other hand, is pursuing a dual strategy by installing new parallel structures and also trying to reinterpret existing rules and structures and exerting influence through an active personnel policy. This gives it the potential to fill the vacuums left by the partial withdrawal of the US.

German foreign policy has to hold its ground in the face of this competitive multilateralism and make the best possible use of the multilateral order to advance its own interests and for the sake of general peacekeeping. It is worth investing in maintaining the liberal world order because many other countries also benefit from a rule-based and inclusive international system. A strategic approach in the context of great power rivalries requires three kinds of maintenance measures. Firstly, filling the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the US (for example, in implementing the Paris Climate Agreement). Secondly, the creation of platforms for dialogue that facilitate, maintain and strengthen ongoing communication between the major powers (such as the Open Skies Treaty). And third, preventing major powers from blocking multilateral mechanisms. This is a difficult task in the UN Security Council. However, for the UN system as a whole, it could be beneficial to temporarily move certain political processes out of the UN and embed them in intergovernmental conferences that are not subject to the UN-wide unanimity requirement in order to maintain the multilateral system's capacity to act.

It is worth investing in maintaining the liberal world order

The Alliance for Multilateralism initiated by Germany is a constructive undertaking in that it aims to bring together the interests of medium-sized and smaller states. The alliance could provide a hub for the maintenance measures described above, and, in the sense of “multi-speed multilateralism”, advance individual projects for strengthening the international order at a time when the rival great powers are displaying a particular reluctance to enter into reciprocal arrangements. For example, it could support developments in international criminal law (such as the planned treaty on crimes against humanity).

Multi-speed multilateralism

In all this, it is important to remember that multilateralism is not an end in itself. More multilateralism does not necessarily mean better multilateralism. What we need is effective multilateralism. To this end, Germany should take active steps to create a more effective UN structure, for example in peacekeeping missions. The effectiveness of multilateralism cannot be measured solely by the number of agreements that are signed. When reciprocity is severely impaired, we will have to be prepared to accept setbacks in the architecture of international and multilateral systems. Therefore Germany should concentrate its efforts on certain core projects: rule-based trade policy (WTO), coordinated health policy (WHO), effective climate policy (UNFCCC), and more effective peace missions. Using its own resources for this purpose in a targeted way is emblematic of the principled pragmatism that we are propagating here. The UN's 75th anniversary should be the starting point for a multilateral reform agenda in these areas.

Germany should focus its efforts on certain core projects

3. Resonance orientation: German foreign policy from the inside out

Multilateral and European action both need to be bolstered from within, i. e. from inside German society. It is all too easy for political, rule-based multilateralism as a reflection of economic globalisation to fall victim to far-right populist, authoritarian attacks. To avoid this, it is important to explain how Germany benefits from multilateralism, not just in general terms, but particularly in terms of specific decisions and compromises. This includes explicitly pointing out the disadvantages that can arise from multilateral compromises (such as relative globalisation disadvantages) and, with regard to the multilateral system as a whole, emphasising the need for, and form of, reforms that serve its own interests.

It is important to explain how the multilateral system serves Germany's interests

In addition, answers to foreign policy questions should not be based solely on domestic motivations, which is a constant danger in Germany. This leads specific issues to quickly turn into paralysing debates about fundamental principles, as was recently the case with regard to supplying arms to Iraqi Kurds in the summer of 2014, and the naval protection missions in the Strait of Hormuz. These issues may be hotly debated by experts, but they do not generally serve to win over the general public.

On the whole, surveys on German foreign policy reveal there is a general reluctance for Germany to be more involved in foreign policy. However, there is greater public acceptance of German involvement in specific cases. Even during the coronavirus pandemic, there is public support for foreign policy action *with* other countries.² It is, therefore, vital to prepare upcoming foreign policy decisions more effectively for public debate. The domestic discourse on foreign policy should not be conducted reactively on the basis of individual cases but should be strategically planned and proactively guided by German policymakers. It is likely that the public will accept the complexity of foreign policy if this is done in a transparent manner.

Upcoming foreign policy decisions should be more effectively prepared for public debate

By focusing on case-by-case decisions embedded in a strategic discourse, the European Monnet method could also be applied to German foreign policy: crisis can act as a catalyst. The public is generally more willing to act when there is a crisis. If Germany's policy is to be conceived from the inside out, and with a view to the long term, it has to be based on effective crisis forecasting coupled with the ability to take civil, diplomatic, or military action.

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Editorial information

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For more information (German only) on the Working Group of Young Foreign Policy Experts, see: www.kas.de/jungeaussepolitiker

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