

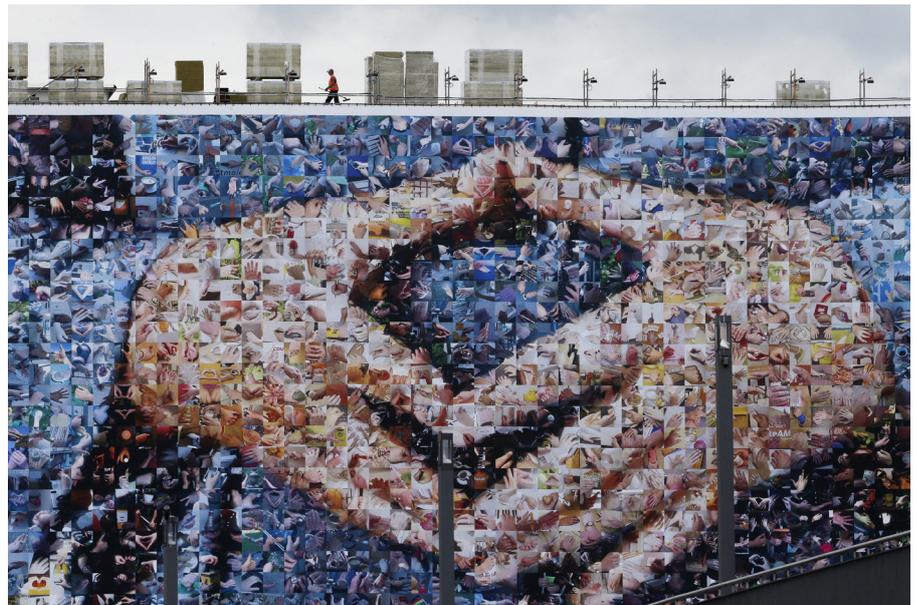
More Responsibility? German Foreign Policy in 2014

Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany's foreign policy has become erratic. Frank-Walter Steinmeier is determined to set it back on track. The core policy fields are the Franco-German friendship, relations with Russia, and the Middle East. However, Berlin faces structural obstacles in pursuing a more assertive foreign policy.

By Christian Nünlist

“Every new beginning is infused with magic.” Does this famous line of poetry by Hermann Hesse also hold true for Germany's foreign policy? At any rate, the new (and former) Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) has gotten off to a furious start. With the return of this veteran foreign policy expert, observers expect things to become more interesting as the passivity of German foreign policy is overcome.

The year 2013 was not a good one for diplomacy in the German capital. *First*, the scandal set off by the wiretap on Angela Merkel's mobile phone marked a new low point in relations with the US. Moreover, faced with reports about the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war, Germany refused to allow even a debate within NATO on a possible intervention by the West. Merkel's signature was missing on the Syria communiqué of the St Petersburg G20 summit, which was adopted by the US, the UK, France, Spain, and Italy. Among the Western powers, this raised skepticism about the reliability of Germany within the alliance and recalled unpleasant memories of Germany's abstention regarding the UN Security Council's Libya resolution in 2011. *Secondly*, François Hollande's election victory brought about a cooling down of German-French relations. An internal memorandum of Hollande's Socialist Party, leaked in April 2013, bemoaned the “egotistical intransigence of



Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU party was the clear victor in the federal parliamentary elections of 22 September 2013. T. Schwarz / Reuters

Chancellor Merkel”. Germany only offered logistical support and participated in a European training mission to the French military operation in Mali. *Third*, Berlin was disabused of its optimism regarding relations with Moscow when the Russian authorities conducted searches of German political endowments operating in Russia. Federal President Joachim Gauck and Merkel decided not to attend the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February 2014.

Now that Merkel's third term in office has begun, it is hoped things will take a turn for the better. The coalition agreement between the SPD and the CDU/CSU states that Germany is aware of its special responsibility in Europe and the world. Already now, after about three months of “Merkel III”, some new inflections can be discerned in Berlin's foreign policy. *First*, an effort is underway to improve relations with France. *Secondly*, Germany's policies

towards Russia are to be predicated on a more cooperative template. The crisis in Ukraine marks a first, high-stakes testing ground for a more assertive foreign policy. *Third*, Germany aims to take on more responsibility in global crises and conflicts. Steinmeier believes that the year 2014 will be a decisive one for the Middle East: Germany aims to play a constructive role in reaching an agreement in the nuclear dispute with Iran, in the realization of a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in resolving the Syrian conflict.

After four years of restrained foreign policy, Berlin aims to be more assertive internationally, as confirmed by the perfectly synchronized keynote speeches delivered at this year's Munich Security Conference by President Gauck, Foreign Minister Steinmeier, and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen. However, the effort to transform German foreign policy under "Merkel III" is hampered by structural impediments.

The Taming of a Key European Power

The year 1990 marked an important turning point for Germany's foreign policy: Until then, alignment with the West and *Ostpolitik* had been the guiding principles. Under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (CDU), NATO and European integration were keystones of German's external rela-

After four years of restrained foreign policy, Berlin aims to be more assertive internationally.

tions. Under Willy Brandt (SPD), they were complemented by a policy of *détente* with Eastern Europe.

Following Germany's reunification, Helmut Kohl (CDU) continued to pursue the formula of "a European Germany, not a German Europe" (in the words of Thomas Mann) and emphasized transatlantic continuity in order to dampen latent resentment and prejudices among neighboring countries, some of whom feared an overly strong Germany might resurge as "Gulliver Unchained". Out of a sense of historic guilt, the generation that had experienced the Nazi years voluntarily offered to participate in limiting its own power through institutional constraints – in a move described aptly as the "taming of power" by political scientist Peter Katzenstein.

The Main Foreign-Policy Actors

Angela Merkel (59, CDU) has served as chancellor since 2005. In the past ten years, she was nominated eight times by Forbes magazine as "**Most Powerful Woman**". In the past four years, she left foreign-policy questions (apart from EU and Russian policy) to the weak former foreign minister Guido Westerwelle. For Merkel, domestic policy has always been more important than foreign policy.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier (58, SPD) already served as foreign minister under Merkel from 2005 to 2009. Subsequently, he was highly critical of German foreign policy and accused Merkel and Westerwelle of lacking creative force. Now, he has been given a **second chance**. His goal is to repair relations with the US, France, and Russia and to launch a public debate over strategy.

Ursula von der Leyen (55, CDU) has previously served as minister of family and labor issues under Merkel. The chancellor surprisingly nominated her as Germany's **first female defense minister**. Von der Leyen could use this position to raise her profile as a potential aspirant to the chancellorship and thus as Merkel's successor. In her new position, she has positioned herself as an ambitious fellow campaigner of Steinmeier's for a more assertive foreign policy.

In 1999, Germany lived up to its increased international responsibility by engaging in a more active foreign policy. Based on the argument of "Auschwitz – never again", Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer advocated for Germany's participation in the Kosovo War and discarded the pacifist tradition that had guided West Germany's policy since World War II ("War – never again"). However, in 2003, Schröder strictly refused to take part in the US attack on Iraq. The US was deeply aggrieved by this break with Kohl's foreign policy.

Under Angela Merkel (CDU), the government's attention was almost entirely taken up by the European debt crisis. Germany's European policy became an executive matter for the chancellor. At the same time, Merkel's second cabinet included the extremely weak Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. The chancellor allowed

him to pursue a passive "culture of military restraint". In March 2011, the German abstention in the UN Security Council regarding the Libya intervention resulted in a diplomatic shambles.

Starting Over with France

The new coalition agreement emphasizes the importance of cooperation with France as a "partnership that is unique in its breadth as well as its depth". A Foreign Ministry strategy paper makes mention of "starting over" in this relationship. Germany wants to help carry France's burden in military missions in Africa. As part of the EU mission to Mali, the number of German military instructors is to be raised from a maximum of 180 to a ceiling of 250 troops, some of whom will be detached from the German-French Brigade. This

joint overseas mission is seen as highly symbolic. In the recent past, Paris had expressed its exasperation at being unable to deploy the brigade into action due to German concerns. Also, Germany will contribute transport and refueling aircraft to the EU mission in the Central African Republic (CAR). The increased German engagement is seen in Paris as an important step towards a joint EU strategy for Africa.

Moreover, Steinmeier is planning to visit political hotspots on the EU periphery together with his French colleague Laurent Fabius. While French foreign policy has so far been focused on North and West Africa, while German's strategic interests lay towards the East, Berlin and Paris aim to coordinate their efforts both in the Mediterranean and in Eastern Europe. Also, Steinmeier and Fabius have agreed to align their positions ahead of important future EU summits. The two already practiced this advance consultation in January 2014 in the case of the EU mission to the CAR. In February 2014, working together with Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, they negotiated between the government and the opposition in Kiev – thus successfully reactivating the "Weimar Triangle" (Germany-France-Poland) as a continental leadership troika within the EU.

Steinmeier regards the US turn towards Asia as an opportunity for Europe to advance the common EU foreign policy and to take on more global responsibility. However, the close harmony between Berlin and Paris could aggravate a "Deauville Complex" among the smaller EU states – in autumn 2010, Merkel and Sarkozy met in the French town of Deauville and bilaterally determined the next steps in dealing with the euro crisis. Subsequently, "Merkozy" monopolized the management of the euro

crisis at the expense of the institutional EU decision-making process.

A New Russia Policy?

In Merkel’s first cabinet, Steinmeier was at pains to continue the Social Democratic tradition of German *Ostpolitik*. His idea of “Change through Integration” was a reference to Egon Bahr’s “Change through Rapprochement” (1963). Merkel refused to countenance NATO memberships for Georgia and Ukraine, a decision that Russian President Vladimir Putin highly appreciated. The 2008 war in Georgia did not bring about a fundamental change in Berlin’s policy vis-à-vis Russia, even though Merkel has become increasingly critical of Putin in recent years. Putin’s authoritarian style, both domestically and externally, has been viewed with suspicion in the Berlin chancellery and has increasingly highlighted the shortcomings of the Russian-German “modernization partnership”.

Now, the intention is to return relations with Russia to a more cooperative track. Gernot Erler (SPD) replaced the previous Russia coordinator Andreas Schockenhoff (CDU), who had repeatedly criticized Putin’s autocracy. Erler and Steinmeier, on the other hand, emphasize the strategic importance of German-Russian relations. Germany as an export-oriented country is economically dependent on imported resources. Germany is the world’s largest importer of Russian oil and gas; about 40 per cent of Germany’s gas imports are sourced from Russia. The German nuclear phase-out and the completion of the Nord Stream Pipeline will likely cause this share to increase even more in the future.

The wording of the coalition agreement includes the following statement, which may be regarded as Steinmeier’s article of faith regarding Russia, “the EU’s biggest and most important neighbor”: “Security in Europe can only be achieved with, but not against Russia.” Generally speaking, Steinmeier sees Russia not as a problem, but as part of the solution. He does not want Russia to become even more isolated within Europe. As in Merkel’s first period in office, Berlin’s Russia policy is likely once more to become a bone of contention between the Chancellery and a resurgent Foreign Ministry.

Berlin’s treatment of Ukraine marks an interesting test case for the new policy vis-à-vis Russia. At the end of 2013, Steinmeier’s

predecessor Westerwelle openly fraternized with the protest movement on Kiev’s Maidan square. When the violence escalated in February 2014, however, Steinmeier travelled to Kiev, where he and his French and Polish colleagues together with the Russian side negotiated an agreement between the pro-Western opposition and the pro-Russian government that brought about an intermittent lull in the violence. With great personal dedication, Steinmeier contributed significantly to the temporary

Steinmeier sees Russia not as a problem, but as part of the solution.

resolution of the crisis. It remains to be seen whether Berlin will manage to achieve a resolution for Crimea as well that is acceptable both for the West and for Russia.

Middle East Mediator

Similarly to the diplomatic coup in Kiev, a more assertive German foreign policy could also raise its mediation profile in the Middle East. During his first period in office, Steinmeier spent about one third of his time dealing with the Middle East. Merkel, for her part, had declared on several occasions that the security of Israel was a non-negotiable part of Germany’s reasons of state. However, relations between Germany and Israel have been tense since Germany abstained from voting in the UN at the end of 2012, when Palestine applied for status as a non-member observer state. At the end of February 2014, despite regular German

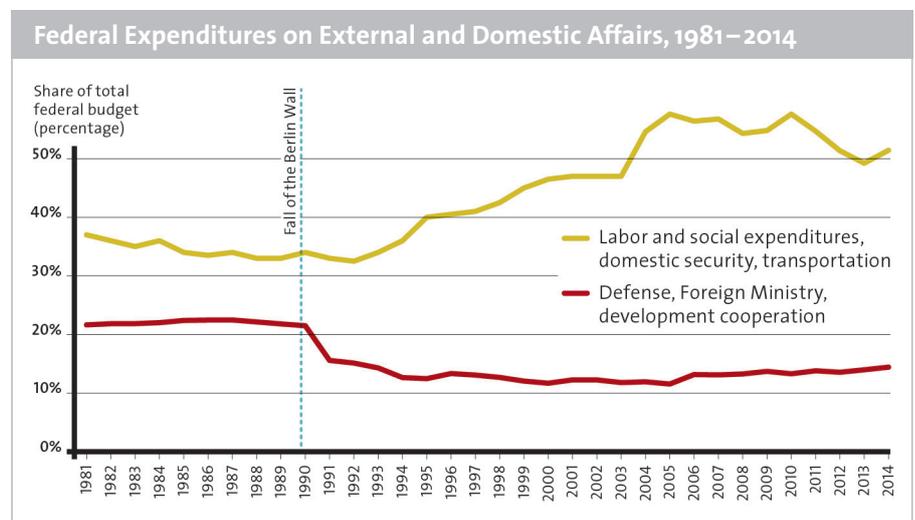
criticism of its settlement policies, Israel placed its trust in Berlin when the countries agreed that Germany would represent Israeli citizens in states without Israeli embassies (e.g., Indonesia or Malaysia).

Germany supports US Secretary of State John Kerry’s shuttle diplomacy and Washington’s current efforts to achieve a Middle East peace agreement between Israel and Palestine in the West Bank (cf. *CSS Analysis No.144*). If Kerry’s mission should fail, Steinmeier might reactivate his own Middle East diplomacy. Berlin is an acceptable dialog partner for Arab countries, too, with relations being unencumbered by a colonial past or interests based on power politics. The controversial decision to abstain in the Libya vote of 2011 might give Germany credibility here. On the one hand, as a NATO and EU member, Germany is committed to a Western position. On the other, it has the necessary standing to mediate credibly in global crises between Russia, China, and the US and to intercede with a moderating effect, for instance in the Syria conflict.

Some minor concrete steps have already been taken: Steinmeier decided to participate actively in the destruction of residual material from Syria’s chemical weapons within the framework of the UN and to have them incinerated in German installations in Munster – a move that his predecessor Westerwelle had categorically rejected.

Transatlantic Trouble

The refusal to participate in the George W. Bush government’s invasion of Iraq placed



a heavy strain on German-US relations in 2003, as it was the first time that Germany had openly opposed the US. While Merkel engaged in transatlantic damage limitation from 2005 onwards, the relationship remained tense: In 2008, Merkel placed a hold on NATO's eastward expansion and successfully opposed membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Germany's abstention (together with China and Russia) in the UN Security Council regarding the Libya intervention in 2011 cost it a great deal of sympathy among its European and North American allies. On the one hand, Berlin was criticized for having stepped out of line with the Western camp (the simultaneous opposition to France and the US being regarded as a particular violation of taboo); on the other hand, Germany was censured for having abandoned a value-based foreign policy after previously advocating prominently for the principle of the responsibility to protect.

Conversely, in Germany, too, the revelations of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 brought about an enormous loss of trust in the US. The secret bugging of Merkel's mobile phone in particular caused a big stir in Germany. The close cooperation between the German and US intelligence service was also sharply criticized. The German government is under public pressure to protect the privacy of its citizens better.

In the meantime, both sides are making efforts to show goodwill again: The transatlantic partnership is being talked up, and the foundation of shared values and interests is emphasized. It is true that the US government shows little willingness to meet German demands for a "no-spy" agreement and continuously stresses how much the German intelligence services benefit from their cooperation with the US services. However, in early 2014, the US government sent Secretary Kerry to Berlin to pour oil on the troubled waters. Merkel for her part accepted an invitation from US President Barack Obama to visit the US this year. At the same time, however, it was

determined that Germany and the EU should reduce their dependence on the US by strengthening their own intelligence services and investing in European technology.

Vox populi

Due to structural constraints, it is unlikely that German foreign policy will change radically in the next four years. A significant shortfall remains between the claim to greater foreign-policy standing as a Euro-

The multilateral institutions that underpin German foreign policy are currently in crisis.

pean economic heavyweight and the second-largest NATO state on the one hand, and the actual funding made available for foreign and security policy issues. Since 1990, expenditures on diplomacy, defense, and development cooperation have been sharply cut back (see info box p. 3). US Secretary of State Kerry therefore called on the German government at the Munich Security Conference to supply the necessary resources to match the new sense of responsibility and mission as a source of new impulses for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The media's focus on Steinmeier's return to the Foreign Ministry has also so far distracted from the fact that Berlin's European policy has become more presidential during the euro crisis, at the expense of the Foreign Ministry and the foreign minister's influence. Tellingly, in his inaugural speech, Steinmeier criticized the move towards "foreign policy by summit". He demands that authority be restored from the Chancellery back to the Foreign Ministry and that Germany's EU and Russian policy no longer be left to Merkel.

Merkel, for her part, has not yet made any public statement on a possible change of course in foreign policy. However, being a rather cautious politician, the chancellor is highly responsive to popular opinion. Only 20 per cent of the German population

want their country to become more strongly engaged within NATO. More than 60 per cent are opposed to the use of military force and thus reject that demand by President Gauck that Germany should engage "earlier, more decisively, and more substantially" in global conflict resolution – "not just politically, but also with military means". It remains to be seen whether Merkel will extend her support to the appeals of the speakers at the Munich conference – appeals that are unpopular among the German public.

There are also geostrategic reasons why Berlin is unlikely to interfere actively in global conflicts and take on responsibility, including through military force as a last resort. In particular, it lacks a familiar partner who can impose a global order: The US as the leading Western power is in retreat, and its enthusiasm for global diplomatic and especially military engagement is diminishing. Western interventions without the US are unrealistic. Furthermore, the multilateral institutions that underpin German foreign policy – the EU and NATO, but also the UN and the OSCE – are currently in crisis.

The scope for action is therefore limited. The cornerstones of German foreign policy – allegiance with the West, European integration, *Ostpolitik*, and multilateralism – will not change substantially, even if Berlin's foreign policy should become more active once more, especially in the fields of crisis prevention and mediation of diplomatic solutions to conflicts. At least under Steinmeier, a return to reliable, pro-Western German foreign policy may be expected. The new dynamics of the Franco-German pair are promising. Steinmeier's success in Kiev was an impressive demonstration of a confident, diplomatically adroit German foreign policy working in combination with EU partners and in consultation with Russia.

Dr. Christian Nünlist is Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich and directs the team «Swiss and Euro-Atlantic Security».

CSS Analyses is edited by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. Each month, two analyses are published in German, French, and English. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy.

Editors: Christian Nünlist and Matthias Bieri
Translation and lectorship: Christopher Findlay
Layout and graphics: Miriam Dahinden
ISSN: 2296-0244

Feedback and comments: analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
More issues and free online subscription:
<http://www.css.ethz.ch/cssanalysen>

Most recent issues:

Interreligious Tension in South and Southeast Asia No. 148
The Sino-Swiss Free Trade Agreement No. 147
The Future of Conventional Arms Control in Europe No. 146
The Proliferation of Advanced Conventional Weapons No. 145
The Kerry Initiative: Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man? No. 144
Debating European Defence and Security No. 143