

The German vision of NATO's future – The Alliance as a building block of Germany and Europe's security

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The anniversary NATO summit in Strasbourg/Kehl (3–4 April 2009) officially decided to start work on a new strategic concept for the North Atlantic Alliance, for which Germany and some other members have been lobbying for a long time. Dissatisfied with the current form of the Alliance in which the United States plays a dominant role, Germany has been advocating a thorough reform of NATO. According to Germany, the Alliance should become a political organisation based on co-operation between the USA and the EU as equal partners, and should take Russia's position into account to a larger extent. Barack Obama's statements about the need for multilateral co-operation in security policy and for rapprochement between the USA and Russia have been interpreted in Germany as signalling a possibility to revise the USA's policy, and offering Germany a chance to achieve its objectives concerning NATO.

Evolution of Germany's policy within NATO and towards the USA

1. During the cold war, NATO was a guarantee of security for the Federal Republic of Germany, the Alliance's strategy was identified with Germany's security strategy, and West Germany did not question the USA's dominant position in the Alliance and accepted the United States as the security policy leader. After German unification, the Helmut Kohl government (CDU/CSU/FDP) continued West Germany's policy and opted for co-operation with the USA within NATO. In the 1990s, Germany was thus the European advocate of trans-Atlantic co-operation and took a cautious position with regard to the development of a European security policy. This attitude was also related to the doctrine according to which the Bundeswehr should only be used to defend German territory (which had been enshrined in the constitution until the mid-1990s), as well as the passive attitude of both the public, which had benefited from the 'peace dividend', and the government which pursued 'cheque-book diplomacy' within NATO and refrained from discussing issues concerning the place of a united Germany in European and trans-Atlantic security policy.

2. A deep change in Germany's security policy and its attitude towards the United States and co-operation within NATO occurred during Gerhard Schröder's rule. In that period,

Germany started to abandon the idea of trans-Atlantic security co-operation, and sought a counterbalance to the USA, which was to be created by developing a security and defence policy within the EU¹. This was an expression of the emancipation of the unified Germany which was looking for its own place in international politics and redefining its interests. This emancipation had been catalysed by three events – the NATO intervention in Kosovo (in which Germany participated), the US operation in Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq. The Schröder government’s decision to send the Bundeswehr to take part in this operation, the first ‘intervention’ of this kind for the Federal Republic of Germany, paved the way towards Germany’s involvement in foreign missions within the framework of NATO, the EU and the UN (the broadly disputed involvement of the Bundeswehr in the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon), while the European Union’s poor ability to respond single-handedly to the events in Kosovo triggered a discussion about the roles of Germany and the EU in the security policy. When the Bush administration decided not to accept the assistance NATO offered to provide in connection with the operation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, this led to an adjustment of Germany’s policy. In Germany, that decision was perceived as marginalising NATO and the European allies. The decision on the war on Iraq not only provoked firm objections from the German government, but also prompted it to form the coalition seeking to counterbalance the USA, an unprecedented move in Germany’s policy. The underlying reason was that, from Germany’s point of view, the USA’s decision did not take into account the opinion of the major European allies, and called into question the purpose of the North Atlantic Alliance’s existence.

3. In spite of its calls for improvement of German-American relations and relations within NATO, Angela Merkel’s coalition government formed by the CDU/CSU (parties which traditionally had advocated co-operation with the United States) and the SPD has upheld the position as redefined during Schröder’s rule with regard to security issues and the vision of co-operation within the Alliance. Although Germany’s rhetoric towards the USA has changed, Germany still refuses to accept the USA’s dominant role within NATO or America’s practice of not consulting its measures with the most important EU countries (Germany, France). The difference between the USA’s and Germany’s interests are still visible in their differing attitudes towards such strategic security issues as the missile shield deployment, NATO enlargement by the admission of Ukraine and Georgia, and most recently, the Alliance’s reaction to Russia’s moves during and after the conflict in Georgia.

What the Germans need NATO for...

The German political scene (except for the Left Party and some groups within the Greens) does not question the NATO’s *raison d’être*, although it calls for a different political shape of the Alliance, with its primary objective defined as in the paraphrase of the well-known saying: “to keep the Americans in; to keep the Russians in; to keep the weapons down”².

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“to keep the Americans in...”: Germany wants NATO to become an organisation that would effectively monitor the USA’s actions, because both public opinion and the German political elite view some of the USA’s moves in the security policy sphere as a kind of threat to global peace and order³. Therefore, Germany seeks firstly to streng-

¹ The changes in the German way of thinking about the security policy are best illustrated by the concept, discussed in Germany in 2007, of Europe/ the European Union’s ‘equal distance’ to the USA and Russia, authored by Peter Struck, a former defence minister in the SPD/Greens government (2002–2005) and currently the leader of the SPD’s representation in the Bundestag.

² This is a paraphrase of the statement by Lord Ismayr, the first NATO secretary general, concerning the Alliance’s objectives (“to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”), authored by Jürgen Trittin, deputy chief of the Greens representation in the Bundestag. Jürgen Trittin, „Ein rüstiger Rentner”, *Internationale Politik* issue No 4, April 2009, p. 51.

³ According to public opinion polls (the Forsa Institute, March 2007), during George W. Bush’s term the USA was believed to pose a greater threat to global peace than, for instance, Iran (48% to 31%). <http://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/:stern-Umfrage-Deutsche-USA/585728.html>

⁴ NATO as a community of values rather than a military alliance with specific objectives.” Guido Westerwelle in an interview for ZDF television’s *Berlin direkt*, 6 April 2009.

then the political significance of the Alliance⁴, and secondly, to change the balance of power within NATO, which until now has been dominated by the USA, through the creation of a European pillar (the EU) within the Alliance. This line of thinking is based on the assumption that within NATO, the European Union should speak with a single voice on security issues. The Alliance would then be based on true American-European co-operation. Consequently, the USA would no longer be *primus inter pares* among the 28 member states, and the Alliance would rest on two equal pillars, the USA and the European Union, with an extensive apparatus of military and civilian instruments. The objective would be to control those of the USA's actions which the Germans may perceive as unilateral, and to co-decide on security policy issues on an equal footing with the United States.

"...to keep the Russians in...": Russia is perceived in Germany as a difficult but necessary and strategically important partner for NATO and its projected 'European pillar' in the security policy sphere. Some German politicians admit the possibility that Russia might become a NATO member (such as Peter Struck (SPD), Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP), Jürgen Trittin

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(the Greens)) and be awarded the status of a possible 'third pillar' (after the USA and the EU) within the Alliance understood as a forum for political discussions and binding decision-making on security policy issues. Even though not all German politicians share this vision of such close co-operation with Russia, and despite the critical opinions expressed by the Christian Democrats, all German parties have

advocated more intensive co-operation between Russia and NATO. The efforts to bind Russia with the European Union in the security sphere is also viewed in Germany as a natural consequence and continuation of the 'change through ties' (*Wandel durch Verflechtung*) policy, which has been dominant in the political and economic relations between Germany and Russia, and of the idea of strategic partnership between the European Union and Russia which Germany has been advocating. This ideology, combined with German economic interests, will prompt Germany to continue its policy of security policy co-operation with Russia, irrespective of what Russia actually does. Within NATO, Germany will oppose any

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measures against Russia; and the German position is that the Alliance should not take any measures that might provoke Russia's protests or harm its interests, such as the deployment of the missile shield or the admission of Ukraine and Georgia as NATO members. This means that, for the sake of co-operation with Russia, Germany in fact approves of a Russian zone of influence in Eastern Europe⁵.

"...to keep the weapons down": According to Germany, the United States should recognise the importance of non-military instruments (political, economic and development aid) in the security policy. By emphasising the need for a combined civilian-military approach to security threats, Germany aims at counterbalancing its lack of any stronger military involvement in NATO or, in future, in the EU. This is related to the German public's aversion to using the Bundeswehr as a foreign policy instrument and the German army's greater

⁵ Cf. the interview with Volker Perthes, director of the Berlin-based Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik research institute, "Perthes: Strefy wpływów są normalną rzeczą" [Perthes: Zones of influence are a normal occurrence], published on 2 April 2009 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

involvement in foreign missions. Because it does not have sufficient deployment capacity (despite reforms to the Bundeswehr) and cannot use its full potential (due to the public's resistance to the idea), Germany seeks to shape the discourse within NATO in such a way that would allow for the recognition of civilian instruments which the Germans have been successfully using abroad, such as development aid projects, training missions, capacity building and economic instruments, thus elevating the status of Germany as a security policy partner.

...and how they see the Alliance's role in the global security policy

The Germans currently have no sense of a 'hard' ('old type') security threat. They have a broader definition of security threats which includes terrorism, the lack of energy security, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, unstable states, regional conflicts, and even global warming or the economic crisis, and the escalation of phenomena which may occur as a consequence, such as migration, water conflicts, etc.⁶ However, Germany does not want the scope of NATO's interests to be extended to include these spheres⁷ beyond the tasks provided for in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (on the collective defence of the Alliance members)⁸. While discussions about these issues should take place within NATO, it should be the European Union rather than the Alliance that implements the decisions taken. In a situation where there is no direct sense of threat, and according to the German view, NATO has therefore lost its importance as a defence alliance, Germany would like to strengthen NATO's role as a (regional, US/European) political alliance which analyses and discusses global security threats and decides on the measures to be taken in co-operation with other organisations such as the UN, the European Union, the African Union, etc. To this end, NATO should support the development of a global network of regional security organisations tasked with managing crises and conflicts, with the Alliance's assistance consisting in training and logistics aid for such organisations as the African Union, for example.

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Therefore, according to Germany, NATO as a 'regional alliance' should not enlarge beyond the trans-Atlantic area, as that could damage relations with Germany's important partners, Russia and China. Germany is firmly opposed to the concepts, proposed by some in the USA, to transform NATO into a 'global democracy league'⁹ that would replace the United Nations, and objects to the tendency to globalise NATO's activities by strengthening co-operation with, for instance, Japan, Australia or South Korea, which

might lead to the formation of 'a coalition of the willing' with a view to imposing the USA's objectives. In Germany, such concepts are presented as part of official US policy, and rejected as manifestations of the USA's tendency towards global interventionism.

⁶ Article by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister, "We Face New Threats and Challenges", *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, 3 April 2009.

⁷ In particular, it opposes the inclusion of energy security issues into the Alliance's remit, because that would prejudice relations with Russia and would not be conducive to the development of Russia-NATO relations, which is Germany's priority objective.

⁸ "Security, consultations, determent policy and defence, as well as crisis prevention and partnership are still important", the German defence minister Franz Josef Jung in the article "New strategic concept" published by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 16 March 2009.

⁹ "I cannot imagine a global NATO", in the German government's statement presented to the Bundestag by Chancellor Merkel on 26 March 2009.

Conclusions

1. Germany wants NATO to become one of the elements in German and European security policy. NATO would remain a regional alliance based on the guarantees of Article 5, without expanding its remit or territory beyond the trans-Atlantic area (although given the absence of a direct sense of threat to Germany's or Europe's security, NATO is in fact of marginal importance for Germany as a defence alliance).
2. In the longer term, Germany would like NATO to become a primarily political alliance tasked with analysing global threats. Its objective would be to control the United States' actions and expand its strategic partnership with Russia into the security sphere. According to this concept, the Alliance would rest on two pillars, the United States and the European Union, with Russia as an equally important partner, or even an Alliance member.
3. According to Germany, it is the European Union that should become the actor in charge of responding to the current (indirect) threats to European security. In Germany's view, European security policy should become independent from the USA's; or possibly complementary to NATO's policy, as proposed by the German Christian Democrats. The European Union should seek to align its member states' defence policies and develop a single position on security issues (the missile shield being a current example). This single-position approach within the EU would therefore in fact preclude the development of closer bilateral relations in the security sphere between individual EU members and the United States, as well as any increased significance of Germany and France – as the states determining EU policy – towards the USA
4. The declarations made by the Obama administration concerning a multilateral approach to international politics and security, a rapprochement with Russia and greater emphasis on non-military/preventative instruments in the security policy (such as increased spending on development aid) have awakened hopes in Germany that the Alliance might undergo a reform that would be in line with Germany's interests. For this reason, German politicians have started to promote a strategic concept for the Alliance that would take Germany's postulates into account¹⁰.

¹⁰Before and during the Munich security conference, or before the NATO summit in Strasbourg/Kehl. The article by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy entitled "We Europeans Need To Speak With One Voice", published on 4 February 2009 in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.



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