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Leadership is about building trust!

May 08 *The shortcomings of German foreign policy*

Germany is not always as effective as it could be at bringing its influence to bear. Sensible policy must set priorities and Germany's priority should be to strengthen Europe as a global "soft power". To create leverage as a soft power and as a backbone for the preservation of the liberal order, social economy, and the rule of law, not only do clashes in competences between the different ministries have to diminish, but German foreign policy must also be more credible and prepared. Finally, a credible German foreign policy needs to be built on a receptive and open-minded domestic society.

First of all, by no means does German foreign policy get it all wrong. Moreover, where problems do exist, the situation is not always better elsewhere. Observers abroad commend Germany on the professionalism of its foreign service. However, they also repeatedly criticise Germany for all too often shying away from using its clout in the international arena – or for doing so only to promote its own economic interests. Another point of criticism is Germany's supposed reticence to assume leadership or co-leadership tasks.

The grand coalition that came to power in late 2013 has promised to address many of these issues: It drew praise from around the world for its vow to detail what responsibilities Germany is willing to assume, to provide greater impetus for common European action, and in general to play a more decisive and substantial role in global politics. At the same time, this has raised questions with regard to Germany's foreign policy concepts and instruments.

Leadership requires setting priorities

In the public debate, the view is occasionally voiced that German policy "is not strategic", and that Germany refuses to assume a leading role. This is blanket criticism. However, the perception that Germany is not as effective as it could be at

bringing its influence to bear, and is in fact more focused on details than on the grand scheme of things, is to some extent justified.

It comes as no surprise that expectations with respect to German leadership and co-leadership have grown. Germany's influence in Europe has increased, while at the same time, by comparison, Europe's global influence has decreased. Yet German foreign policy is by no means unaware of its influence, or simply unwilling to lead. For example, Germany has in a very targeted way pushed for reform in other EU member states and in the euro area.

For more than a decade, Germany has been calling for reform of the United Nations Security Council, with the aim of obtaining one of the additional permanent seats. Most partners have expressly welcomed Germany's desire to share responsibility for, and to help shape, global policy, of which the Review2014 campaign is a visible expression. However, assuming leadership is always also about building trust. Therefore, Germany must say which collective objectives it would pursue, and what use it would make of the institutional power of a permanent seat on the Security Council. This has not always been clearly communicated, or has simply not been self-evident.

As a medium-sized power, Germany cannot become engaged in all areas, and it can certainly not assume a leading role everywhere. Leadership and co-leadership only become possible when there is a willingness to set priorities. This also means assuming responsibility on a selective basis. That is: deciding where and with whom one will shape policy, what the objectives will be, for which purposes Germany's limited instruments and resources must be employed, and which areas not to focus on.

In the past, this was often avoided, so as not to offend certain partners. For example, the "Strategy paper on shaping globalization" does not specifically state what qualifies these countries – beyond their economic data – to become a partner in shaping globalization. Additional criteria regarding their political systems, their relationships with neighbouring countries, and their concepts with respect to the international status quo are needed to make them true partners in shaping globalization.

Strengthening the EU as a global power

Generally speaking, Germany knows full well that it is too small a country to go it alone in the globalised world. The correct – and strategically wise – consequence for German foreign policy is to work to strengthen the EU as a stabilising power in the international context, to provide impetus for a Common Foreign and Security Policy that is worthy of its name and, from time to time, to take joint action with partners to promote common European interests. The nuclear negotiations with Iran initiated by the E3 are one good example, as are diplomatic efforts on Ukraine undertaken in the Weimar Triangle format.

However, it does seem that Germany sometimes has a hard time ensuring that long-term common European interests prevail over the short-term goals of its national actors. For example, when Germany pursues items on its own agenda, such as, for example, the issue of solar panels in its relations with China, it undermines joint EU action, joint action that it itself needs.

When it comes to global governance, or considering the strategic challenges that the international community is facing in connection with an increasingly assertive China, the EU has much greater influence than Germany or any other EU member state. For that reason alone, it would be better to actively contribute to shaping EU policy on China, as opposed to giving China (or others) the impression that common EU positions can be undermined by targeted bilateral action.

The Federal Foreign Office should play a coordinating role

There is an abundance of concepts, guidelines and strategy papers on the various areas of German foreign policy. Often, these contain general praise for a comprehensive approach that deliberately combines different policy tools – ranging from diplomacy to development cooperation to employment of military instruments.

However, in practice, the different ministries involved often clash over competence, as recently occurred between the Federal Ministry of Defence and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation over Germany's policy on Africa. The lesson here seems to be that, without leadership and coordination, no strategy can be implemented. It would make sense for the Federal Foreign Office to assume this coordinating role.

So far, Germany has not learned to deliberately employ soft power in a way that fully brings its influence to bear. The United Kingdom, for instance, makes use of its leverage, in the form of the English language, London as a global financial centre, and its imperial tradition, to maintain global influence, despite being a medium-sized power.

Germany's soft power stems primarily from its economy, and from the domains of technology and research, as well as from its liberal structures, its social market economy, and its solid rule of law. If employed in the right way, all of this can have a great international impact. For example, Germany very much needs to be more proactive internationally, with respect to its research and academic relations policy, as well as its cultural relations policy. And the influence that German companies exert at the international level, through their economic activities alone, should specifically be viewed as a political advantage, not only as an economic one.

Of course, it is impossible to harmonise all action with a foreign policy effect – that is, activities at the political and economic level, of NGOs, and in the sphere of science and research. After all, Germany's foreign relations reflect our pluralistic society, and this adds to the general attractiveness of Germany. Yet it does not mean that the

various actors should not meet to discuss their interests and objectives in the foreign policy domain, as well as how these objectives can be reached.

It would be in line with our often-repeated commitment to the rule of law, and with the goal of strengthening the rule of law in international relations, for Germany to take a forward-looking approach and to campaign for the establishment of norms and rules in those shared areas – the cyber domain, oceans, and space – that to date have not been sufficiently codified. Superpowers that believe they can use their superior position (while it lasts) to control these spheres will not take the lead here. Through its own initiatives, Germany would therefore have a good chance of helping shape the EU's cyber foreign policy, as well as the debate on arms control in cyberspace.

Is German foreign policy credible?

Credibility gaps appear in German foreign policy where declared norms are, or appear to be, in conflict with reality, and therefore are perceived by at least some of Germany's partners as pure rhetoric. Most often, what is needed is to ensure that the necessary means are provided to reach one's declared objectives. As Germany is eager to point out, it is the fourth largest contributor of funding for United Nations peacekeeping operations.

However, Germany has up to now not been willing to provide and place under UN command large German contingents for peacekeeping operations in Africa. Germany has maintained this position even though the United Nations has repeatedly emphasised that the participation of well-trained and well-equipped units from Germany (and other NATO nations) would not only increase the chances of success for many UN operations, but would also underscore true "united" support for such operations, thus demonstrating that this burden must not always be borne by poorer troop contributing countries.

There are credibility issues at the European level as well. In recent years, every party in a governing coalition has spoken of a common European defence policy, if not even of a "European army". However, to put it modestly, initiatives to this end have been underwhelming. The same holds true for calls for a European energy policy. Is Germany truly prepared to follow through on the creation of a common energy policy, and to campaign for this at the international level? It will, after all, not establish itself on its own. And in view of our central geographic location, such a project would not get off the ground without Germany.

Instead, more caution should be exercised when certain terms are used that not only serve as polite diplomatic phrases – which in certain cases may well be the intention – but that can create very real expectations that no one intends to meet. For instance, the meaning or intent of the popular term "strategic partnership" is frequently unclear. The same applies to our expressed desire to interact with other countries "on an equal footing". Do we really mean what we are saying?

Be better prepared!

Especially for medium-sized powers, success of their foreign and security policies will increasingly hinge on whether or not they register global developments in time, and on how they cope with uncertainties. International politics will always be driven by the unforeseen – and the unforeseeable. Yet our ability to recognise critical developments early on can be improved.

One way to contribute to this would be to have more diplomatic officers with extensive regional and linguistic expertise, who are given the time and the opportunity to travel extensively and to listen to various groups, including non-diplomats, all with a view to feeling the true pulse of societies in "critical" regions – and we all know which ones these are.

Another feasible project would be to identify risks through direct cooperation between the Federal Foreign Office and political research institutions (full disclosure: the author's institution would be greatly interested in such an effort). Together, they would attempt to develop better instruments for detecting critical signals that appear, and are dealt with, in think tank papers and diplomatic telegrams, so as to understand where, and in what constellations, these may lead to crises. These two projects would prepare the ground for preventive diplomacy.

At any event, foreign policy begins at home. Merely desiring to shape global international policies, and making statements to this effect, is not sufficient. Countries like Germany that depend on an open and liberal world order must also be prepared to provide the resources needed to maintain this order. And they must communicate domestically why they are willing to bear certain burdens.

The issue is not, as one may think when listening to the often-too-brief debates in connection with NATO, merely the share of defence spending as a percentage of gross domestic product. Rather, what is important is the overall contribution a country is willing to make, in both material and immaterial terms, as its investment in global responsibility. This comprises diplomacy, expertise, forward-looking strategy, as well as innovation.

Finally, we must always also ensure that we ourselves are living by the same values we seek to promote internationally – especially among those partners we want to encourage to implement economic and political reforms. This means not least staying receptive to the increasingly mobile and young generation from these other countries and cultures.

(Translation from the German original-version)