

# Back to Square One?

## German foreign policy and public opinion in a changing international environment

**G**ermany seems extremely comfortable with the status quo.” Walter Russell Mead’s assessment of German foreign policy is more than a little sobering.

After all, it has been six years since the country’s president, foreign minister, and defence minister unanimously declared the time had come for Germany to “take on more responsibility”. The so-called “Munich Consensus” was welcomed by Germany’s partners, and met by appeals for a serious public debate on foreign policy at home. Looking ahead, what remains of Munich, and how has the debate in Germany evolved? Two trends emerge:

First, given a dramatically changing international environment, the question of taking on more responsibility has taken on a new meaning. Back in 2014, the idea had been for Germany to step up its support of the country’s partners and allies, expressed by President Gauck’s plea for the country to “preserve and help shape the order based on the European Union, NATO and the United Nations”. However, fast-forward to 2019, all three of these pillars of German foreign policy are being undermined on various fronts.

Second, 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany’s international identity remains ambiguous. Its institutions – the Bundestag, the Chancellery, as well as the Foreign and Defence Ministries – are divided (Syria or Huawei, anybody?), while

public opinion betrays a deep uncertainty, confusion even, over Germany’s place in the world, and the means by which it should fend for its interests.

European cohesion is a case in point: Despite the fact that 60 percent of the German public consider France their country’s most or second-most important international partner, the French Minister for European Affairs, Amélie de Montchalin, rightly points out that President Macron’s reform proposal have all but fallen on deaf ears in Berlin. A similar pattern emerges with respect to climate policy: Whereas Germans perceive environmental issues as the single most important foreign policy challenge (31 percent) and see Berlin at the vanguard of European climate policy, Dutch Member of the European Parliament Bas Eickhout laments the fact that Berlin has become an obstacle in the fight against global warming.

The transatlantic alliance is in even greater trouble: A majority of Germans across a whole range of divides – including East and West, male and female, young and old, less and well educated, rural and urban, and all parties – has a negative view of their country’s relationship with the United States. American military bases in Germany? Of negligible importance, according to 45 percent of the population. Forego the US nuclear shield? Why not, according to 31 percent. To be sure, such attitudes reflect Germans’ opinion of the current President,



whose re-election 87 percent believe would negatively impact US-German relations. But consider this: While only 40 percent of Germans believe that Berlin should increase its defence spending, a majority of 52 percent would favour Germany more than doubling(!) its defence spending if such a policy enabled Germany to adopt a more independent foreign and security policy.

But what might be the alternative? Well, not China, it would seem, which many Germans appear to view with increasing ambiguity: While a majority of the public (60 percent) favours greater cooperation with Beijing, only 9 percent perceive China's growing international influence as positive. More than three quarters feel that Berlin should take a stronger stance in defending its political interests vis-à-vis the Middle Kingdom – even at the expense of damaging the economic relationship – yet 54 percent come out against a tougher trade policy.

What to make of this apparent confusion? In hindsight, the 2014 diagnosis was accurate: Germany does need to take on more responsibility. However, it seems clear that Germany will no longer be able to rely on its partnerships and alliances to the extent policy-makers “had assumed” back in 2014. Nor does the public seem enthusiastic about the Western alliance, with a mere 55 percent in favour of a foreign policy anchored in the “West”, compared to 31 percent calling for neutrality. The

question, therefore, is no longer limited to burden-sharing. Instead, Berlin faces the question of whether and how it wishes to protect and defend its interests around the world. In short, Germany appears to be back to square one, in urgent need of a public debate on foreign policy.

Without a doubt, 2020 will be an important year for German foreign policy. Heading into the second half of its two-year stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, from July to December 2020 Berlin will also assume the presidency of the European Council. However, four years into the Trump administration and six years into the “Munich Consensus”, Berlin is still shying away from clearly articulating its interests, let alone well-thought-out plans for action. ✂

1 <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/140131-Munich-Security-Conference.html>



**JOSHUA WEBB**  
Editor, The Berlin Pulse,  
Körper-Stiftung, Berlin