

Germany at the Helm

Why we cannot afford to waste Germany's presidency
of the Council of the European Union



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ANA PALACIO
International Lawyer; Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Spain (2002 – 04), Madrid

On 1 July, Germany will take over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. Germany's presidency could not have come at a more important moment in time, and carries the potential to be a game-changer for Europe. Not only because of Germany's position at the helm of the EU-27, but because of the enormous challenges ahead. However, amidst the plethora of immediate problems Europe faces, we must not lose sight of the forest for the trees. Beyond the COVID-19 response

and economic reconstruction, it will be crucial to build a foundation for effective multilateralism.

As Europe has gone from crisis to crisis over the last decade, it has exuded passivity. Being drawn into one maelstrom after another, it has found just enough strength not to drown, but not enough for a decisive course of action. There are myriad reasons for this perpetual muddling through. The absence of leadership, however, ranks prominently among them.

In this respect, the German presidency is reason for cautious optimism. Though reluctant, for at least a decade now, Germany has been the de facto leader of Europe. Nothing gets done without a tacit nod or more from Berlin. This is simply reality.

Now, by some twist of fate, Germany is to formally set the European agenda, at a time when the continent needs its leadership the most. True, the German Constitutional Court's decision to restrict the Bundesbank's participation in the European Central Bank's Asset Purchase Programme has cast a shadow of uncertainty on future EU activities, on the Union's structural integrity, as well as on Germany's role in Europe. The ramifications of this decision, which go far beyond monetary policy, will play out over the next years. Nonetheless, Germany's presidency represents an opportunity that we cannot afford to waste.

The immediate focus of Germany’s presidency will necessarily shift to efforts to adjust to – and recover from – the effects of the pandemic, with an emphasis on public health and the economy. Tackling these gargantuan tasks is the right course of action. Simultaneously, however, we must not forget our external environment, the shape of which is very much up in the air.

Conventional wisdom has it that trends which pre-dated the crisis, in particular the increasingly open rivalry between China and the United States, will accelerate. Such fears are fueled of course by the war of words and blame between Beijing and Washington. The international system is running an all too real risk of fracturing, with Europe caught somewhat in between, its leaders uncomfortably trying to chart a path between commercial opportunity and the transatlantic alliance.

How should we respond? Yes, Europeans must continue to increase their capacity to act on the international stage. And yes, much remains to be done to bolster European self-sufficiency, particularly in relation to technology. However, such efforts will not inoculate Europe against the impact of a world regressing towards pure power competition – a world in which Europe would be poorly positioned to compete and which it should urgently seek to avoid.

For years we have seen a progressive erosion of the institutions, instruments, and rules that guide global governance. International fora have become more about politics than policy with

institutional structures serving as fiefdoms of influence rather than platforms to respond to actual challenges. The World Health Organization is an example par excellence. The consequences are now being painfully felt.

Effective multilateralism has long been a buzz word for the EU, but has rarely been put into real practice. And yet that is precisely what is needed today and what should be a core element of the German presidency’s international agenda. The global effort to develop and deploy a vaccine would be a natural platform to build a positive, cooperative agenda. Steps to this end are already being taken, most visibly the EU-organized international fundraising campaign for research into a vaccine.

But cooperation and facilitation must not mean acquiescence and should not be pursued at all costs. Prior to any negotiation, it is imperative to know your own position, including red lines and the areas in which you are willing to seek a compromise. Europe has never conducted such soul-searching, but now it must. We have to be aware of our values and commit ourselves to preserving them. This means a respect for rights, but also transparency and a commitment to rules-based approaches.

As we look forward to this most important of Council presidencies, let us hope that Germany takes advantage of this moment of fluidity and of its weight in order to build a foundation for international cooperation. It would be a silver lining to the very dark clouds surrounding us. ✕

