

# Chances in Change

Even if Germany's foreign policy will be marked by continuity, the world is changing and Germany must deal with this

**A**ngela Merkel's 16-year-long chancellorship showed that, given the choice, German voters prefer continuity. With her not running for re-election, they voted for change – because they did not have another option. But will a new face at the top of Germany's government be the only change one should expect?

Speculation about a post-Merkel change in Germany's foreign policy started long before election day and it intensified with every percentage point The Greens and the Free Democratic Party gained in the polls. The Greens have a strongly values-based approach that can also be found in the programme of the Free Democratic Party. Both will have to prove that this will last when in government and confronted with the need to simultaneously uphold German economic interests in countries like Russia or China – a difficult balancing act that Merkel handled over the years with increasing pragmatism. In addition, as junior coalition partners, the two parties' room for manoeuvre will depend on their capability to recapture some of the foreign policy influence lost to the chancellery during the last years.

Apart from that, the instability of world affairs in the coming years will determine how much time Germany's government will have for fundamental debates about foreign policy shifts. An escalation in the Taiwan Strait, new pandemics, or climate

emergencies are just three of a plethora of imaginable troublemakers. Merkel was respected as a tireless crisis manager – from the financial crisis to the euro crisis, the refugee policy crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events made her an expert in reacting and led to her international reputation as a cautious mediator rather than risky action taker. This approach was the perfect fit for the foreign policy soul of the German public: the survey results of *The Berlin Pulse* show for the fifth year in a row that most Germans prefer restraint.

## No more avoiding change

The new government will not be able to neglect the changes happening in its surroundings by continuing with this cautious style of foreign policy. The digital transformation empowers new actors such as Big Tech companies and forces societies to renegotiate fundamental rights like freedom of speech or to fight for new ones such as public access to data. In addition, the climate crisis is already changing the reality of parts of the global population. Not only abroad but also at home, as Germans had to learn painfully this summer. Merely reacting will no longer be sufficient when it comes to tackling climate change or the digital transformation.

One way for foreign policy to respond successfully to these developments is to embrace them

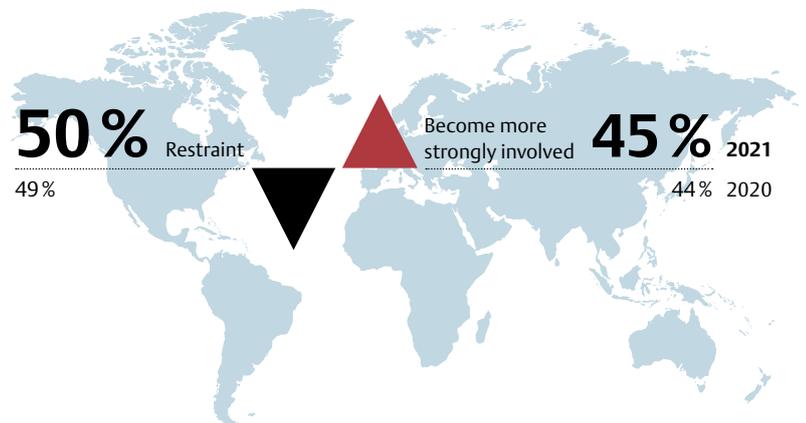
as chances. This can be done by creating the international prerequisites for competitiveness and leadership in both areas. As this year's survey results of *The Berlin Pulse* show, a vast majority of German respondents is optimistic when it comes to Europe's competitiveness in the technological sphere: 63 per cent say that Europe will be able to compete against the United States and China. They are equally hopeful about the impact of an increasingly digital world, which 51 per cent perceive as an opportunity rather than a threat for democracy. They are also self-confident: one-in-two sees Germany as a fore-runner rather than a laggard in European climate policy and names the European Union as most strongly engaged actor in the fight against climate change. And, even if 50 per cent of respondents favour restraint over stronger international involvement, they tend to be more assertive when it comes to the digital sphere. Six-in-ten say that Germany should react with offensive countermeasures when faced with a cyberattack.

### Three strategies for more leadership

A forward-looking German foreign policy could build on the optimism and self-confidence of the public in these two areas of change and liberate itself from the cautious approach of the Merkel years.

*The Berlin Pulse* survey results reveal three strategies that foreign policy makers could use to convince the public of the need for a broader German leadership role despite their historic predilection for restraint. First, by strengthening a common European foreign and security policy. This was mentioned by most German respondents as the European policy goal Germany's new chancellor should promote particularly. It would signal to the public that Germany will not lead alone. Second, and related, by putting more effort in the revitalization of transatlantic relations. *The Berlin Pulse* results show a turnaround in German perceptions of the transatlantic partnership. In September 2020 eight-in-ten respondents considered US-German relations as bad; one year later seven-in-ten perceived them as good. A 'Biden effect' is also reflected in responses about Germany's most important

### International responsibility: Should Germany become more strongly involved in international crises?



partner: 44 per cent of respondents name the United States compared to 10 per cent the previous year. Third, by convincing the youngest generation of Germans to become their ally for change. Sixty-five per cent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 34 favour stronger international involvement over restraint. Young Germans also consider climate change as the biggest foreign policy challenge. And 71 per cent – 20 points more than the average for all age groups – perceive the digital transformation as an opportunity for democracy. To achieve this goal, the new government must respond to their demands.

Over the past one and a half decade, Germans became increasingly change-averse. The new government must remind the public – and itself – of the necessity to proactively address the existential changes ahead. This will only work if it does so from a leadership position together with others. With this in mind, even the lethargic German foreign policy soul might be changed. ✕



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