

Wind of Change: A New Era for German Foreign Policy?



Germany is at a crossroads. After 16 years under Angela Merkel's steady stewardship, Europe's largest country faces what Germans fear most: change. The nearer Merkel's departure, the harder it has been for Germans to accept the inevitable. More than 80 per cent hold a positive view of her. But is Germany really so enthusiastic about Merkel or just nervous about what lies in store? On one level, enthusiasm for Merkel is easy to understand. Germany is more prosperous than ever, unemployment is low and the country is admired far and wide. So much so, in fact, that nearly 60 per cent of Germans say their country's influence will remain intact in the post-Merkel era, according to *The Berlin Pulse* survey from May. And yet, the ground is shifting. Even die-hard fans know that Merkel's style of leadership – to hold off making decisions for as long as possible, which has come to be known in German as *merkeln* – is no longer sustainable at home or on the world stage.

When it comes to foreign policy, Merkel's genius has been to convince Germans that they had nothing to worry about. Whether the issue was Russia, China or even the United States, she diverted the public's attention by laying what one political rival once described as a 'layer of fog' over the issues. At her final summer press conference in July, Merkel was peppered with questions about everything from how women governed differently from men to where she planned to spend election day. She faced few questions on foreign policy, however. China – the central challenge facing the West in the coming decades – was not even mentioned.

The best example of Merkel's talent in shifting public attention away from foreign policy is Nord Stream 2, the controversial pipeline linking Russia and Germany's Baltic coast. She downplayed objections from the United States, Poland and Ukraine, calling the pipeline a 'commercial deal' outside the purview of politics. Meanwhile, her surrogates characterized Nord Stream 2 as a contribution towards *Ostpolitik*, which many Germans are convinced played a central role in bringing down the Berlin Wall. What is not to like?

One finds a similar pattern across Germany's foreign policy portfolio from the Western Balkans to Ukraine and Hungary: a slavish devotion to 'dialogue' and conferences, creating an impression of progress that upon closer inspection turns out to be little more than a mirage.

Merkel's foreign policy legacy is one of frozen conflicts, stalled negotiations and inaction. Her failure to address the international challenges Germany faces has allowed problems to fester. Her successor has the unenviable task of lancing the boil. Given how the public liked Merkel's foreign policy style, the new government will be inclined to follow her lead. If so, they will soon discover that inaction is no longer an option.

The coming years will be defined by great power competition between the United States and China. Washington is counting on Germany's support. So far, in classic Merkelian fashion, Berlin has tried to play both sides of the fence, voicing unease about China's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang while carrying on business as usual and pursuing investment deals with Beijing. In contrast to the United Kingdom and



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other US allies that have decided to bar China's Huawei from their 5G networks, Germany has opted to allow the company in, provided its equipment passes a strict security evaluation.

The Berlin Pulse suggests that most Germans have no illusions about what side of the US-China divide to be on: two-thirds said the United States was more important to Germany than China, with just under 20 per cent saying China was more important.

Germany has good reasons to be cautious about angering China, however. The country is its second-largest export market after the United States and a swathe of German industry, from auto manufacturers to machinery makers, have invested substantial sums over decades in building factories in China. That reliance did not prevent Germany from recently sending a frigate to the Indo-Pacific. But even that mission, which Germany stressed was not intended to antagonize Beijing, underscored that 'decoupling' from China is not a viable option.

Neither is backing away from the United States. For all the talk of redefining US-German relations following the trauma of the Trump years, Germany has slipped seamlessly back into the transatlantic comfort zone. That is a mistake. Trump may be gone, but the scepticism he roused at home about foreign engagements and the idea that allies such as Germany 'owe' the United States remain alive and well. The way the Biden administration withdrew from Afghanistan was Trumpian: done with almost no consultation with, or even a willingness to consider the views of, allies. It was textbook 'America First'.

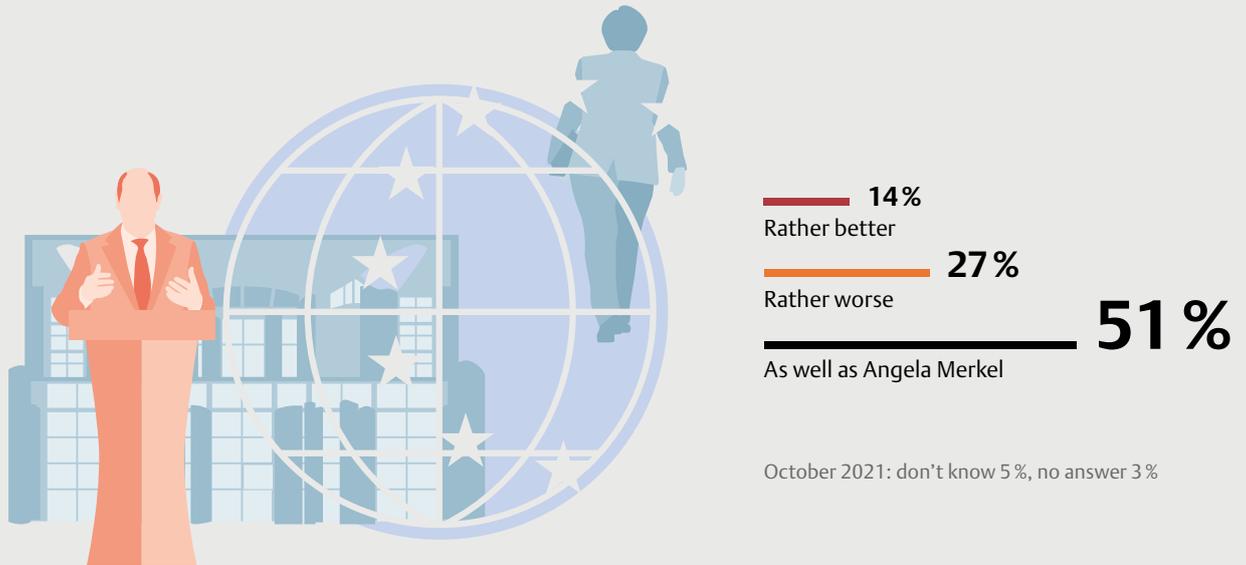
So far, President Joe Biden has taken a different tack on Germany. A dyed-in-the-wool transatlanticist, he has pursued it like an eager suitor, going to great lengths to repair the damage Trump inflicted on the relationship. In June, as Merkel stood by his side, Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that the United States has 'no better friend in the world than Germany'.

But does Germany still want to be the United States' friend? *The Berlin Pulse* indicates that large majorities of Germans perceive it as a partner on issues as disparate as free trade, security and human rights. That marks a substantial shift from a year ago when Trump was still in charge.

Despite that reversal, anyone following its recent domestic political debates might be forgiven for concluding that Germany has turned its back on the transatlantic alliance. Much of the political class, especially on the left, seems to have concluded the country does not really need the United States anymore. They question whether Germany should continue to pursue its NATO defence spending commitments and the nuclear-sharing agreement with the United States. But, despite Merkel famously stating in 2017 in a Bavarian beer tent that 'the times where we could fully depend on others have begun to end', reliance on the United States is as strong as ever.

In terms of the economy – as its largest export market – and security, the United States is still Germany's indispensable ally. As *The Berlin Pulse* survey confirms, Germans have lost much of their knee-jerk resistance to foreign military

Would Olaf Scholz as a Chancellor represent Germany's interests in the world rather better, rather worse or as well as Angela Merkel?



engagements when their country's security is at risk or to protect allies and combat terrorism. But Germany still lacks the capacity to act alone. No degree of fantasizing about achieving 'strategic autonomy' in Europe will change that reality any time soon.

What has already changed, however, is Washington's expectations of Germany. Biden might have nothing but praise for the country but, like most American 'nice guys', he wants something in return. That something is action. If the United States is going to continue to guarantee German security, Berlin will have to do more than just pay lip service to the idea of protecting Western interests around the world. That applies not just to China but also to Russia, the Middle East and even Europe.

When it comes to the European Union, the United States wants the same thing from Germany as many of its European partners: leadership. No other country on the continent has the political or economic clout to take on that role.

Leadership requires a willingness to take risks, make unpopular decisions and live with the consequences. It would force Germany, for example to take a much harder line on the likes of Poland and Hungary as the leaders of those countries seek to systematically dismantle the rule of law and democracy. It would mean standing up to Vladimir Putin and not pretending that he can be trusted to respect the territorial integrity of Russia's neighbours. The same applies to China.

As much as Germans bristle at change, they would be wise to accept that it cannot be halted. The only question is whether they will try to shape it or have it forced on them. Merkel's departure opens the door for Europe's largest country to assert itself on the world stage. It is time for Germany's new leadership to walk through it.

