

Making Germany More Strategic

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Experts at the Bonn CISG International Security Forum confronted the perfect storm of combined challenges of growing multipolarity, rising unilateralism, and global threats. The world order that has been in place for decades is rapidly changing. This unraveling of world order makes transatlantic leadership all the more necessary. The United States is stepping down from its leadership role in global affairs despite studies such as the 2018 Pew Global Attitudes Study that showed that 63 percent of respondents worldwide and 58 percent of Germans “prefer the U.S. over China as the world’s leading power.” Competition to fill the leadership vacuum has begun with a rising China and nationalist Russia taking the initiative. Will Europe strengthen the Transatlantic Pillar?

The wide range of diverging assessments and perspectives presented at the Security Forum made it clear that the process of adapting to changes in the international system will require an immense amount of effort, consideration, reflection, and the political will to compromise and cooperate.

The need to take on more responsibility is especially acute in Europe and Germany. Sustaining the Transatlantic Partnership’s Western values is needed to help reshape world order. French President Emmanuel Macron has presented a vision to reform the European Union and to prepare it for international leadership. However, Germany, the economic powerhouse in the middle of the continent, remains reluctant to take a leading role. It continues to react with crisis management, lacking strategic vision. This reluctance results in halting steps toward reform of the EU, including in security issues, such as PESCO and a European intervention force, as well as in eurozone economic structures that would strengthen the union on the international stage.

Germany’s history compounds its reluctant leadership dilemma and has become an obstacle to its future. After World War II, the country set out to recover economically under the security umbrella of the United States. Lacking full sovereignty during the Cold War and struggling with its history of nationalism, mil-

itarism, and Nazism, Germany developed a strategic culture that was passive, timid, morally uncompromising, and dominated by feelings of guilt. Never again would it engage in “regular” foreign affairs that include protecting national interests and morally messy foreign policy.

Nearly three decades after unification and at a time when power politics and nationalism are on the rise, Germany has to recalibrate its strategic culture. For several years, U.S. presidents have called for German leadership and a stronger Europe. Now is the time for Germany to find the right balance between its international responsibilities and its culture of remembrance. Since nothing moves forward in Europe without it, the country not only has to develop a national strategy but also strengthen Europe’s strategic role in the transatlantic partnership.

Three obstacles stand in the way of Germany developing a new strategic culture, however.

First, even though its leadership set out at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 to take on more responsibility, and despite the subsequently conducted foreign policy and defense reviews, German strategic culture and the German public’s aversion to the military have not changed significantly. According to one survey in 2017, “two-thirds (67 percent) of Germans also hold a positive opinion of NATO but were least supportive of defending Alliance members. Just 40 percent of Germans believe that Germany should provide military force to defend a NATO ally if Russia attacks it. More than half (53 percent) did not support such aid.”



Second, given the dominant strategic culture, it is politically risky to suggest a German initiative or participation in international alliances publicly when the situation is morally and legally unclear. Dogmatic public backlash often prevents an informed debate on foreign policy issues and preempts policy decisions, as seen recently with the suggestion of a German military intervention should the regime in Syria again use chemical weapons against its opponents. Furthermore, domestic rather than international or security issues drive the political fortunes of aspiring and high-level German politicians.

Third, Germany’s strategic thinking is hampered by a lack of cooperation and coordination within the government and especially among ministries, whose independence is protected by a constitutional mandate. At the same time, foreign policy in coalition governments, which are the norm for the country, requires collaboration between ministers with often conflicting political programs, adding to the lack of coherent strategic thinking and planning.

Germany can resolve its dilemma by implementing a more strategic process in its political structure to overcome its reactive, crisis-management culture. A strategic approach builds on informed public debate as a foundation for policymaking, which an independent expert council could address. Similar but not identical to a National Security Council, such an independent Council of Experts for Strategic Foresight could support an informed public discussion but is not caught up in the inter-ministerial or intra-coalition rivalry in policymaking. The Council of Economic Experts is an excellent model for such an independent body. The German Council of Economic Experts – Germany’s Economic Wise Men – reports to the chancellor once a year on the projected development of the economy. The government responds, and the result is an informed public debate that receives a significant level of media coverage.

A Council for Strategic Foresight could contribute significantly to a more strategic consideration of developments that German foreign policy will likely face in the future. It could lay the foundation for a continuing, informed public debate on strategy and foreign and security policy, based on an annual experts’ report that includes scenarios and foresight for current as well as likely future challenges. In the long run, this could lead to a change in the strategic culture, enabling elites and politicians to develop more easily a strategy for Germany and Europe backed by the public, which would strengthen or reshape world order with a robust transatlantic pillar.

