

A Superhero Without Superpowers? Germany and Its “Spider-Man Doctrine”

Dr. Jana Puglierin, Head of Program,
Center for European Policy Studies, German Council
on Foreign Relations (DGAP)

Over the past few years, Germany has nominally adopted the superhero’s signature motto – “with great power comes great responsibility.” But without more strategic vision, the country looks more like Batman: a lonely billionaire with high-tech weaponry but no long-term plan.

Germany has certainly taken its time: After years of encouragement – and gentle pressure – from its allies, Berlin finally signaled its willingness to play a greater international role in 2014 when then-President Joachim Gauck spoke of the country’s need to “take on more responsibility” at that year’s Munich Security Conference.

Since then, a “new responsibility” narrative has taken shape based on the following logic: Germany benefits like no other country from globalization and an open, rules-based international order. The country is the 800 lbs. gorilla in the EU in terms of economic strength, political stability, population size, and geostrategic location. Therefore it cannot simply carry on as before in the face of new challenges to the international order – it needs to take resolute steps to preserve and shape that order by shoring up the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations. Patrick Keller and Gary Schmitt of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, respectively, have called this logic the German “Spider-Man Doctrine”: with great power comes great responsibility.

But four years on, the question remains: Is Germany ready to take on more international responsibility and pursue a coherent foreign and security strategy?



At first glance, the answer seems to be “yes”: several developments indicate that Berlin is playing a greater international security role. The Bundeswehr is engaged in 13 foreign operations. Germany has taken the lead of the multinational battalion in Lithuania within the framework of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence, providing a structure for the successful implementation of the Wales Summit decisions. With next to no debate, the German government decided to deliver arms to the Peshmerga forces in 2014 when Iraq’s Kurdish regions were threatened by the so-called Islamic State, breaking a taboo in German foreign policy. After France requested mutual assistance under Article 42.7 TEU in November 2015, the German government rushed to secure a mandate in the Bundestag for military intervention in Syria, promising France it would deploy up to 1,200 soldiers, a German frigate, and six Tornado reconnaissance jets. Moreover, the country has played a leading role in managing the West’s difficult relationship with Moscow since Russia annexed Crimea and fanned the flames of military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Germany was also key in negotiating the JCPOA with Iran.

So Germany's foreign policy has indeed come a long way. But does it follow a coherent strategy?

Not really. The evolution of German foreign policy is not primarily the manifestation of a new strategy, but rather a response to the geopolitical crises that overtook Europe shortly after President Gauck delivered his speech. The questions Germany faced back then were whether to send a couple more soldiers to the EU training operation in Mali, or a German MedEvac-Airbus to the Central African Republic – one that would not even have to evacuate German soldiers. Since then, Russian President Vladimir Putin has used the threat of military force to bring a portion of Ukraine back to mother Russia; IS created its “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria; a series of terror attacks shook European capitals; and an unprecedented wave of refugees arrived at the EU's shores.

In short, over the last four years Germany's foreign policy has been reactive and driven by crises, rather than proactive and driven by a coherent strategy. What's more, there is still no common understanding among the German foreign policy elite of what “taking over more international responsibility” should mean in practice. Some argue that Germany should “lead from the center,” others think Germany should be a “reflective power,” a “shaping power” (Gestaltungsmacht), or primarily just a “civilian power”.

The elephant in the room question is: What role should the German military play? So far, there is often a “kinetic gap” between the things Germany does and the things it encourages and enables close partners and allies to do. A good illustration is the Mali operation, where France is actively intervening militarily to prevent Islamist groups from advancing further, while Germany is training Malian soldiers to provide security for their own country.

Germany still lacks a strategic culture that encourages public discussion of military matters. But this discussion will soon be unavoidable: fundamental differences with the British and French remain, and pressure on the Germans to take the same risks as their allies is building up fast.

This helps explain why Germany has yet to live up to its Spider-Man doctrine. Berlin clearly lacks the super-human abilities for which the fictional Marvel Comics superhero is known. In fact, Batman might be a more appropriate role model for Berlin. Unlike most superheroes, Batman does not possess any superpowers; instead, he relies on his physical prowess, martial arts abilities, detective skills, technology, vast wealth, and indomitable will.

However, reading the annual reports of the German Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, one doubts Germany's ability to be Europe's Dark Knight. Despite reversing a downward trend in defense spending, the German Bundeswehr is still in miserable condition – it is struggling to manage equipment shortages, and remains chronically underfunded. Germany still spends only about 1.2 percent of its GDP on defense, and during the recent election the Social Democrats, invoking fears of “rearmament”, denounced NATO's 2 percent spending target, despite having signed on as part of Merkel's coalition government.

In sum, Germany's foreign and security policy suffers from a major contradiction between its rising ambitions and its meager capabilities. If the next German government does not close – or at least narrow – this gap and make a European security commitment that corresponds to its economic and political weight, Germany will cut a depressing Batman-like figure: a lonely billionaire with a ridiculous costume.