



Germany's New Muscle

By Stefan Wolff

Much like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks marked a turning point in international politics—and one that looked quite different to Germans and Americans. In the United States, the Soviet collapse prompted U.S. President George H. W. Bush to envision a “new world order” for the 1990s and beyond. But in Germany, the demands of reunification and the ever present political and emotional legacy of the Nazi regime left leaders unwilling to seize upon momentous changes to articulate a new proactive foreign policy grounded in national, rather than European interests.

This paralysis is over, argues political scientist Wilfried von Bredow in the German monthly *Internationale Politik* (Vol. 58, No. 9, September 2003, Berlin), the flagship publication of the German Council on Foreign Relations, a leading Berlin think tank. Germany's global role and self-perception have changed dramatically in recent years, most noticeably after the terrorist attacks on the United States. Two events—one prior to September 11 and one after—influenced and highlighted this evolution: The Kosovo conflict in 1999 and the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003. In different ways, both episodes have shaped Germany's new international identity. The purely pacifist dogma of the past, whereby Germany refused to commit troops to foreign policy tasks, has evolved into a more assertive stance. Germany now boldly formulates and pursues its national interests, even if doing so means opposing Washington.

During the Kosovo conflict, the German government spoke out in favor of military action against Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic and provided equipment and personnel to the NATO mission. In the face of the human suffering in Kosovo and with vivid memories of the Bosnian tragedy, Germany was not prepared to allow a second Srebrenica. The public also began to accept military force as a tool for managing crises and preventing conflicts. And in an important symbolic event that affirmed a new German identity, Germany hosted the European Council in Cologne in June 1999, when the European Union (EU) committed to its common European Security and Defense Policy.

The debate preceding the 2003 war in Iraq further revealed the shift towards a more assertive German foreign policy agenda and strategy, with German Chancellor

Gerhard Schroeder opposing U.S. military action. Von Bredow highlights how, in the midst of a reelection campaign, the German government not only publicized its antiwar stance “with great furor” but also chose to “actively obstruct any possible legitimizing of the Anglo-American strategy in the U.N. Security Council.” Ironically, Schroeder’s decision to oppose the Iraq war was no less unilateral than the United States and Britain’s decision to wage it. Germany’s foreign policy priorities—the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting global terrorism, and preventing or resolving conflicts— and the country’s insistence on achieving them through the strengthening of multilateral regimes became evident to all.

Now that it has asserted its strategic national interests more forcefully on the global stage, von Bredow argues, Germany must move beyond rhetoric and pool resources with its European allies to build a genuine European defense capability— though one that does not undermine or duplicate NATO’s role. Thus far, Germany has played an ambiguous role, advocating European military capabilities as a complement to NATO’s security umbrella, but also supporting efforts to create an independent EU military planning capability, which clearly would duplicate NATO’s current role.

Such moves suggest that Germany will remain committed to multilateralism, but a very selective form of multilateralism that focuses on the EU and on other organizations beyond the reach of U.S. dominance, or at least on settings in which the United States can be counterbalanced. While politically attractive in an age of anti-Americanism, this approach may backfire on Berlin in the long run. Current and future German governments (and their European partners) need the United States to secure geopolitical stability, not just because of unrivalled U.S. capabilities, but because, the United States and Europe share fundamental common values. A serious and permanent rift would dramatically diminish the ability of either side to defend these values and project them around the world as a credible and desirable alternative to conflict and chaos.

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