Berlin's Best Hope

Ulf Gartzke

Since taking office in November 2005, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has racked up an impressive foreign policy record. First and foremost, Merkel moved quickly to repair transatlantic relations with Washington, which had been badly damaged over the Iraq war under former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Red-Green government. While European politicians on the Left have repeatedly resorted to anti-American rhetoric as a crucial element of successful election campaigns, Germany's conservative CDU/CSU parties firmly believe that strong political and security ties with the United States are an indispensable pillar of German foreign policy. And after Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac essentially turned 10 Downing Street and the Élysée Palace into lame-duck residencies, Chancellor Merkel's early effort to reach out to Washington paid off, with her emerging as President Bush's most important partner in Europe.

Second, Merkel decided to recalibrate Berlin's approach vis-à-vis Paris. In sharp contrast to her populist predecessor, who had essentially outsourced German foreign policy to the French in the run-up to the Iraq war, Merkel made it clear from the outset that she would not be taken for a ride by Chirac and company. The same still applies, in principle, to current hyperactive French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose constant attempts to steal the political limelight from his German counterpart have caused marital strains in the much vaunted *"couple franco-allemand."*

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Third, Merkel adopted a tougher line toward Russia, not shying away from criticizing Moscow's aggressive foreign policies and its nasty crackdown on political rights and press freedoms at home. In spite of Germany's growing energy dependence on Russia, Merkel dared to pursue a principled, values-based foreign policy, thus breaking with the far-too-chummy "men's friendship" that had developed between Gerhard Schroeder and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Fourth, Chancellor Merkel's international leadership role was further bolstered by the fact that Germany held both the EU and G-8 presidencies in 2007. During her six-month stint at the EU helm, Merkel paved the way for the new "Reform Treaty" to replace the ill-fated Constitutional Treaty, pushed through binding post-Kyoto CO_2 reduction targets for the 27-nation bloc, and even managed to stay cool in the face of harsh anti-German/anti-EU attacks by her ultra-conservative populist neighbors in Poland.

Up until now, these foreign policy accomplishments have offset a rather lackluster domestic performance (complete with a derivative economic policy and growing opposition to her handling of internal affairs from the SPD). For better or for worse, Merkel has been dubbed Germany's "globe-trotting chancellor." But this state of affairs is beginning to change. Germany's next general elections—to be held by the fall of 2009—are looming large on the political horizon. Since the fall of 2007, German politics in general, and within Merkel's "grand coalition" in particular, has become noticeably more polarized. Fundamental differences between the CDU/CSU and the SPD have sharpened, and not only over domestic issues. Increasingly, it is clear that the two political factions have radically different visions for Germany's foreign policy.

More robust on Russia (and China)

Political differences between the CDU/CSU and the SPD over how to best deal with President Putin's Russia are nothing new. Back in 2002-2003, German conservatives were already highly critical of then-Chancellor Schroeder's alignment with Paris and Moscow in opposition to the Iraq war. Subsequent attempts by Schroeder to form a "strategic partnership" with Moscow were greeted with suspicion by the CDU/CSU, which viewed the initiative as a dangerous departure from Berlin's long-standing Atlanticist posture. Schroeder's glossing over of the Russian government's crackdown on political rights and press freedoms is also well documented. At one point, he even famously referred to the Russian leader and former KGB spy as a "flawless democrat."

Shortly before losing the early general elections he called in 2005, Chancellor Schroeder signed a landmark energy deal with President Putin to build the 750-mile Nord Stream offshore gas pipeline stretching from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. Scheduled to become operational in 2012, the pipeline will transport Russian gas directly to Western Europe, thus bypassing countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland, with whom Moscow has had serious energy conflicts in recent years. The Polish government in particular was outraged at the fact that neither Putin nor Schroeder had consulted Warsaw before signing the pipeline deal. Today, Germany already imports more than 40 percent

of its natural gas from Russia, a share that is bound to rise even higher in the coming years. Finally, Schroeder's decision to become chairman of the Russian-controlled Nord Stream consortium after leaving office came under a great deal of criticism at home and abroad since it was widely viewed as an unprecedented, inappropriate blurring of state and private affairs.

Upon taking office, Chancellor Merkel engineered a clear departure from her predecessor's unabashedly pro-Moscow policies. As a gesture of goodwill, she made a point of inviting Poland to connect to the Nord Stream pipeline (although the offer was unfortunately rejected by the populist Kaczynski administration in Warsaw). Merkel also adopted a tougher line vis-à-vis Moscow and decided to speak out against deteriorating political conditions within Russia, as well as the continuing atrocities being committed by the Kremlin's proxies in Chechnya. During her official visits to Russia, Merkel made sure to meet with prominent human rights NGOs and dissidents in an effort to send a clear signal to Putin that she, unlike Schroeder, was not willing to look the other way when it seemed convenient and opportunistic. And in early December 2007, Merkel, in striking contrast to French President Sarkozy, pointedly refused to congratulate Vladimir Putin on his party's crushing "success" in the Russian parliamentary elections. The message was clear: in Berlin's view, the elections in Russia had failed to live up to proper European standards.

This confrontational approach towards Russia is certainly not without its critics. At the SPD party convention in late October 2007, foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier—who previously served as Chancellor Schroeder's chief of staff and was a key player in confronting the Bush administration over Iraq—sharply criticized Merkel's Russia policy, charging that she seemed "to always look fearfully at how newspaper headlines back home" would view her relationship with President Putin. Merkel, of course, knows quite well that a principled, values-based foreign policy is supported by large segments of the German population, especially young people, women, and the well-educated. These are all crucial demographics that traditionally lean heavily towards the SPD/Greens and who could potentially swing the next elections in favor of Merkel's conservative CDU/CSU parties.

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In essence, the main thrust of the SPD's criticism of Merkel's Russia policy has been that she publicly provokes and antagonizes one of Germany's most important political, economic, and energy partners in the pursuit of short-term domestic political gain—namely, by holding Moscow to naïve and unrealistically high Western democratic and human rights standards. In the process, the argument goes, Merkel also directly threatens Germany's energy interests precisely when Germany most needs reliable external suppliers.

Merkel's Asia policy, in particular with regard to China, has opened up another major foreign policy fault line within the governing "grand coalition." Unlike her predecessors, Gerhard Schroeder and (to a lesser extent) Helmut Kohl, Merkel does not view China exclusively through

the narrow prism of business, trade, and economic opportunity. To be sure, German global players such as Volkswagen, Daimler AG, and Siemens have been very successful in China for many years, and continue to heavily expand their manufacturing and market presence there. At the same time, though, Merkel is arguably the first German chancellor who recognizes the growing economic, political, and even military challenges posed by the PRC.

Political relations between Berlin and Beijing suffered a major blow on September 23, 2007, when Merkel became the first German chancellor ever to meet with the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government was particularly outraged by the fact that Merkel received the exiled Tibetan leader at her official Berlin residence. The message was unmistakable: while reaffirming her government's continued commitment to the "One China" policy, the German Chancellor was not willing to sacrifice her own political beliefs and principles on the altar of close political and economic ties with a rising China.

Just one month later, a strategy paper on Asia prepared by the CDU/CSU Bundestag group offered new insights into the conservatives' big-picture thinking about the world's most populous and most dynamic region. According to Dr. Heinrich Kreft, a senior CDU/CSU foreign policy advisor who helped shape key elements of the document, Germany's Asia policy had been too narrowly focused on China and its economic potential for far too long. By emphasizing the importance of strong bilateral ties with other key democratic countries in the region—including India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—the new Asia strategy argues, in essence, that Berlin and the EU should opt for a much broader and more values-based foreign policy approach that takes full account of Asia's growing political and economic weight on the global stage. The Merkel government thus, in the words of the CDU/CSU paper, views China as both "a strategic challenge and an opportunity for Germany and Europe." It clearly recognizes that the astonishing economic success of China's authoritarian regime increasingly poses a new ideological challenge to the West's paradigm of liberal democracy and free markets. By strengthening Germany and Europe's political and economic ties with Western-oriented democracies in Asia, the CDU/CSU parties want to avoid the possibility that a rising, authoritarian China becomes the kind of powerful model that other countries in the region and beyond feel tempted to follow.

Back home, this approach to Asia is very popular. Meanwhile, parts of the SPD, as well as some opposition politicians, have raised a chorus of objections to this "Americanophile foreign policy," which they blame for "serious power-politic[s] conflicts between Russia/China, and Germany." Instead, they advocate a more nuanced geopolitical positioning of Germany. This strategy is partly motivated by traditional anti-American left-wing reflexes. It is also, however, an attempt to prepare for the time when America's "unipolar moment" comes to an end.

Flashpoint: Afghanistan

In October and November 2007, respectively, the German parliament voted overwhelmingly to extend the Bundeswehr's ISAF and OEF mandates in Afghanistan for another year. While more than three-quarters of all MPs backed the continuing

deployment of up to 3,500 troops and several Tornado reconnaissance aircraft, they did so despite the fact that the Afghanistan operation is increasingly seen as a lost-cause mission with little moral legitimacy. In fact, public opinion in Germany, like in Canada, has turned firmly against the ISAF/OEF missions, with recent surveys indicating that two-thirds of all Germans favor an immediate military withdrawal.

For Chancellor Merkel and her conservative CDU/CSU allies, the Bundeswehr's bloody, seemingly open-ended Afghan engagement is a potential political time bomb—one with the power to blow up ahead of the next federal elections in 2009. The domestic debate triggered by NATO's January 2008 request to deploy several hundred additional German infantry troops as part of the Alliance's Quick Response Force (QRF) in northern Afghanistan is further proof that Afghanistan represents arguably Merkel's biggest foreign policy vulnerability. The SPD and the Greens are already stocking up on election campaign ammunition, arguing that the QRF mission there backed by the CDU/CSU is a "combat mission" of a completely "new quality."

So far, only the post-Communist Left Party has called for the Bundeswehr's pullout. But many left-wing MPs from the governing SPD party, and even some CDU/CSU legislators, under strong pressure from their local constituents, are openly critical of the Afghanistan mission. The Greens are divided, with some MPs voting for the ISAF extension. Meanwhile, the free-market FDP party, the CDU/CSU's putative future coalition partner, is also increasingly skeptical of the Afghanistan mission.

Given this highly charged domestic political context, demands from abroad that German troops leave the "safe" parts of northern Afghanistan to support terrorist-hunting operations in the South are misplaced. They play directly into the hands of those who want a complete German military pullout. If Germany's continued military presence in Afghanistan were to be perceived as the product of American pressure, the public case for sustaining the German mission there would fall victim to left-wing demagogues waiting to play the potent card of latent anti-Americanism. There already exists a widespread perception in Germany that the Bundeswehr's Afghan deployment is, above all, part of President Bush's "global war on terror," a.k.a. the neocon crusade.

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How can the Afghanistan conundrum be solved? There are essentially two options. The first one—politically tempting but strategically dangerous—would be for the governments concerned to cave in to public pressures and pull out of Afghanistan. In the short term, such a move, supported by large segments of public opinion in Germany, Canada, and elsewhere, would defuse a situation that could potentially contribute to electoral defeat at the hands of disgruntled voters who no longer believe in the moral legitimacy and military necessity of the Afghanistan intervention.

The risk of this course of action is that Afghanistan will once again become a failed state, a haven for international terrorists and drug lords, with potentially devastating consequences for international security.

The second option is to go on the offensive and try to convince public opinion at home that the military mission in Afghanistan is a cause worth fighting for. Germany, for instance, only narrowly escaped disaster in September 2007 when a group of Islamic terrorists (including two German converts), who had been trained at al-Qaeda camps along the Afghan-Pakistani border, were arrested before they could set off massive car bombs at the Frankfurt airport on the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. But making the case for the Afghanistan mission directly is a risky strategy that demands brutal honesty and strong political leadership. The harsh reality is that we are unlikely to successfully transform Afghanistan into a thriving Western-style democracy. Rather, a realistic litmus test should be to make sure that the country can never again serve as a terrorist haven.

Finally, and most importantly, political leaders from the relevant NATO countries can no longer afford to remain silent about why fighting in Afghanistan is justified in terms of our core national security interests. Even conservative critics agree that for far too long Chancellor Merkel preferred not to take a strong stand in Germany's acrimonious Afghanistan debate. For example, only in the fall of 2007, after criticism of her failure to visit the troops, did she finally decide to go there. With al-Qaeda and the Taliban on the rise in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, as well as mounting public opposition in Germany to the Bundeswehr deployment, such a defensive and reactive stance ultimately carries huge potential political and military risks, both at home and abroad.

Reading the political tea leaves

Despite having hit quite a few political bumps in recent months, Chancellor Merkel's term in office has already exceeded the expectations of friends and foes alike. Today, Angela Merkel—once dismissed by hardcore conservatives as "the divorced, childless, Protestant woman from former East Germany"—is fully in charge of the CDU/CSU camp. Going into the next election cycle, she faces no credible internal contender and is recognized as the conservatives' best vote-getter. After all, Merkel's personal approval ratings have consistently been at or above 50-60 percent; that is, much better than the figures for the overall CDU/CSU-SPD "grand coalition" (30-35 percent).

As Germany approaches its next general elections, which will most likely be held in the fall of 2009, the CDU/CSU and the SPD will step up efforts to accentuate the differences in their political stances, mobilize their respective bases, and reach out to potential swing voters. For the SPD, this will mean moving further to the left and continuing its anti-reform drive. It likely will also continue to trend in an anti-American foreign policy direction. The SPD knows very well that its last-minute victory in the closely contested 2002 elections was, above all, due to Chancellor Schroeder's opportunistic use of the pacifist, anti-American card in the run-up to the controversial Iraq war. Looking ahead, opportunities for this card to be played again exist over Germany's policy towards Russia—especially if somehow linked to the SPD's strong

opposition to the deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Europe, which has been rejected by about 90 percent of the German population. The same is true for the Bundeswehr's Afghanistan mission, which is now opposed by two-thirds of all Germans. Growing military losses there will increase calls for a swift pullout.

If a Democratic administration takes over the White House in January 2009, life should get easier for Merkel and her CDU/CSU parties, as the Left will likely have fewer opportunities to follow its anti-American instincts. Furthermore, Merkel would receive a major domestic political boost if the next U.S. administration (Democratic or Republican) were to agree to legally binding CO_2 reduction targets. After all, the Chancellor's international leadership role in tackling global climate change is extremely popular back home. For the conservative CDU/CSU parties, unlike the SPD, consistent and strong ties with the United States are an indispensable cornerstone of German foreign policy. In an age of Islamic extremism, rising Asian power, and the emergence of an increasingly multipolar world, there can be no doubt that a unified transatlantic alliance is necessary to ensure that our fundamental values of democracy, freedom, and open economies prevail.

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