

Checkbook Diplomacy in 1991 (Retrospective Account, 1995)

Abstract

Despite international pressure, the Federal Republic of Germany refused to get involved militarily in the Gulf War (1991) and instead offered generous financial support. In the following piece, then foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher defends this position in retrospect and emphasizes that Germany has always met its international obligations. It was not without reason, he says, that in 1989 the two superpowers identified Germany as an important partner in Europe.

Source

[...]

But the situation in Iraq continued to escalate. Saddam Hussein was clearly unwilling to withdraw from Kuwait voluntarily. The trade embargo was scheduled to be in effect until January 15, 1991. The Security Council had made it unmistakably clear to Saddam Hussein that the United Nations resolutions—which were unconditionally supported by Germany’s government—would be enforced with military power unless he complied by that date. This ultimatum demonstrated a new quality in international crisis management: Thanks to the participation of Egypt, Syria, and Morocco, the United Nations’ mustering of forces was a concerted action by Western and Arab countries.

In December 1990, the Turkish government requested the deployment of units of the AMF (Allied Mobile Force). Since these battalions included air and land units of the Bundeswehr, the proposal triggered a vehement controversy, both in the German populace and within the nation’s political parties, in view of the NATO Treaty.

NATO was eager to demonstrate its determination to defend Turkey against outside attack. In this context Germany committed itself to sending German air units to Turkey to deter Saddam Hussein from attacking our ally.

By now the public increasingly demanded our actual military participation in the Gulf coalition. Yet even aside from constitutional qualms, we had to bear in mind the fact that the Two-Plus-Four Treaty had not yet been ratified by Moscow, and we were therefore well advised to take the Soviet Union’s domestic situation into account. We must in no way supply the forces that opposed Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy in regard to Germany with valid arguments; if the Soviet parliament refused to ratify the Two-Plus-Four Treaty, the decision would have catastrophic consequences for Germany and Europe. Shevardnadze’s decision, on December 20, to resign from his post as foreign minister had disconcerted me greatly.

Shevardnadze justified his resignation in the following words: “This is my protest against the impending dictatorship. The democrats are quitting the scene, and a dictatorship is approaching—I am not speaking lightly. No one knows what the dictatorship will look like, what kind of dictator there will be, or what things will be like. I will always support the ideas of renewal and of democracy.” And he continued, “If you create a dictatorship, no one can say who will be the dictator. When you push the button, you decide not only on Gorbachev’s fate but on that of perestroika and democracy.” Though he did not say so explicitly, I thought that his concluding sentence could only mean that the end of perestroika would also jeopardize ratification of the Two-Plus-Four Treaty in the Supreme Soviet. Given this particular situation,

therefore, I opposed the use of Bundeswehr troops in the Gulf for reasons not only of constitutionality but also of foreign policy. As matters turned out, several more months would pass before the Soviet ambassador handed me the ratification document at the German Foreign Office on March 15, 1991; not until then did Germany regain its full sovereignty.

[...]

Germany's Contribution to the Liberation of Kuwait

On February 23 the final phase of the Gulf War began. We were all relieved that, despite some predictions to the contrary, the war could be ended so quickly. Never before had an aggressor been given as many chances to concede as had Saddam Hussein. But he had refused to seize even a single one of these opportunities.

Within its limits Germany had proved a reliable partner of the war alliance: It was one of the first nations to transform the United Nations embargo of Iraq and occupied Kuwait into binding national law; we also subjected our government to the United Nations Security Council resolutions on the Iraq crisis as well as all further resolutions passed by other international organizations. Since we were not represented in the Security Council, our participation in other international associations—such as the EC and the European Political Cooperation, the WEU, and NATO, as well as institutions for economic cooperation—was all the more important. In March 1991, after the suspension of hostilities was announced but before the official truce, Bonn also met the United States' request to send naval units to the Gulf to sweep for Iraqi mines.

Germany made an important contribution to Kuwait's liberation by facilitating the Soviet Union's political cooperation with the West; we advocated opening the West's financial institutions to Soviet interests and needs.

In this crisis situation we significantly stabilized the situation in Europe through our Eastern policy and contributed to the balance of interests and cooperation with the Soviet Union. Germany's willingness to support the Soviet Union's economy facilitated its withdrawal from Central Europe. That move in turn improved the Alliance's strategic position in regard to security.

A stable position of security for Europe at a time of fundamental change was a precondition and basis for the actions in the Persian Gulf. Without the peaceful political developments in Central Europe that had resulted from the London NATO summit of July 1990 and the agreements made shortly thereafter between the Federal Republic and the Soviet leaders, it is doubtful whether Moscow would have helped to implement the United Nations' measures against Iraq and the presence of American units in the Gulf. And on September 17, 1990, Eduard Shevardnadze, speaking in Tokyo, had stated, "If the crisis [the Gulf War] had erupted before the end of the Cold War, we would have prepared our missiles for firing, unleashing the Third World War."

Prudence in foreign policy and a clear endorsement of the policy of the Western Alliance, with consideration of the Soviet Union's basic needs—these were our guidelines. Our American, British, and French allies were entitled to solidarity from us. At the same time we supported the final French as well as Soviet attempts at mediating the conflict. Because I viewed it as our primary task to avoid war without abandoning our objectives, I regarded Mitterrand's and Gorbachev's efforts as an expression not of weakness but of responsibility.

As the most important transfer point for American and British troops, Germany was far more involved in the war against Iraq than was generally realized. We had allowed the United States to use its installations on our territory for their military actions, and Germany allowed U.S. planes to fly over and land in our territory. We further supported the transport of U.S. and British units stationed in Germany to the Persian Gulf. Particularly during the second phase of deployment of allied forces beginning in November 1990,

almost 900 German freight trains, 450 Rhine boats, and land vehicles transported the bulk of the U.S. and the British Rhine forces' equipment to the ports of Bremerhaven, Nordenham, Emden, Rotterdam, and Antwerp within a few weeks. The German air force also served as an important tool in transportation, not only as part of several humanitarian missions but in more than 250 military actions by American, British, and Dutch forces.

Germany's financial aid to the alliance in 1990-91 amounted to approximately 18 billion Deutschmarks; of that, 10.3 billion Deutschmarks—more than half the total amount—went to the United States. Unlike many other nations, Germany delivered the full amount on the promised date. Included in part of the total sum were contributions of 800 million Deutschmarks to Great Britain and 300 million Deutschmarks to France. By 1993 Turkey, in addition to Germany's regular contribution to that nation's defense forces within NATO, received additional aid from German arms reserves worth 1.5 billion Deutschmarks.

[...]

Source: Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Rebuilding a House Divided: A Memoir by the Architect of Germany's Reunification*, translated by Thomas Thornton. New York: Broadway Books, 1998, pp. 477-79, 482-84. © 1998 Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, Munich, in the Random House Publishing Group.

Recommended Citation: Checkbook Diplomacy in 1991 (Retrospective Account, 1995), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3717>> [May 14, 2025].