

Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Germany's New Global Role (2016)

Abstract

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier reflects upon the new global challenges of German foreign policy that require the country to take greater responsibility by assuming a leadership role in Europe despite its troubled history.

Source

“Germany's New Global Role: Berlin Steps Up”

Over the past two decades, Germany's global role has undergone a remarkable transformation. Following its peaceful reunification in 1990, Germany was on track to become an economic giant that had little in the way of foreign policy. Today, however, the country is a major European power that attracts praise and criticism in equal measure. This holds true both for Germany's response to the recent surge of refugees – it welcomed more than one million people last year – and for its handling of the euro crisis.

As Germany's power has grown, so, too, has the need for the country to explain its foreign policy more clearly. Germany's recent history is the key to understanding how it sees its place in the world. Since 1998, I have served my country as a member of four cabinets and as the leader of the parliamentary opposition. Over that time, Germany did not seek its new role on the international stage. Rather, it emerged as a central player by remaining stable as the world around it changed. As the United States reeled from the effects of the Iraq war and the EU struggled through a series of crises, Germany held its ground. It fought its way back from economic difficulty, and it is now taking on the responsibilities befitting the biggest economy in Europe. Germany is also contributing diplomatically to the peaceful resolution of multiple conflicts around the globe: most obviously with Iran and in Ukraine, but also in Colombia, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria, and the Balkans. Such actions are forcing Germany to reinterpret the principles that have guided its foreign policy for over half a century. But Germany is a reflective power: even as it adapts, a belief in the importance of restraint, deliberation, and peaceful negotiation will continue to guide its interactions with the rest of the world.

THE STRONG MAN OF EUROPE

Today both the United States and Europe are struggling to provide global leadership. [...]

When U.S. President Barack Obama assumed office in 2009, he began to rethink the United States' commitment to the Middle East and to global engagements more broadly. His critics say that the president has created power vacuums that other actors, including Iran and Russia, are only too willing to fill. [...]

Meanwhile, the EU has run into struggles of its own. In 2004, the union accepted ten new member states, finally welcoming the former communist countries of eastern Europe. But even as the EU expanded, it lost momentum in its efforts to deepen the foundations of its political union. That same year, the union presented its members with an ambitious draft constitution, created by a team led by former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. But when voters in France and the Netherlands, two of the EU's founding nations, rejected the document, the ensuing crisis emboldened those Europeans who

questioned the need for an “ever-closer union.” This group has grown steadily stronger in the years since, while the integrationists have retreated.

Now, the international order that the United States and Europe helped create and sustain after World War II—an order that generated freedom, peace, and prosperity in much of the world—is under pressure. The increasing fragility of various states – and, in some cases, their complete collapse – has destabilized entire regions, especially Africa and the Middle East, sparked violent conflicts, and provoked ever-greater waves of mass migration. At the same time, state and nonstate actors are increasingly defying the multilateral rules-based system that has preserved peace and stability for so long. [...]

Against this backdrop, Germany has remained remarkably stable. This is no small achievement, considering the country’s position in 2003, when the troubles of the United States and the EU were just beginning. At the time, many called Germany “the sick man of Europe”: unemployment had peaked at above 12 percent, the economy had stagnated, social systems were overburdened, and Germany’s opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq had tested the nation’s resolve and provoked outrage in Washington. In March of that year, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder delivered a speech in Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, titled “Courage for Peace and Courage for Change,” in which he called for major economic reforms. Although his fellow Social Democrats had had the courage to reject the Iraq war, they had little appetite for change. Schröder’s reforms to the labor market and the social security system passed the Bundestag, but at a high political price for Schröder himself: he lost early elections in 2005.

But those reforms laid the foundation for Germany’s return to economic strength, a strength that has lasted to the present day. And Germany’s reaction to the 2008 financial crisis only bolstered its economic position. German businesses focused on their advantages in manufacturing and were quick to exploit the huge opportunities in emerging markets, especially China. German workers wisely supported the model of export-led growth.

[...]

EUROPE’S PEACEFUL POWER

Germany’s relative economic power is an unambiguous strength. But some critics see the country’s military restraint as a weakness. During Schröder’s chancellorship, Germany fought in two wars (in Kosovo and Afghanistan) and adamantly opposed the unleashing of a third (in Iraq). The military engagements in Kosovo and Afghanistan marked a historic step for a nation that had previously sought to ban the word “war” from its vocabulary entirely. Yet Germany stepped up because it took its responsibility for the stability of Europe and its alliance with the United States seriously. Then as now, German officials shared a deep conviction that the country’s security was inextricably linked to that of the United States. Nevertheless, most of them opposed the invasion of Iraq, because they saw it as a war of choice that had dubious legitimacy and the clear potential to spark further conflict. In Germany, this opposition is still widely considered a major achievement—even by the few who supported U.S. policy at the time.

In the years since, Germany’s leaders have carefully deliberated whether to get involved in subsequent conflicts, subjecting these decisions to a level of scrutiny that has often exasperated the country’s allies. In the summer of 2006, for example, I helped broker a cease-fire in Lebanon to end the war between Israel and Hezbollah. I believed Germany had to support this agreement with military force if necessary, even though I knew that our past as perpetrators of the Holocaust made the deployment of German soldiers on Israel’s borders a particularly delicate matter. Before embracing the military option, I invited my three immediate predecessors as foreign minister to Berlin for advice. Together they brought 31 years of experience in office to the table. Germany’s history weighed most heavily on the eldest among us,

Hans-Dietrich Genscher, a World War II veteran, who argued against the proposal. My younger two predecessors agreed with me, however, and to this day, German warships patrol the Mediterranean coast to control arms shipments to Lebanon as part of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon—an arrangement accepted and supported by Israel.

Germany's path to greater military assertiveness has not been linear, and it never will be. Germans do not believe that talking at roundtables solves every problem, but neither do they think that shooting does. The mixed track record of foreign military interventions over the past 20 years is only one reason for caution. Above all, Germans share a deeply held, historically rooted conviction that their country should use its political energy and resources to strengthen the rule of law in international affairs. Our historical experience has destroyed any belief in national exceptionalism—for any nation. Whenever possible, we choose *Recht* (law) over *Macht* (power). As a result, Germany emphasizes the need for legitimacy in supranational decision-making and invests in UN-led multilateralism.

Every German military deployment faces intense public scrutiny and must receive approval from the Bundestag. Germans always seek to balance the responsibility to protect the weak with the responsibility of restraint. If Germany's partners and allies walk an extra mile for diplomacy and negotiations, Germans want their government to walk one mile further, sometimes to our partners' chagrin. That does not mean Germany is overcompensating for its belligerent past. Rather, as a reflective power, Germany struggles to reconcile the lessons of history with the challenges of today. Germany will continue to frame its international posture primarily in civilian and diplomatic terms and will resort to military engagement only after weighing every risk and every possible alternative.

EMBRACING A GLOBAL ROLE

Germany's relative economic strength and its cautious approach to the use of force have persisted as the regional and global environment has undergone radical change. Germany's partnership with the United States and its integration into the EU have been the main pillars of its foreign policy. But as the United States and the EU have stumbled, Germany has held its ground and emerged as a major power, largely by default.

In this role, Germany has come to realize that it cannot escape its responsibilities. Since Germany sits at the center of Europe, neither isolation nor confrontation is a prudent policy option. Instead, Germany tries to use dialogue and cooperation to promote peace and end conflict.

[...]

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Closer to home, the Ukraine crisis has tested Germany's leadership and diplomatic skills. Since the collapse of Viktor Yanukovich's regime and the Russian annexation of Crimea in early 2014, Germany and France have led international efforts to contain and ultimately solve the military and political crisis. As the U.S. government has focused on other challenges, Germany and France have assumed the role of Russia's main interlocutors on questions concerning European security and the survival of the Ukrainian state.

Germany did not elbow its way into that position, nor did anyone else appoint it to that role. Its long-standing economic and political ties to both Russia and Ukraine made it a natural go-between for both sides, despite Berlin's obvious support for the victims of Moscow's aggression. The intense political debate that played out within Germany over how to respond to the challenge only enhanced Berlin's credibility, by showing the world that the government did not take its decisions lightly. The Minsk agreement that Germany and France brokered in February 2015 to halt hostilities is far from perfect, but one thing is certain: without it, the conflict would have long ago spun out of control and extended

beyond the Donbas region of Ukraine. Going forward, Germany will continue to do what it can to prevent the tensions from escalating into a new Cold War.

During the euro crisis, meanwhile, Germany was forced to confront the danger posed by the excessive debt levels of some Mediterranean EU states. The overwhelming majority of the eurozone's members and the International Monetary Fund supported plans to demand that countries such as Greece impose budgetary controls and hard but unavoidable economic and social reforms to ensure the eventual convergence of the economies of the eurozone. But rather than placing the responsibility for such changes in the hands of these countries' national elites, many in Europe preferred to blame Germany for allegedly driving parts of southern European into poverty, submission, and collapse.

Germany has come under similar criticism during the ongoing refugee crisis. Last autumn, Germany opened the country's borders to refugees, mainly from Iraq and Syria. The governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia worried that this move would worsen the crisis by encouraging more refugees to enter their countries in the hope of eventually crossing into Germany. So far, however, such fears have proved unfounded.

How and when Europe will resolve this crisis remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that even a relatively strong country such as Germany cannot do it alone. We cannot give in to the rising desire of certain groups of the electorate to respond on a solely national level, by setting arbitrary limits on the acceptance of refugees, for example. Germany cannot and will not base its foreign policy on solutions that promise quick fixes but in reality are counterproductive, be they walls or wars.

A reflective foreign policy requires constant deliberation over hard choices. It also requires flexibility. Consider the recent refugee deal Germany helped the EU strike with Turkey. Under this agreement, the EU will return to Turkey any migrant who arrives illegally in Greece and in return will open a legal path for Syrians to come to the EU directly from Turkey. The agreement also contains provisions for much deeper cooperation between the EU and Turkey. Despite controversial developments within Turkey, such as the escalation of violence in the Kurdish regions and the increasing harassment of the media and the opposition, Germany recognized that Turkey had a critical role to play in the crisis and that no sustainable progress could be made without it. No one can tell today whether the new relationship will be constructive in the long term. But there can hardly be progress or humane management of the EU's external border unless European leaders engage seriously with their Turkish counterparts.

Some politicians, such as the former Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski, have described Germany as Europe's "indispensable nation." Germany has not aspired to this status. But circumstances have forced it into a central role. Perhaps no other European nation's fate is so closely connected to the existence and success of the EU. For the first time in its history, Germany is living in peace and friendship with France, Poland, and the rest of the continent. This is largely due to the renunciation of complete sovereignty and the sharing of resources that the EU has encouraged for almost 60 years now. As a result, preserving that union and sharing the burden of leadership are Germany's top priorities. Until the EU develops the ability to play a stronger role on the world stage, Germany will try its best to hold as much ground as possible – in the interests of all of Europe. Germany will be a responsible, restrained, and reflective leader, guided in chief by its European instincts.

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