

Germany and the United Nations (July 7, 2005)

Abstract

As part of the process of reforming the United Nations, the red-green government strove to acquire a permanent seat for Germany on the U.N. Security Council. This reform failed, due in part to resistance from the United States. Shortly before the decisive negotiations, arguments were made for and against Germany's inclusion in the Security Council.

Source

Should Germany Have a Seat on the U.N. Security Council?

Pro: Matthias Nass. Contra: Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

Pro: Berlin is a reliable partner and has earned a permanent seat on the Council.

By Matthias Nass

In a few days the U.N. General Assembly will vote on the expansion of the U.N. Security Council. Germany has come together with Brazil, India, and Japan to form the "Group of Four" (G4) and is campaigning for a permanent seat on the United Nations' most important body. It is, in the words of Volker Rühle, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Bundestag, "the right moment and the right goal."

Reform – years overdue – is in sight. For the composition of the Security Council mirrors the world of 1945, not the political reality we face at the beginning of the 21st century. For 60 years, its core has always consisted of the "Permanent Five": the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China – the victors of World War II. Whole continents, Africa and Latin America, for example, are not represented by permanent members. With only one seat, prospering Asia is woefully underrepresented. In its present form the Security Council is an anachronism.

Without representativeness there is no legitimacy. This, however, is needed by a Security Council that according to the U.N. Charter has the last word on war and peace. And which increasingly determines international law. After the 9/11 attacks, the Council gave all member states concrete responsibilities in the fight against terrorism, especially with regard to the screening of international money transfers. The Council must be expanded, its legitimacy must be strengthened – not to satisfy the ambition of Great Power wannabes, but because a global threat assessment dictates it.

An expert committee put in place by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan has identified two criteria for the expansion of the Security Council: first, all regions of the world should be represented on it; second, it should include the nations that "make the largest contributions to the United Nations – financially, militarily and diplomatically." Without a doubt Germany belongs to this group of nations. It contributes to closing "the gap between hopes and performance" (Annan). Germany contributes 8.6 percent of the U.N. budget, making it the third largest contributor behind the United States (22 percent) and Japan (19.4 percent). It is ahead of permanent Security Council members Great Britain (6.1 percent), France (6.0), China (2.0) and Russia (1.1). Germany has always been a reliable contributor.

Additionally, Germany has also become one of the largest contributors of troops. Bundeswehr soldiers are stationed in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia; they participated in the peace missions in Cambodia, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf. Even more importantly: German diplomacy has largely played a

constructive role in recent years. It fought for the International Criminal Court in The Hague; it argued for intervention in the war-torn Sudanese province of Darfur. Civil rights advocates and human rights groups attest to the fact that Berlin has acted credibly and unselfishly.

Multilateralism is the axiom of all German foreign policy today. Berlin would have withdrawn its candidacy immediately had there been the slightest chance of England and France giving up their permanent seats in favor of an EU seat. But there isn't such a chance. Still, the federal government would like to reemphasize that we would give up our [permanent] seat the minute the EU is willing and able to speak with one voice on the Security Council.

At any rate, Germany's European partners do not see a clash of interests in Berlin's candidacy. Italy is the only country whose pride seems to be hurt. Together with others (Pakistan, Argentina, and South Korea), it is organizing the opposition to the G4 in the New York "Coffee Club." France and Poland, our most important neighbors, happen to support the German candidacy. They will even be co-sponsors of the resolution on the expansion of the Security Council.

None of the four candidates, by the way, is demanding the veto right that is so jealously guarded by the "Permanent Five." And not only because they have no chance of receiving it anyway. The veto is as anachronistic as the present composition of the Security Council, which has only one justification: to keep America the superpower on board. America would never subject itself to a majority vote (see Iraq), but without it the U.N. would be paralyzed.

Like Japan, Germany has enjoyed the benefits of life in the quiet corner for decades. But the expectations placed on a reunified Germany have risen; we can no longer duck down like we did in the times of the Cold War.

Since the world stopped being divided into East and West, the Security Council has grown increasingly more important. Today, it is practically in permanent session as a sort of global crisis center. Anyone who wants to strengthen the United Nations, who wants to put it in a position to meet the challenges of the 21st century, must hope that Germany soon becomes a permanent member of the Security Council – along with Brazil, India, Japan, and perhaps South Africa and Egypt. Then and only then will this "world" body have arrived in the present.

Contra: Fewer people, fewer soldiers: We Germans are not a power of the future. By Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

If there really were a "magical Jeannie" – like the genie in the bottle in the TV-series – a genie who fulfilled her master's every wish, then Germany would sit on the U.N. Security Council no later than tomorrow. But since wishes aren't enough in the real world, a few thorny questions have cropped up along the path to New York. Is an ambitious campaign for a Security Council seat in the German interest? Is the need urgent enough to justify the political costs? Does the German strategy promise success or just disgrace?

The best sentence from the German application reads: whoever pays calls the shots. Indeed, with 8.6 percent of the U.N. budget, Germany is the third largest contributor. That should entitle one to a say in the matter. But with this checkbook diplomacy German grandeur also comes to an end. It is certainly true that the Security Council reflects the power structures of 1945 and not those of today. But this only means that the Council should recruit members from Asia, Africa, or South America. Europe is already overrepresented. Today, three of the five permanent members come from Europe, namely England, France, and (half of) Russia. Why a fourth European power should become a permanent member remains a mystery.

And why Germany in particular? Unlike India, Germany is not a power of the future. Its economy is

stagnating. Its share of world trade is falling. Ditto for the number of soldiers and citizens. The Federal Republic is a shriveling country with growing ambitions. Real statesmanship would be the sound management of this minefield. Instead the advocates of a Security Council seat are acting like the hotrods of foreign policy. They rev their souped-up engines and hope that no one will realize how little horsepower they have underneath the hood.

If Germany were to become a permanent member of the Council, it would have to participate in every vote on war and peace, and it would have to assume its share of the responsibility for the outcome. That means: pay and send soldiers. Yet no one but Luxembourg spends as little on its military as Germany: 1.2 percent of the GDP. Is the country really ready to allocate considerably more funds to foreign aid and defense only to sit at the table with the big boys? A vote of confidence in the Bundestag was required even to deploy troops against the terrorist regime in Afghanistan, a move that was purely defensive and prompted no objections on ethical grounds or on the basis of human rights. What will Germany do in murkier cases if the Security Council obliges it to take a position? Is it really willing to give up the “culture of restraint” of which it is so proud?

Advocates of the German candidacy argue that abandoning it would lead to the “garden gnome option” of German foreign policy. Yet there is no such automatism. In fact, Germany will have to shoulder more responsibilities in the future – even without a Security Council seat. But [without a seat] the government will be able to pick and choose its engagements depending on its power, means, desire, and in accordance with its national interests. Renouncing the German candidacy will not release the Federal Republic into a realm of irresponsibility; rather it will increase its freedom of action in foreign policy. Germany, after all, is not a superpower but a middle power.

Anyone who wages a campaign as ambitious as the federal government should be reasonably confident that he'll win in the end. Otherwise the campaign is nothing but a gamble whose end could bring a dramatic loss of prestige for Germany. The chancellor is schmoozing with the Russians and the Chinese to win their votes. Germany also bases its strategy on a coalition of the willing. Four wannabes want to combine their forces, but instead they are only multiplying the forces of opposition. Japan's major adversary is China; India has Pakistan as a counterweight, and Brazil's opponent is its neighbor Argentina. And Germany is openly opposed by Italy. Other European skeptics include Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, and Spain. Some countries are remaining quiet and hoping that others will block the bid. Thus, the federal government's unilateral move is endangering a first-class goal of German foreign policy (European unity) in order to pursue a second-class one (a Security Council seat).

Three major projects have charted the course of German policy since World War II: Western integration, *détente* [*Ostpolitik*], and German unification. All of them succeeded America supported them. The federal government is pursuing the fourth major project without and even against America. The federal government argues that the United States has only one vote and that it isn't terribly popular on the world stage today. Semi-distance, not closeness to America will secure the majority, or so the government hopes. This seems to be motivated by more than mere election strategy. A permanent seat could easily lead to the next step in the parting of ways with America. That would be the gravest of all misreadings of German interests. The Federal Republic became secure and prosperous in the convoy of our Western alliance partners. Wise self-restraint has been, until recently, the secret of German foreign policy. What has suddenly changed?

The price for a seat for the new German self-confidence is very high indeed. If only Jeannie, the genie in a bottle, could wish it away.

Source: "Soll Deutschland im UN-Sicherheitsrat sitzen? Pro: Matthias Nass; Con: Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff," *Die Zeit*, July 7, 2005.

Translation: GHDI staff

Recommended Citation: Germany and the United Nations (July 7, 2005), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3728>> [May 13, 2024].