

Germany as a Middle Power (September/October 2006)

Abstract

A self-assured middle power, argues political scientist Herfried Münkler, fulfills its international obligations while pursuing its own national interests and constantly strives to safeguard its influence on the world stage. Germany's efforts to acquire a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, he notes, were part of its middle-power strategy. The failure of these efforts, he remarks, showed that Germany's "power portfolio" was out of balance. For Münkler, the key to stabilizing Germany's position as a self-assured middle power is diversifying the kinds of power at its disposal within the framework of international structures and obligations.

Source

The Self-Assured Middle Power: Foreign Policy in a Sovereign State

Power and Self-Assuredness

A person who knows that he is recognized is self-assured: the position that he holds in a group or community is solid and is not seriously contested by anyone. And, of course, his position is not towards the rear but rather right up front. A person who has essentially achieved what he set out to achieve can be self-assured. But there is also no cause for complacent self-satisfaction: relationships are in constant flux and one must be careful not to slip in the rankings. The recognition of others must always be won anew. Self-assuredness is the prerequisite for believing that it is possible to succeed in this endeavor. Over the course of the 1990s, Germany increasingly worked itself into exactly this sort of position within Europe and in the world. One can call this position that of a self-assured middle power.

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A middle power's scope for action and its opportunities to exert influence are admittedly much more dependent upon soft power than those of an empire. If one were to succinctly distinguish between soft power and hard power, one could say that hard power is based on a unilateral relationship in which the direction of influence runs from the holder of power to the subject to that power. Soft power, on the other hand, emanates from an at least bilateral relationship of recognition. If soft power is indeed more cost-effective than hard power, then it is because of these structures of recognition. For the same reason, however, it is also more precarious and requires constant care. Middle powers are thus intensely concerned with recognition and reputation. But they also want this recognition and reputation to become permanent, so that they are relieved of the burden of constantly reestablishing their status. The goal is to lower their dependence on those who grant recognition and thus reduce their influence. Germany's attempt to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council last year, unsuccessful for the time being, was above all an attempt to secure its newly acquired position as a middle power on a long-term basis. The assumption in Berlin was that Germany had already achieved sufficient standing to succeed in this project. On top of that, people had trusted that Germany's position as the third-highest contributor to the U.N. budget conferred sufficient prestige, prestige that could be converted into political clout through membership on the U.N. Security Council. This failed and was probably doomed to fail – but this, however, had less to do with any particular deficits in Germany's reputation than with the structural organizational conservatism of the United Nations and with the problematic nature of coalition building, a process upon which German success in this project had depended.

Thus, despite the growth in political self-assuredness that has occurred since reunification, Germany's position as a middle power remains precarious. It is based in large part on the country's economic performance. If one considers the four kinds of power that Michael Mann described in *The Sources of Social Power* [*Geschichte der Macht*] – political, economic, military, and ideological or cultural power – it quickly becomes apparent that even a reunified Germany lacks a balanced power portfolio. Its political power is for the most part integrated into EU structures and is only available to the government as a national resource in limited measure. The same applies for its military power, which is essentially integrated into NATO structures, although attempts are being made to create more room for action and decision-making by building up specifically European military structures. The decision to assume the position of lead nation in the European military mission in the Congo was largely determined by this long-term interest in creating more room for decision-making by building up different integrative structures for the German military.

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One defining characteristic of a self-assured middle power is that it actively participates in the production of collective goods and does not attempt to either shirk obligations or buy itself out of them. A self-assured middle power does not opt for a free ride under the circumstances described here. Thus, self-assuredness finds proper expression in the assumption of international obligations as well as in the pursuit of individual national interests. Accusations that foreign policy is being militarized are mostly based on the demand to continue the policy of buying one's way out of [military] obligations. But that also means: waiving the right to introduce one's own ideas and ultimately accepting a situation of dependence upon those whose power portfolio also includes military instruments. Europeans learned what that means the hard way during the Yugoslav wars of disintegration. Accepting this, however, is tantamount to renouncing both middle-power status and self-assurance.

Therefore, an essential prerequisite for stabilizing Germany's position as a self-assured middle power is diversifying the kinds of power available to German politics – by all means within the framework of international structures and obligations. Ideological/cultural power deserves more attention than it has received thus far. At the core of this is the desire to establish Germany as a place for culture and as a hub for science and research. With regard to science and research, one important factor will be the attractiveness of German universities to foreign students and scholars. It is doubtful that the reforms in higher education (which have come to be known simply as the Bologna process) will be helpful here, insofar as they have diminished rather than enhanced the specific attractiveness of Germany. From a structural standpoint, Germany's landscape for science and research is threatened most of all by a particularistic federal system [*Kleinstateerei*], which is especially pronounced in the area of education and research policy. In this regard, the decision not to squeeze the federal government out of higher education reform as part of the federalism reform was an important prerequisite for enhancing Germany's attractiveness in this area. Rather than simply reacting to problems and deficits, success will surely depend on thinking and acting strategically, on the ability of German politics to recognize culture and research as a resource in its power portfolio. This does not rule out that both are also important in making Germany an attractive location for business and industry.

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Source: Herfried Münkler, "Die selbstbewusste Mittelmacht. Außenpolitik im souveränen Staat", *Merkur* 60, no. 689/90 (September/October 2006), p. 847ff.

Translation: Allison Brown

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