

The Libya Crisis (March 28, 2011)

Abstract

At the peak of the Arab Spring, the UN Security Council voted to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. Germany, serving its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the Council, sided with Russia and China and abstained. The authors of this article join the chorus of Western alliance partners who harshly criticized this action.

Source

“A Serious Mistake of Historic Dimensions”: Libya Crisis Leaves Berlin Isolated

He has already told this story often enough, but it is so moving that he never gets tired of it.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle told the story once again on Friday, in the small German town of Horb am Neckar in the southwestern state of Baden-Württemberg. He recounted how he drove in a limousine onto Tahrir Square in Cairo and people ran up to him, wanted to hug him, and he felt nearly crushed in their embrace. He says that this enthusiasm was not directed at him personally as the German foreign minister, but rather at the entire country.

But the story was naturally also intended to make him look good. Westerwelle told his listeners how the crowd chanted: “Long live Egypt, long live Germany!” Then he called out to the audience: “You can be proud of this country!”

[...]

The Wrong Friends

[...] The general sense of consternation that followed Germany’s decision to abstain from the United Nations Security Council vote on establishing a no-fly zone over Libya raises the question of whether this government is simply out of its depth when it comes to foreign policy. It certainly looks that way. Granted, in view of the chaotic situation in Libya, it is undoubtedly justifiable to decide against deploying German troops in a military operation in Libya. But does this mean that Germany had to abstain from the UN Security Council vote, opposing its allies the US, France and Britain and siding with Russia and China?

“The decision is a serious mistake of historic dimensions, with inevitable repercussions,” says former German Defense Minister Volker Rühe. When he joined the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in 1963, Rühe says he was primarily motivated by the party’s foreign-policy positions and its pursuit of close ties in Europe and in NATO. Now he says: “The main pillars of the conservatives’ policies are being destroyed due to a mixture of lack of direction and incompetence.” Rühe’s message, so it would seem, is that Merkel and Westerwelle are incompetent.

The Germans could have opted for another solution: the “yes, but” option. That would have involved a vote in favor of the resolution but without any—or with minimal—military participation. But Merkel and Westerwelle instead decided on a surreptitious “no” vote, which is essentially what an abstention means when made by a Security Council member without a veto right. The three cabinet members responsible for German foreign policy—Foreign Minister Westerwelle, Defense Minister Thomas de Maizière and Development Minister Dirk Niebel—subsequently adopted a rather brusque tone with the allies who are enforcing the no-fly zone. To make matters worse, the policies of the German government lacked

consistency. Merkel said that the “resolution that has been passed is now also our resolution.” Germany withdrew warships currently operating in the Mediterranean, yet approved a plan to send AWACS surveillance planes to Afghanistan to free up NATO capacity for the no-fly-zone mission.

Intense Annoyance

None of this appears to be particularly adroit—but the issue here involves more than just diplomatic skills. Westerwelle and the chancellor are currently dissolving the very foundation of German foreign policy, namely its solid integration within the West.

The Security Council abstention has sparked intense annoyance and confusion among Germany’s traditional partners, as Westerwelle noticed on Monday of last week at a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Brussels. He was asked by a number of his counterparts why Germany had decided to abstain from voting. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé confronted Westerwelle directly. “If we had not intervened, there would have probably been a bloodbath in Benghazi,” he said. Westerwelle responded that the course of the military operation had only served to increase his skepticism.

To support his arguments, Westerwelle cited Amr Moussa, the secretary general of the Arab League, who had been quoted the previous day as saying that the air strikes had led to civilian casualties and the UN resolution had gone beyond what the Arab League had approved. But the German foreign minister did not have up-to-date information. His Danish counterpart Lene Espersen pointed out to him that Moussa had corrected his statement in the meantime. She cited a press conference in which Moussa said: “We are committed to UN Security Council Resolution 1973. We have no objection to this decision.”

Westerwelle remained unimpressed. The EU should focus on humanitarian aid for the civilian population, he said. Juppé countered by saying: “The EU cannot restrict itself to humanitarian aid alone—it has to develop its own intervention capacities.”

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Abandoning Traditional Foreign Policy

Internal squabbling is causing splits within the West, and this is in large part due to the German foreign minister. Westerwelle’s decision to abstain from the UN Security Council resolution was taken in spite of the advice of many of his aides in the Foreign Ministry who had pushed for the “yes, but” option.

Germany’s abstention from the vote reflects more than just the government’s skepticism toward the mission in Libya. It is also an expression of a new foreign-policy doctrine embraced by Westerwelle. This sweeps aside the basic convictions that have served as the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany’s foreign policy for the past 60 years. Merkel supports his position. She also finds it perfectly acceptable that Germany occasionally opposes all of its key European and NATO allies.

Until now, all previous postwar German governments have adhered to the principle that Germany cannot allow itself to become isolated within the West. In recent decades, the Germans have tried to remain close allies with France and the US. This has been just as important a cornerstone of Germany’s foreign-policy identity as its friendship with Israel. When this was not possible in extreme situations, such as during the US attack on Iraq in 2003, then the Germans placed great importance on at least having the French on their side.

Westerwelle doesn’t want Germany to leave the Western alliance, but it doesn’t hold the same meaning for him that it did for previous foreign ministers. Showing solidarity with France and the US is not an end in itself for Westerwelle. Merkel holds similar views and leaves Westerwelle free to act. If necessary, the chancellor feels that Germany can go its own way.

Westerwelle considers the traditional German compulsion to show loyalty to its Western allies to be obsolete. The world has changed, and there is a new global security architecture, even if many countries have not yet understood that fact. “Germany has not isolated itself,” says Westerwelle. He points out that China and Russia were not the only countries to abstain from the Security Council vote—India and Brazil also refrained from voting. What is so terrible about going up against the French, he asks, when you have the Brazilians on your side? Westerwelle likes to talk about “strategic partners.”

Break with the Past

That is a break with tradition. After World War II and the fall of the Third Reich, Germany showed itself to be a reliable ally, earning it respect and appreciation among its former enemies. The expectation was that Berlin would follow the Western line; no one imagined it would go it alone. That is now changing, however.

Westerwelle showed the first signs of this new policy shortly after he took office as foreign minister in October 2009. One of his key issues was the removal of the last US nuclear warheads from Germany. These missiles are now only of symbolic importance, standing for the close political and military alliance between Germany and the US. But for Westerwelle, scoring political points by taking a stance on disarmament was more important than the bilateral relationship.

The Americans were annoyed. They asked themselves why the foreign minister was so keen to get rid of this symbol of German participation in the nuclear umbrella. It took a long time for the diplomats at the German Foreign Ministry to convince Westerwelle not to repeat his demands, at least not in such a vocal manner.

Source: “‘A Serious Mistake of Historic Dimensions’: Libya Crisis Leaves Berlin Isolated,” *Spiegel Online*, March 28, 2011,

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