The Power Conundrum (February 22, 2012)

Abstract

Does economic might and military abstention make Germany a geo-economic power? The author takes issue with this characterization. Neither a middle nor a great power, Germany defies the usual definitions of power.

Source

Germany Remains an Enigma

A new thesis is making the rounds among Germany experts: Germany, it is said, is a geo-economic power. The country is supposedly unique in combining the self-confident exercise of economic power with a renunciation of classic power politics, especially with regard to its military aspects. While Berlin, in the euro crisis, is not shying away from reshaping the EU in the image of Germany, it kept out of the intervention in Libya. The concept of the geo-economic power was coined by the political scientist Edward Luttwak in 1990. With the end of the Cold War, according to Luttwak, military power is losing importance, replaced by instruments of economic power – capital and innovation instead of missiles and tanks.

It is true that Germany, since reunification, has not developed into a classic middle or great power. It has not boosted its military strength, it has not extricated itself from European and trans-Atlantic ties, it is not pursuing hegemony over neighbors. Instead, Germany has remained true to the traditions of the Federal Republic, which was born in the constellation of the Cold War.

To be sure, there was a bit of “militarization,” especially around the year 2000, when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder took Germany into two wars, Kosovo and Afghanistan. And occasionally there is a bit of Great Power noise, as when a CDU politician rejoices that Europe is now speaking German. Overall, however, Germany today is hardly any less pacifist, especially after the experience in Afghanistan, than it was during the height of the peace movement; at the moment the Bundeswehr is being downsized further. And all in all, Germany today is also hardly any less multi-lateral in its orientation than it was in the old Federal Republic.

That it slipped into the role of a disciplinarian vis-à-vis Greece is not the result of strategic intent, but a consequence of circumstances: of economic success, of the size and location of Germany. After hesitating for a long time, Berlin had no other way out than to present a plan for solving the euro crisis. Yet the concrete formulation of the plan was driven largely by domestic political considerations. Angela Merkel did not want to force the German model onto others, but calm the voters at home: German money is available only in return for guarantees that make sense to the Germans.

Germans are not bothered by the fact that an imbalance exists between Germany’s economic weight and its willingness to exercise power in terms of foreign and security policy, quite the contrary. Not to give offense internationally, to swim with the current, to move in the safe middle, instead of regularly going out on a limb in foreign policy, as France does, for example – this is in line with Germany’s self-image. The Federal Republic continues to see itself as the counter project to the German power state, which began two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. And restraint in foreign politics is also good for business – it is only in exceptional cases that German foreign policy gets in the way of the global activities of Germany companies.

Germany lacks the strategy to become a geo-economic power; economic strength is not deployed systematically as an instrument of foreign policy. And the extensive renunciation of the military dimension – striking especially compared to the new powers in Asia, which are building up their military substantially – is also grounded in the overall strategic constellation in which the German state has grown: for one, in the security guarantee by the U.S., for another, in the location in the center of Europe, surrounded by EU partners. Exercising power over others, whether in the classic sense through power politics or in the modern sense geo-economically, remains foreign to the Germans. However, the fact that power is accruing to them is a fate they cannot ignore in the long run.

Source: Ulrich Speck, “Deutschland bleibt ein Rätsel,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 22, 2012.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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