

## Between a rock and a hard place? Navigating domestic and international expectations on German foreign policy

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Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Navigating Domestic and International Expectations on  
German Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article takes stock of German foreign policy during Angela Merkel's third term in office (2013-2017). It argues that the longer-term significance of Germany's foreign policy during this period is twofold. First, the Merkel government was confronted with multiple European and international crises which worked as a magnifying glass for the growing international expectations on Germany to become more actively engaged on the international stage. Second, the tenure of the Grand Coalition saw a significant shift in the German domestic foreign policy discourse that was marked by a concerted effort of leading decision-makers to make the case for Germany to accept greater international responsibilities. This emerging consensus among foreign policy elites expresses a changed self-conception of German foreign policy which, however, continues to be viewed with scepticism in the broader public. Informed by such a broad two-level perspective that focuses on the interplay between international and domestic expectations on German foreign policy, the article explores the record of the Grand Coalition in the main international crises it had to engage with. It suggests that the Merkel government was better able to live up to its own aspirations in two-level contexts which left it with greater domestic room for manoeuvre.

## Introduction

The foreign policy agenda of the third Merkel government was dominated by multiple economic, political, diplomatic and military crises in Europe and the broader international environment. The ongoing Eurocrisis, the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, the so-called refugee crisis as well as the uncertain trajectories of European integration and transatlantic relations after the British vote to leave the European Union (EU) ('Brexit') and the election of Donald Trump as US President are the most critical cases in point. In the words of Germany's then foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2014a, 8), having to respond to such crises became the 'permanent condition' of German foreign policy. Viewed from the outside, Germany often was the 'indispensable power' (Bulmer and Paterson 2016, 44) in international efforts at crisis management.

On the domestic level, the third term in office of Chancellor Merkel was marked by a significant shift in the German foreign policy discourse. The most notable expression of that shift was how leading German decision-makers including President Joachim Gauck (2013, 2014) and foreign minister Steinmeier (2014b) acknowledged the increased responsibilities of Germany on the international stage. At the same time, the German public remained largely sceptical towards the self-declared ambition of the Grand Coalition to play a bigger part in international politics that matched Germany's status as a 'major European power' (Steinmeier 2016, 106). For the Merkel government, foreign policy thus remained a difficult balancing act between international and domestic expectations. In this two-level constellation (Putnam 1988), the Grand Coalition stepped up the efforts to overcome domestic reservations about Germany taking over more responsibilities in international politics and to prepare the ground for a more active German foreign policy.

The article develops this argument as follows. It begins with sketching out the background to the growing international demands on German foreign policy. The article then traces the main

shifts in Germany's domestic foreign policy discourse during the Grand Coalition. Against that background, the discussion explores some of the main challenges for German foreign policy in this period, focusing on the Eurocrisis and Brexit, the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, the refugee crisis and the transatlantic relationship.

### International Expectations on German Foreign Policy

The Grand Coalition took office at a time when German foreign policy was widely criticised in the international arena. In many places, Germany was seen as a 'free rider' that takes advantage of the international order and stability which its partners provide without making adequate contributions itself (Hyde-Price 2015, 601-602). This view was driven, not least, by judgements about the foreign policy of the second Merkel government between CDU/CSU and FDP (2009-2013) which was widely seen on the international stage to indicate the absence of strategic direction and a neglect of Germany's international responsibilities (Grant 2014). The prime exhibit for that view was Germany's abstention in the UN Security Council vote on Resolution 1973 on Libya in March 2011 which put Germany against all three of its main international partners, the US, France and the UK, who supported the resolution and were the main drivers behind it. Germany's position was widely criticised in the Western alliance and partly seen to indicate a move of German foreign policy towards isolationism and the turning away from its long-standing partners (Oppermann and Spencer 2016).

The backdrop of such reservations and uncertainties reinforced international demands on the Grand Coalition to involve itself stronger in international affairs. On one hand, Germany moved into the spotlight of international expectations to show leadership in European and international crises due to a perceived lack of alternatives. While France had lost some of its international standing as a result of its economic weakness (Bulmer and Paterson 2013, 1392-1396), British foreign policy was increasingly preoccupied with the implications of the Brexit

referendum (Whitman 2016, 522-524). At the same time, the Obama administration sought to pivot US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific and to delegate the responsibility for European crisis management to its transatlantic partners (Brands 2016). The Trump administration, in turn, appears to take a purely transactional view on the transatlantic partnership making it contingent on the willingness of its European partners to shoulder a larger part of the burden for European security. All this fed into a growing sense of an international leadership vacuum which German foreign policy was expected to fill.

For many, Germany was predestined for this role because of its standing as Europe's strongest economy. While other European countries still suffered from the aftereffects of the financial crisis, the German economy got out of this crisis relatively well (Matthijs 2016, 136-138). In comparison to many of its European partners, Germany also looked like an island of political stability that came to be symbolised by the long period in office of Chancellor Merkel. Importantly, the long-standing international reservations against Germany turning its economic and political strength into a more active foreign policy have also for the most part evaporated. From the perspective of its international partners, Germany's history is ever less seen as a legitimate reason for German restraint in international politics (GIZ 2015, 80-81). To the contrary, the image of contemporary Germany abroad carries mainly positive connotations. For example, Germany ranks close to the top in studies on the 'soft' power resources of countries worldwide. These rankings reflect a sense of cultural attractiveness of Germany as well as the perceived legitimacy and moral authority of its foreign policy (Crossley-Frolick 2016, 6-7). In the 'Nation Brands Index' of the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK), a market research institute, which maps many facets of country images in international public opinion, Germany came in second, behind the US, in 2015 and 2016 (GfK 2016). Germany's high international esteem is also being projected on Angela Merkel personally who enjoys higher levels of trust and

confidence in international opinion polls than other heads of government (Pew Research Center 2017).

In this way, the third Merkel government saw a continuation of the longer-term trend over the course of which the international weight of expectations on German foreign policy ever more increased. This reflects both the strength of Germany and the weakness of others. In any case, German foreign policy was pushed into an international leadership role more than it had actively sought such a role (Steinmeier 2016, 106).

### The Domestic Foreign Policy Discourse

For the domestic discourse around Germany's place in the world, the third Merkel government marks an important watershed. At the centre of this were a range of coordinated speeches by President Joachim Gauck and different cabinet members which argued that Germany should pursue a more active foreign policy and take on more international responsibilities. These speeches expressed a changed self-conception of German foreign policy and signalled the wish for a foreign policy restart after the much-criticised record of the second Merkel government (Hyde-Price 2015, 602-605). The message to Germany's international partners was that German foreign policy recognises their demands to take on a fairer share of the burden for international stability and security as legitimate and is willing to meet expectations for stronger German contributions. In the domestic arena, the speeches were meant to prepare a sceptical public for a more active role of Germany in international politics.

The domestic debate around Germany's responsibilities in international politics was initiated by a speech of President Joachim Gauck (2013) to mark the Day of German Unity on 3 October 2013. In this speech, Gauck raised the question whether Germany's '[international] engagement [was] on a par with the weight that our country carries' and argued against 'the

idea that Germany plays itself down to eschew risks or solidarity'. Germany would have to 'adjust to taking on more responsibility' (Gauck 2013). Similar points were made in speeches by Joachim Gauck (2014), foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2014b, 2015) and defence minister Ursula von der Leyen (2014) at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 and 2015. Overall, these (and other) contributions to the German foreign policy debate presented a largely similar line of argument that rested on four pillars.

First, the speeches emphasised how Germany was immediately affected by conflicts and upheavals in its international environment because it 'is more interconnected in and with the world than almost any other' country in the world (Steinmeier 2015). The discourse highlighted Germany's vulnerability to international crises and the threat of international instability for its security:

Our country is not an island. We should not cherish the illusion that we will be spared from political and economic, environmental and military conflicts if we do not contribute to solving them (Gauck 2013).

Germany 'benefits more than most from an open world order' (Gauck 2014) and has to 'rely on a rule-based international order and adherence to the regulations more than any other state' (Steinmeier 2015). Upholding such an order therefore stands out as Germany's 'most important foreign policy goal in the 21st century' (Gauck 2014). In the face of an increasingly fragile international environment, 'to sit and wait is not an option' for Germany (von der Leyen 2014).

Second, Germany would have to make contributions to international security and stability that reflect its increased international weight. Germany foreign policy must and can no longer flinch from this task: 'Germany is too big to comment on world politics only from the side lines' (Steinmeier 2014b). The discourse takes up the international criticism of Germany as 'a spectator of global affairs' (Gauck 2013) and 'the shirker in the international community'

(Gauck 2014) and acknowledges that German foreign policy must accept more responsibilities (Steinmeier 2015), taking on a greater share of the burden in the transatlantic alliance (von der Leyen 2014). Germany is prepared to 'accept responsibility, and to assume leadership' (Federal Government 2016, 23) and to engage itself 'earlier, more decisively and more substantially in foreign and security policy' (Steinmeier 2014b).

Third, the rationale for a more active role of Germany in international affairs ties in with previous shifts in the German post-unification foreign policy debate since the late 1990s (see Hellmann et al. 2007). This is the case, in particular, for the relevance of German history and the changing meaning of Germany's responsibility for its foreign policy. Germany's past and its responsibility for World War II and the Holocaust have become ever less accepted as a valid argument against a greater German involvement in international politics. To the contrary, according to Joachim Gauck (2013), the question that puts itself is whether Germany is not using its past as a pretext to evade its responsibilities in dealing with international crises. Germany's culture of restraint as a lesson learned from its history, in the words of Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2014b) should not become a 'culture of remaining on the sidelines'. While references to German responsibilities were primarily used to emphasise the limits on German foreign policy before the end of the Cold War, they since tend to carry a different connotation that supports the case for a stronger role of Germany in international politics (Crossley-Frolick 2016, 2-3). Along these lines, Germany's 'new power' on the international stage also brings 'new responsibility' (SWP/GMF 2013).

Fourth, the discourse for a more active participation of Germany in international politics is being complemented with assurances that German foreign policy will still hold on to its tried and tested foundations. In this way, the discourse confirms certain limits and conditions for a stronger international engagement of Germany and substantiates how German foreign policy should exercise its responsibilities. In particular, this comes in the shape of commitments to



multilateralism and international cooperation. In an interconnected world, ‘responsibility is always shared responsibility’ (Gauck 2014) and the strengthening of multilateral institutions remains a priority of German foreign policy (Steinmeier 2015). In this context, special emphasis is put on Germany’s European vocation. Thus, international expectations that are directed at Germany need to be embraced in a European framework (Steinmeier 2014a, 11-12), and German foreign policy should be an ‘instigator’ (Steinmeier 2014b) of a common European foreign, security and defence policy. Germany would continue to be guided by its ‘European instincts’ (Steinmeier 2016, 113). Moreover, the discourse foregrounds that while German foreign policy does not rule out the use of military force in principle, it continues to see this only as ‘the most extreme means’ the use of which ‘requires restraint’ (Steinmeier 2014b). When, as a ‘last resort’, deployments of the Bundeswehr need to be considered, ‘Germany should not say “no” on principle. Nor should it say “yes” unthinkingly’ (Gauck 2014).

All things considered, the tenure of the Grand Coalition has witnessed a remarkable shift in the foreign policy discourse of leading German decision-makers. This shift was complemented by a comprehensive foreign policy review which foreign minister Steinmeier initiated in December 2013 and which was aimed at starting a ‘mature, enlightened discourse’ with the broader public about ‘the level of responsibility’ Germany should take on in international affairs (Steinmeier 2014a, 5). To this purpose, the German Federal Foreign Office (2014) conducted numerous discussion meetings with national and international foreign policy experts as well as citizens. The ‘Review 2014’ thus responded to the criticism, which experts reiterated during the review itself, that German foreign policy has in the past done too little to communicate and explain its objectives in the public domain. This has been blamed for the increasing disconnect between rising international expectations on German foreign policy and the widespread rejection of a stronger international engagement of

Germany in the general public. A more active and reliable German foreign policy is said to be held back precisely by such lack of public backing (Federal Foreign Office 2014, 20-21). The review documented a broad consensus among the participating experts for a more active German foreign policy and, in particular, a German leadership role in Europe (Federal Foreign Office 2014, 24-25). In this sense, the 'Review 2014' reflected the overall shift in the German foreign policy discourse and contributed to its broader entrenchment in public debate. However, the arguments of political elites and experts continued to be met with scepticism in German public opinion. As a case in point, only 37 and 40 per cent of respondents to opinion polls in 2014 and 2015 agreed that Germany should accept more responsibilities in international crises, while 60 and 55 per cent disagreed. Compared to the early post-Cold War years, when 62 per cent of respondents to a 1994 poll were in favour of Germany taking on greater international responsibilities, support for a more active German foreign policy in the general public has thus declined (Körber-Stiftung 2014, 2-3, 2015, 1-2). The German public remains particularly sceptical towards foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr, which 82 per cent of Germans wanted to see reduced in 2014. In contrast, majorities in public opinion support a stronger civilian engagement of Germany in international affairs, for example in the form of humanitarian aid or diplomatic assistance (Körber-Stiftung 2014, 5).

The mismatch between the foreign policy views of decision-makers and the general public has thus become bigger, not smaller during Angela Merkel's third term in office. As a consequence, the scope for foreign policy issues to become politicised in the party political arena has increased further, both between the coalition partners and, in particular, between government and opposition parties (Brummer and Oppermann 2016, 16-19). This longer-term trend was reinforced over the period in office of the Grand Coalition, most notably through the rise of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) which has positioned itself in opposition to the government on European policy and the refugee crisis as well as on

Germany's policy towards Russia and its defence and development policies (Alternative für Deutschland 2017, 25-29). On the other side of the political spectrum, the Left Party accuses the government of 'great power politics', opposes Bundeswehr operations abroad as a matter of principle and demands an end to the 'German hegemony' in the EU, in particular in the Eurocrisis (Die Linke 2017). Thus, relevant parties on both ends of the German party system seek to mobilise, in different ways, public reservations against the established foreign policy mainstream. This holds particular promise when international crises push foreign policy issues to the top of the political agenda as was often the case during the third Merkel government.

In summary, the antagonism in the German foreign policy debate between an emerging elite consensus that Germany should assume more responsibilities in international politics and the questioning of this consensus in large parts of the German public and at the margins of the party political spectrum has continued to deepen during Angela Merkel's third term in office. These two conflicting trends reinforce each other in that the changing elite discourse provokes the mobilization of societal and political opposition to a more active role of Germany on the international stage which, in turn, increases the pressure on foreign policy decision-makers to make the case for such a role in the domestic political arena.

### European Integration in Crisis: The Euro and Brexit

During the Grand Coalition, German foreign policy was confronted with two existential crises in European integration (see also Wendler, this special issue). First, the Eurozone crisis remained unresolved and heated up again in 2015. Second, the January 2013 announcement of a referendum on Britain's EU membership and the British vote to leave the EU in June 2016 put into question the relationship between Britain and the EU and the future of the

integration process itself. In both cases, the European and international expectations were that Germany would play a leading role in resolving the crises.

Germany's policy towards the Eurocrisis was from the beginning a difficult balancing act between international expectations and domestic constraints. On one hand, Germany's economic strength made it the main target for international demands to provide leadership in overcoming the crisis (Paterson 2011, 72-74). On the other, the German government's domestic room for manoeuvre was closely circumscribed by a highly mobilised public opinion which did not want Germany to take over significant financial costs and risks. How Germany should respond to the developing crisis was also strongly contested within and between political parties (Oppermann 2012, 510-513). In consequence, the German government was initially very reluctant in dealing with the crisis, for example when it for a while resisted a rescue package for Greece in 2009 (Schoeller 2017, 7-9).

On the international level, this half-hearted approach earned Germany the reproach that it has worsened the crisis and failed to live up to its status as Europe's leading economic power (Jones 2010, 21-22). Over the course of the crisis, German foreign policy felt constrained to become ever more involved in managing the crisis and, more by default than by design, gradually assumed a leadership role (Bulmer and Paterson 2016, 47-48). At the same time, the German approach remained strongly driven by domestic constraints and expectations. Most notably, the German government put the blame for the crisis squarely on the over-indebtedness of countries at the periphery of the Eurozone and argued that the only way out of the crisis therefore involved strict fiscal discipline, austerity and structural reforms in these countries (Miskimmon and Hertner 2015, 48-54).

The rigid German insistence on such a prescription came under often heavy criticism on the European level, both politically and economically (Matthijs and Blyth 2011). This came to a head again in the debate over a third rescue package for Greece in July 2015. At that time, the

political and economic situation in Greece escalated when the country under the newly elected government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsirpas did not honour a commitment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and rejected a reform package agreed with the Troika – the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF – in a referendum. Largely due to German pressure, however, the EU held on to its demands for wide-ranging austerity measures as a precondition for additional aid payments. To underline these demands, the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, threatened Greece with a ‘time-out’ from the Eurozone should its government not touch up its reform proposals (*FAZ*, July 11, 2015). Ultimately, the Tsirpas government had little choice but to bow to European pressure which paved the way for the rescue package to be agreed and disbursed.

While the hard line of the German government was widely applauded domestically, the international response was in part highly critical (Hellmann 2016, 8). In Greece, more than anywhere else, the European demands for austerity led to severe social dislocations (Höpner 2015, 239). At the same time, any conceivable alternative to the policy of the Troika which would not have involved a Greek exit from the Eurozone, namely permanent transfer payments to Greece or an inflationary policy in Germany (see Höpner 2015), were anathema to the German government if only for domestic political reasons. In any case, the discussions around the third rescue package for Greece exemplify that the Eurocrisis remained a delicate tightrope walk for German foreign policy between domestic constraints and European expectations also during the third Merkel government. Although the initial German reluctance in the crisis had at the time of the Grand Coalition long given way to a clear claim to leadership, the German approach was still largely marked by the primacy of domestic politics. In other European countries, Germany’s leadership role in the Eurocrisis was therefore for the most part not seen as a welcome example of Germany accepting more

international responsibility, but rather stoked resentment against a German hegemony in Europe (Bulmer and Paterson 2016, 49-50; Giddens 2014, 8-9).

Not dissimilar to the Eurocrisis, Germany is also central to the European response to Brexit. From the British side, the expectation was that its concerns would fall on comparable sympathetic ears in Berlin and that Germany would take a mediating position between the EU and the UK. This was already noticeable during the attempts of Prime Minister David Cameron to renegotiate Britain's terms of EU membership (Oppermann 2016, 522-525). Since the referendum, a widespread British expectation is that German business interests will make the German government accommodate Britain's demand for continued full access to the European single market after the country has left the EU (Galpin 2016).

To all intents and purposes, these British hopes have not materialised. Rather, the main German priority in the Brexit discussions has been to maintain the integrity of the single market and to avoid the disintegration of the EU. To this purpose, Germany opposes any bespoke deals and special arrangements for Britain but insists on strict compliance with European rules. The German government and Angela Merkel personally have taken the lead in coordinating the positions of the remaining 27 member states to ensure a unified European approach. The Grand Coalition has made an effort to consult widely with other EU members and to support the special priorities of particular countries, most notably Ireland. For Chancellor Merkel, it was important 'to listen to many in the EU' and to enter into 'a phase of listening, understanding and learning from each other' (Bundeskanzleramt 2016).

As a result, the German government has made a substantial contribution to the clear-cut course of the EU in the Brexit discussions so far. This was the case, for example, for the European refusal to enter into talks before the British government had triggered article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty or with regard to the sequencing of the negotiations. Together with France, Germany has also taken the initiative to develop proposals for the future development and

further deepening of European integration after Britain has left the EU. Within days of the referendum, the German and French foreign ministers, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Jean-Marc Ayrault, presented a joint paper in which they commit to ‘move further towards political union in Europe’ putting forward a ‘shared vision of Europe as a security union’. The other European states were invited ‘to join us in this endeavour’ (Ayrault and Steinmeier 2016).

Germany’s leadership role in the Brexit debate was facilitated by the absence of strong domestic constraints. In the party political arena, the government approach enjoyed broad cross-party support from CDU/CSU, SPD and the Greens. The positions of Left Party and AfD remained diffuse and were not strongly articulated in public discourse. The issue was also not a priority for public opinion and was largely absent from the 2017 general election campaign. Most notably, the government has from the start closely involved business representatives in its deliberations and decision-making.<sup>1</sup> This has succeeded in aligning in particular the German car industry and the leading business associations with the government position that the protection of the single market must have priority over Germany’s future trading relations with Britain (*Observer*, July 9, 2017). Unlike in the Eurocrisis, the German government did thus not have to make allowances for strong domestic political restrictions and was able to put its European policy objectives front and centre of its approach to Brexit.

#### Security Crises: Ukraine and Syria

The commitments of German foreign policy decision-makers to a more active role of Germany in international politics was put to the test in the diplomatic and military crisis in Eastern Ukraine. The starting point of the crisis was the announcement of the Ukrainian government under President Yanukovich in November 2013 that it would not sign an association agreement with the EU and the following mass protests which culminated in

violent clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian sympathisers with many casualties in February 2014. The situation escalated in particular in Eastern Ukraine which became the site of an armed conflict between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces. The crisis came to a head with the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The two Minsk agreements of September 2014 and February 2015 have established a truce between the two sides which remains fragile, however.

The international expectations on German foreign policy in this crisis were high from the outset. Most notably, the US administration under President Barack Obama left the leadership of diplomatic efforts to defuse the conflict largely to the German government. The lack of British engagement further added to the gap in international crisis management which German foreign policy was expected to fill (Giegerich and Terhalle 2016, 157-158). Germany appeared predestined for this role not least because of its geopolitical location which made it vulnerable to any instability caused by the conflict. Russia's annexation of Crimea, in particular, came as a 'strategic shock' (Kundnani 2015, 108) to Germany. Moreover, Germany was better able than other European countries to draw on existing contacts and diplomatic channels to the two conflict parties thanks to its close political and economic relations to both Russia and Ukraine (Steinmeier 2016, 112). In any event, Germany's efforts were widely judged favourably (Hellmann 2016, 8). The Grand Coalition was credited with a 'strong sense of resolve and responsibility' (Hyde-Price 2015, 610) and Chancellor Merkel was applauded for having 'played an impressive role' (Pond 2015, 173).

Germany's approach to the conflict rested on three pillars. First, German foreign policy sided unequivocally against Russia. Thus, Chancellor Merkel left no doubt that Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea 'clearly constitute a violation of basic principles under international law' (Merkel 2014). In practical terms, Germany supported economic sanctions against Russia and argued that such sanctions should only be lifted in



return for a full implementation of the second Minsk agreement (Fix 2016). In view of Germany's tradition of *Ostpolitik* and its economic interests in Russia, this hard line against Russia caught many observers by surprise (Kundnani 2015).

Second, the German government took on a central role in multilateral crisis diplomacy. Notably, German initiatives, in close consultation with France, were decisive for the two Minsk agreements. In the process, German foreign policy has been careful to coordinate its positions with the US and its partners in the EU, G7 and OSCE (see Merkel 2014). It has avoided passing over other EU members (Hellmann 2016, 7-8) and was instrumental in agreeing and maintaining a common EU position on sanctions against Russia (Hyde-Price 2015, 609).

Third, German foreign policy endeavoured to keep up its dialogue with the Russian government. This was guided by the belief that Russia would have to be reintegrated into the European security architecture after the conflict had been resolved. The German experience was, in Steinmeier's (2015) words, 'that there can only ever be lasting security in Europe with and not against Russia'. Along these lines, Chancellor Merkel stood out as the foremost international interlocutor of President Putin, and foreign minister Steinmeier kept in constant touch with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov (Forsberg 2016, 30).

Turning to the domestic arena, the government approach did not go uncontested. Rather, its strong position against Russia and the question of sanctions raised objections from different quarters. In the final analysis, however, German foreign policy was not in any meaningful way shaped by domestic constraints, because the Grand Coalition was able to pass over or neutralise reservations about its policy. That was the case, for example, for a range of voices from within the SPD, including former Chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, which argued for a more compromise-oriented approach to Russia. Open letters which were signed by politicians, intellectuals and other public figures across the political spectrum

articulated similar views (see *Die Zeit*, December 5, 2014). Foreign minister Steinmeier, however, although himself an advocate of *Ostpolitik*, did not embrace this standpoint but pursued a policy that combined a hard line against Russia with a readiness to engage in dialogue (Forsberg 2016, 31-37).

As for the broader public, the government line came to be endorsed by clear majorities over the course of the conflict. While public opinion was initially mixed, the downing of a Malaysia Airlines passenger aircraft over Eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, presumably by pro-Russian separatists, did a lot to shift public attitudes against Russia. Whereas 49 per cent of Germans still wanted the government to act as a neutral mediator in the conflict in March 2014, the policy of the Grand Coalition had the support of a majority of 61 per cent already in December 2014 (Pond 2015). In November 2014, 58 per cent of Germans were in favour of economic sanctions against Russia and 76 per cent thought the accusations of the German government against Russia were justified (ZDF 2014). In contrast to the Eurocrisis, public opinion did thus not emerge as a significant constraint on German foreign policy.

Even more importantly, perhaps, the German government was also able to get large parts of German business on its side. While the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations and large businesses with significant investments in Russia were predictably critical of economic sanctions against Russia (Fix 2016, 3; Kundnani 2015, 112-113), other representatives of German business accepted the primacy of longer-term security interests over shorter-term economic motives and increasingly came to back the imposition of sanctions (Forsberg 2016, 34; Pond 2015). German foreign policy did thus not come under sustained pressure from the side of German business and industry.

Against this background, the Ukraine crisis stands out as the most notable example during the third Merkel government in which German foreign policy was able to meet international demands for a more active German contribution on the international stage and to win

domestic support for such a course. In comparison, German foreign policy played a much lesser role in the second major security crisis during the tenure of the Grand Coalition, the conflict in Syria. At the same time, it should be noted that the German government has gradually involved itself more in international diplomatic efforts around that conflict as well. The main case in point is that Germany has agreed in January 2014 to meet a UN request to participate in the destruction of chemical weapons of the Assad regime which were brought out of Syria under an agreement brokered by the US and Russia. This reversed the position of the second Merkel government which had declined such a contribution due to the reservations of foreign minister Westerwelle (Hyde-Price 2015, 602-605). Over the summer of 2014, moreover, the Grand Coalition decided to support the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq with weapons and ammunition. This breaks with an established principle of German foreign policy not to deliver military equipment into conflict regions (Giegerich and Terhalle 2016, 160). On a French request after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015, finally, Germany assists the airstrikes of its western allies against so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq with Tornado reconnaissance flights and a frigate of the German Navy. However, such contributions sit uneasily with a large majority in German public opinion, 82 per cent of which opposed Germany's participation in a military intervention in the conflict in October 2015 (Körber-Stiftung 2015, 16). If anything, this serves as a reminder that even a relatively minor military engagement in Syria remains a difficult domestic political balancing act for German foreign policy.

### The Refugee Crisis

The decision of the Grand Coalition in early September 2015 to let refugees who were stranded in Hungary into Germany to apply for asylum stands in contrast to the caution and careful weighing of options with which German foreign policy, in particular under

Chancellor Merkel, is often associated. Rather, international observers widely praised Angela Merkel for her 'moral leadership' (*New York Times*, 5 September, 2015) in this humanitarian crisis. Given the perceived time pressure, however, the Merkel government acted without broader multilateral consultations with its European partners and did not foresee the wider domestic political repercussions of its policy. In consequence, the German approach to the refugee crisis increasingly came under pressure from two sides.

On the European level, the German government failed to bring about agreement among EU member states on a common response to the crisis. Central and eastern European EU members, in particular, resisted plans from the European Commission for a quota system to distribute refugees across the EU which the Merkel government had supported. Rather, Germany was accused of misusing the European institutions for its own national interests and of disregarding the Dublin II Regulation under which asylum applications must be examined in the member state where refugees have first entered the EU. The attempt at German leadership in the crisis thus foundered on the lack of followership in the EU (Bulmer and Paterson 2016, 50-51).

At the same time, the Grand Coalition also was in a tight corner domestically. The initial 'welcoming culture' towards the refugees increasingly gave way to public rejection. Already in October 2015, 69 per cent of Germans were dissatisfied with the refugee policy of the government (Infratest Dimap 2015). What is more, 45 per cent of respondents saw the issue as the greatest challenge for German foreign policy. In the eyes of the German public, the refugee crisis stood out as the single most important foreign policy problem facing Germany, far ahead of the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine (Körber-Stiftung 2015, 9). In the party political arena, the issue more than anything mobilised growing support for the AfD and led to public divisions inside the coalition, in particular between CDU and CSU. German foreign

policy was thus under strong domestic pressure to achieve a decrease in the number of refugees coming to Germany.

To this purpose, the German government was a key advocate of the March 2016 EU-Turkey agreement in which Turkey pledges to improve its border protection and to bar refugees from entering the EU. In return, the EU committed to assist the integration of refugees in Turkey with six billion Euros and held out the prospect of liberalizing visa requirements for Turkish citizens and of moving forward with Turkey's EU accession process. While the agreement has indeed contributed to a sharp decline in the number of refugees reaching Greece from Turkey as was the intention of the Merkel government (*Die Zeit*, February 2, 2017), the deal has come under heavy international criticism with a view to the living conditions of the refugees and human rights violations in Turkey (Amnesty International 2017). Moreover, it has been suggested that the agreement makes the German government susceptible to Turkish blackmail (*FAZ*, May 15, 2016). Altogether, the refugee crisis stands for the limits of German influence in the EU and the close interplay between foreign policy decisions and German domestic politics.

#### Transatlantic Relations and NATO

The growing international expectations on German foreign policy also came into focus with regard to Germany's relationship with the US and its role in NATO. This was because President Trump hardened America's stance towards its European allies and toughened up US demands for a fairer burden sharing in NATO. In particular, the Trump administration threatened to scale back America's engagement in NATO should Germany and other NATO members not meet the agreed target to spend two per cent of their gross domestic product on defence by 2024.

Although the precise meaning and binding nature of the two per cent target were judged differently by the coalition partners, the German government pledged to ‘improve the burden sharing imbalance’ (von der Leyen 2014) in the alliance. It worked on the assumption that the US would further ratchet up its demand for such a contribution and that the future of the transatlantic security community would increasingly depend on the willingness of NATO members to ‘shoulder a larger share of the common burden’ (Federal Government 2016, 31). Along these lines, the medium-term fiscal planning of the German government provides for an increase of the defence budget from 37 to 42.4 billion Euros by 2021. While this would still only amount to 1.3 per cent of the German gross domestic product, the planned spending increases put Germany on track to meeting another NATO target according to which member states should spend 20 per cent of its defence budget on military investments by 2020 (Glatz and Zapfe 2017, 6-7).

Furthermore, the German defence ministry has started to align its national capability planning more with NATO’s strategic guidelines than in the past. In particular, the focus has shifted from crisis management back to collective defence aiming to make the Bundeswehr a key pillar of the European defence capability within NATO. In the context of the NATO Framework Nations Concept that was initiated by Germany, the Bundeswehr accepts leading responsibilities for the coordinated development of the capabilities of the participating countries (Glatz and Zapfe 2017, 2-6). Also, the German government, together with the Netherlands and Norway, has in 2015 taken over the leadership of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force that was agreed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict, the main purpose of this task force is to improve the ability of the alliance to respond to possible security threats from Russia (NATO 2016).

It has to be noted, however, that the strengthening of Germany’s engagement in NATO remains highly sensitive domestically. This is the case, not least, with a view to increasing

resentments towards the US in German public opinion (Kundnani 2015, 111) and because of a German strategic culture that continues to be sceptical of the role of military instruments in security policy (Hyde-Price 2015, 612-613). As a case in point, the then-SPD candidate for the chancellorship, Martin Schulz, tried to score political points in the 2017 elections by rejecting the NATO two per cent target and by rebuffing President Trump's demands for higher German defence spending (*Reuters*, May 31, 2017). Moreover, a stronger German engagement in defence policy might corroborate existing suspicions in the German public that the elite discourse about the growing responsibilities Germany should take on in international politics is in fact code for an increasing militarisation of German foreign policy (Crossley-Frolick 2016, 13-14).

## Conclusion

The foreign policy record of the third Merkel government is of longer-term significance mainly in two respects. First, the multiple international crises it had to deal with highlight the growing challenges and expectations that are in store for German foreign policy in an increasingly fluid and uncertain international environment. Second, the tenure of the Grand Coalition has witnessed a significant shift in the domestic foreign policy discourse in the sense that German decision-makers have clearer and more emphatically than before committed to taking over greater international responsibilities. However, reservations against a stronger German engagement on the international stage persist in the broader public and in the party political arena. This suggests that the trend towards a stronger domestic politicisation of German foreign policy will further intensify.

This tension between international and domestic expectations played out differently across the different crises that dominated the foreign policy agenda of the third Merkel government. On one hand, the Eurocrisis and the refugee crisis exemplify the double bind of German

foreign policy between tight domestic political restrictions and widespread international criticism. In the Brexit crisis and the Ukraine conflict, in contrast, German foreign policy did not have to make significant allowances for domestic considerations and was able to act in ways that were widely appreciated on the international level. As for the current fault lines in the transatlantic relationship, the jury is still out how far a stronger engagement of Germany in NATO will provoke domestic opposition.

The mixed foreign policy balance sheet of the Grand Coalition suggests that the ability of German foreign policy to live up to its own aspirations to assume greater international responsibilities is shaped by the respective two-level constellation. By this measure, the more domestic latitude the German government has and the less international expectations conflict with domestic restrictions, the more successful German foreign policy will be. At the same time, German foreign policy will have to accustom itself to more international criticism that goes hand in hand with a more active role on the international stage which will not always correspond to the interests of its international partners. For the near future, the fragmentation of the German party system, the entry of the AfD into the Bundestag and the complex government formation after the 2017 elections indicate, generally speaking, a tightening of the domestic constraints and therefore a more difficult two-level context of German foreign policy. The task of the successor to the third Merkel government to navigate the different and at times conflicting demands and expectations on German foreign policy will thus not become any easier.

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## Notes

1 Interviews with members of the German Bundestag from CDU/CSU, SPD and the Left Party in June 2017.

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