



POLICY BRIEF

Germany: Baffled hegemon

Constanze Stelzenmüller

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany has transformed into a hegemonic power in Europe, but recent global upheaval will test the country's leadership and the strength of its democracy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 turned reunified Germany into Europe's hegemon. But with signs of a major global downturn on the horizon, Germany again finds itself at the fulcrum of great power competition and ideological struggle in Europe. And German democracy is being challenged as never before, by internal and external adversaries.

The greatest political challenge to liberal democracy within Germany today is the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, or AfD), the first far-right party in the country's postwar history to be represented in all states and in the federal legislature. While it polls nationally at 12 percent, its disruptive impact has been real. European elections in spring 2019 and elections in three eastern German states in the fall will test the party's reach, and the strength of Germany's political middle.

All this will limit the bandwidth Germany has for shoring up liberal democracy in Europe and a rules-based international order. Russia and China

are challenging Europe's cohesion aggressively, as does the Trump administration's "America First" policy. The impact of this on Germany is stark. No country in Europe is affected so dramatically by this new systemic competition. Far from being a "shaper nation," Germany risks being shaped: by events, competitors, challengers, and adversaries.

Germany's options are limited. It needs to preserve Europe's vulnerable ecosystem in its own enlightened self-interest. It will have to compromise on some issues (defense expenditures, trade surpluses, energy policy). But it will also have to push back against Russian or Chinese interference, and make common cause with fellow liberal democracies. With regard to Trump's America, Germany needs to resist where necessary—and cooperate where possible.

The German miracle of 1989 may be ending, and foreign policy will become a major stress factor in the coming years. That, too, will test the strength of its democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, “Wir sind das Volk”—we are the people—became the rallying cry (via Poland and Hungary) of a peaceful democratic revolution that brought down the Berlin Wall after more than four decades of communist rule in East Germany. It ended the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact, and the USSR, and led to German reunification, as well as to the enlargement of NATO and the EU. Almost all of Europe was now truly “whole and free.” Germany was suddenly, in the words of then-Defense Minister Volker Rühle, “encircled by friends.” Nowhere did the notion of the end of history and the victory of the West through democratic transformation and the global spread of a rules-based international order find more enthusiastic support than among the Germans. The United States, their greatest champion throughout, cheered on the newly reunited “Berlin Republic”—so called after its new-old capital city—to take a more active stance in guarding the continent’s safety and stability.

History had other ideas. On the eve of the 30th anniversary of these momentous events, Germany again finds itself at the fulcrum of great power competition and ideological struggle in Europe, with some key differences. *Firstly*, the challengers are turning Europe’s integration and openness against it, and these competitors now include not just Russia, but China and—in a stunning reversal—President Trump’s America. Like Moscow and Beijing, this White House recognizes that Germany is the linchpin of the European project—pull it out, and the structure falls apart. *Secondly*, the ideological fault line no longer runs between capitalism and communism, but between liberal democracy and nationalist authoritarianism; it runs throughout almost all of the Western polities, including Germany. And *thirdly*, once more, there are Germans chanting “we are the people” on the streets—except that this time, shockingly, the demonstrators are linked mostly to the far right.¹

This begs two urgent questions: Is German democracy at risk? And what are the implications for its role as a major power and guardian of democratic rules in Europe and farther afield?

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY

The postwar (West) German model of liberal democracy was a unique exercise in constitutional redesign as a lesson from history: a re-foundation of the German polity in such a manner as to prevent any return of the aggressive nationalist excesses of Imperial Germany, the political hypervolatility of the Weimar Republic, and above all the murderous malignancy of the Third Reich. The Federal Republic recommitted itself—under oversight and with active help from the three occupying powers—to representative democracy, separation and balance of powers, federalism, the independence of the judiciary, political pluralism, and the protection of individual dignity and rights. The relationship between the state, markets, and society was a carefully calibrated and regulated equilibrium. The Basic Law, as West Germany’s 1949 constitution was called, was intended to be provisional, yet it has endured beyond reunification to the present day—a testament to its lasting strength.

Nonetheless, the German democracy that for decades appeared to be resilient against any kind of radical authoritarianism on the left or right, and more recently looked like a bulwark against the democratic recession seen elsewhere in the West, is being challenged today as never before, by both internal and external adversaries. But where does the risk reside, and how great is it? And even if German democracy is not threatened existentially, is it, and the global order created 70 years ago, still fit for purpose?

The single greatest political challenge to liberal democracy in Germany today is the far-right AfD.² Founded in 2013 as a euroskeptic party, it failed to pass the 5 percent threshold for entry into the federal legislature in that year’s national elections. For a while, it seemed condemned to a fringe existence, like other German hard-right parties of earlier decades. While it slowly gained traction in state elections, it was the refugee crisis of 2015, during which the Merkel government let in nearly a million asylum-seekers, mostly from Syria, that

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fueled its roaring transformation into a virulently xenophobic—and electorally successful—far-right party.

In the earthquake national vote of September 24, 2017, the AfD earned 12.6 percent of the vote, entering the Bundestag for the first time, as the third-largest force and the official leader of the opposition. By the end of 2018, it was represented in each of Germany's 16 state legislatures—the first far-right party in the country's postwar history to be represented in all states and in the federal legislature. That is a remarkable achievement by any European standard, and certainly by those of Germany's traditionally slow-moving, cautious, and centrist party politics.

The “alternative” in the party's name is not an empty rhetorical flourish. The AfD is in many ways a political group riven by ideological differences and squabbling; among its functionaries and delegates are numerous amateurs, lightweights, and cranks.³ Yet it would be a huge mistake to underestimate the intent and impact of this party bent on disruption. It seeks to tear down not just Germany's postwar centrist consensus and its commitment to reconciliation with its former victims (party co-chair Alexander Gauland has referred to the 12-year reign of National Socialism as a “fleyspeck” of German history), but also what AfD politicians—in a deliberate throwback reference to extremist critiques of the interwar Weimar constitution—often refer to as “the system.”

Its party program describes Germany's constitutional order as an “illegitimate state of affairs” based on a violation of the rule of law, in which a “small and powerful elite is secretly in charge of ... a political cartel.”⁴ It sees these elites as in control of most of the mediating institutions of representative, pluralist democracy: the political parties and the media (especially publicly funded media), which is why it attacks these with particular venom. It is not seeking to abolish formal democracy, but rather to establish the permanent rule of a self-defined

majority; in other words, illiberal democracy.⁵ The AfD is ethnonationalistic and xenophobic. It does not have a fully developed foreign and security policy program, but it seeks to take Germany out of the EU unless the Union “reforms”—by which it appears to mean turning back the integration clock to the European Economic Community of the 1970s or before. And while it professes support for NATO, it calls for the withdrawal of all allied troops and nuclear weapons from German soil. It is anti-Islam, anti-Western, and overtly pro-Russian.⁶

The party leadership (helmed by Gauland together with his fellow legislator Jörg Meuthen), used to be content with discreet dog whistles in the direction of the extreme right, and refusing to put any distance between themselves and overtly neo-Nazi, identitarian,⁷ or Pegida⁸ milieus around (and increasingly, within) the AfD. Yet it has become increasingly vitriolic and taboo-breaking in its public language, including in Bundestag debates. During the 2017 election season, the AfD developed a commanding social media presence (supported by Russian bots), but wielded street protests with equally ferocious impact. Throughout 2018, right-wing mob parades in both eastern and western German cities repeatedly saw key AfD figures marching together with known extremists doing the Hitler salute, while the party leadership was invoking *Widerstand* (resistance) or *Umsturz* (revolution) in Berlin: “The AfD is inebriated with its own internal radicalisation,” wrote Mariam Lau of DIE ZEIT, an astute observer of the new party.⁹

The AfD did not appear out of nowhere. An important 2018 book by the German historian Volker Weiß authoritatively traces the party's intellectual roots from radical nationalists of the interwar period like Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Carl Schmitt to their postwar torchbearer Armin Mohler, who in close cooperation with French extreme-right thinkers like Alain de Benoist founded the *Neue Rechte* (New Right) movement, based on the idea of a “Conservative Revolution.”¹⁰ He inspired the creation, around the turn of the millenium,

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of a tightly-knit network of influential “new right” publications (*Junge Freiheit*, *Sezession*), publishers (Antaios), and think tanks (first and foremost the Institut für Staatspolitik, or the Institute for State Policy, run by Götz Kubitschek and Ellen Kositzka).

Crucially, the movement’s main enemy was not Islam or dark-skinned immigrants, despite the fact that many of the intellectual leaders of the new right have openly voiced ethnonationalist or even racist views; above all, they recognized these issues as especially capable of mobilizing protesters and voters. The real thrust of their hostility was against Enlightenment liberalism, universalism, and global modernity. Its key concern and focus was “metapolitics”—in other words, winning the culture wars—not the race wars. As Weiß notes, their crusades against political correctness, marriage equality, gender mainstreaming, and other conservative obsessions gave them “an immense resonance reaching far into the fundamentalist Christian milieu.” (The U.S. Tea Party, he writes, was an inspiration here.) “The New Right,” Weiß adds, “had had a fully-fashioned worldview for a long time. ... [T]he last step was bundling its forces in form of the AfD to move from metapolitics to real politics.”¹¹

There is a serious argument to be made that Merkel’s highly idiosyncratic style of governance was what created space for the AfD in the first place. It was she who “triangulated” the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) toward the middle of the political spectrum, leaving its right flank uncovered. She favored a technocratic depoliticization of the issues leading to a narrowing of acceptable choices, and a deliberate “asymmetric demobilization” of the opponents’ voters.¹² Indeed, it was none other than one of Merkel’s signature expressions, “there is no alternative,” which gave rise to the name of Germany’s new right-wing party.

But just how much political presence and power does the AfD have? The actual membership of the AfD is tiny at 30,000—a tenth of that of its larger rivals.¹³

Its leaders consistently languish at the bottom of all national popularity polls for politicians. Its legislative leaders have attracted attention for unprofessional conduct and ignorance of parliamentary procedure. A 2017 research paper on the party’s performance in state legislatures (at the time, it was represented in 13 out of 16) suggests a heterogeneous picture: Some representatives and regional groups opted for constructive participation in the work of legislation and committees. Yet a far greater percentage, it said, continued to behave like a movement, laser-focused on using their office—and the floor of the legislature—as a platform for political theater and the mobilization of their followers via social media.¹⁴

That is even more apparent in the Bundestag, where the AfD has been seated with 92 deputies since October 2017. The liberal daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently did meticulous statistical analysis of the parliamentary role played by the AfD over a period of six months; it makes for fascinating and disturbing reading. It describes a party grouping that uses “orchestrated laughter” by the entire group, multiple interruptions, and deliberate rhetorical provocation in order to disrupt, undermine, and polarize debate, and to exhaust and discredit the other parties. Its interventions and parliamentary questions are almost always about immigration and asylum, or law and order issues—even when the actual debate is on a completely different topic. Formerly taboo *völkisch* (ethnonationalist), racist, anti-Semitic, or revisionist ideas are given frequent airing, so as to normalize right-wing discourse.¹⁵ Gauland, in his first post-victory speech on national television, promised to “hunt” Chancellor Merkel, and to “take back our country and our *Volk*.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, he claimed the right to be “proud of the achievements of German soldiers in two world wars.”¹⁷

Germany’s established political forces have reacted to this onslaught with mixed success. For many months, parties, media, and civil society institutions regularly fell into the trap of allowing themselves to be triggered by the deliberate provocation tactics of

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the AfD. Some, arguably, thereby became enablers and amplifiers of the very phenomena they were trying to push back against. For some media—television talk shows in particular, whose ratings profited immensely from the scandalized coverage—the relationship with the AfD was nearly symbiotic.

Lessons have clearly been learned by the other side. Debates in the Bundestag, often staid and delivered in front of empty seats, have become rather more lively. Several parliamentarians, the chancellor included, have gained national applause for expert takedowns of the AfD on the floor of the house. Increasingly, politicians as well as the media appear to understand that they need to engage calmly and push back hard on the actual merits of issues that voters are concerned about such as immigration, crime, or a lack of public services—and where right-wing politicians, it turns out, are often weak. Centrist parties are focusing hard on solving problems, and on listening to voter concerns more. When the far right marches, the centrist majority now turns out too, cheerfully and often in much greater numbers. And Merkel has stopped using the phrase “there is no alternative.”

All this notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that the AfD has successfully moved the needle of public discourse to the right. As a result, the overall mood in German politics has become notably more febrile and defensive. This is particularly the case for the center-right CDU and its smaller Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), as well as the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), all of which have lost the commanding 30-40 percent vote shares they enjoyed for decades; they are now in an uneasy third grand coalition under Merkel’s leadership. During the summer of 2018, the CSU—dreading the loss of its absolute majority in fall state elections—attempted a disastrous AfD-lite brinkmanship campaign that nearly brought the federal government down, lost them the absolute majority anyway, and saw their leadership plummet in the polls.

And Germans were shocked and dismayed in the fall, when right-wing marches in the eastern towns of Chemnitz and Köthen turned violent, and the police were seen as struggling to maintain control of the streets and their monopoly on public order. The head of Germany’s federal domestic intelligence agency (*Bundesverfassungsschutz*), Hans-Georg Maaßen, lost his job after disputing government and media accounts of mob brutality during these marches. And it is lost on no-one that there is an above average presence of former members of the military and the police forces in the ranks of the AfD. Even worse, AfD legislators were seen marching in the mobs.

By the end of 2018, however, Merkel’s grand coalition government appeared to have regained a surer footing. This was in no small part due to the fact that the chancellor, following a drumming of her party in two regional elections, surprised even her closest confidantes by announcing that she would step down as party chair after 19 years. The ensuing contest for the party leadership captured national interest because, for the first time in longer than most Germans cared to remember, it featured three candidates who represented genuinely different generational and political camps. Merkel’s preferred choice, the centrist Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, won out narrowly and has promised a no-holds-barred national debate on immigration and integration. But her win also led to a spike in her mentor’s poll numbers. This, in turn, was widely interpreted as a stabilization of the chancellor’s power. A premature general election should still not be ruled out, but the chances of Merkel serving out her term, which ends in 2021, have gone up. At the same time, the AfD looks as though it is plateauing after disappointing state election results (13.1 percent in Hessen and 10.2 percent in Bavaria).

Yet 2019 will be a historic test year for the staying power of the AfD—and for the resilience of its opponents. On the one hand, the AfD has been able to stabilize and institutionalize itself as a party (complete with several party foundations) due to

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Germany's public party funding system, which is based on a party's vote share in the past national elections. But a financing scandal and the continuous ideological morphing process that has hardened the grip of the most extreme right on the party has finally moved the domestic intelligence agencies to act. In January, the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* announced it was putting the hard right *Flügel* (wing) section of the AfD, led by the agitator Björn Höcke, under surveillance.¹⁸ This has caused the AfD to crack down on internal discipline, becoming noticeably less rambunctious on social media, and even going so far as to disband some of its more radical youth organizations.¹⁹

The more immediate and pressing challenge lies in a series of four major elections scheduled throughout 2019. The May 23-26 elections for the European Parliament (EP) will see the first-ever transnationally orchestrated populist challenge to the broad alliance of major parties that has called the shots in the EU for decades; it is led by Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. The likelihood of the populists' gaining a majority is next to zero. But they are expected to make significant gains, which might give them a blocking power in the parliament, or could at least significantly complicate the organization of majorities for legislation.²⁰

With seven EP seats, the AfD has so far been a far smaller presence in the European legislative than Salvini's League party, Marine Le Pen's National Rally, or Poland's Law and Justice party. The AfD too is projected to double its seats, yet it has remained largely absent from the pre-election grandstanding by other European populists.²¹ Will it attempt to link up to this budding Populist International?

The 2019 elections that matter more directly for the future of German politics are state elections—first in the tiny city-state of Bremen (May 26), and then, far more importantly, in three large eastern states: Brandenburg, Saxony (September 1), and Thuringia (October 27). In all three, the AfD

made a huge leap in the 2017 federal elections, becoming the strongest party by a hair's breadth in Saxony (27.0 percent as opposed to the CDU's 26.9 percent), and the second-strongest in the two others.²² A January 2019 Allensbach poll exposed the sharp political divides between western and eastern Germany, with respondents in the latter expressing skepticism toward democracy, below-average trust in the institutions of the state, and a "sense of alienation in their own house."²³

Since the projected numbers for the CDU and the SPD do not appear to suffice for a grand coalition, this raises a question the Christian Democrats in particular have been dreading: might their regional chapters renege on the national party's categorical pledge never to enter into a coalition with the AfD for the sake of political power? Might they even see themselves forced to do so simply for the sake of providing governance? Or would they choose the highly unstable option of a minority government tolerated by the AfD and therefore existing on its sufferance? Will—in a breathtaking historical irony—the east once more become the crucible of political change in Germany, on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall?

Much can happen between now and the fall of 2019—especially given the peculiarly volatile characteristics of the AfD's electorate. Germany is a country that has been spared major terrorist attacks and boasts full employment, record surpluses, and a declining crime rate; the initially uncontrolled influx of refugees in 2015 has long since slowed to a trickle, not least because Chancellor Merkel has quietly concluded bilateral deals with most potential transit countries designed to keep them out. And yet more than two-thirds of respondents in exit polls on the day of the 2017 national election said they were concerned about terrorism, crime, and immigration, showing that they are worried about integrating the more than a million refugees likely to stay in Germany; on the other hand, some of the highest concern was polled in regions that have taken in few or no refugees at all. The AfD

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pulled in its nearly 6 million voters from across the political spectrum (with nearly a million from the CDU, 470,000 from the SPD, and mobilizing more than 1.2 million non-voters).²⁴ Even more revealingly, two-thirds of AfD voters said they had cast their vote as an act of protest rather than as an act of conviction.²⁵ That suggests that the fight for liberal democracy in Germany is for the defenders of liberal democracy to lose.

The challenge is considerable, because even larger questions about Germany's domestic order loom in the near future. Germany, as the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz notes, is like other Western societies in that it is "undergoing a transformation from a relatively homogeneous and egalitarian industrial modernity to a postindustrial late modernity which is much more clearly polarized and mobile in social and cultural terms, challenging the political parties."²⁶ This is true for none more than the two big-tent parties, the CDU and SPD, which for half a century defined the political middle in Germany, serving as clearinghouses for regional, ideological, and class divisions. Yet across Europe, their sister parties have survived only by assimilating some of their fringe challengers' positions, like in the Netherlands; or by transforming, as in the U.K., where both the Tories and Labour have crystallized into more radical versions of themselves.

Merkel has managed over nearly two decades as party leader to modernize her CDU; yet its old conservative wing (which lost the December 2018 party leadership battle only narrowly) is disgruntled and restless. The Social Democrats, with a proud 150-year history, are now relegated by most polls to third or even fourth place in the German party spectrum, and appear to be divided between nostalgia for the past and fear of the future. The Liberals and Die Linke, despite strenuous appeals for public attention, are stuck at or below 10 percent of the vote. The Greens, meanwhile, soaring on a political sugar rush in the polls at 20 percent, have yet to prove that they are more than just a shiny receptacle for alienated CDU

and SPD voters. Fielding a prime minister in one of Germany's 16 states and serving as coalition partners in eight more, they have left their wild and woolly roots in the pacifism and environmentalism of the 1970s behind them. But the Greens have yet to prove that they have ideas for how to govern a complex and anxious postindustrial society on the cusp of monumental changes, or that they could be trusted to co-lead a major European power whose neighbors and allies are tired of its parochialism and introversion as threats multiply around them.

In the economic arena, four successive Merkel governments have kicked key issues down the road: the vulnerabilities of its energy policy; the future of its vaunted globally competitive advantage in manufacturing, exports, and skilled labor, given radical impending changes in artificial intelligence and automation—and a highly probable economic downturn. Desperately needed infrastructure investments (roads, bridges, trains, airports, mobile telephony, and cables) were sacrificed to the obsessively pursued goal of bringing down public debt. What will it cost to maintain Germany's cherished inclusive social model and civic solidarity under these circumstances? And finally, are the state and its institutions still capable of providing effective, credible governance?

While its stability and its democratic values will continue to be tested in the economically and politically difficult years ahead, and the AfD may be here to stay, Germany's democracy is not fundamentally at risk. But the exertion of preserving it throughout a cyclical downturn in global economics and security will no doubt limit the bandwidth Germany has for another key task: shoring up liberal democracy in Europe and a rules-based international order.

GERMANY AS A GUARDIAN OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND BEYOND?

In June 2013, the *Economist* published an instantly iconic cover with Germany's heraldic beast, a

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stylized eagle, peering fearfully out from under one of its wings, accompanied by the headline “The Reluctant Hegemon.”²⁷ The British magazine’s lead editorial argued that Germany was “united, strong and rich,” whereas France and Britain were weak or distracted. As a result of Germany’s reluctance to lead, it wrote, “Europe is drifting towards disaster ... [U]nless Germany stirs itself, the continent’s economy—and its politics—will get worse.” It ended with a stirring comparison that was guaranteed to get German elites’ attention: “When American leadership shored up a vulnerable West Germany half a century ago, it was in the interests not just of Germans but of Americans too. Now it is Germany’s turn to lead its weaker allies, for their sakes and for its own.”

A quarter-century after reunification, Germany had become a pivotal middle power on the rise—arguably even a major power in global trade terms, and certainly in relation to most other nations in Europe. In terms of political, economic, and social (if not military) heft, Germany is a, if not *the*, key player in Europe, and a buttress of the European project. But even for powers of far greater stature, like the United States, Russia, and China, Germany had become the indispensable partner and enabler of their strategic purposes on the continent and beyond it.

The result was a unique “voluntarist moment” in post-Cold War German politics. In 2014, in the aftermath of the financial crisis and under the impression of Russian aggression in Ukraine, there was an attempt to shake up German foreign and security policy to make it more engaged with the world. At that year’s Munich Security Conference, the country’s president, foreign minister, and defense minister gave a set of coordinated speeches recognizing that this growing power entailed a commensurately greater responsibility to accept the burdens of leadership: “faster, more decisive, and more substantial,” as then-President Joachim Gauck promised. The Foreign Ministry’s subsequent review as well as the Defense Ministry’s

White Book acknowledged that Germany needed to lean forward in order to shape its strategic environment.

Allies seemed to agree. Memorably, Poland’s then-Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski had told Berliners: “I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity.”²⁸ Yet more than any other great power—or any European nation—it was the United States that was pushing Berlin toward a more active stance. George H.W. Bush, the patron saint of Germany’s unification, had still asked in vain for “partnership in leadership” in 1990. But the Obama-Merkel partnership, notably cool at the beginning, ended up being probably the most co-equal that a German chancellor has ever had with an American president.

However, Germany’s newfound resolve almost immediately found itself under pressure. Between 2014-15 it became, in quick succession, the fulcrum of three major crises: the eurozone crisis, the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and a migration crisis that had begun in Syria and spilled all the way to Europe and over the German border. Each one of these crises has been a stark object lesson in the dilemmas of leadership for the Berlin Republic. In all three cases, Germany departed from its habitual caution, played a significant leadership role, attempted to shape outcomes, paid a real price, and probably achieved as much success as was realistically available at the time. But others paid a price too—neighbors and allies, and their citizens—and the fundamental sources of all three crises remain unresolved. Harsher critiques accuse Berlin of contributing to or deepening the problem, and thereby worsening existing fissures in Europe, or even undermining the European project. For the first time in postwar history, the fight over the future of the European project is not just about the when and how to deepen or expand the EU, but rather—at least for a few member-states—about whether the clock of European integration ought not to be turned back altogether.

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There are also alarming signs of paralysis and strain emerging within our seemingly sophisticated European nation-states. It is plausible to read Brexit as a failure of devolution in Britain; the rise of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) is rooted in part in the vast distance between France's civil society and an overbearing executive branch driven by a technocratic elite; many Germans' anger is sparked by an enormous backlog of infrastructure investment. Yet nothing bears more potential for conflict in Europe today than questions of identity. Who may call him or herself a citizen—and who may not? Here, the legacy of colonialism, the follow-on consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, and the unresolved issues of migration and the refugee crisis enter a toxic combination, exacerbated by fears of a new economic downturn. All of this makes fertile soil for extreme populists.

It also swiftly became clear that Europe is once again one of the battlegrounds of great power competition. Europe is weakened by the financial crisis, surrounded by instability, and riven by deep disagreements about the future of the project. Unlike America, it is existentially dependent on deep integration, both within the boundaries of the EU and with the rest of the world. Russia and China are now turning the old and new connective elements of integration and globalization (from physical infrastructure like pipelines and transportation hubs to cyberspace and social media) against Europe in different ways, and to different purposes. Russian interference appears to be mainly cacophonous, opportunistic, and destructive;²⁹ China's seems far more strategic, as well as more politically and technologically sophisticated. Both are now players in the European arena, and each seeks to divide the EU for its own national aims.

But the real conundrum for Europe, and the development that is turning this new era of great power competition into a perfect storm, is "America First," or what Robert Kagan has called the "rogue superpower" America: neither bent on global transformation through intervention, nor in retreat, but

"active, powerful and entirely out for itself"—including in relations with its oldest and closest allies.³⁰ The Trump administration's attitude to Europe is at best the transactional approach sketched out by the December 2017 National Security Strategy. At worst, it is bullying, predatory, and hostile—as evinced by its use of economic coercion, in the form of multiple threats of tariffs and sanctions, the president's repeated references to the EU as a "foe," and the increasingly overt support for illiberal authoritarians like Orbán and Salvini. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's very first European speech in December 2018 in Brussels finally made it clear (if confirmation was needed) that it is not just the president who sees the EU as an enemy. Pompeo asked if the EU was still serving the interests of its citizens, adding that international institutions that no longer serve their purpose should "be reformed or eliminated."³¹ It rang alarm bells across the region, as did the demotion of the EU delegation in Washington, DC.³² What's more, this administration has a noticeable weakness for Europe's autocrats. Trump and his comrades-in-arms call that healthy national pride, but it is more accurate to call it ethno-chauvinism.

Even where the Trump administration's actions are not directed at Europe, they show reckless disregard for its interests, needs, and vulnerability; its Middle East and Russia policy and the botched announcements of withdrawal from Syria and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty are all cases in point. Washington—even Trump's Washington—is of course right to ask Europeans to share a greater security burden, but its actions are also imposing disproportionate costs on Europe. And as for Europe's main tranquilizing hope—the administration's support for NATO and deterrence in Eastern Europe—it is rapidly dwindling in the face of the recent departures of many senior trans-Atlanticists in the administration, beginning with Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (and many of the senior Europe policymakers in the Pentagon) as well as A. Wess Mitchell, the State Department's top Europe official. And given the government's fixation on China, its perceived main adversary and nemesis,

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some in Washington are anxiously asking themselves if Trump might not be capable of conceding to the Kremlin, as the price for its allegiance, a sphere of influence in Europe.

There is a German-American sub-story here too; this administration and this president (as well as, apparently, its ambassador to Berlin) appear to have a special animus against Germany and its current chancellor.³³ The larger point is that, like Moscow and Beijing, this White House also recognizes that Germany remains the key prize in Europe for any adversary.

The impact of all this on Germany is stark. No country in Europe is affected so dramatically by this new dispensation of systemic competition, no country has had its certainties so ruthlessly overturned. In the words of an elegant recent essay written by the senior diplomat Thomas Bagger:

“From the life-changing experience of an entirely unexpected, nonlinear event such as the ‘*annus mirabilis*’ 1989, many Germans derived a thoroughly linear expectation of the future. There is something deeply ironic—and very human—in this expectation. But it is now being shattered. Coming to terms with this particular German version of the return of history and geography will be the country’s crucial challenge in setting realistic foreign policy priorities for the future.”³⁴

Post-1945, the “Bonn Republic” (named after the small town on the banks of the Rhine chosen by its first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, as the post-1945 capital) had attempted to comprehensively answer the “German Question” once and for all. It did so through self-containment and *Westbindung*, or anchoring itself firmly in the institutions of the West: the European project, NATO, the United Nations, and in principled multilateralism more generally. None of this could have been sustainable without two additional factors: moral rehabilitation (acknowledgment of guilt, atonement, and reparations) and the protection provided by the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

That protection, and America’s stewardship of the international liberal order, allowed Germany to shift resources from defense to welfare, and to become an export champion in global markets. After the fall of the Wall, EU and NATO enlargement provided Germany with a completely new economic hinterland and comfortably buffered the former frontline state against friction with Russia. As its then-Defense Minister Volker R uhe put it, Germany was now “encircled by friends”; it would have been equally accurate to say that Germany had exported its security risks and threats from its borders to the borders of its new neighbors. This, in turn, allowed Germany to concentrate on its economic transformation and the simultaneous development of a generous welfare state. In brief, we owe not only our security to America, but also our social peace.

All this had the effect of turning the Berlin Republic into a de facto “shaping power” over the past 30 years. In other words, within the fragile European ecosystem, Germany is what Americans call “an 800-pound gorilla”—the animal that makes the trees tremble just by rolling over in its sleep. From the point of view of most of our neighbors, we are, well, the Americans of Europe. The others urgently need us, but also fear our inconsiderateness—including our inability to even recognize when we need to be considerate.

And it is not clear that we are aware just how much we have benefited from America and the rest of Europe, or that we would be willing to acknowledge that fact and draw the appropriate conclusions. Few countries in Europe so firmly believed in reconciliation, progress, globalization, democratic transformation, and a rules-based international order. Yet no other country has been so deeply in denial about the tension between its high-minded normative convictions, and its own selective compliance with them. We sing the praises of normative universalism, but are absolutely ready to swerve away from our convictions in pursuit of our national interest. We see ourselves as the engine of

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European integration, but when it comes down to it, German governments regularly hit the brakes. And we persistently refuse to acknowledge that German decisions—in the controversy over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, the eurozone, or refugee crises—have consequences (and costs) well beyond our borders.

Consequently, no country in Europe has been so profoundly shocked and perplexed by the developments of the past three years. Germany today is—for all its wealth and power, including soft power—also increasingly lonely, overwhelmed, and beset by internal rifts. Other European nations still look to it for leadership, but increasingly fear its inability to act. And, far from being a “shaper nation,” Germany risks being shaped: by events, competitors, challengers, and adversaries.

GERMANY'S OPTIONS

Germany's options in this dire new strategic environment are limited. Building walls, repatriating supply chains, and generally turning itself into a Fortress Germany are not a realistic choice for the country, which shares borders with nine neighbors and is existentially dependent on its economic integration with the rest of Europe. Yet the temptation to turn itself into a Greater Switzerland that attempts to accommodate and juggle equidistant relations with all major powers—regardless of their illiberal nature or their active hostility—is very real, as contentious national debates over issues that touch on relations with Russia (sanctions, pipelines) and China (broadband) demonstrate. Imminent technological changes (artificial intelligence, automation, quantum computing) will have a massively disruptive impact on Germany's export-driven economy and labor markets; that perspective could reinforce the inclination to beat a retreat.

But following this urge would be a dead end. Germany's relative power and stature in the highly fragile and vulnerable political ecosystem that is

Europe implies that it has to take on a far greater effort to preserve it—in its own enlightened self-interest. But that does not mean subsuming itself in an all-out push for European integration. In fact, the populist theory—most recently articulated by Yoram Hazony—that opposes control and shared sovereignty, or nation and Europe, is a false dichotomy.³⁵ A Germany that anchors Europe and survives in a world of great power competition has to be both a strong nation-state and one that is committed to European solidarity. Functioning nation-states and European integration are two sides of the same coin across Europe.

In domestic terms, that requires putting national houses in order to mitigate the stress and friction—all the things that extremist populists like the AfD exploit—that are the price of openness and interdependence. Institutions, economies, and social contracts need to be repaired and made more resilient.

European integration, contrary to a common misperception in Washington, is not seen as a goal in itself by German policymakers. Merkel is by no means atypical in taking an ultrapragmatic line. She has pursued integration where it is feasible and solves problems; but more often than not, her default option for difficult political conundrums has been to seek multilateral or bilateral intergovernmental agreements. Yet there is actually a persuasive technocratic argument to be made that some areas—eurozone and immigration management and defense—would benefit greatly from further integration. Leaving these thorny issues to nation-states alone might even make Europeans more vulnerable. But because of the sovereignty trade-offs involved, such a step requires a level of trust that is currently in short supply in Europe, not least because of the solidarity failures of recent years, in which Germany has played a role.

All this means that in terms of its relations with the rest of Europe, Germany's relative power dictates a duty of care, an obligation to forge genuine

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compromises that take the needs of neighbors into account. In pursuit of that goal, it will need to regain the trust of some of its neighbors and close vulnerabilities in its own position. Critiques by European neighbors (and, yes, by the United States) of Germany's defense spending, its trade surpluses, and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline may be strident. They may even be self-interested. But they are legitimate in substance, and addressing them is in fact in Germany's *own* self-interest. If the United States wavers on its NATO commitments, major European powers must urgently take up the slack, including Berlin. Trade surpluses (never mind the Trump administration's fixation with "winnable trade wars") can be brought down with much-needed domestic infrastructure investments. As for the pipeline, Berlin could simply stop resisting the application of EU competition law to the project.³⁶ Germany will only increase its isolation if it continues to behave as though such pragmatic compromises are not available.

Yet Germany will also have to become tougher and more assertive on other issues. Effective deterrence is much more than just military effectiveness. It means never taking options, such as economic sanctions, military options, or future EU and NATO enlargement, off the table pre-emptively. It requires pushing back much more strongly against Russian or Chinese interference, whether in Germany, in the EU, or farther abroad.³⁷ Finally, it needs to make common cause with fellow liberal democracies against the authoritarians—even if it means standoffs with fellow EU members like Hungary, Italy, and Poland.

The conundrum of how to deal with Trump's America remains. Germany's policy toward the United States may have to be schizophrenic for the foreseeable future. It will have to be based on two contradictory insights: that Trumpism goes beyond Trump; and that America is, as the 2018 midterm elections showed, more than Trump.

So free-riding on an unreliable and occasionally predatory ally is no longer an option. Europe and Germany must become stronger and more independent. But "strategic autonomy" from the United States—as recommended by France—which would entail a strategic decoupling of Europe from America, is utterly unrealistic, even for a Europe shocked and united into beefing up its resilience and its defenses out of fear. Europe continues to need America by its side, not least when it comes to responding to the Chinese challenge. On the other hand, the United States needs us too: we host its bases and its companies, we create jobs in America with our companies, we partner with it in diplomacy, we provide an important development and trade backstop to many U.S. interests and initiatives. And we might occasionally remind it that, in terms of trade and regulatory power, we are in fact a peer competitor. In sum: If we want to be taken seriously by America, and to be treated as a subject, rather than an object, of U.S. strategy, we need to establish a much stronger defense and security presence, as well as a robust technology policy. We need to put up resistance where necessary—and cooperate where possible. Perhaps we can learn from Nancy Pelosi here?

Indications are that Chancellor Merkel and her foreign minister, Heiko Maas, are fully aware of the level of the challenge. At the 2019 Munich Security Conference, the chancellor gave a remarkably punchy and feisty speech refuting the Trump administration's (and other) criticisms, for which she received a rare standing ovation; the Chinese top diplomat Yang Jiechi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and U.S. first daughter Ivanka Trump were among the few who were observed to have remained seated.³⁸

The fact that Germany has campaigned for and won a two-year non-permanent seat in the U.N. Security Council as of January 2019 is surely a signal of ambition. But that will expose it to scrutiny all the

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more. A “New Ostpolitik” designed to reassure eastern neighbors is no doubt welcomed, but what does that mean if it is counteracted by Germany’s energy policy? Maas’ “Alliance of Likeminded Multilateralists” is a worthy goal. But then Berlin must stand with other democracies like Canada when their citizens are imprisoned by China, and protest more strongly against heinous crimes like the state-ordered murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In the end, the most precious power asset for a democracy is legitimacy—in other words, its willingness to stand by its own convictions.

CONCLUSION

Looking back at the past three decades of German history brings to mind the term “*les trente glorieuses*”—the 30 wonderful years—that the French demographer Jean Fourastié applied to the years of economic boom France enjoyed between 1945 and 1975. The term could have been applied to (West) Germany in that time as well.

But the description is far more applicable to the first three decades of the Berlin Republic. Between 1989 and 2019, after the fall of the Berlin Wall

and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, two countries that had been nervously eyeing each other across the front lines became one flourishing European hegemon. The historically unique gains in prosperity, power, and prestige that came from that are the real German postwar miracle. There are now, sadly, plenty of signs that this miracle is coming to an end—perhaps even with a cyclical downturn in world politics ahead. It is possible that foreign policy will become a major stress factor for the German polity in the coming years. With the security architecture of Europe in limbo, the validity of the alliance with America in question, and a greatly increased security burden coming the Europeans’ way, the domestic debate about Germany’s proper role in all this will become significantly strained, even polarized. And that, too, will test the strength of Germany’s democracy.

A similar version of the second part of this essay will be appearing in the online-based Berlin Policy Journal in March; a German translation will run in the March/April edition of Internationale Politik.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Constanze Stelzenmüller is the inaugural Robert Bosch Senior Fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution.

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