

Germany's European Imperative

Wolfgang Ischinger

Henry Kissinger once suggested that political decisions should be guided by two core questions: “What are we trying to achieve?” and “what are we trying to prevent?”¹

For Germany, the answers to both questions are clear. What we need to prevent at all costs is Europe falling apart, paving the way for a return of nationalism, which has brought war twice in the past century. What we want to achieve is equally clear: we want Europe to be able to defend its political, economic, and societal model. This is why Germany must now embrace a “European imperative”² as the basis for its decision-making. Whatever Berlin intends to do, it should first ask what its actions would mean for Europe’s ability to recover from the crisis and for Europe’s capacity to protect its values, interests, and sovereignty on the world stage.

The pandemic has upended plans for the current German presidency of the Council of the EU. The primary task will be that of “maintaining EU integration as such.”³ The pandemic risks deepening rifts between Europe’s hard-hit south and the countries of the north, it threatens to widen fissures between eastern and western EU member states over migration and the rule of law, and it generally risks strengthening Euroskeptic forces across member states. And as if this were not enough, emboldened external actors—Russia and China in particular—are eager to exploit the pandemic in efforts “to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarization”⁴ in Europe to advance their own agendas.

In this regard, the recent decision to create a recovery fund proves that the grand coalition in Berlin understands that EU member states were “writing a page in a history book” rather than “a page in an economics manual.”⁵ In financial terms, it also sent the much-needed signal of solidarity and empathy that Berlin had failed to convey in previous crises.

For Germany, the initiative was tantamount to a massive change in mindset. Berlin should use this occasion to once and for all do away with the one-sided narrative of being exploited as Europe’s paymaster—a narrative long cherished by policy makers, journalists, and the wider public. Too often, EU budget increases have been criticized without mentioning the benefits of integration, let alone the cost of disintegration. Between 2014 and 2018, the single market increased real incomes in Germany by almost 120 billion euros, while, in the same time period, Germany’s net contribution to the EU budget amounted to 10–15 billion euros per year.⁶ Thus, the economic benefits Germany accrues alone outweigh the costs it incurs many times over.

Yet, making the case for Europe in Germany is not the only task for German leaders. They also have to make the case for Germany in Europe. If Germany is to act as a bridge builder in a deeply divided EU and forge sustainable compromises on important European issues—from migration and asylum to climate change and defense—it needs to be perceived as an honest broker in the common European interest, as a legitimate leader that has Europe’s best interests at heart.

To strengthen Europe’s ability to defend its values and interests in the world, Germany should take bold steps toward fully embracing and implementing the European imperative.

Most importantly, we need to end the “small nation’ thinking”⁷ of the past. At a time when Europe’s ability to “relearn the language of power”⁸ is called for on various fronts, Germany must seize the opportunity to amplify Europe’s voice in the world.

Germany's desire to strengthen Europe's role in the world is still at odds with Berlin's own inability to approach policy issues from a more (geo-)strategic and global angle. This inability was particularly evident in the German debate about the U.S.-EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). In these discussions, narrow domestic targets took precedence over geopolitical considerations.⁹ Likewise, the recent debate on U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Germany gave the impression that this was exclusively a national issue and had few if any ramifications for NATO or Euro-Atlantic security. Time and again, members of the German political elite fail to consider the international repercussions of their statements and policies.

Europe has to stand its ground in a global environment where innovation and economic growth have become a primary domain for geopolitical competition. Yet, Germany itself has still been reluctant to view its economic relations through a wider geopolitical lens. It continues to rank economic growth and export promotion before other foreign policy goals and does not link these economic goals to other priorities. At a moment when Germany's most important trading partners increasingly extend beyond its close strategic allies, this policy is neither sustainable for Germany nor conducive to empowering Europe.¹⁰ In this regard, Germany's China policy will constitute one of the principal tests of Berlin's willingness to embrace the European imperative.

Germany regularly acknowledges that the most decisive challenges of the future, including climate change, migration, and technological competition, all require European solutions. Still, Berlin often balks at requests to back up its demand for "more Europe" with the necessary resources, financial and otherwise. Germany's climate policy is a primary example. Climate and environmental protection topped the list of priorities for the German presidency of the Council of the EU. However, Berlin has been reluctant to provide the funding needed for the European Commission's ambitious Green Deal.

Climate policies are not the only area where this is the case. Financial nit-picking and concerns about burden-sharing often dominate German debates about European policy priorities and objectives. The European imperative demands a public debate that defines the concrete goals and benefits that Germany seeks to achieve at the European level. And it demands that once these goals are defined, Germany invests the resources needed. Recent survey data suggest that Germans do not only desire a more active role for their country in Europe, they are also willing to provide more resources for concrete European policy ambitions, including in the fields of climate protection and innovation.¹¹

A Europe able to defend its values and interests in the world must speak with one clear voice. The starting point includes Germans listening to their neighbors when their core interests are at stake. An EU foreign policy à la carte will not work. We cannot call for joint European positions on some issues while at the same time—as was initially the case with Nord Stream 2—trying to restrict European jurisdiction when we see it as a hindrance. The EU cannot become "*weltpolitikfähig*"¹²—capable of acting at the global level—if every single member can veto every decision for parochial reasons. Put differently: being guided by the European imperative cannot be understood as acquiescence to a Europe of the lowest common denominator. To this end, Germany should take three steps.

First, Berlin should continue to make the case for an extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) to the domain of foreign and security policy and, as a first step, voluntarily waive its veto right. Of course, critics may argue that the risk for Berlin is small, as it is less likely to be outvoted than other countries. But at the very least, this would send a clear signal to the rest of Europe.¹³

Second, Germany should seriously consider how it can make using the veto more costly for others. Abstaining from using its own veto will certainly help, but would clearly not be enough.

And third, Germany needs to be more willing to forge ahead with a critical mass of like-minded partners when the EU's consensus requirement gets in the way of action. In the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, this is particularly urgent. Here and elsewhere, Berlin must not hide behind a lack of consensus but should actively seek partners that share an ambitious agenda for Europe. Of course, this means reinvigorating the Franco-German partnership, which has recently shown the way in the economic realm but should also be more active in foreign and security policy. The European imperative demands that Germany should not press ahead without properly consulting or reassuring its neighbors. But it should also not allow individual EU partners to paralyze the European project and prevent efforts to update it.

The partnerships Berlin needs to foster in order to help defend European values and interests in the world extend well beyond the EU. This is most important following Brexit. Germany should work closely with France to secure close coordination and cooperation with the United Kingdom.

Germany should also underscore its ambition to turn the EU into a credible foreign policy actor. There is no need for semantic debates about the true meaning of “strategic autonomy” or “European sovereignty.” But there is a clear need to enhance Europe’s ability to act. Europe’s lack of influence on the course of conflicts that have affected its core interests—most notably those in Syria and Libya—has been all too evident. While Europeans have been quick to criticize the United States for abandoning its traditional role, the European approach has been even more impotent and inward-looking than that of the United States.¹⁴ A world of “Westlessness”¹⁵ is also a consequence of Europe’s apparent inability to defend its own core interests. While Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has promised a “geopolitical Commission,”¹⁶ Josep Borrell, the EU high representative for foreign affairs, has repeatedly underlined the necessity for Europe to “relearn the language of power.”¹⁷ European leaders must make sure that these grandiose claims are filled with meaning.

In any case, it is obvious that the EU will not learn to speak the language of power as long as Germany does not. Even in a world increasingly shaped by great-power competition, it still makes sense to defend the European model of multilateral cooperation, trying to forge win-win situations or investing in rules-based frameworks. But this should be done from a clear-eyed position of strength and based on reciprocity, recognizing the fact that other actors do not share the European world view. Even the United States has to adapt to a new era of great-power competition in which the U.S. is facing increasingly powerful rivals in a world where liberal democracy is no longer the only game in town. For the EU, which was essentially designed to overcome a “dog-eat-dog” world, the learning curve is far steeper. It is still new to the great-power game.¹⁸ For very good reasons, Europeans, and Germans in particular, detest the kinds of policies that come with it. Yet, even if they operate differently, Europeans must learn how to respond more decisively and effectively to attacks on their core values and interests. What kind of message does it send if repeated attempts to hack into parliaments or to undermine the integrity of elections—the critical infrastructure of European democracies—are not met with a strong response? With Berlin’s help, Europe must make sure everyone understands it will not accept being bullied and will mobilize its special set of resources to push back.

This plea for Germany to embrace the European imperative and accept the leadership role that is part of it should not be misunderstood. Germany cannot—and will not—lead on its own. It must always build coalitions, with France remaining its first and foremost partner. What is needed is a “European Germany,” as Thomas Mann put it. It is a Germany that is aware of its limits. But it is also a Germany that is aware of its potential. German leaders and the German public often seem blissfully unaware of the fact that decisions made and actions taken in Berlin can be existential issues for its partners. German leadership based on the European imperative would acknowledge and anticipate the ripple effects of German decisions and actions for Europe. More important still, it would create a simple but powerful benchmark for all political decisions taken in Berlin: first and foremost, they must be geared toward strengthening Europe. If Berlin throws its full weight behind the EU, it can become Europe’s “enabling power.”

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Wolfgang Ischinger has been chairman of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) since 2008 and teaches at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin as senior professor for security policy and diplomatic practice. He advises the private sector, governments, and international organizations on strategic issues. Ambassador Ischinger is a member of the Trilateral Commission and the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and serves on a number of nonprofit boards and advisory councils, including the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the American Academy Berlin, and the Atlantik-Brücke. He is also a member of the Supervisory Board of Hensoldt GmbH and of the International Advisory Council of Investcorp, London. Ambassador Ischinger joined the German Foreign Service in 1975, followed by a distinguished diplomatic career. From 2006 to 2008, he was the Federal Republic of Germany's ambassador in London and from 2001 to 2006 in Washington, DC. He served as deputy foreign minister (state secretary) of Germany from 1998 to 2001 and as political director of the foreign ministry from 1995 to 1998. In 2007, he represented the European Union in the Troika negotiations on the future of Kosovo. In 2014, he served as the special representative of the OSCE Chairman-In-Office in the Ukraine crisis. In 2015, he chaired the OSCE "Eminent Persons Panel on European Security," mandated to offer recommendations on how to build a more resilient European security architecture. From 2008 to 2014, he was also global head of government relations at Allianz SE, Munich.

- ¹ Henry Kissinger, "Kissinger: Great Things Cannot Be Achieved Without Some Sacrifice of the Present for the Needs of the Future," Atlantic Council, October 3, 2015, <https://perma.cc/C4W8-WAR7>.
- ² Foreign Minister Heiko Maas used the term in his address to the German ambassadors. See Heiko Maas, "Speech by Federal Minister Heiko Maas at the opening of the 18th Conference of the Heads of German Missions," Berlin, May 25, 2020, <https://perma.cc/7V59-G35K>.
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- ⁵ Silvia Amaro, "Italy Readies More Economic Stimulus as Its Coronavirus Death Toll Surpasses 12,000," CNBC, April 1, 2020, <https://perma.cc/VE9J-TEWL>.
- ⁶ Representation of the European Commission in Germany, "Oettinger zu EU-Finanzien nach 2020: Nettozahler-Debatte ist zunehmend sinnentleert," February 14, 2018, <https://perma.cc/E3CQ-SRUL>; Representation of the European Commission in Germany, "Mythos: Wir Deutsche zahlen für den Rest Europas," May 9, 2019, <https://perma.cc/ZG6Y-ZBRN>.
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- ⁸ Josep Borrell, "Embracing Europe's Power," *Project Syndicate*, February 8, 2020, <https://perma.cc/C35M-H99G>.
- ⁹ Sophia Besch and Christian Odendahl, "The Good European? Why Germany's Policy Ambitions Must Match Its Power," Centre For European Reform, February 2020, <https://perma.cc/7HZW-7C59>.
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- ¹¹ Johannes Hillje and Christine Pütz, "Selbstverständlich europäisch!? 2020. Der Auftrag für die EURatspräsidentschaft," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung/Das Progressive Zentrum, March 2020, <https://perma.cc/9ZA4-M6AM>.
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- ¹³ For an overview of national preferences regarding QMV and alternative paths toward more efficient and effective EU external action, see Nicole Koenig, "Qualified Majority Voting in EU Foreign Policy: Mapping Preferences," Berlin: Hertie School – Jacques Delors Centre, February 10, 2020, <https://perma.cc/9VA4-7DKY>.
- ¹⁴ Gideon Rachman, "End of the American Era in the Middle East," *Financial Times*, December 30, 2019, <https://perma.cc/JRT8-RJ63>.
- ¹⁵ Tobias Bunde et al., "Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness," Munich: Munich Security Conference, <https://doi.org/10.47342/IAQX5691>.
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- ¹⁷ Josep Borrell, "Embracing Europe's Power," *Project Syndicate*, February 8, 2020, <https://perma.cc/C35M-H99G>.
- ¹⁸ Zaki Laïdi, "Can Europe Learn To Play Power Politics?," London: Centre for European Reform, <https://perma.cc/Y6UD-UL5U>.