

Lessons from Germany's (entirely predictable) UN Security Council defeat

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It is not hard to mock the resounding defeat of Germany's bid for a seat on the UN's Security Council. One commentator called it a foreign policy Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. The term was popularised by Richard Wagner for his revolutionary synthesis of music, visual art, design and architecture. But you get the idea: big, loud and tragic.

The executive organ of the UN has five permanent members (the US, Russia, China, France and the UK) and 10 rotating non-permanent members, elected for two-year terms in the General Assembly from among the other 188 member states, grouped by region. This most recent election was for the 2027-28 period, and two of the five seats up for election were allotted to the so-called Western European and Other States group.

Regional groups often agree on candidates to maximise their chances. The countries that enter the race sometimes campaign for these seats for more than a decade, lobbying every single member state. Yet Germany went in years after Portugal and Austria had already declared. It would have needed at least 127 votes. Last week, Berlin was beaten with 104 votes to Lisbon's 134 and Vienna's 131.

But, as my grandfather liked to say: "Must we cry?" The rivals deserved their wins. Portugal expertly leverages its relations with former colonies in Africa, Asia and South America to punch above its weight internationally (UN secretary-general António Guterres and European Council president António Costa are both Portuguese); its recognition of Palestinian statehood is likely to have added to support in the global south. Austria is the Schrödinger's cat of diplomacy, discreetly supporting Israel and Ukraine while touting its constitutional neutrality to the non-western world.

Germany, meanwhile, appears to have presumed too much and not tried hard enough. It is the fourth-largest funder of the UN, the world's third-largest economy and Europe's largest. It has won each of its six previous Security Council bids and has long argued that its stature ought to merit a permanent seat. Its campaign slogan was "Respect, Justice, Peace", but Chancellor Friedrich Merz did not even show up at

September's annual General Assembly meeting to work the room. Austria sent its president, chancellor and foreign minister. So much for respect.

As for justice, Berlin prides itself on being a staunch defender of international institutions and law, of right over might. But it has made significant cuts to development and humanitarian aid.

And Merz — who has a tendency to think after speaking — has refused to condemn US strikes against Venezuela (he called them legally “complex”) and said Israel was “doing the dirty work for us” with strikes on Iran.

And peace is an elusive goal in a moment when Russia, China and Donald Trump's US are vying to reshape the global order to their liking through coercion and military force. Germany is re-arming at speed and is now Ukraine's biggest national provider of military aid; allegations of a Kremlin campaign against Berlin's candidature for the Security Council are entirely plausible.

Berlin's defeat at the UN, however, is rooted in a larger dilemma. Before his election, Merz gave a speech in which he said he wanted Germany to become “a leading middle power”. But the remark famously attributed to Henry Kissinger — “poor old Germany: too big for Europe, too small for the world” — is if anything truer today than during his lifetime.

Russia regularly blocks the Security Council with vetoes, while China has been working assiduously to gain power and the ability to set standards in UN institutions. The US announced in January that it would retrench or retreat from more than 60 international bodies; the Board of Peace, Trump's ersatz Security Council, is bereft of funds. Germany's diplomats, meanwhile, invoke “multilateralism” like a mantra.

To navigate (never mind lead) in a world of aggressive great powers, a middle power like Germany must learn to forge alliances, especially with countries that do not share its values and interests. Berlin does actually have a group of like-minded allies in the EU — but then it would have to concentrate on solving problems within the bloc, rather than elbowing out smaller member states in pursuit of empty prestige.

Respect, Justice, Peace: nice work if you can get it. But meanwhile maybe Germany should give generosity, consistency, humility a try.