

Foreign and security policy in Germany's election: Why it matters

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In recent years, much public and scholarly attention has been given to Germany's transition of from a "civilian" towards a "normal" power. Yet, despite this metamorphosis of a country which, for decades, sought to avoid military engagement at all costs, to a more pragmatic and interest-driven actor, a core feature of German foreign policy stayed the same: its desire to express leadership through diplomacy and economics rather than military tools.

The 2011 crisis in Libya, during which the CDU-FDP coalition headed by Angela Merkel chose not to take part in the NATO intervention which overthrew Muammar Gaddafi and subsequently destabilised the county and other parts of North Africa, is but one example of this continued commitment to military abstinence. Similarly, Germany's role in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, this time under a CDU-SPD coalition, has been characterised by Berlin's attempts to facilitate a peaceful settlement, mostly via the use of sanctions.

In both crises, Germany demonstrated a preference for a 'civilian' crisis response and advocated a de-escalation policy. One should not expect a major change in Germany's foreign policy direction if Martin Schulz replaces Angela Merkel as the country's chancellor. Rather, as long as the respective candidate leads a grand coalition, the major pillars will likely remain unaltered, as an analysis of the two parties' election programmes reveals.

Despite the CDU's commitment to hit NATO's 2% target for its defence budget until 2024, and to increase the role of the Bundeswehr "in light of the security situation", Merkel's party also promises to increase the budget for development cooperation to 0.7% of GDP, matching a target set out by the United Nations. This measure is strongly aligned with the SPD's focus on "crisis prevention, humanitarian aid and sustainable development" and its readiness to increase the defence budget – even though only "to the extent needed".

This is not to suggest that the two parties are aligned on every aspect of their programmes. As is the case so often in politics, the devil is in the details – and in what is omitted. The question of arms transfers, for instance, remains a major point of controversy. The CDU avoids the topic in its election programme, while the SPD stresses the need for "cut-backs" and for a common European procurement policy.

Much more significant are, however, the differences between the positions of the CDU/CSU/SPD and those of the smaller parties, especially at the fringes of the political

spectrum. While Die Linke, Germany's leftist party, demands no less than the end of the production of military goods in the country and wants to prohibit the participation of "German companies in international or foreign arms companies", its right-wing competitor, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) advocates a reform of the Bundeswehr. The proposed reform includes the re-introduction of compulsory military service and an option to establish 'Heimatschutzkräfte' (militia-like groups), while stressing that territorial defence is to be "ensured largely independently".

Even though it seems highly unlikely at this point that any of the more extreme points of view will find traction among the German population, it is crucial to keep foreign, security and defence policy on the radar. First, many pressing 'internal' topics, such as the fight against "homegrown terrorism" or the handling of the refugee and migration crisis are closely related to the action Germany and its partners take in and towards Europe's immediate neighbourhood.

Second, numerous (populist) governments – especially in Eastern Europe – seem to have discovered that taking a position against Germany's alleged quest for "hegemony" can help them divert attention away from their own shortcomings. Third, any decision to step up efforts in the realm of security and defence will automatically alter the political agenda, bringing to the forefront new players and ultimately diverting attention from and resources to those topics which the major parties originally identified as their priorities in these elections: education and social justice for the SPD and family and employment for the CDU.