

Policy Brief

After the German Election

What's next in EU foreign and security policy?

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The EU should appear more capable of acting, more capable of global politics and more sovereign. That is what the election manifestos of the leading German parties and future coalition partners say. But if you take a closer look, you often find vague formulations, old proposals or ones that will probably collect dust on the shelf. This policy brief addresses the questions that the next federal government in Germany will have to face in the area of EU foreign and security policy to get a little closer to the promise of an EU capable of acting in foreign policy.

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Introduction

Until the beginning of August, European foreign and security policy was largely a feel-good issue in the election. For one, the largest parties often seemed to be in agreement here. For another, the discussions remained mostly vague. The latter changed abruptly with the disastrous withdrawal of the Americans and their allies from Afghanistan¹. In terms of security policy, Afghanistan has always been more within NATO's area of responsibility. But the withdrawal also highlighted the limits of Europe's capacity to act. Without the US, the Europeans were not even able to evacuate their own nationals and local staff.

A few weeks later, an Indo-Pacific security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) heralded the end of the European Biden euphoria. The lack of coordination showed that Washington will not wait for EU partners in its tough China stance. At the same time, the US caused the cancellation of a multibillion-euro Franco-Australian deal by exporting nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. This showed that the Biden administration's "Buy American" course knows no allies. Despite all this, European foreign and

¹ For reasons of readability, the pronouns "they", "them" and "their" are used in some cases to refer to single individuals. The plural form should be read as the singular in these cases.

security policy remained a fringe issue in the German election – but when it cropped up, calls for improving Europe’s capacity to act became louder.

The next federal government in Germany can significantly influence the EU’s capacity to act in foreign policy. But this influence will not be served to it on a silver platter. At some point or another, it will have to weigh national interests against European ones. It will have to decide how many resources to allocate and which risks are justifiable, for example in the case of EU military crisis management. It will have to rethink and repackage institutional reform proposals. In all of this, it will always be faced with the difficult question of when it is actually possible to act as an EU of 27 member states, and when it is necessary to move forward courageously with a smaller group. These issues tend to linger in the background during coalition negotiations. But the political calendar and the threats in Europe’s backyard will demand answers very soon.

1. **Russia and China: When do we need dialogue and when toughness?**

“Europe must become a geopolitical player and learn to speak the language of power”. Since 2019, that has been Brussels’ response to the growing rivalry between the US and China, and to Russia’s often aggressive policies. However, implementation is hampered by the fact that member states have different views on the right mix of toughness and dialogue. Especially when it comes to China and Russia, [many](#) Europeans have a sceptical view of Germany. The impression has too often been that German economic interests trump European geopolitical considerations.

- **China:** Basically, the German parties [agree](#): Yes, China is a systemic and economic rival – and yes, we must nonetheless cooperate with China, be it in the economy, disarmament or climate issues. Dialogue and toughness, then. But what does that actually mean? This question arises, for example, in the case of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which the German government helped to negotiate. Since the Chinese imposed sanctions on a number of European academics and Members of the European Parliament, the agreement has been on hold. But sooner or later the next federal government will have to ask itself whether it should be renegotiated and where the line should be drawn, be it in human rights or in ensuring a level playing field. The overriding question is to what extent Germany is prepared to demonstrate European toughness when its economic interests are at stake. The next German government must also decide on the extent to which China should be confronted in terms of security policy. The deployment of the German frigate “Bayern” to the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea was an interesting balancing act. On the one hand, Germany followed the appeal of its allies to show presence in a region where China is increasingly asserting claims to power. On the other, the German government tried to avoid provocation by offering a port call to Shanghai. Beijing declined due to lack of trust. In the future, this balance will be difficult to maintain. At the same time, the next German government should coordinate its actions more closely at European level, for example in the deployment of the navy, as proposed by the new EU [Indo-Pacific strategy](#).
- **Russia:** [Dialogue and toughness](#) is also the mantra for Russia. But here, too, the question is whether and where to draw the line. The question arose in particular with the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The German government could repeat as often as it liked that this was a purely economic project; its European neighbours to the east saw it differently. They were all the more annoyed by the July compromise, in which the Americans abandoned their opposition. In return, the German government said that they would not allow Russia to use Nord Stream 2 as a geopolitical weapon and would stop gas deliveries if necessary. To be credible, the next federal government must be clearer about the scenario in which this could actually happen. The credibility of a single European voice is also at stake when it comes to offers of dialogue

with Russia. When France and Germany proposed an [EU-Russia Summit](#) in June, the Eastern Europeans emphatically vetoed it. They rejected concessions without anything in return. Apart from the content: if the aim is to get the EU to speak with one voice on Russia, then Paris and Berlin should probably not try to set the tone so publicly.

All in all, it will not be enough to talk about dialogue and toughness if it remains unclear what will be used and when. At the latest, these questions will be back on the agenda in the discussions on the Strategic Compass for the EU's security and defence policy (to be adopted in March 2022) and NATO's next Strategic Concept (summer 2022). The new German government should therefore agree on a course internally and with its European partners very soon. It will also have to acknowledge that the dividing lines between geostrategic and economic issues are becoming increasingly blurred.

2. What European lessons should be learned from Afghanistan?

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has made the Europeans painfully aware of the limits of their strategic autonomy. Without the Americans, they would not have been able to secure the airport in Kabul and evacuate their citizens and local staff. When it came to the lessons for Germany and Europe, two camps quickly emerged: some said that the EU should be empowered to undertake such an evacuation mission, which would also include providing it with a rapid reaction force. Others fundamentally questioned the deployment of the German army for missions abroad and the noble goal of state-building.

- **Consequences for Mali:** When it comes to European lessons, the focus turns to Mali very quickly. Unlike Afghanistan, the Europeans are leading the mission here. Besides the French, who shoulder by far the largest military burden with about 5,000 soldiers on the ground, the Germans also play a major role. They are currently leading the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and are involved in the EU and UN missions with up to 1,700 soldiers. However, the French are thinking more and more loudly about a gradual withdrawal. Moreover, the prospect of the Malian government cooperating with "Wagner", a Russian mercenary group, recently called into question the mandates of the EU and UN missions. In Berlin, there have been increasing calls for a thorough review of the mandate for the German army's mission, which runs until May 2022. While the current mandate of the UN mission ends in June 2022, EUTM Mali is to continue until May 2024. Against this backdrop, the next government should coordinate very closely with European and international partners and seek a coordinated review of both mandates to embed them in a comprehensive strategy for the Sahel. After all, if Afghanistan has shown anything, it is that one should in any case refrain from premature and unilateral announcements of withdrawal.
- **A European initial entry force:** At the beginning of September, it sounded like [Berlin](#) and Brussels had come up with the idea of a rapid EU response force of 5,000 soldiers as a lesson learned from the Kabul airport debacle. In reality, 14 member states, including Germany, had already put this proposal on the table in May as part of the EU's Strategic Compass for security and defence policy. The considerations are based on the situation that existed in Mali in 2013. At the time, the French intervened and barely prevented Islamists from taking the capital. Afghanistan has certainly given the proposal of an initial entry force a boost. But there are still some open questions. How exactly should this force be composed? The first working papers in this regard are already available. The main question is whether this rapid reaction force will actually be deployed. After all, in 2012-13, Germany too had ignored the urgent French warnings about Mali for too long.

Behind both points is the larger question of the level of ambition in EU crisis management and the German role in it. Especially in their southern backyard, the Europeans can no longer rely completely on the Americans and NATO. France does not want to shoulder this burden alone. For the next federal government in Germany, this issue is not only about solidarity with its closest EU partner, but also about its own interest in a more peaceful neighbourhood.

3. What do institutional reform proposals for EU foreign policy *really* achieve?

When it comes to [an EU that should be more willing to engage in global policy](#), Germany tends to make institutional reform proposals. However, the past legislative period has shown that some of the old familiar proposals are not very realistic at present. In the case of others, there are divisions over how to implement them. To make progress on the institutional track, the next federal government in Germany needs to be clearer about what it wants and forge coalitions more systematically.

- **Extending qualified majority voting to EU foreign policy:** All pro-European German parties have committed to this proposal. It is possible within the framework of the Treaties and indeed this would be an important step towards a more agile EU foreign policy. However, all member states would have to agree to this and, as we have [shown here](#), we are still a long way off. So what strategy does the next German government want to pursue in order to make progress here? One possibility would be a gradual approach, initially focusing on individual policy areas such as sanctions policy or civilian crisis management (proposals [here](#)). An alternative would be to use constructive abstention more systematically. Here, however, Germany would also have to be prepared to set a good example. In any case, it is important to convince France to staunchly follow suit. In the past, Paris has also been in favour of extending qualified majority voting to EU foreign policy, but only in combination with EU tax policy. The latter, however, is vehemently opposed by some member states such as Ireland. So, the next federal government in Germany should think about other package solutions.
- **EU seat on the UN Security Council:** This proposal, which was already anchored in the last [Coalition Agreement](#) found its way into the German election campaign programmes once again. However, it is currently unrealistic for three reasons. Firstly, the UN Charter currently rules out full EU membership. Secondly, the proposal hinges on the faltering reform of the Security Council. And thirdly, a European seat would mean France giving up its seat. That will [not happen](#) in the foreseeable future. The next German government should not build castles in the air, but pragmatically consider how European cooperation in the Security Council can be made more efficient. The increased coordination between the European non-permanent members of the Security Council is a good example. In 2017-8, for example, Sweden brought together all preceding, current and future EU members of the Security Council in the E8 Group, which then adopted joint statements on core dossiers such as the Middle East, Ukraine and Syria.
- **European Security Council:** The proposal aims to make EU security policy more political and strategic. It was put on the table by France and Germany in [2016](#), but has remained there ever since. An agreement on the exact [design](#) (e.g. all 27 member states or a smaller group of them, with or without the UK) could not be reached either within the coalition or between Germany and France. A Security Council with rotating members is not possible under the EU treaties, and the British currently show little interest in such formats with the 27 member states. However, a regular meeting of the European Council on security issues would be realistic and useful. The next federal government in Germany could reintroduce the proposal as part of the Strategic Compass for security and defence policy. The fear is that once again

there will be a lack of implementation – to be more precise, a lack of political will and the necessary resources. Setting priorities annually or reviewing implementation annually at the highest level could provide the necessary boost.

4. What balance between flexibility and inclusivity is needed?

In order to be capable of acting despite the unanimity requirement, member states are increasingly choosing more flexible forms of cooperation. This can be done within the framework of the treaties, as in the case of the Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence (PESCO). For the most part, this involves interstate coalitions. The last German government often advocated inclusivity. But the manifestos of the leading parties increasingly speak of a multi-speed Europe or coalitions of the willing. However, this always raises the question of the potential for division.

- **EU foreign policy:** Flexible groupings such as the Normandy format in the talks on the Ukraine conflict and the E-3 (Germany, France and the UK) have become common. But they also repeatedly lead to frustration among smaller EU member states. The next federal government in Germany must consider how to achieve a balance between flexibility and inclusivity. How can other member states and the EU institutions be involved in decision-making? This will be difficult especially if the British are part of the equation because they prefer not to be involved with Brussels after their departure from the EU.
- **EU crisis management:** In recent years, France has repeatedly led European coalitions of the willing, such as the naval mission in the Strait of Hormuz. Germany did not participate beyond political support. Among other things, such coalitions do not correspond to the system of collective security, which the German “Grundgesetz” (“Basic Law”, i.e. the German Constitution) stipulates is a condition for foreign deployments of the German army. One way out would be Article 44 of the EU Treaty, whereby member states can decide unanimously to delegate a crisis management task to a smaller group of member states. They can then decide among themselves on the implementation. Sounds like a good compromise between flexibility and inclusivity. But it also raises difficult questions for the next federal government in Germany: would it really be willing to play a leading role in such a European coalition of the willing? Perhaps even more difficult a question, would it agree to an operation where it is not involved in implementation? Could it cope with this relative loss of control?

Conclusion: Taking European responsibility

The next federal government in Germany can contribute greatly to creating an EU that is more capable of engaging in global politics. This issue will not be the focus of the coalition negotiations. However, the political calendar will soon demand answers to the questions posed above. The adoption of the Strategic Compass for EU security and defence policy is expected to fall within the first 100 days of the new German government. In its Council Presidency, France will take the reins here at the beginning of January. In view of the approaching elections, Macron will need a strong partner in Berlin who will also courageously support the ambitious proposals and convince others. The German contribution becomes

even more important when it comes to implementation. Only then will it become clear whether the German government is ready to assume European responsibility. This means that sometimes national interests are subordinated to European compromises. It also means, here and there, leading coalitions of the willing beyond the lowest common denominator of the 27 member states. This can be accompanied by risks and costs that must then also be rationalised in domestic politics.

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