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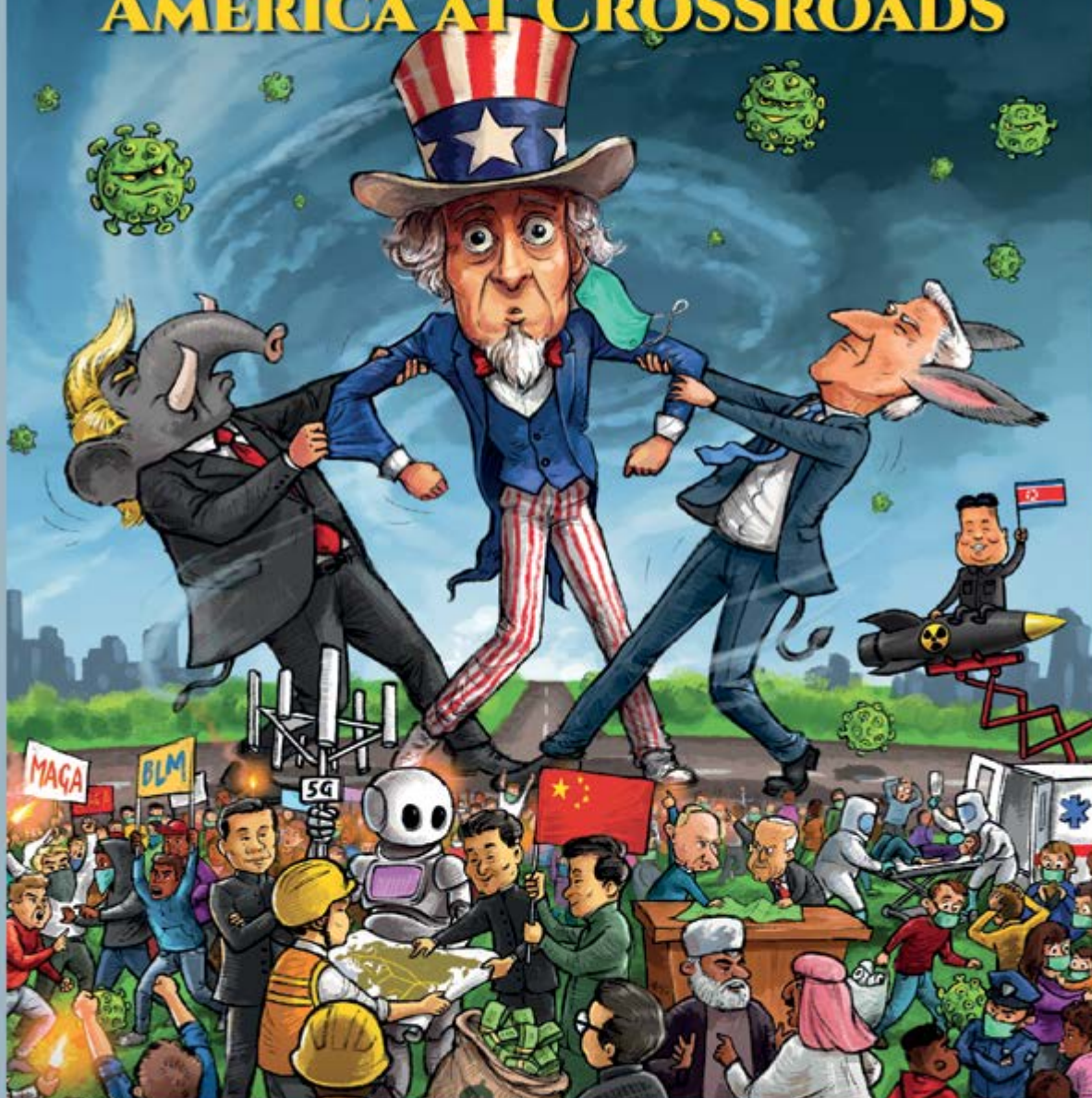
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GERMANY'S EUROPEAN IMPERATIVE

Wolfgang Ischinger

GERMANY is facing a crucial decision. It can either embrace what the country's foreign minister Heiko Maas called in May 2020 a "European Imperative" as the basis for its decisionmaking and actively step up to strengthen the EU. Or it can decide to stick to the status quo and therefore choose not to be a part of those shaping the change we are witnessing in the global order.

Given the "Munich consensus" from 2014, where German senior officials declared that Germany was willing and ready to take on more responsibility internationally, this decision should be an easy one to make. In the same speech, Maas underlined this position when he stated that "we need to recalibrate balance between the international division of labor and the risks of strategic dependencies. And I want Germany and Europe to be in the vanguard here."

This further emphasizes that Germany can only have an impact on global developments through a strong European Union. Therefore, Berlin needs to prevent at all costs the falling apart of the EU, for such an outcome would only pave the way for a return of nationalism. Germany wants the EU to be able to defend its political, economic, and societal model. Whatever Berlin intends to do, it should first ask what its actions would mean for the EU's ability to recover from the crisis triggered by the pandemic and for the EU's capacity to protect its values, interests, and sovereignty on the world stage.

The current time constitutes the turn of an era that is marked by the end of several German foreign policy certainties. The liberal order no longer seems to prevail as the only legitimate governance model. In fact, in the past decade, each year there

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German foreign minister Heiko Maas, originator of the concept of the "European Imperative"

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

have been more countries with a net decline in their Freedom House Index than there were countries with a net gain. This points to what scholars Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg have termed the "third wave of autocratization." These developments are also mirrored in the opinion polls of German society. In our October 2020 special edition of the Munich Security Report we found that 34 percent of Germans perceive the current German security situation as being worse than it was between 1990 and 2001, with only 30 percent indicating that it was better. Moreover, we showed that Germans increasingly believed (75 percent in 2020)

that the number of crises and conflicts will rise in the next years.

Another certainty, which Germany has relied on for decades, was that the United States would remain a "European power." Germany has long taken this security guarantee for granted and has not stepped up its part in the burden-sharing, as expected from the American side. Future developments in this regard depend largely on the outcome of the November 2020 elections in the United States. However, Angela Merkel's Trudering Doctrine from 2017 stands: "The times in which we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over [...]."

Therefore, I can only say that we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands.”

WORTH THE PRICE

The current German presidency of the Council of the European Union provides a welcome opportunity to take steps in the direction of a European Imperative. However, as Cornelius Adebahr has pointed out, in times of a pandemic, “maintaining EU integration as such” has become the primary task. The pandemic risks deepening rifts between the EU’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 Eurosceptic forces across member states. As if this were not enough, emboldened external actors—Russia and China, in particular—are eager to exploit the pandemic in efforts to, as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell has put it, “undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarization” in Europe to advance their own agendas.

The pandemic is intensifying trends that were already present before. Ever since the Brexit referendum, it is clear

that there is a possible threat of EU disintegration. Considering how harmful that would be to Germany, the country has not taken enough action to prevent it. Too often EU budget increases have been criticized without mentioning the benefits of integration. Between 2014 and 2018, the single market increased real incomes in Germany by almost €120 billion, while in the same time period Germany’s net contribution to the EU budget amounted to between €10 and €15 billion per year. Moreover, a 2019 study by the

Kiel Institute for the World Economy showed how grave the consequences of EU disintegration would be for Germany, finding it to be the foremost net loser whose gross domestic product would drop by €173 billion. This is only one way to highlight how valuable the EU is for Germany. It therefore needs to be willing to pay a considerable price to ensure its continued existence.

In this regard, the recent decision by the EU to create a recovery fund proves that the grand coalition in Berlin understood that EU member states were “writing a page in a history book” rather than “a page in an economics manual,”

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real incomes in Germany by almost €120 billion, while in the same time period Germany’s net contribution to the EU budget amounted to between €10 and €15 billion per year. Thus, the economic benefits Germany accrues alone outweigh the costs it incurs many times over. Moreover, a 2019 study by the

as Italy’s prime minister Giuseppe Conte put it in April 2020. It sent a 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 the EU’s paymaster.

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

To strengthen the EU’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 Germans need to end what Sophia Besch and Christian Odendahl have called “small nation” thinking” of the past. At a time when the EU’s ability to “relearn the language of power” is called for on various fronts,

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as Borrell recently put it, Germany must seize the opportunity to amplify the EU’s voice in the world. Germany’s desire to strengthen the EU’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. 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.

WIDER GEOPOLITICAL LENS

The EU 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 the EU.

In this regard, Germany's China policy will constitute one of the principal tests of Berlin's willingness to embrace the European Imperative. While the pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities in the supply chains, concerns over China's more and more aggressive foreign policy and growing military capabilities are rising. These concerns were intensified through the coronavirus crisis following the use of disinformation and propaganda by the Chinese regime.

Germany regularly acknowledges that the most decisive challenges of the future, including climate change, migration, and technological competition, all require Europe-wide 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. The risk is well-known: in 2019, 24.9 million people were internally

displaced as a result of weather-related disasters, and the World Bank estimates that due to climate change more than 140 million people could become internally displaced in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America by 2050. These climate impacts can also undermine peace, particularly in fragile states. Climate Change can also intensify interstate conflicts, as the effects may exacerbate resource scarcity or even create new and contested resources, as we can see in the Arctic. But still, climate and environmental protection topped the list of priorities for the German presidency of the Council of the European Union. 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 nitpicking and concerns about burden-sharing often dominate German debates about EU 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 EU level. And it demands that once these goals are defined, Germany invests the resources needed. Recent survey data suggests that Germans do not only desire a more active role for their country in the EU, they are also willing to provide more

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resources for concrete EU policy ambitions, including in the fields of climate protection and innovation.

LANGUAGE OF POWER AND INFLUENCE

An EU 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 positions by the member states on some issues while at the same time—as was initially the case with Nord Stream 2—trying to restrict EU jurisdiction when we see it as a hindrance.

The EU cannot become what Jean-Claude Juncker called "weltpolitikfähig"—capable of acting at the global level—if every single member state can veto every decision for parochial reasons. Put differently: being guided by the European Imperative cannot be understood as acquiescence to a European Union 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 the European Union.

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 this 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 the EU. 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 the EU’s ability to act. The European Union’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 many in the EU have been quick to criticize America for abandoning its traditional role, the EU approach has been even more impotent and inward-looking than that of the United States. As the Munich Security Conference’s 2020 Report put it, a world of “Westlessness” is also a consequence of the EU’s apparent inability to defend its own core interests. While Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has promised a “geopolitical Commission,” Borrell has repeatedly underlined the necessity for the EU to “relearn the language of power.” European leaders must make sure that these grandiose claims are filled with meaning.

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In any case, it is obvious that the European Union 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 EU’s 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 EU’s world view. Even America has to adapt to a new era of great-power competition in which the United States 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. As Zaki Laïdi has argued, the European Union is still new to the great-power game. For very good reasons, Europeans in general (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, the EU 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 closest partner. What is needed is a “European Germany,” as

Thomas Mann put it—a Germany aware of its limits, but also of its potential.

This would signify an end of the German unawareness of the impact its decisions and actions have on its partners. German leadership based on the European Imperative would acknowledge and anticipate the ripple effects of German behavior for the European Union. And most importantly, it would create a simple but powerful benchmark for all political decisions taken in Berlin: first and foremost, they must be geared toward strengthening the EU. Germany can become Europe’s “enabling power,” if Berlin throws its full weight behind the European Union. ●