

## **The new German foreign policy: Responsibility and interests**

**COMMENTARY**

BY

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Only rarely does one experience such a unanimous and clear commitment to a new direction Germany's foreign policy is taking as at the security conference late January in Munich. In unison, Federal President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen are singing from the same song sheet and stress that Germany must take more responsibility in its foreign policy and thus also in military terms. This is a clear break with the foreign policy of former Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in the past four years who kept preaching a "culture of military restraint".

This new direction comes at a decisive point in time. In 2014, the 3000 soldier-strong mandate of the *Bundeswehr* in Afghanistan is coming to an end; whether and to what degree soldiers are to be stationed at the Hindukush in 2015 and beyond must still be negotiated with the Afghan government. The Germans have always been highly skeptical of *Bundeswehr* deployments abroad. Afghanistan in particular, where the security situation has not really improved much despite the fact that the *Bundeswehr* had been stationed there for 13 years, is often cited as proof of the fact that a cost-intensive military engagement is hardly made for achieving stable peace. At the same time, the statements of German top politicians stand in sharp contrast to a general mood in Germany where people are more concerned about their daily lives, and interest in events outside of one's doorstep only perks up when they create jobs in Germany.

The question remains why Gauck & Co have set such an unpopular course. From a military-economy perspective, one may argue that military resources that will be freed due to the (partial) pullout from Afghanistan must be deployed elsewhere to justify the scope and legitimization of the *Bundeswehr*. German politicians involved in international relations may argue that Germany must not let France determine European foreign policy to avoid being involved by Paris at a later date in military missions such as in Mali and the Central African Republic. Others may argue along the lines of Chancellor Merkel's rather fussy 'strengthening' (*Ertüchtigung*) which legitimizes arms exports and weapons deliveries to friendly third countries.

These different reasons already show that the essence of a new German foreign policy is about facing the dialectics of responsibility and interest. For when German politicians unanimously speak in favor of globally bearing more responsibility, inevitably the question arises what they actually feel responsible for. If one assumes that one feels particularly responsible for what one is particularly interested in, the question of a definition of interest arises; a question which German politicians in particular are

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loath to reply to. Still, this clear reference to responsibility could indeed turn into the decisive foundation for determining German politics. Germany should name its primary responsibility: its international partners (such as NATO, EU), humanitarian emergency assistance, the enforcement of human rights and democracy, the security of Germany, or the growth of the German economy. What counts is that the government takes an unequivocal stand and not hides behind mere lip service and a balancing act between various interests.

It is important, too, that the government learns from its previous interventions. Lessons from the interventions of the past 20 years are quite sobering: if, for instance—and also in the framework of the security conference in Munich—*Bundeswehr* deployments abroad are presented as a political tool, it becomes clear that so far no-one has really looked at these assignments in detail. In post-conflict countries in particular, where there are no clear boundaries between the civil and the military, personified by warlords, militias and private security companies, the *Bundeswehr* is a questionable tool of government intervention. In post-conflict countries, building up the country's domestic security, to establish connections between the executive and the justice system, create trust of the population into the security apparatus, etc. is the crucial task—all tasks for which a policeman is far better trained than a soldier.

When therefore there is talk about external responsibility, the government is well advised to first think about which means suit which goals. The postulate of external responsibility must by no means be considered as a free ticket for legitimizing *Bundeswehr* deployments worldwide or to establish a European army. For the expertise of the military lies in leading conventional wars and not in ending civil wars. Therefore, if external responsibility is taken seriously, a first central step would be to create police units on a federal or European level that are prepared for the necessary measures in a post-conflict situation. Part of that would be the training of policemen and -women, the disarmament of militias or the safe stockpiling of weapons.

A "responsible" external responsibility therefore means a lot more than a mere financial and military commitment to participate more in interventions; it is a lot more uncomfortable. Interests first need to be defined at the same time as sensible means with which results can be achieved during an intervention. Here, a self-critical analysis of lessons learned from deployments in Bosnia Herzegovina, the Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan and South Sudan is necessary before entering into new interventions.

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