

Ghostly leadership and hard power

BY PIALUISA BIANCO

Germany's bloody past – from the Nazi to the Communist era – has taught the country's leadership to feel the *schuldfrage*, the question of guilt at all times.



Since World War II, a “debellicized” (as the Britain-based military analyst Colin Gray described it) Germany has usually projected a relatively tame foreign policy. Not even a cataclysmic turn of events like the fall of Berlin Wall changed this passive profile. The reunification boosted Germany's mercantilist approach on global stage. The view in Bonn and then Berlin was that German power should be exercised “through” Europe.

But these are not usual times. That's because Germany, and the world, are changing. The European Union is no longer enough. Foreign policy challenges are overwhelming and worrisome. The EU is too weak and Germany too large to respond to all these challenges without diminishing Europe or eliciting fears of a resurgent Germany.

At the same time talk of the Germany emerging as the moral leader of the West is wildly overblown. There is something disquieting in this history where questions disappear, and yet the answers survive. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between. Germany needs a more imaginative and assertive approach to the world, and yet it needs an appreciation of the limits of what it can and should do alone.

Former President Joachim Gauck a couple of years ago criticized those who still used “Germany's guilt for its past as a shield for laziness or a desire to disengage from the world. Germany is really too big to only sit on sidelines and comment on world politics.” In the Trump era this issue can no longer be avoided.

The Berlin's strategic shift has many reasons. First, *“L'effet des richesses d'un pays, c'est de mettre de l'ambition dans tous les coeurs”* (The effect of wealth in a country is to put ambition in everyone's heart), Montesquieu once said. Germany is no longer the meek giant of the postwar years. Its leading economy has propelled the country to take an assertive role on the world stage.

A champion of EU and NATO enlargement, Germany is the most populous state in Europe, by far the

continent's most stable and prosperous economy. It enjoys centrality in geography and is a dominant voice in the EU. Precisely because they have occupied the center of Europe as a land power, Germans have always demonstrated a keen awareness of geography and strategy as a survival mechanism. This is something which Germans may yet recover, allowing them to move beyond their current ghostly leadership.

As a trading state, its freedom, wealth, and influence result from the existing liberal international order. However, for seven decades Germany contributed relatively little to directly upholding that order, especially in terms of military force.

Might a reunited, rich and liberal Germany become a balancing power in its own right between the Atlantic Ocean and the Eurasian heartland, permitting a new and daring interpretation of Central European culture to take root, and thus providing the concept of Central Europe with geopolitical ballast? And that begs the question: Is German power to be feared less than its inactivity?

Second, with ongoing changes in the international power structure, with the return of hard power, and with the new security challenges of globalization – international and cyber-terrorism, unstable and failing states – free-riding on the back of American power might no longer be an option. Even before the presidency of Donald Trump there was the perception that the United States could not or would not be around, as it once had been to solve Europe's problems in future.

But the EU has no foreign policy or defense. By standing back Berlin has ceded the initiative to London and Paris, missing opportunities to shape policy, as happened over Libya. Here we now have one of the many European paradoxes: French power – which was a guarantor of Germany's European vocation – is shrinking and the United Kingdom is out of the EU, so Germany is the only one that could step in and fill the leadership vacuum at the top of the EU.

Third, the financial crisis has highlight-



ed the economy's relative strength and its dependence on a well-protected global economy. Germany has accepted that its principal option is to rally Europe, but as the past years of crisis have shown, it has had limited success.

The EU is an economic entity, but economics has turned from being the binding element to being a centrifugal force. Either something new must be introduced into the European experiment, or it might come undone. Berlin believes that holding the EU together requires adding another dimension that it has thus far withheld in its dealing with the bloc: military-political relations. Has Germany left the shadow of its past behind in order to pursue its own way?

The West needs a Germany willing to contribute to global security and world order in ways commensurate with its overall power. And such a self-confident Germany may more easily understand that the world is a complex place, where military, intelligence and surveillance are essential tools of power.

However, Berlin has not made the defense budget a national priority for decades. German defense accounts for just over 1.2% of the GDP today, down from roughly 2% in 1991. In comparison, the budget for the German ministry of labor and welfare is more than four times the size of that of the ministry of defense. It's no surprise that the size of the German military continues to shrink, with fewer than 10,000 combat-ready deployable forces today and less than 15% of the budget allocated for developing military technology and producing new weapons systems.

European and NATO partners continue to express their hope that by pooling and sharing defense efforts and procurement programs, they can overcome national deficits in military capabilities. Progress on this front has been scant. Waiting for allies to call for German engagement is no longer sufficient. No one says it will be easy, but Germany must now step up to the responsibility that comes with its power. The real problem is the German political will to be

a more serious international security actor.

Although Berlin has continually deployed troops abroad since the mid-1990s, it has done so in a manner that is either too little, too late or too risk-averse. It's been nearly 20 years since German troops served as peacekeepers in Bosnia in their first active foreign posting since the World War II. It's been 15 years since Germany joined the 1999 NATO-led Kosovo mission, when a German warplane helped bomb the former Yugoslavia. Afghanistan, where 54 German soldiers have died, has since reminded Germans of the risks of war.

If anything popular opinion against foreign adventures has increased. A recent poll found that more than 60% of the German public oppose military missions abroad.

It is hard to see how long these arguments will run. There is little new in the substance of the debate. What is new is the bipartisan willingness of today's leaders to confront the issues in advance. Now, quite reasonably, they want a more considered discussion. But they are still a long way off from changing policy.

Germany can retain the respect of international opinion as it takes a leadership role by adhering to Angela Merkel's Western values-based approach to foreign policy.

But it is incumbent that the main problem of German foreign policy be addressed: the tensions between Merkel's center-right Christian Democrats and the center-left Social Democrats. There is a stark contrast between the two sides.

The parties' differences over values, interests and obligations have up to now produced mild ambiguity and domestic realism, but in the future – even after the September 2017 elections – they might have divisive consequences that affect Europe's position as a whole.

Despite these differences, the chancellery, the new Social-Democrat president, the foreign minister and the defense minister, have called for a new framework that contravenes the culture of restraint Germany has practiced for so long. Such reconfiguration shows how urgent it is for German leaders to adjust and manage a complex, necessary and tricky foreign policy. It is no easy task, one which requires political unity above all. A fractured German foreign policy toward the East and West, and the fissures that it would create, may soon appear at the worst time.