

Forum

The Myth of German Pacifism

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The end of the Red-Green government and the creation of a new grand coalition of Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) in Germany give us reason to reflect on the major policies that marked the alliance of the SPD and the Greens and offer thoughts on what to expect for the future. In foreign affairs, the leftist coalition will forever be associated with its Iraq policy, in particular the crisis in bilateral relations with the United States that emerged as a result of severe differences over how and whether to disarm and overthrow Saddam Hussein. Many might be inclined to believe that little will change with this new government, given the widespread belief in the United States that Germany bases its foreign policy on markedly different values. By virtue of its unique history, Germany is marked by both an instinctive pacifism and a distrust of unilateralism. This finds strong echoes in the seeming academic consensus regarding Germany's "strategic culture," which claims that German foreign policy since the Second World War has demonstrated remarkable continuity, despite momentous events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, German unification and more recently, the terrorist attacks on the United States.¹ Policy analysts like Robert Kagan go further, claiming that Europe is just Germany writ large.² In this view, Germany is only one of a majority of European countries which, by virtue of their weakness, fixate on multilateral decision-making and prefer to resolve conflicts nonviolently. It is these pacifist instincts that the Red-Green coalition, and Gerhard Schröder in particular, exploited to squeeze out an electoral victory in 2002. The Social Democrats and Greens, it is maintained,

ran opportunistically against the United States, throwing away almost fifty years of strong relations for narrow, short-term gains.

A look at German foreign policy behavior since unification, however, suggests that German pacifism is a myth. There was no cross-party consensus in the 1990s around a principled opposition to the use of force. Even in the early years after the end of the Cold War, the Christian Democrats began very quickly, albeit deliberately and often secretly, to break down legal and psychological barriers to the deployment of German forces abroad. At that time, it was the Social Democrats and Greens, not the entire political class that carried the torch of outright pacifism, and bitterly fought this agenda. Yet, within a decade they themselves were leading Germany into its first use of force since WWII, the Kosovo air war. As a result, both parties faced accusations from political opponents (and even some of their own members) of political opportunism, but it was a genuine change driven by a new realization and resolution of a value conflict in favor of promoting human rights. Only an argument emphasizing a genuine learning process can explain *who* was behind the change in policy, *why* they felt compelled to break with the parties' antimilitarist traditions and *when* decisive change took place.

However, as is generally true of parties of the Left in Europe, this newfound consensus on the use of force in humanitarian operations did not extend to more strategic pursuits like disarming Iraq, particularly when they were framed in such explicitly self-interested, strategic and non-humanitarian terms as was the case in American policy statements before the war. The issue was not the means, but the ends of the invasion. The Social Democrats and Greens seized on it partly for opportunistic reasons, but this does not mean it was disingenuous. Yet, if the 2002 election had resulted in the predicted CDU victory, today's transatlantic crisis might largely have been avoided. If they had been elected, the Christian Democrats would certainly not have formed an axis of opposition with France and Russia, and would have thereby deprived this coalition of resistance to U.S. policy of its only genuinely principled and moralistic member. A CDU government might have even participated in the war effort, exposing the myth of the "Kagan hypothesis" as well.

Only if we abandon this myth of German pacifism can we begin to make sense of post-Cold War German foreign policy, explain its

Iraq policy, and know what to expect in the future. Party differences over the use of force were the norm during the 1990s, and to the extent that a consensus has formed, it is around the idea of a more “normal” Germany. All of this suggests that Germany can now, just fifteen years after unification, be considered a typical European country. Its parties debate the national interest—with the Left supporting more humanitarian causes and the Right favoring strategic interests. Germany’s left-wing parties have overcome their traditions and are no longer instinctively pacifist, making judgments on a case by case basis. Iraq simply failed the test.

The CDU’s Normalization Strategy

Advocates of the importance of pacifism in Germany stress the continuity and antimilitarist nature of its foreign policy. But, almost immediately following unification, Christian Democratic politicians began to stress that a united Germany needed to be capable of acting militarily in operations other than territorial defense and the protection of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Sometimes the phrase “normal” was used. More often, it was the concept of *Handlungsfähigkeit*.³ Literally translated as “capability for action,” it was essentially a euphemism for military sovereignty. The CDU’s political objectives were to increase German influence. Defense Minister Volker Rühe and his aides, for example, complained that Germany’s lack of contribution limited the say it had over important events, such as in the Gulf War. A key adviser complained that despite the billions it had contributed financially, “The Belgians sent a ship and they had more influence than us.”⁴

This is not to say that Germany wanted to regain the possibility of *unilateral* military action—this was explicitly prohibited by the constitution. However, the CDU did set out to gain all possible freedom of maneuver, pursuing a two-pronged strategy to this end. The public face was a reinterpretation of the longstanding consensual interpretation of the constitution that forbade the deployment of German forces out-of-area, other than to meet Germany’s Article V obligations under NATO (the provision that compels alliance members to aid any member that is attacked). The CDU now claimed that any

operation under the auspices of an international organization was legal: mandates from the United Nations (UN), NATO or the European Union (EU) would all qualify as missions under the collective security institutions explicitly permitted in the constitution. This provoked serious opposition from the Left. It is tempting, as some have done, to interpret this as a genuine legal dispute over the actual meaning of the constitution. However, as Karl-Heinz Hornhues, Vice President of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, later recounted, "The question, 'What can we or can we not do?' did not have conclusive legal answers but rather political ones."⁵

The second, more secretive aspect was to steadily increase the degree of participation in humanitarian and other UN peace operations, particularly in Yugoslavia, that would be palatable to the German public. This had the effect of "habituating" ordinary Germans to the deployment of armed forces abroad, as key politicians later testified. The government steadily escalated its degree of involvement, beginning with the deployment of personnel and equipment to monitor the embargo against Serbia on the Adriatic and aircraft to detect violations of the no-fly zone over Bosnia during the early years of the Balkan wars. The former, as it took place in Italian waters, was justified as falling under NATO's defensive perimeter and therefore clearly constitutional. A key aide later said, "We made great efforts to make sure that it was not portrayed as an intervention. That was the rhetorical and political trickery. Of course it was an intervention." The strategy also created legal precedents that would expand the radius of intervention, eventually provoking, they believed, a constitutional case that would be decided in their favor. The same adviser to the defense minister said of the German deployment to Somalia: "We would otherwise never have gone to Somalia because we knew from the beginning that the operation would fail. Rühle wanted it purely from the point of view of creating facts on the ground."⁶ The strategy proved remarkably successful. Moving from mere monitoring to enforcement of the embargo on the Adriatic, as well as the no fly zone, provoked constitutional challenges (even from the CDU's own centrist coalition partner, the Free Democrats (FDP) that did in fact vindicate the government's position.

Although there undoubtedly are committed humanitarians in the Christian Democratic Party, this was primarily a self-interested

strategy. For example, the government refused to send troops to Haiti at the time, as it lay beyond the security periphery of Europe. It justified its differing level of enthusiasm for participating in the Balkans on the basis of the geographical proximity to Germany, the threat to regional stability, and massive refugee inflows.⁷ This narrower definition of the national interest was also evident many years later in the behind-the-scenes sniping of the CDU about contributing to the mission in East Timor. Hornhues said, "There was an intense discussion. We did not want to embarrass ourselves, but under our breath we said, 'Enough of this nonsense.'"⁸ Former Defense Minister Rühle was also opposed, according to his chief-of-staff: "The Fraktion voted for it, even though we were against it. There was no real need for medical support by German soldiers. That could have been done by German medical and civilian organizations. Sometimes we have to say no."⁹

Despite claims of a consensus on Germany's role abroad by outside observers, the Social Democrats and Greens contested every step in this strategy of habituation, what they called the "militarization" of German foreign policy through "salami tactics." There was, indeed, pacifism in Germany but it was mostly on the Left. The SPD challenged the constitutionality of the government's actions, but its opposition continued after the cases were settled in July 1994, showing that the underlying motives were deeply political. Social Democrats could contemplate the deployment of German forces in UN operations, but only for peacekeeping and even then only with a litany of conditions. The Greens opposed even this. This put both parties out of line with their ideological counterparts in other European countries such as France and Britain, which were pleading for more forceful humanitarian intervention, particularly in Bosnia.

These different attitudes reflected German history. While French Socialists and British Labour could envision the use of force for purposes that resonated with their internationalist and humanitarian values, the German Left simply could not.¹⁰ The constant refrain was that history had shown them that war only causes more destruction and was not a morally appropriate or efficacious means of resolving conflict. There could be no distinction between war for self-interested or selfless aims. Katrin Fuchs, a prominent SPD politician, categorically said, "Military interventions are not humanitarian

actions.”¹¹ Heidemarie Wieczorkek-Zeul, who would later become a cabinet minister, dismissed “semantics,” claiming that “peace enforcement means fighting wars.”¹² Using force in Bosnia would only exacerbate the situation, and most leftist politicians opposed any escalation of a peacekeeping operation in which German soldiers were not even on the ground.

Learning by Force: The Left's Normalization

Cracks in the leftist consensus soon developed, as an increasing number of civil wars proved incapable of resolution through diplomacy and peacekeeping, with disastrous humanitarian consequences, most notably in Rwanda and Bosnia. Many members of the Green and Social Democratic parties began to question the degree to which one half of their old mantra, “Never Again War,” was compatible with the other, “Never Again Auschwitz.” As Walter Kolbow, defense spokesperson for the SPD at the time, later recalled, “The events in Bosnia changed the quality of opposing further military involvement. It became increasingly difficult to stand by and watch murders take place. We came increasingly to the realization that if we do not intervene, we bear the guilt for failing to protect people.”¹³

Even then, the SPD was accused of electoral opportunism. The German public was evolving on the use of force, undoubtedly partially due to the CDU’s efforts. The SPD, the argument went, was simply chasing them. The 1994 chancellor candidate and head of the party, Rudolf Scharping, attempted a revision of the party platform to allow for German participation in operations beyond simple peacekeeping. This likely was part of a broader strategy of moving to the center in the 1994 federal elections, supported by the moderate wing of the party and the party leadership. It was the Greens who were thought to be staying true to their principles, refusing to reconsider their outright opposition to even German peacekeepers.

In fact, the situation was reversed. The SPD was going through a genuine learning process in which it exchanged its complete pacifism for a more nuanced approach that made exceptions in the case of human rights violations. The centrists in the party supported this

strategy not to win an election, but because by virtue of being moderates, they had an easier time admitting the value conflict. They argued that they were the true representatives of leftist values and that “history” could no longer provide an excuse. Norbert Gansel, a defense expert and longtime advocate of disarmament, predicted:

Time will prove that [our position] is no departure from the common path of social democracy ... Like pacifism, this conviction also belongs to humanistic internationalism, to the tradition of the German Left, to the legacy of liberal socialism ... After blockades, threats, shelling, murder and hostage-taking, our duty to help and to militarily protect the peacekeepers now weighs more heavily than any history that forbids us from forcing others to their knees.¹⁴

When in May 1995 the SPD opposed the CDU government’s proposal that German Tornado aircraft help provide air defenses for the new rapid reaction force in Bosnia, Karsten Voigt, foreign policy spokesperson of the SPD, organized a revolt of almost a fifth of the members of his party. This included moderates as well as almost all the foreign and defense policy experts, who, by virtue of their in-depth knowledge, were able to see the finer nuances between a humanitarian operation and a self-interested, strategic military mission that so many on the left wing would not accept.

SPD policy responded not to the electoral calendar, but to facts on the ground in Bosnia. Scharping was forced to drop his effort to moderate the party platform. Only after the massacre in Srebrenica in July 1995, which provided the most striking example to date of the tension between protecting human rights and nonviolence, was the party able to make this change. In the first vote on the deployment of a NATO peace enforcement mission after the signing of the Dayton Accords in November 1995, the SPD overwhelmingly supported the use of Tornado aircraft. Srebrenica broke the Green party in half, leading to the now famous exchange of public letters between Joschka Fischer and the left wing of the party in which he argued that a leftist party must support armed action in such circumstances to stay true to its principles.¹⁵ In parliament, half of the Green deputies defied their party platform and voted for German participation in the Implementation Force (IFOR).

To the extent there was opportunism, it was on the part of the Greens. Internally they had long been going through their own

agonizing reappraisal of policy. Although the left wing of the party protested publicly against Fischer's stance, they were expressing doubts behind the scenes. In private discussion documents, the party admitted having no answers as to how to stop the Serbs or protect the civilian population. Yet, the party abstained over the renewal of the IFOR mandate and did not make major changes to its platform, continuing to forbid even peacekeeping. Some later admitted that this was partially electorally driven, as it helped distinguish the Greens from the SPD. It belied the actual change occurring in the minds of the even the left wing members of the Greens. Absolute pacifism was fading even amongst its most vehement adherents. One of them, Winfried Nachtwei, said:

Of course Rühle had a strategy of taking small steps and getting the public accustomed to military intervention. The efforts to find non-military solutions were also insufficient. However, this does not change the fact that there was no alternative to using military force ... We continued a critique for domestic political reasons that was not right in view of what was necessary for the Balkans.¹⁶

This process culminated in the endorsement by both left-wing parties of German participation in the NATO air war against Yugoslavia to disrupt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo just after the 1998 federal elections put them in power. Because the Greens had obscured their true evolution, they were accused by opponents of opportunism. Hornhues would later say, "For years the thought of being in power had buzzed around Fischer's head. How does a Green politician gain power? He has to formulate positions that are acceptable to a coalition partner."¹⁷ In fact, the debate was surprisingly uncontroversial given the distance both parties had traveled away from pacifism. The responsibility of governing now prevented holdouts from denying the value conflict that they had been able to do while in opposition, knowing full well that the CDU-led government would still send peacekeepers. Members of the new coalition stressed the unavoidable responsibility they now bore for preventing actual violations of human rights. As the war dragged on, the coalition was hard to hold together because the spiraling nature of the conflict confirmed typical fears common within the Left about the inefficacy and inherently escalatory nature of the use of force. Nevertheless, the moral question of force had been resolved. Futility was the issue. At a special party conference, the Green party

rejected a resolution that endorsed absolute pacifism as the natural lesson to draw from German history and denied the value conflict.

Kosovo versus Iraq

Humanitarianism, not multilateralism or NATO solidarity, was the key to ensuring the solid support of the SPD and Greens for Kosovo. Both parties had to be assured that there were not self-interested, ulterior motives driving NATO policy. "The NATO military action is not about territorial conquest or oil," Nachtwei observed.¹⁸ This was not an easy admission for a Green Party that had long demonized the alliance. "That the primary goal of the [NATO] threat is unequivocally humanitarian ... cannot simply be wished away," wrote Nachtwei and others.¹⁹ Solidarity with Germany's western allies was important, but mostly because of the goal of the operation. The Federal Republic, they argued, could not longer have others do the heavy lifting on issues that the SPD and Greens also cared about. The Left had even evolved far enough on the issue of using force that they could largely support a war of self-defense in support of an ally, the American invasion of Afghanistan. Germany even sent some combat forces. This went too far for a number of far Left members from both parties who previously had backed the Kosovo operation. But, the chancellor's resort to a vote of no confidence should not be taken as a sign of ingrained German pacifism. Schröder easily could have relied on an overwhelming majority with the support of both the CDU and the centrist FDP. He simply chose to instill party discipline rather than build a cross-party consensus. Green resistance was more an annoyance than a fatal threat to the coalition.

The Iraq war, however, simply went too far for the German Left. It was arguably an offensive war, which led most to view the U.S. as driven by greed and aggression, rather than engaged in preemptive self-defense as it claimed. The Americans contributed to this perception by focusing on weapons of mass destruction and their threat to the United States as the main rationale. To the extent that the humanitarian case was added, it was, at least originally, well down the list. Given several earlier unilateral moves on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the International Criminal Court and global climate

change, professions of selfless American motives came across as hollow. Much has been made of Bush's speech to the United Nations on 12 September 2002, but even there, the message was one of polite defiance. Bush invited others to endorse the war, but stated that the United States would act regardless. It was not a sign of genuine multilateralist commitment. The UN route only slowed down the process—there would be no constraints on U.S. military force.

The German government likely regarded this as faux multilateralism and announced that it would not fight in such a war, even if endorsed by the UN Security Council. This was considered a shocking unilateral move by those who think in terms of instinctive German multilateralism. But, the German Left had been pragmatic about the Security Council since the Kosovo War, if not before. Leading leftist politicians recognized that a club of five powers which often made decisions on the basis of their narrow self-interest was not the imprimatur of legitimacy for the international community. If leftists needed convincing, they only needed to look at the Russians' behavior during the Kosovo crisis. Hence, the two parties made frequent calls for Security Council reform even before they became converted to the idea of a permanent seat for Germany. The key issue was the goal of the mission, and whether it was morally legitimate. Kosovo passed this test, despite the lack of a resolution, while Iraq did not—regardless of what the UN might do.

As the war was framed outside of the U.S. as self-serving, the response of the German Left was preordained. Undoubtedly, Schröder picked up on the surge in the polls when he criticized U.S. "adventurism" in Iraq, and he might have been feeling pressure from Fischer's Greens, who seized on the issue first.²⁰ But the SPD's position would have been the same regardless. In interviews conducted in 2000-2001, I explicitly asked numerous members of both parties about what were then only hypothetical scenarios, so as to test the limits of the Left's new position on the use of force. All ruled out another war in Iraq. In 2002, the Greens and Social Democrats did what parties always do—emphasize the issues that fit with their ideological profile, resonate with their values, and serve them electorally. It might have been opportunistic, but it was sincere.

This sincerity played a crucial role as it lent moral weight to the new Putin-Chirac-Schröder axis of opposition to the war. The U.S.

and the world expected French opposition, particularly from a Gaullist president. Jacques Chirac's lack of conviction was demonstrated by the careful line he tried to walk between insisting on inspections, yet not ruling out participation in a war. A Gaullist could not allow the U.S. to judge for itself the existence of weapons of mass destruction—that would represent unbridled hegemony. But it did not want to be on the sidelines if such a determination was made. Russia made little effort to justify its position with the internationalist and multilateralist rhetoric that France used. As a result, a joint Chirac-Putin press conference might have generated television coverage, but not a genuine belief that Europe was opposed on antimilitarist and multilateralist grounds—only Germany's involvement provided that. Franco-German solidarity did more to create the appearance of a united Europe opposed to U.S. policy than any other factor.

All of this might seem to suggest that Germany might not be particularly unique, but that Europe as a whole is more multilateralist and less willing to use force. This is evident in the balance of European public opinion. But it is no monolithic bloc. The most important determinant in Western Europe for explaining a country's Iraq policy seems to have been party and partisan positions. The German Left was not alone. Besides France, the major opponents of the war within NATO—Canada and Belgium—were led by leftist coalitions. The Netherlands, Japan, Australia, Spain, Denmark, and Italy, all with Right-leaning governments, offered moral and even material support to the war and the operation in its aftermath. The quick departure of Spain after the victory of the Socialists showed how precarious support was in these countries. Australia would have followed them had the Labour Party won the most recent election there. On the Left, only Blair's Labour party was a major exception. However, his policy provoked the largest backbench rebellion in British parliamentary history. On the Right, the only exception seems to be France with its unique Gaullist ideology.

Germany easily could have been part of this sympathetic coalition had the Red-Green coalition not narrowly defeated the Right in 2002. Foreign policy observers continually point to the single statement by Edmund Stoiber, the CDU/CSU chancellor candidate, that he would not support a unilateral U.S. invasion of Iraq. This is said to indicate the pervasive antimilitarist and multilateralist political cul-

ture in Germany. Yet, one does not have to be a firm believer in the United Nations or a pacifist to oppose American unilateralism, as it is essentially a signal by the Americans that input is not welcome. Being ignored is bad for Germany's strategic interest as well as its moral sense. Considering that some studies estimate only 4 percent support for such a scenario, it is amazing that Stoiber held out as long as he did to make such a pronouncement.²¹ There were still large party differences that would have been represented in policy. Over 70 percent of CDU voters would have supported a UN-backed invasion, over twenty points more than SPD supporters. After the election, the CDU introduced a resolution in parliament that called for Germany to provide numerous kinds of military support to the U.S. in case of war, regardless of whether it was backed by the UN. Had the election gone the direction that all expected before the Iraq issue entered the campaign, it is likely that Germany would have been involved tangibly in some way. This would have blown apart the idea of a unified European opposition, leaving France to protest alone with Russia. The current transatlantic crisis frequently lamented today might not even exist had the CDU polled just a few points higher. The war would have been contentious, but it would not have implicated the future of transatlantic relations and NATO.

This possibility should lead us to be skeptical about Germany's innate pacifism. For many, Iraq seemed to indicate that Germany had changed little since the end of the Cold War. In fact, it proved the opposite. Parties argued about the national interest in a predictable and non-parochial way. The arguments against intervention raised by the Red-Green coalition before the war were standard antimilitarist fare seen in all European countries, but they were not pacifist. Intervention might inflame the region, setting a dangerous precedent for unilateral military action. Remarkably, any reference to Germany's history was conspicuously absent—the German Left was no different than any other of its ideological counterparts abroad. In fact, the Federal Republic arguably might now be a completely normal European power. All of this is good news for transatlanticists who have lamented the growing ideological gap between Europe and the U.S. These are more transient than we often imagine. The recent election of a CDU-SPD coalition will undoubtedly bring about a thaw in relations. The election of a Democratic President in

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2008 would return relations to the same state as they were in the 1990s. Renewed consensus is often just an election away. Transatlantic relations have not fundamentally changed, but Germany has.

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Notes

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