



Can Chancellor Scholz Save the West?

The New German Government
and Global Geopolitics

MAXIMILIAN TERHALLE



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The Author

Maximilian Terhalle is a Visiting Professor in Practice at LSE IDEAS. In 2021, he completed an IISS Adelphi Paper on [“The Responsibility to Defend: Re-thinking Germany’s Strategic Culture”](#) (with B. Giegerich). Following the German federal election in September 2021, Maximilian will adopt the Adelphi Paper as his starting point to further elaborate on the geopolitical state of European security in the transatlantic context, within which China’s strategic power has figured as the most impactful, yet least understood, external factor. During his two-year stint at LSE IDEAS, he will continue to consult with senior MPs in Berlin. In 2019-20, Maximilian served as a Senior Adviser for Strategic Affairs to the UK’s Ministry of Defence. His spell at the MoD presents the most recent part of a series of almost 12 years he has spent abroad doing policy work, conducting research and teaching in the US, China, the UK and Egypt since 2000.

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With Germany's new traffic-light coalition government (*die Ampel*) sworn in on 8 December 2021, euphoria about new prospects for environmental policy and overall excitement for the beginning of a new political era have run high in the country. In contrast, during the election campaign and in the two-month run-up to the eventual formation of the new administration, comprising the Greens, the Liberals (FDP) and the Social Democrats (SPD) under the leadership of Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD), its members expressed less concern about geopolitics. Only to be surprised by, and absorbed into, Russia's latest military threat levelled against Ukraine, and the construct of the post-Cold War security order as such, since December 2020.

Equally so, the coalition treaty's (*Koalitionsvertrag*) seventh chapter, released on 24 November 2021, portrays a familiar narrative on Russia (“deterrence and dialogue”); and, while the wording pertaining to China is distinct from that which the previous government employed, the treaty relies on the EU's triad of “partnership, competition and systemic rivalry”. Missing from the preamble and the main body of the document is a strategic vision for Germany's role in the world.¹

Driven by an understandable determination to form a new government, those discrepancies on matters of national security that did briefly surface amongst the three partners in October and November were quickly withdrawn from public debates and subsequently watered down in the final agreement on the leadership's four-year plan of action. Nevertheless, when Rolf Mützenich, an old political hand and now leader of the 206-member-strong SPD group in the Bundestag, stressed

his objection to the stationing of US tactical nuclear weapons in Germany in October 2021, it quickly became obvious that his main point of objection was Germany's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing agreement. In fact, Mützenich appears to share this key goal with the new foreign secretary, Annalena Baerbock (Greens), who argued against tactical nuclear weapons during the election campaign.

With the coalition treaty published, it is interesting to see how it neatly detaches NATO's strategic deterrence from the undesired debate about tactical deterrence (nuclear sharing). Briefly addressed later in the document, the treaty cautiously suggests that the debate about the replacement aircraft for the Tornado, and in particular the certification process for carrying tactical nukes, will be conducted in an "objective and precise" manner. Still, the coalition and its representatives have endorsed 'nuclear sharing' since taking office.² Furthermore, looking eastwards, Lars Klingbeil, now one of the SPD's two new party chairs, invited Gerhard Schröder, former German chancellor and a longstanding and friendly lobbyist for Vladimir Putin's gas business with Germany, to address his constituency during the 2021 election campaign (as he had already done in 2017).³ Regarding Moscow, the coalition treaty does not indicate a change in future policy; in fact, it points to "close ... relations" with Russia, which the new government regards a "significant international actor", "now and in the future".⁴ Finally, the SPD's left wing under Mützenich, now much enlarged, insisted that the frigate *Bavaria*, trawling through the South China Sea in support of open sea lanes (and of like-minded states

engaged or located in the region), had to make a port call in Shanghai in order to appease China's ruling Communist Party. While the frigate never arrived at the bay, as Beijing denied it permission to anchor, allies and partners in the region alike were left with no explanation of the intention behind this move.⁵

Placed at the end of the seventh chapter, the current treaty document mentions Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy and demands from China the peaceful resolution of ongoing disputes in the region, though does not include any military elements in its strategy. (This was the main criticism levelled against the strategy when it was first presented in September 2020, and something which the EU's Strategic Compass, in contrast, will reflect).⁶ It seems that the views of some of the *Ampel's* more realist proponents, including liberal MPs such as Alexander Lambsdorff, green MPs such as Omid Nouripour, or even SPD MPs such as Nils Schmid, have been rendered less prominent by the coalition treaty.

Those less critical of the coalition's strategic outlook may suggest that the proof lies in the pudding of governmental action, regardless. They may be right. Though, a first powerful indicator of a more pessimistic view could be spotted in Manama on 21 November 2021, only three days before the treaty was announced. Schmid, the SPD's foreign policy spokesperson mentioned above, who was intimately involved in the coalition negotiations, coolly remarked at a conference in Bahrain: to those in a more upbeat mood, "do not expect too much change from the German government in terms of its foreign policy."⁷

In other words, there is reason to believe that Berlin may pursue a high degree of continuity, not least because the new Chancellor has steadily strived to paint a public image that puts precisely this much-heralded notion at centre-stage, conveying the message that he aims to be Angela Merkel's heir. In fact, at the height of the election campaign, he imitated her body language by placing his hands in the shape of the famous "Merkel Rhombus" (*Merkel-Raute*) in front of his body. Curiously, Scholz's notion of continuity betrays the change-based narrative used by the coalition partners during and after their election campaign.

However, such continuity may neither be anchored by a strategic understanding of what the world looks like today nor answer to much international demand for proactive German leadership. Rather, Scholz's continuity will likely be characterised by an adapted version of Merkel's security-related muddling-through approach (*auf-Sicht-Fahren*), especially vis-à-vis Russia and China. Frankly, Merkel only showed limited interest in several crucial security proposals made by some of Germany's closest allies, such as Emmanuel Macron's ideas for Europe's future deterrence strategy in his speech at the Ecole de Guerre in February 2020 and the recommendations provided by NATO's Reflection Group in November of the same year. For his part, Scholz regularly sat next to Merkel at the cabinet desk when the politics of each proposal were considered. Moreover, when Scholz addressed Nord Stream 2 at his first EU summit as Germany's new Chancellor on 16 December 2021, he felt comfortable adopting Merkel's original description of the pipeline as a "private enterprise" between Russian and German companies.⁸ Many European states felt as if the 'geopolitical' criticisms they had made over many years were now muted. While adaptations to this approach are not inconceivable, it may be safe to say that Scholz's socialisation in recent years has indeed laid the foundation for more 'continuity.' Whether such continuity, upholding Merkel's conspicuously flawed perception of Putin's intentions really, will provide useful guidance, and improve Germany's standing in NATO, is currently being determined by the Ukrainian crisis.

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DOMESTIC OBSTACLES

Shortly before leaving office at the end of 2021, Heiko Maas, Baerbock's predecessor as foreign secretary, somewhat self-critically concluded that Germany's actions needed to be more “than the extension of German domestic politics.”⁹ Sensing continuity, Maas knew why he brought the issue up as he had sat next to Scholz at the cabinet desk for four years.

In fact, Maas's remarks pertained to an argument that is fundamental to understanding large parts of the official German mindset, and continuously put forth especially by senior policymakers of the SPD. It suggests: “nobody (read: the US) can tell us when to act, unless we are prepared to”. Certainly, no government wants to publicly come across, in any shape or form, as the proverbial poodle on a major power's lap. However, this is not, at its core, what this unspoken working assumption is about. Rather, in the context of the ongoing, but not necessarily endlessly peaceful, great-power competition, the failure of such thinking rests on the belief that Germany's independence exempts it from—and allows it to freely navigate the dynamics of—the (great-) power-political context. In fact, the old adage that Germany is too big for Europe but too small for the world, still in use in Berlin today, has been outdated for some time; rather, Germany's leaders have employed its sheer economic weight and, importantly, the political veto-power that comes with it, such that it can seemingly continue its often-inward-looking course.

This powerful domestic snap-back mechanism has overlooked the critical fact that China and Russia won't put their strategies on hold until Berlin is 'ready', nor have they done so in the past. In fact, these powers relentlessly work in pursuit of their contrary interests and impose their will whenever there is an opportunity to do so, regardless of German objections. Thereby they merely, if unforgivingly, mirror the fiercely competitive nature of today's strategic affairs. Regarding the United States, it is equally mistaken to assume that the country will alter its strategic outlook based on Germany's readiness to engage.

The significant difference to Moscow and Beijing remains, though, that Washington still provides the ultimate security guarantee for Europe, including Germany. Being politically alert to when the preconditions of this guarantee are at stake is therefore a task of the highest importance. As a result, absorbing the message contained in the EU's so-called Strategic Compass, to be revealed in March 2022 (albeit partly leaked in November 2021), that, in security terms, "world politics is more than anything determined by others"¹⁰ will be the first step Berlin needs to take before considering ways to shape today's strategic context.

With the West's dynamism and leadership at stake, the new government should not abstain from the power politics currently reshaping the global order by pursuing its notion of continuity. In fact, Berlin has a responsibility to defend precisely that order which has allowed it to recover and grow wealthy since the end of WWII.¹¹ The need to address this strategic context is all the more pressing when even the experienced counsel of distinguished statesmen, such as the former Polish foreign secretary Radoslaw Sikorski, seems to lose its previously stinging accuracy. While Poland was much neglected by the Merkel administration in years past, Sikorski for one has been relentless in his warnings against Europe's, and indeed Germany's, sleep-walking concerning hard security. His latest admonition from August 2021 reads: "My greatest fear is that it will take another terrible disaster before European leaders get serious about defence".¹²

Alas, the main reason why Sikorski's statement is surprisingly outdated today is its unspoken assumption that "another terrible disaster" might be similar to the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and thus limited in its scope. In other words, Europe's NATO members will remain unaffected by another act of Russian aggression. However, while Sikorski's judgement reflects a view that is also widely held in Berlin and may be true for the current crisis over Ukraine, there is an important case to be made that his understanding of Russian intentions will not hold, either for Germany or the rest of NATO.

Here is why—and how—the new Scholz government should prioritise its strategic priorities.

EUROPE'S SECURITY DURING A US-CHINA WAR

Berlin's coalition partners have taken notice of China's stealthy approach to Taiwan and the South and East China seas. Equally, they have perceived the significance of Xi Jinping's "historical resolution" proposed to the Politburo last November, only the third of its kind, on Chinese history according to which, after Mao re-established China and Deng made it wealthy, it is Xi who is making it powerful on the international plane, economically and militarily. Nevertheless, while the coalition treaty document envisages a "comprehensive China strategy" that is "closely coordinated with the US"¹³ and while individual Greens such as Reinhard Bütikofer

have emerged as vocal China critics, the rare German debates that have been held about today's great-power rivalry still suffer from two critical particularities: first, the neat compartmentalisation of strategic affairs into their respective Russian and Chinese theatres; and second, the lack of interest in the consequences of a not-unlikely US–China war for Europe's security.

Given that such a twofold challenge to the liberal order did not exist for NATO during the Cold War, it may come as no surprise that the implications thereof have not yet been fully understood. The alliance's China-Russia nexus is a perfect example of what Henry Kissinger called the 'linkages' of international affairs, where the power dynamics in one major regional theatre, more likely than not, affect the power dynamics in another major regional theatre. It is the demanding task of the strategist to sense the power-related implications that might arise from them and, in turn, the opportunities to act upon them.¹⁴

In this vein, perplexed by Donald Trump's election in 2016, few German observers and policymakers looked closely when, during his congressional hearing in January 2017, James Mattis was asked whether the United States could fight two major wars. His cryptic answer was: "No, Sir!"¹⁵ The strategic conclusion for US allies to draw from Mattis's reply is as simple as it is mind-boggling: Practically, this means that a US absorbed by a major war in East Asia will have neither the material capabilities nor the psychological credibility to deter Russia from NATO's eastern flank. The security guarantee, more than 70 years old

and axiomatically assumed by most Germans, would lack America's existential backing.¹⁶

While Emmanuel Macron has, in the meantime, come up with his notion of strategic autonomy, the President's contested ideas have never since spurred debates in Berlin on the future of Europe's transatlantic security, which could have addressed Mattis's crystal-clear message. Moreover, the UK's (modest) nuclear build-up was put under the rubric 'miscellaneous' of post-Brexit Britain. Left without governmental input, some German policymakers might fill the gap by retreating to Kissinger's judgement of 2018 to the effect that Putin is "not a Hitler."¹⁷ This is only true, though, as long as the key enabler behind this proposition, the United States, is credibly capable of deterring Russia. In other words, Putin won't attack as long as America's grip on Europe's security is firm. Once this is no longer the case, as when the US may be involved in a war with Beijing, he won't hesitate to put into action the line that persistently stands out from his major speeches of the last 15 years: that the end of the Cold War is not the "final verdict of history." This is why there is good reason to believe that Putin will strike once America is absorbed in a war with China. His geopolitical record may only convince those of the opposite in Berlin who dismiss his revisionist power politics as justified reaction to the supposedly Western-inflicted disregard for Moscow in the last 15 years. The SPD, having often generously downplayed Putin's aggressive nature in years past, harbours several outspoken adherents of this view in the first row of its leadership.

TRUMP AS SWORD OF DAMOCLES

Another, equally daunting prospect may exacerbate the reverberations a Sino–American war might have for Europe’s security. While Donald Trump’s business instincts may lead him to leave the question of his renewed candidacy deliberately open, the likeliness of the 45th President running again is a realistic one. In fact, Europeans have looked rather worriedly at how the majority of the GOP has dismissed their fellow party-members who dissented from Trump. For instance, Liz Cheney, who together with nine others objected to the storming of the Capitol, instigated as it was by the former President, was recently ousted by her constituency and prevented from running as a Republican in Wyoming. And even if Trump were not to become the Republican nominee but a competitor of the likes of Mike Pompeo or Ron DeSantis eventually emerged successful from the primaries, the Trumpian mindset vis-à-vis Europe, and Germany in particular, would not lose its sharp edge. Alas, with 80 per cent of Republican voters wanting Trump to run again according to a recent poll by Quinnipiac University, and with the same number believing that Joe Biden stole Trump the victory in the election, no contemporary John McCain-like candidate is likely to arise on the Republican horizon.¹⁸



“Again”—?

*Detail from a photo by
Micael Candelori,
[Creative Commons](#)*

With the commencement of Biden's presidency in January 2021, Germans seem to have downplayed the seriousness of the American political currents that drove Trump to go as far as uttering his willingness to dispense with NATO in 2019. Even if that did not happen, the threat implied in his message, as when he felled Mattis the same year, was conspicuously clear. Or so it should have been to Europeans, and Germans in particular.

What transpired instead in Berlin was the rapid evaporation of those not-unrealistic fears about NATO's future. It seemed that a frightening, once-in-a-lifetime nightmare could now be deleted overnight from one's memory with a quick sigh of relief. In fact, a large majority, especially but not exclusively in the German capital, has come to think Trump never happened, so let's forget about him.

This is why the probability of a Trump returning to the White House and the likely detrimental implications for Europe's security have yet been little understood by Berlin's traffic-light government. To be clear, mentioning the prospect of a Trump 2 here is not meant to be defeatist and thereby help to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy; rather, it is designed to serve as a healthy reminder of the stakes that Europe has in the next US presidential election. While the decision ultimately lies in the hands of the American people, Germany under Scholz may offer the incumbent President a great deal of geopolitical support to strengthen his hand for 2024. Supporting Biden in this way defines their vital interest, as China and the

US could also go to war under a re-elected President Biden (or then perhaps Kamala Harris), with Putin's eye for opportunities unchanged, regardless.

A STINGING TRANSATLANTIC BARGAIN

Against this backdrop, conceiving and negotiating a new transatlantic bargain that mutually reinforces the alliance may now offer the decisive strategic move forward. (The coalition treaty rather cryptically mentions the need for "fair burden-sharing".)¹⁹ Such a bargain will require levels of political willpower and leadership on both sides of the Atlantic unprecedented since the end of the Cold War; efforts certainly made much more difficult by the polarisation found within Western societies today, if only suppressed but discernible in authoritarian states, too. Practically, stemming and turning the tide of a misleading perception in China and Russia that "the East is rising and the West is declining"²⁰ is the core strategic task of the present. In turn, such a systematic boost, if well communicated and executed, would critically help strengthen domestic resilience and self-confidence among Europe's and America's populations. In fact, the Biden presidency presents the golden opportunity for the alliance's members to rebalance and reinvigorate the transatlantic relationship. After all, the strategic benefit of sustaining the West's global power, should be worth the transatlantic candle. In contrast, inaction and neglect may see the West's power fleeting sooner rather later.

To be clear, this is not designed to offer a return to the heyday of the transatlantic relationship. Rather, this proposal is predicated on hard facts. One, Europe cannot defend itself militarily against Russia; two, China will outgrow America economically, even based on ultraconservative growth rate numbers (2-3 per cent).²¹ Jointly, however, Europe and America can retain the strategic edge over their fiercest and envious rivals, precisely because transatlantic power combined politically beats the latter's economic, military and innovative-technological capacities as well as cultural appeal.

If so, the core transatlantic task will be to make NATO as indispensable as possible on both sides of the Atlantic so that, from the standpoint of either's national interest, its break-up becomes almost unjustifiable in the future. But how?

America and its European partners need to devise a new rationale for NATO. This strategic rationale must combine the individual strengths of all member states so that the global credibility of the alliance as a whole is not geographically compartmentalised (into the European and the East Asian theatres). While that is a herculean task if approached through a bureaucratic lens, with its built-in tendency to separate complex issues into unrelated individual strings, it is absolutely vital, not least because the real-world linkages between those theatres of action spur a very different logic of power for which NATO must be prepared if it wants to decisively shape those dynamics in its self-interest.

This rationale needs to be functional in the sense of a clear attribution of strategic tasks. Rethinking NATO's burden-sharing thus means that Europe, spearheaded by Germany, would take over the provision of conventional deterrence for the continent against Russia; America, on the other hand, would concentrate on containing China, though this can only be the start. What will give the alliance its decisive edge, though, is something else. Understanding the China challenge purely as a military one misses the point. Precisely because Beijing's economic power fires the engine of its massive military growth, America

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needs Europe. As the US will realistically not be able to keep up with China’s economic growth, Washington’s European allies can powerfully compensate for this deficit and help contain China’s growth economically. While the coalition government’s “comprehensive China strategy” still needs to be devised, Berlin in particular could help slow down China’s economic growth by employing measures of targeted de-coupling, including the threat thereof. Referring to the geoeconomic weight Germany can muster for the sake of the transatlantic alliance, Thomas Friedman exaggerated only slightly when he suggested in August 2020: “The looming Cold War with China ... will be won in Berlin.”²² Moreover, Germany’s finessing of key European states into this policy of economically weakening China (before a conflict) could serve, if pointedly communicated vis-à-vis China, as another powerful means of containment. The United States would, in turn, underline its credible commitment to the extended nuclear deterrence for Europe, precisely because Europeans are not capable of providing such in view of Russia’s overbearing nuclear posture and offensive military doctrine. In essence, by convincingly reassuring each other of the mutually reinforcing measures either side can bring to the transatlantic table, the reciprocal bonds may be powerfully tightened.

This rationale may be the best way to help contain China, prevent a US–China war and, following the above logic, a war of Russia against Europe. In any event, the alliance will only prove its ultimate value for survival at the moment when containment fails. In other words, the rationale needs to be extended because, as Yan Xuetong, an influential advisor to China’s Politburo, recently asked, “[what] if the means of peace does not lead to the goal of rise?”²³ The question NATO must raise therefore is, how well are we prepared for Beijing’s likely stealthy answer to the frustration of its ambitions? In such a momentous event, America would most likely, and understandably, throw its entire military weight against China. Not the least, the US would have to cope with Beijing’s exponentially growing nuclear stockpile, which presents, according to a recent statement by General Mark Milley, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, “one of the largest shifts in geostrategic power”.²⁴

In turn, this would guide German strategic policymakers back to the question about the credibility of America's nuclear deterrence for Europe. As Mattis made clear, the United States would not be able to fight two such major wars simultaneously. The conclusion of such an analysis then leads to the need to think very soberly about beefed-up European nuclear capabilities, hypersonic or otherwise, to prevent Russia from blackmailing or attacking Europe. Macron attempted to open up the debate on European deterrence in his speech at the Ecole de Guerre in February 2020. So, too, did an Adelphi Paper by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in mid-2021.²⁵ And similarly, former British four-star general Richard Barrons, former German four-star general Klaus Naumann, France's nuclear expert Francois Heisbourg and former German top diplomat Peter Wittig, all of whom have in their different ways, since 2017, publicly tried to warm policymakers and strategic analysts alike to the arch-political significance of Europe's nuclear subject matter.²⁶

Much of the American and European concern about combined European capabilities or a Eurodeterrent hails from the Cold War. Some Europeans fear that this might open Pandora's box, encouraging an end to the extended deterrence provided by the US for Europe; other Europeans are against it as they don't trust the credibility of European capabilities, and Americans wonder, at times, why they should continue their service to the alliance when its European members are willing to provide nuclear deterrence themselves.

The problem with these worries is that they are out of sync with today's geopolitics. For Germans in particular, 'no European nukes' has become an ideological fig-leaf for not thinking harder about security. Compared to Macron's February 2020 speech, Germany's debates are out of kilter. Leaving aside for a moment MP Mützenich's radical opposition to (nuclear) armaments—only thinly veiled by the coalition treaty—even a trusted transatlanticist, such as the last defence secretary, Annagret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU), insisted in October 2020 that "we cannot provide our own nuclear deterrence, nor do we want to."²⁷ And Baerbock, Germany's incumbent foreign secretary, has come to second her by stressing that, in strategic terms, "Germany [is] a state that... never wants to become a nuclear armed power."²⁸ However, NATO's nuclear deterrence needs to adapt and be re-thought due to vastly changed circumstances in the global strategic landscape, with China featuring as its gamechanger. Notwithstanding the immense political difficulties that would precede a Eurodeterrent, Yan Xuetong's above implications should enable us to gain a crystal-clear view of what is at stake and of how well we are prepared to take on the no less than vital challenges involved.

The proposition made here is as follows: at its core, the sea-based Eurodeterrent is complementary to, and firmly integrated into, NATO's military structures. It thereby reflects, but also appropriately expands, a joint statement Biden and Macron made in September 2021, which stressed the US recognition of the "importance of a stronger

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and more capable European defence ... [which] is complementary to NATO.”²⁹ Such a Eurodeterrent would serve as a standby, strategic fall-back position against Russia, a life insurance really, in case America’s nuclear capabilities are absorbed in a war with China. Based on UK and French capabilities at first, Poland³⁰ and Germany would need to contribute substantively to the build-up of the deterrent from the beginning. In light of the China factor, Germany propelling forward this idea together with its European allies would demonstrate to Biden that the continent is committed to dramatically improving its defence. Most significantly, rather than dividing the alliance, it would mutually reinforce the existing structures and ties; it would also send a powerful and much-needed message of Western strength to others.³¹

The Biden presidency offers the context most conducive to the political process of strategically adapting the West’s core survival mechanism; once initiated and underway, it may be accelerated. Three years are not a lot of time, but the awareness of the stakes should have the potential to powerfully propel forward the respective concepts—and submarines.

A not insignificant side effect, the build-up of the European deterrent would also serve as the emergency fall-back position in the worst case of a US withdrawal from Europe under a Trump 2, which would seal NATO’s fate. Regardless of the trigger, be it a China–US war under Trump or a Trump demonstrating his strategic dismissal of Europe by ‘bringing the troops home’ and re-focusing America’s nuclear arsenal away from the continent, such a Eurodeterrent, in contrast, would serve as the only remaining military life insurance against Russia. In light of Putin’s credible willingness to seize the opportunity and overturn ‘history’s final verdict’ of 1991 (which he never accepted), the deterrent would be the ultimate means to prevent Putin from forcibly imposing his will and his notion of ‘reinventing Russian–European cooperation’ onto the continent. In this vein, Putin’s manifold implications and intimations as to his vision of Europe’s future geography have pertained to his notion of the “historical Russia”, which collapsed in 1991.³²

While not underappreciating the efforts and worldviews of individual members of the traffic-light government, looking at the neglect of foreign and security affairs during the German election campaign including its TV debates (*Trielle*) in September 2021 and looking forward at Germany in early 2022, Winston Churchill's observations made a hundred years ago do strike a chord with those who have remained less convinced by European security-related policies and Germany's in particular: there still exists a "refusal to face unpleasant facts, desire for popularity and electoral success irrespective of the vital interests of the state."³³ Whether the black-swan-like prospects for Europe's vital security interests outlined above will help concentrate *Ampel*-Germany's strategic mind remains an open, fundamentally pressing question. Thus far, it seems the new government has a preference for continuity.

GREEN DEAL TRUMPS STRATEGY?

Churchill never met Greta Thunberg. Or Luisa Neubauer, for that matter, the ever-present public face of Germany's Fridays for Future movement. Presumably, to him, too, the importance of global climate protection would have been undeniable. Intuitively though, he would have felt slightly uncomfortable about the single-mindedness with which Berlin's coalition government and the country's manifold climate activists often see themselves marching, like missionaries, at the forefront of efforts to protect the environment, nationally and internationally. As the new government's coalition treaty somewhat generously puts it, "climate protection secures freedom, justice and sustainable wealth."³⁴

In this vein, the EU's Green Deal has become the focal point of German debates. This evolution has come at the expense of discussions about how indeed the country should make its hard choices on national security priorities, as they frequently have an environmental bias. With climate protection as the new government's "absolute top priority",³⁵ there has rarely been sufficient room in public debates to raise questions about how to define priorities and how to prioritise among them.

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Baerbock offered the Greens’ take on such a prioritisation after COP 26 when she repeated her demand that “climate neutrality must be the *sine qua non* for every field of policy”³⁶, a claim that resembled a ‘veto’ but was slightly watered down by the end of November to an ‘environmental check’ of all future legislative acts. Despite this adaptation, her statement overlooked the old, but no less fundamental, adage that ‘the enemy has a voice too’. For instance, climate degradation has not ameliorated the trajectory of the US–China hegemonic rivalry at all, as the latest digital summit between Xi and Biden demonstrated in November 2021. Also, it has by no means altered the determined fierceness with which Putin and Xi have pursued their interests. In turn, this means that the reciprocal dynamics between the ‘linkages’ remain unchanged and are vitally threatening to Europe’s security. Churchill, addressing Neubauer, might have added whether she had yet met Hong Kong’s freedom activist Joshua Wong, only to remind her that political freedom will not survive the present contest if it is not constantly backed up by hard and credible power. At least, this is how Biden understands his ‘alliance of democracies’.

Against this backdrop, even if Baerbock’s model of prioritisation may be strategically speaking incomplete, fast-approaching tipping points of the global climate crisis remain indisputable. This black-elephant-like dilemma of prioritisation has not yet been discussed in Berlin, however. It is therefore not unlikely that the implementation of the respective policies will derive from a process of unresolved prioritisation.

THE GREEN DEAL’S *SINE QUA NON* IS DETERRENCE

Before this script is reinstated by the new Scholz government, however, there may be an alternative way to address this prioritisation challenge. While climate-related adjustment measures will have to be a global and sustained, multi-decade and multi-model effort (e.g., emissions reduction, carbon removal, sequestration technology, carbon pricing and trading, and geo-

engineering), vital security concerns might impose a strategic urgency that leaves no choice. Such urgency would coldly deprive the coalition treaty's preamble (that the climate crisis "threatens ... our freedom, wealth and security"³⁷) of its underpinning conviction that such threats must, as a priority, be conceived as environmental ones.

Put differently, the prioritisation of a credible deterrent and a robust Western alliance, including the unmistakable articulation of Western values, is the *sine qua non* that needs to be in place, so that the next decade can unfold without a major war. So, as a classic strategic paradox,³⁸ a new version of Mutually-Assured-Destruction-like deterrence (MAD) may be the necessary precondition for the continuing efforts to safeguard and ensure the benign climatic conditions that make civilised life possible on this planet in the first place. Thereby a multi-decade safety window would be crafted during which a planet-wide emergency could be solved. An active, green realpolitik will need to operate under these daunting limitations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The new German government's first few months in power have shown a striking degree of continuity; striking because the three coalition partners' unifying slogan has—explicitly—been 'progress' ever since the days of the election campaign. In fact, it now seems likely that such progress will be limited to domestic issues while the SPD-driven continuity in foreign and security affairs has

only been mildly disturbed by the ambitious Greens and Liberals, for instance regarding Nord Stream 2 and China.

Thus far, this has meant that the Scholz government has not heeded the longstanding international request, or demand, for more German leadership. It is therefore still the case that Germany uses its built-in and inward-looking veto-power to put a break on Western responses to the challenges levelled against the international order by China and Russia.

In contrast, this analysis has laid out a twofold, if interlinked, picture of the near-term future of strategic affairs for which the new government has not made any preparations, either conceptually or practically. At its core, this picture envisions (for 2024/5) the likeliness of a war between the US and China as well as the probability of a second presidency for Donald Trump. A Sino–American war would existentially perforate the political credibility of the US nuclear guarantee for NATO's eastern flank and Europe as such; a Trump 2 presidency would very likely cut America's ties with the alliance, in particular if Germany has not boosted its hard-power commitment for NATO's conventional deterrence by 2025.

As such considerations have not yet made any inroads into Berlin's government quarter, the suggestions made here have focussed on the need for a newly conceived transatlantic bargain. Not the least, such a bargain and its communication is vitally important to counter the increasingly widespread perceptions in

China and Russia that the West is in terminal decline. In fact, such perceptions may be conducive to dangerous miscalculations on the part of the former powers.

At its core, this new bargain derives from two crude facts: one, Europe cannot defend itself against Russia; two, China will soon outgrow America economically. Consequently, only an allied response to those two powers' ambitions will suffice to cope with them. Such a transatlantic response, furthermore, must be built on an understanding of the interlinked dynamics between the Russian and Chinese theatres and the implications thereof for European security.

More precisely, America's task is to contain China; Europe's—and in particular Germany's—task is to provide the backbone of NATO's conventional deterrence forces. Moreover, Germany will need to use its vast economic power to lead Europe in helping the US to contain the People's Republic (and thereby help weaken the economic engine that feeds China's military apparatus). America, in turn, will need to underline its guarantee of extended nuclear deterrence for NATO's European members. It is the reciprocal reassurance provided to each other that offers this bargain's greatest benefit to either side.

In any event, this bargain for survival needs to confront the possibility of the failure of containment and the outbreak of war in East Asia. Not the least, China's massive growth of its nuclear stockpile would most likely absorb US military forces entirely. In turn, this would expose the unprecedented lack of

credibility of NATO's deterrent against Russia. The strategic answer to this vital threat lies in NATO's complementary Eurodeterrent, a nuclear force at first based on French and British capabilities, albeit comprehensively enlarged by Polish and German contributions. Taking into account the worst-case scenario of a Trump 2 presidency, this European nuclear pillar would have the significant side-effect of providing the fall-back position should Trump pull the US out of NATO by 2025. It may be no secret that with Biden deploying more US troops to Europe early in 2022 he confirms the fears of those in the US who think that America should rather focus on China (which has increased its intrusions of Taiwanese airspace during the same months) and let Europe figure out how to defend itself. For sure, Trump is watching how the events unfold.

Precisely because the article does not consider this bargain a remote aspect of some future policy planning exercises (and thus largely irrelevant today) but, rather, as the hard-headed conclusion of Europe's emerging strategic landscape now, it cannot circumvent the new coalition government's "absolute priority" in policy terms—that is, climate protection.

While there is no doubt that climate-related adjustment measures need to be a long-term, globally sustained and multi-model effort (e.g., emissions reduction, carbon-removal, carbon-pricing etc.), climate degradation has not ameliorated the trajectory of the US–China hegemonic rivalry at all, as the latest digital summit between Xi and Biden

demonstrated in November 2021, nor has it by any means changed the determination with which Putin and Xi have pursued their ambitions.

More importantly, though, the tension discernible between hard security provision and climate protection is not a matter of chronological prioritisation. Rather, the fundamental point made here is that a predominant Western security structure, including NATO's Eurodeterrent, needs to be in place in order to prevent the outbreak of major wars in East Asia and Eastern Europe. Needless to say, any major war would instantly render any global attempts to facilitate climate protection unachievable. In other words, powerful Western deterrence is the *sine qua non* for the new government's ambitious, if well-argued, plans to protect the environment. *Si vis orbem, para bellum!* ■

Notes

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- 14 See Howard, Michael, Henry Kissinger, in idem, *The Causes of War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1983, pp. 229-231.
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Can Chancellor Scholz save the West?

The new German government and global geopolitics

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In the wake of Chancellor Angela Merkel's departure from the German Chancellorship, her successor, Olaf Scholz, inherits a Germany which has been lacking in strategic vision and an acute foreign policy for a considerable amount of time. Maximilian Terhalle asks, can Chancellor Scholz provide this vision for his country, and imbue NATO and the EU with a coherent and unified foreign policy in the face of threats from China, Russia, and a divided 'West'?



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