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With new expectations: German Foreign Policy is too complex to be left only to political insiders

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Bonn, Duisburg, 28 February 2014. The growing expectations for Germany to go beyond its built-in culture of limitations have been visibly on display. The well-publicized speech by Joachim Gauck, the German president, to the Munich security conference on 31 January 2014, with its appeal to fight 'withdrawal and laziness' has proved a catalyst, with amplified echoes provided by other prominent state-related officials ranging from Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the foreign minister, Ursula von der Leyen, the defence minister, and in a more muted fashion by Norbert Röttgen, head of the foreign-affairs committee in the *Bundestag* for Germany. Yet this increased demand to recalibrate German commitments and capabilities has not been matched by a new supply of detailed ideas about how and where upgraded efforts are best applied.

I argue that foreign policy in the post 9/11, and post-financial crisis world is far too complex in form and scope to be simply 'owned' by state officials. On both instrumental and legitimacy grounds the process of dialogue, and even decision-making, needs to be opened up beyond a small group of insiders, however articulate and (and in President's Gauck's case at least) normatively compelling members of this group are. Moreover, with the cautious wait and see and internally- focused approach of Chancellor Merkel, there is space for ideational and entrepreneurial efforts unimaginable in previous years. Unlike a wide number of leaders in the world she does not give the indication of wanting to run the entire ambit of foreign policy from the Chancellor's office.

In terms of design it is unlikely that a new comprehensive doctrine can or will emerge that can animate German foreign policy. Even as it tries to respond to new expectations Germany is unlikely to embrace an approach that will signify that it will be everywhere, doing everything in the world. Certainly there is no credible fear of hegemonic ambitions. In synch with the German political, bureaucratic, societal and fiscal culture, the targeting should be on what areas of functional and geographic specialization – what I have termed in the past as niches – with a privileging of concerted attention in these domains.

The coalitional component of current German politics, combined with the changed nature of the external environment, adds to the ripeness of this project. Unlike in the past, there are no over-arching externally-related divide or source or polarization that hangs over the German foreign policy debate.

Nor is there any credible fear that innovation and robustness along these lines will serve as a recipe for hegemonic ambitions. One of the major appeals for pushing ahead now is that the calls for 'doing more' are no longer championed by forces outside Germany, but emerging organically from inside.

In terms of supply of ideational and entrepreneurial input Germany has an abundance of untapped resources and a huge reservoir of talent not only in the business and NGO communities but in a wide variety of think tanks and research centres – including the one I am affiliated with. And this profile cannot leave out the experienced political foundations as well, sources of considerable admiration around the world.

My suggestion is that a focal point for this process be initiated via a manner akin to a Canadian initiative in the early 1990s via a National Forum on Germany's International Relations. If the Post-Cold War context was very different from the post 9/11, post financial crisis context, the basic need was the same: to adjust old habits with an eye to making specific policy recommendations. As with the substantive results, the stylistic details of co-chairs and range of representation need to be done from inside Germany, although there is some logic for privileging as much diversity from the domestic talent pool as possible. If, at the same time, much of the attraction of this approach is to lever public visibility for both the means and output, there should be built in some elements of sustainability to the process as well. While important in terms of agency, getting results will not be done in a two or three day forum with no serious follow-up.

As the cliché goes, a serious crisis should not be wasted. And although in many ways the changed environment provides far more of a new opportunity than the accentuation of an embedded predicament, coming to terms with the growing demand in terms of the nuances of doing things differently, particularly those generated internally, is never easy. If however the German word, *Anlehnungspartner*, has indeed come to the surface as one of the key guides for action, as denoted by Jochen Bittner in the leading German newspaper *Die Zeit*, the image of the proverbial shoulder to lean on must be expanded: with a connotation beyond what Germany should and can do in the world to an internally-oriented process that builds in a core supportive contribution from German society actors to a remodelled German foreign policy.