





POLICY PAPER


What's Next for the EU Foreign Policy in Post-Merkel Era?

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*This Policy Paper was written by **Flo Van den Broeck** | 8 November 2021

 Rue de La Loi 155, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



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1. Background

After having been sixteen years in power, Angela Merkel will soon step down as Germany's chancellor. Whereas she achieved remarkable results by playing an active role on the diplomatic stage, she did not push forward ambitious reform proposals regarding EU foreign policy. Instead, she will be remembered as a force of conciliation and moderation, advocating for small efforts to manage the EU's many hurdles on the global scene.¹

In the context of a changing transatlantic relationship and exacerbated by a weakening Europe, her successor will however still face severe foreign policy challenges. Certainly, in the wake of the United States' (US) pivot toward Asia, Germany will need to define its role again within this new geopolitical constellation. This is most visible with the AUKUS deal, a security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to confront growing Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific region. Not only this case, but also the US' decision to withdraw from Afghanistan showed how dependent Europe still is on others for security and how little it is taken into account as a strategic player.²

Looking back on Merkel's foreign policy achievements and mistakes, this policy brief will discuss lessons learned and analyse which kind of German leadership is needed for the EU in this era of great power competition. Would the ambitious pro-European integration chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz (SPD) or the cautious but experienced Armin Laschet (CDU) be able to take on the very difficult task of driving the EU forward? Do they have what it takes?

2. Current State of Play

2.1 Merkel's Balance Sheet

Since Merkel took on the role of chancellor in 2005, one could start noticing remarkable foreign policy achievements made by Europe in the world. Through her active role on the diplomatic scene, Merkel contributed to milestones such as the 2014 Minsk Agreement to end the war in Ukraine, the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee agreement and the 2011 resolution to eliminate nuclear energy after Fukushima.

By means of her excellent mediation skills, she furthermore succeeded in bridging internal divides within the Union during a decade of crisis.³ Not only did she establish a common front after the Russian annexation of Crimea, but she also kept the EU together in times of the transatlantic divide during former US' president Trump's presidency.⁴

Although Europe mostly tends to see Merkel as the EU's unifier, she has also defended very divisive policies. This was not only the case with regard to Germany's resolute support for the controversial Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline with Russia, but also in the context of the wave of refugees in 2015.⁵ When looking at the EU at the end of Merkel's reign today, she clearly leaves behind a deeply divided continent challenged by new threats.

¹ P. BURAS and J. PUGLIERIN, 'Beyond Merkelism: What Europeans expect of post-election Germany', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2021 (<https://ecfr.eu/publication/beyond-merkelism-what-europeans-expect-of-post-election-germany/>). Consulted on 2 October 2021.

² G. CHAZAN, 'Aukus security pact is 'insult to a NATO partner', says Merkel's adviser', *Financial Times*, September 2021 (<https://www.ft.com/content/dfc4f860-c178-4c2a-a46c-c5f4e5595b1a>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

³ P. BURAS and J. PUGLIERIN, 'Beyond Merkelism: What Europeans expect of post-election Germany'.

⁴ M. MATTHIJS, 'Merkel's legacy and the future of Germany', *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2021 (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/merkels-legacy-and-future-germany>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

⁵ P. BURAS and J. PUGLIERIN, *Idem*.

Merkel furthermore mostly owes her reputation to responding well to decisive breaks and solving crises. When it comes to geopolitics, her credibility is however limited as she is known to pass up long-term security and defence policy changes.

The crisis of 2011 in Libya, for example, showed very clearly Berlin's reticence on power and military interventionism. The choice for soft power was not only made out of conviction, but also because Merkel knew very well that Germany and the EU as a whole were not strong enough militarily. This awareness did however not lead to focusing more on making NATO stronger or strengthening Europe's underperforming security and defence policy. Consequently, by ignoring this issue, Turkey and Russia were able to expand their military bases closer to the EU's southern borders.⁶

At the same time, however, good lessons can be learned as well from the decision not to militarily intervene in the conflict. Knowing very well that such an intervention would lead to permanent chaos, Merkel decided to break with the US' foreign policy line and develop a more independent profile. Apparently ten years too early, the rest of Europe did not understand her warning to rely entirely on Europe's closest ally for security.⁷

2.2 The US' Pivot Towards Asia

Although the theme of strategic autonomy is now well known within the EU, recent activities have shown that there is still a clear difference between rhetoric and practical action. This was for example highlighted by the AUKUS partnership, which was announced the evening before the EU communicated its Indo-Pacific strategy in September.⁸ The Commission's and the European Council's presidents did not only see this deal as a betrayal of France, but of the EU as a whole. By putting it like that in their discourse, they clearly presented the EU as an integrated strategic player.⁹

Yet, in reality, it has no seat at the table, as European member states continue to regard EU foreign and security policy as additional to their own national policies. Regarded as a fragmented block, the great powers in the Indo-Pacific region did as such not take into account the European strategic views. This was clearly demonstrated by, for example, the refusal of China to have the German warship visit Shanghai.¹⁰

It will probably be no different with the new German chancellor, as the coalition government will possibly not dare to take any too ambitious steps. The intentions are certainly there though. Whereas Merkel was criticised because her so-called lack of vision for the EU, Laschet and Scholz are both

⁶ A. RINKE, 'The evolution of Angela Merkel's foreign policy', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, October 2021 (4) (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/evolution-angela-merkels-foreign-policy>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ R. NIBLETT, 'AUKUS reveals much about the new global strategic context', *Chatham House*, September 2021 (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/aukus-reveals-much-about-new-global-strategic-context>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

⁹ Speech Thierry Breton: Time to rebalance the EU-U.S. relationship, September 2021 (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/breton/announcements/time-rebalance-eu-us-relationship-thierry-breton_en). Consulted on 20 October 2021; S. BISCOP, 'AUKUS and the EU: a snub for the bloc?', *Egmont Institute*, September 2021 (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/aukus-and-the-eu-a-snub-for-the-bloc/>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

¹⁰ S. BISCOP, 'AUKUS and the EU: a snub for the bloc?'

invested in a more strategic approach to international affairs.¹¹ Although the intentions are there, neither of them provides however specific details on how to make Europe stronger.¹²

2.3 The US' withdrawal from Afghanistan

Not only in the case of the AUKUS deal, but also with the American decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, the US' behaviour did not meet Europe's expectations. The mission showed for the umpteenth time Europe's dependence on American capabilities. Without the US, Europe would not even be able to evacuate its own on-site work forces. Inevitably, this experience will have an impact on Europe regarding defence capacity and willingness to act geopolitically.¹³ The lesson learned by various European leaders is that Europe will now better be left to its own devices, instead of close coordination as in the past.¹⁴

At the same time, however, the failed mission is not helping the ongoing European discussion whether interventionism provides added value to international conflicts. The Kabul debacle especially reinforced Germany's pacifist and isolationist positions. Since the post-war era, it has – as described above – never been much in favour of military intervention.¹⁵

With the appointment of a new chancellor there is nevertheless a chance that Germany will change course. This would be the case with Laschet rather than Scholz who shows himself rather indecisive. While both candidates endorse the need of a larger defence budget, Scholz does not seem to have a strong and concrete plan. Laschet, on the contrary, advocates for co-production of concrete defence capabilities such as a European drone project.¹⁶ Yet again, the disagreement between the different parties in the German coalition government on foreign and defence policy will most likely prevent too ambitious plans from happening.

3. Conclusion and Thoughts for Policy Recommendations

When it comes to tackling the challenges ahead, Merkel's policy of remaining neutral and avoiding bold decisions does clearly not seem to be the appropriate approach. Although this held the European member states together in a certain way, it did not provide an answer for Europe as a strategic player on the long term.

In order to deal with growing geopolitical competition as demonstrated by the AUKUS deal, political support is needed for more radical solutions. The EU will need a more courageous and visionary Germany for this that is not afraid anymore to defend Europe's place in the world. Only by acting more as one bloc, the EU could start sending out strong signals.

To become truly strategic, however, the EU will need to modernise its governance model for foreign policy. The intent should not be to transfer more power to the EU, but instead to rescue national

¹¹ A. RINKE, 'The evolution of Angela Merkel's foreign policy'.

¹² J. GREUBEL, 'More of the same, but different: why Laschet should reform the CDU's EU Policy', *European Policy Centre*, January 2021 (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/More-of-the-same-but-different-Why-Laschet-should-reform-the-CDUs-E~3ab164>). Consulted on 3 October 2021; H. HOFF, 'Operation Olaf', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 4 (October 2021) (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/operation-olaf>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

¹³ P. BURAS and J. PUGLIERIN, 'Beyond Merkelism: What Europeans expect of post-election Germany'.

¹⁴ G. CHAZAN, 'Aukus security pact is 'insult to a NATO partner', says Merkel's adviser'.

¹⁵ J. DEMPSEY, 'Judy Asks: Will the Afghanistan Debacle Change Your Country's Foreign and Security Policy', *Carnegie Europe*, September 2021 (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/85354>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

¹⁶ A. RINKE, 'I am a Realpolitiker', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 4 (October 2021) (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/i-am-realpolitiker>). Consulted on 3 October 2021.

sovereignty by enhancing member states' independence from other powers. This could for example be done by developing a system in which competences are both shared and divided, and whereby member states always remain the source of European sovereignty.

Not only in foreign policy, but, as the Afghan pull-out showed, there is also a need to address the intra-European fragmentation in security and defence. Even before Europe would be able to achieve strategic autonomy, it will need to acquire a stronger common security policy and increased military capabilities. To get to this, Europe needs more than ever a Germany that would dare to leave its comfort zone in an area in which Merkel did not want to lead.

Be it Scholz or Laschet, the new German chancellor will be given the difficult task of reinventing Germany's position within the EU and, to some extent, the responsibility of putting Europe back on the map of great powers. This will not be easy, as the German coalition government will make it very hard to put forward ambitious proposals within the EU.

Whether any of these candidates can succeed is a question that only time will tell. It will nevertheless certainly take a while to gain the same amount of political weight, recognition and trust that Merkel rightfully gained over the years.

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

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