

A Status-Conscious Germany between Adolescence and Retirement: Foreign Policy Commemorations on the 60th Anniversary of the Federal Republic

By Gunther Hellmann

How has Germany's drive for "equal status" influenced its foreign policy over the past sixty years?

Can Germany remain a civilian power and still call for equal status?

"In the beginning were the allies." This is the title of a study on "Four Power rights" as a fundamental structural context of German foreign policy which Helga Haftendorn, one of the foremost experts on German foreign policy, wrote in the early 1990s.¹ In the original text, Haftendorn used the term "*die Alliierten*," as opposed to the German word "*die Verbündeten*," since "*Alliierte*" conveys specific connotations in German. Of course, in the decades after World War II "the allies" had become Germany's "*Verbündete*"—yet they also remained in some way "*die Alliierten*" of the coalition allied *against* Germany.

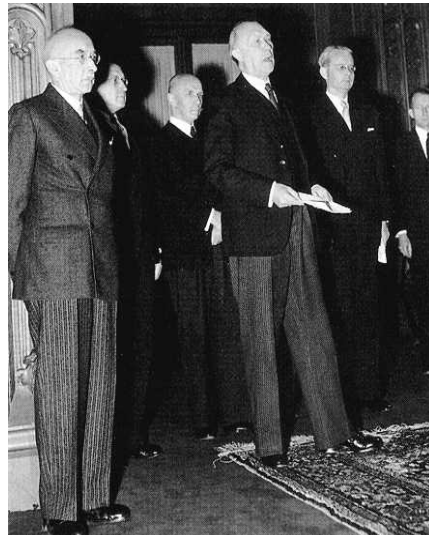
Haftendorn's introduction was a pointed rejoinder directed against an earlier opening sentence by Arnulf Baring, who argued that "Adenauer" was "in the beginning" of the Federal Republic. Baring was certainly right to emphasize the crucial role played by Germany's first chancellor in rebuilding a destroyed country and in establishing West Germany as a solid member of the alliance of Western democracies. Yet Haftendorn's bird's eye perspective on the rise of what was later called the "Bonn Republic" was more to the point since it recognized both internal and external factors enabling Germany to once again become a respected member of the international system.

When the Federal Republic was founded sixty years ago, therefore, there was no such thing called "German foreign policy." *Die Alliierten* were in charge of all essential questions regarding the international status (and thus the normal foreign policy business) of the nascent state. How West Germans used the term "allies" back then and how they speak about their *Verbündete* (and practice being an ally themselves) today tells a lot about how radically Germany's international status and how its self-image have changed. In the 1950s, reference to *die Alliierten* was synonymous with a respectful gesture vis-à-vis foreigners who were at once victors and occupiers, re-educators and defenders. There was an unmistakable gap in terms of status between West Germans on the one side and the U.S., Britain, and France on the other. Thus, it was not surprising that Adenauer began what was to become his foreign policy mantra only a few days after the Basic Law had been promulgated: calling for "equal status" (*Gleichberechtigung*). The gap between victor and vanquished and the drive for equal status is best symbolized in the famous "carpet scene" from 21 September 1949 when Adenauer presented his cabinet to the Allied High Commissioners. To emphasize the difference in status between the Allies and West Germany, Adenauer was told beforehand that only the Commissioners were supposed to stand on the precious carpet. Yet this difference in status was precisely what Adenauer questioned when he consciously stepped onto the carpet (see the pictures below documenting the scene from two different angles).

The two sides of the “status” game: “The Allies” receive ...



... a demanding Chancellor.



One way to recount the history of Germany’s foreign policy over the past sixty years is to tell it as a story of an unflagging yet patient drive for equal status. It is almost entirely a success story—particularly because the status of all the other states relative to which Germans aspired to be treated as “equal” has continuously risen. Membership in the European Coal and Steel Community, the predecessor to the European Union, in the early 1950s; then NATO in 1955; the UN and the G7 in 1970s; and, most recently, the “P5 plus Germany” group, the exclusive club made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany that tries to tackle the Iranian nuclear program—all this marks an impressive line of continuous successes of (West) German diplomacy rising within the ranks of the international hierarchy of power and prestige. Given the lack of hard military resources upon which ascending powers had traditionally relied in pushing for admission to the great power club, Germany’s success is undoubtedly due in no small part to its “civilian power” qualities—i.e., the emphasis on soft power tools such as diplomacy, economic aid, and restraint.

Nevertheless, in celebrating the 19th anniversary of the “Berlin Republic” in October in addition to the 60th anniversary of the old “Federal Republic,” Germany also has to realize that it may have reached the end of the line when it started calling once again for

“equal status”—this time with respect to the status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Germany’s persistent bid for a permanent seat is the clearest evidence yet that the long-cherished self-image of a “civilian power” different in nature from even its closest democratic allies France and Britain is a myth. When Gunter Pleuger, Germany’s former UN ambassador, described his government’s bid in 2003 “not as an end in itself” but rather as an “instrument” in Germany’s drive for “*Mitbestimmung*” (literally: “co-determination”) in international politics, he was probably still counting on many of his listeners to associate all of Germany’s cherished “civilian power” qualities with the “co-determination” vision Pleuger was sketching. Italy and the Bush government in particular may be forgiven for having heard quite a different message. As Stephen Szabo has vividly shown in his book “Parting Ways,” Germany’s ambassador was clearly playing hardball (as other great powers usually do) in the run-up to the Iraq War as he built new alliances in the UN Security Council with France, Russia, and China (against America and its allies).

To debunk the myth of a uniquely “civilian” German foreign policy identity is not to say that “great power politics” today is synonymous with great power politics in, say, the Concert of Europe. The world has changed dramatically since then—and Europe more so than the rest. To be successful under these new conditions, coordination, diplomatic skill, and compromise are essential. The Federal Republic’s foreign policy decision-makers have imbibed this from the infancy of West German diplomacy. Moreover, as the “P5 plus Germany” also shows, none of the big three European players are sufficiently influential, globally, on their own even if they do belong to the most powerful core. The global financial crisis and the successive replacement of the G8 by the G20 clearly show this. Even France and Britain have to realize that their global influence depends ever more on their ability to mobilize European support.

In having finally achieved equal status, at least with regard to France and Britain within the EU as a member of the EU3, Germany is in no different position in principle. Yet it has the crucial advantage of a history of “semi-sovereignty” (P. Katzenstein). In other words, whereas France and Britain have to adjust mentally to ever greater inroads as far as their cherished sovereignty is concerned, Germany traditionally has no trouble with giving up sovereignty since the principle of regaining equal status via integration was the very basis of its success in the past. At the same time, one has to realize that in recent years Germany apparently has come to appreciate the new/old symbols of sovereignty and national influence at a time when others have been walking in the opposite direction. Berlin’s bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC is only the most obvious indicator. The recent opinion of Germany’s Constitutional Court on the Lisbon Treaty contains more subtle language blessing sovereignty and the nation state but essentially points in the same direction.

It will be interesting to see, therefore, how these countervailing pressures play out in the years to come. Overall the foreign policy discourse in Germany is pushing the country toward a solidified, “self-assertive” (“*selbstbewusste*”) normality also observable among other EU member states. At the same time the global influence and standing of the EU as a whole calls for ever closer and more effective coordination. This is especially clear if one combines the rise of powers such as China or India with additional structural changes in the context of globalization (financial crisis) and the increasing dependencies of the EU on its external world (such as in the field of energy). The latter puts a premium on effective coordination and leadership, the former privileges prestige and status-seeking. Although the two do not go together easily, there is some overlap. Prestige and status can also be gained by being an effective leader within and as a voice of the EU. However, since all EU members are pursuing status and prestige goals, to some extent any push for *more* “equal status” for oneself may be seen by others as overstepping a red line. Italy and Germany have fought several status battles over the past two decades. Chancellor Merkel’s soft-going, closed-doors diplomacy provides for an interesting

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example in this context because she demonstrates how status-conscious European leadership can go hand in hand with “national interest” maximization. It is an interesting example in particular since it strikes an obvious contrast with her immediate predecessor (Gerhard Schröder) and with a key rival for European leadership, French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Nevertheless even the ideal type soft power chancellor sticks with the UN policy developed by her predecessor. This commonality between her and Schröder is just one indication of the profound generational change which separates the new generation of Germany’s “self-assertive” foreign policy elite from the previous ones (former chancellors Kohl (CDU) and Schmidt (SPD) both continue to be vehemently opposed to Germany’s bid for a permanent seat).

United Germany at nineteen and the older Federal Republic at sixty have jointly arrived somewhere between adolescence and retirement. This is not the worst condition one can imagine. Experience and wisdom usually come with age. Whether united Germany’s solidified foreign policy practice lives up to the admonitions (both from abroad and from within) from the early 1990s to “grow up” and become “normal” remains to be seen. Besides the fact that it is far from obvious what “growing up” and becoming “normal” may mean in terms of day-to-day foreign policy practice and in long-term diplomatic strategizing, Germany’s allies may in the meantime have second thoughts whether they (and the world) are indeed better off with “grown up” Germans. In any case, Germany no longer has *Alliierte* to look to for guidance and directions. There are also no carpets left to be stepped on in requesting more equal status. Rather, Germany itself is now called upon as an ally to fight the same wars (for instance in Afghanistan) which “*verbündete*” American, Canadian, and British soldiers are fighting. Berlin still shies away from this type of “equality”—and may even intensify the new practice of limited allied solidarity in the years to come. It is not totally unimaginable, however, that the pressures of European and global politics may alternatively lead to some more basic readjustments in German thinking in terms of what normative criteria to draw upon in establishing a new measure for normality—not to mention equality and justice. The EU and the world more broadly would probably benefit from it—as both have done to some extent during the years of the (presumably quite “abnormal”) Bonn Republic.

¹ Helga Haftendorn, “Im Anfang waren die Alliierten. Die alliierten Vorbehaltsrechte als Rahmenbedingung des außenpolitischen Handelns der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” in *Regieren in der Bundesrepublik V: Souveränität, Integration, Interdependenz. Staatliches Handeln in der Außen- und Europapolitik*, ed. Hans-Hermann Hartwich, Götrik Wewer, Opladen 1993, 41-92. “Four Power Rights” is shorthand for the remaining legal responsibilities and rights which the four powers allied in a coalition against Nazi Germany, i.e., the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and Britain held regarding Berlin and “Germany as a whole” until October 1990, including any final settlement of the question of German unity.

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