

June 18. 2021 – Gunther Hellmann

Big Enough for Europe, Small Enough for the World: Germany and Multilateralism as Fate

Henry Kissinger’s quip about Germany’s international role from the 1970s has often been quoted: Germany, he had said, was “too big for Europe and too small for the world”. This pointed analysis about Germany’s geopolitical position and military capacity was, of course, a reference to the history of Germany’s global ambitions and destructive role since Bismarck’s time. Remarkably, in a recent interview Kissinger called for a “global Germany” because now Germany presumably had “the resources and the history to be a major factor in the future”. Given the limitations of an interview Kissinger did not have the space to elaborate on what (or how Germany) has changed. In this essay I will explore why and how he might be willing to go along with the suggested alteration of his quip in the title of this essay and why multilateralism is the critical link.

Last week I joined two journalists for separate interviews about post-Merkel Germany and the meaning and implications of the G7 summit completed on Sunday, issues which I had tried to address in a recent blog contribution on this website. The interview with “stern.de” focused more on the global picture, the interview with Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, until recently the foreign editor at Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, focused more on Germany’s outlook on Europe and the world. In this context Kissinger’s famous one-liner came to my mind and how the adaptation suggested in the title might indeed summarize quite well why fear of Germany has receded – or to be more precise: why fear has even been replaced by trust and even calls for (more) German leadership. “Big enough for Europe” and “small enough for the world” continue Kissinger’s pointers at two different dimensions in analyzing Germany’s position and weight since Europe continues to be the central location of securing whatever additional role Germany might play. In many ways Europe is the *conditio sine qua non* of any German role on a global scale – or, as former chancellor Helmut Kohl used to put it: “Europe is our future. Europe is our destiny” – where “destiny” for the German “Schicksal” might as well be translated as “fate”. When Kissinger said in the 1970s that Germany was “too big” for Europe it meant

that in pre-1945 times the country's territorial extension, its size measured in terms of population and economic strength, and its military prowess were simply indigestible for its neighbours. In that light, arguing that today's Germany is "big enough" for Europe *and* "small enough" at the same time for the world means several things.

The Ambition and Recognition of German Leadership

First, three decades after unification Germany is big enough (and, finally, also mentally prepared) to be *aspiring* for a leadership role. Equally significant, it is also big enough to be *recognized* and supported in such a leadership role. Thirty or twenty years ago neither was the case. When former German Foreign Minister (and current President) Frank-Walter Steinmeier announced in early 2015 that Germany would "seek to be 'Europe's CFO'" the wordplay with "Chief Facilitating Officer" instead of the standard reference "Chief Financial Officer" was not only a clear indication that Germany does no longer want to be reduced to the kind of "cheque book diplomacy" which former Chancellor Schröder (for whom Steinmeier had earlier served as head of the chancellery) had despised. It was also an expression of the fact that Germany's key foreign policy personnel was finally ready to self-confidently assert the position of the "chief" – if, primarily, in a "facilitating" role.

Aspiring to be "chief" is not sufficient, however, if the chief fails to mobilize and motivate followers to *accept* the claimed leadership role. Evidence has been mounting for quite a few years now that such a German leadership role has indeed become acceptable and accepted – and that it is increasingly even been called for by allies and partners within the European Union. Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger rightly recalled a speech from the former Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski from 2011 when he stated in front of an audience at the "Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik", Germany's equivalent to the Council of Foreign Relations, that he "will probably be the first Polish foreign minister in history to say so, but here it is: I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity. You have become Europe's indispensable nation". The significant qualification which Sikorski added was almost always ignored by those who used this statement as an argument in pushing for *more* German leadership, especially an increase in Germany's *military* role. Sikorski also said: "You [Germany, GH] may not fail to lead. Not dominate, but to *lead in reform*. *Provided you include us in decision-making*, Poland will support you."

Qualified Followership

This is the typical pattern which shows up when German leadership is called for by European partners: Germany should “lead” as potential follower X prefers – and it can count on willing followership on the condition that X is “included in decision-making”. Such qualifications will, predictably, almost always produce also two contradictory effects: they condition commitments to followership on Germany leading *in specified ways* which, in turn, will predictably arouse fierce opposition from other, equally necessary, followers which have not been similarly included in decision-making and/ or have very different preferences.

In this sense Steinmeier’s translation of CFO as “Chief *Facilitating* Officer” is the articulation of a realization among Germany’s political class that German leadership is necessarily conditioned on the “inclusion in decision-making” of very diverse European interests. Here the “big enough” can build on the lucky fact that Germany’s political class has internalized what Jeffrey Anderson had called its “reflexive” or “ingrained support for multilateralism” which Germany, in his view, even “exaggerated”. Thirty years after unification and the lingering fears of a coming “Fourth Reich” Germany’s elites seem to have convinced many European partners that habits distilled in a “culture of restraint” during four decades of successful foreign and security policy in the “Bonn Republic” are a reliable predictor that Germans can be trusted not to “dominate”.

European Recognition of German Leadership

Two recent surveys by the German Marshall Fund and Pew probably still surprise many Germans: In the Transatlantic Trends 2021 survey significant majorities among Germany’s European partners expressed the belief that Germany is the “most influential country in Europe”. Even among the most hesitant publics (in the UK and Turkey) Germany ranks ahead of the respective home country (45% to 36% in the UK and 45% to 25% in Turkey). In France, Poland, Italy, and Spain more than 70% of the respective publics perceive Germany to be most influential, far outweighing the respective home country or any runner-up. Perhaps most remarkably, the publics in France and Germany essentially agree about this grave difference of “influence” with 71% of Germans and 72% of French citizens respectively regarding Germany as the most influential country whereas only 11% of Germans and 17% of French citizens think that France is most influential. Only in the US and Canada do publics still rank the UK ahead of Germany (44%

to 23% in the US and 44% to 35% in Canada).

When it comes to individual “confidence” ratings, German Chancellor Angela Merkel ranked slightly higher than US President Joe Biden in a [Pew survey](#) which was conducted from March through May 2021 in sixteen European and Asian countries allied with the US and EU. Chancellor Merkel. Fortunately for German leadership, trust in Germany being a “reliable partner” for the respective country is similarly high across alliance partners surveyed by the GMF. Only Canada (75%) tops Germany (73%) which, in turn, outranks France (66%), the US and the UK (both at 60%) and Poland (45%). If you add another survey conducted by the [European Council on Foreign Relations](#) in November and December 2020 another striking observation pops into the eye: as fewer European allies consider Washington to be the reliable partner it used to be (an impression that has been confirmed by Transatlantic Trends 2021 and Pew), Germany and the US are positioned against each other as the preferred ally to turn to. In the ECFR survey respondents in France, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Hungary were most likely to choose Germany as the most important country to build a good relationship with, above the US. Only respondents in the UK (55%), Poland (45%), Italy (36%), and Sweden (36%) were more likely to rank the US first over Germany (with an almost equal share of Swedes, 35%, ranking Germany above the US).

Europe’s Strongest Economy and Waxing Interdependence

Increasing leadership confidence within Germany and solid or even growing trust in German leadership among Germany’s allies enhances the second dimension of Germany’s being big enough for Europe. After Brexit the relative weight of Germany’s economy, which had always been the EU’s strongest, has increased even more. Moreover, for the time being the German economy seems to be prepared better than the EU average to digest the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is more, the fact that the [German government has agreed](#) for the first time last year to issue common debt on the scale of 750 billion Euro in order to lift member countries out of economic crises brought on by the coronavirus has even expanded Germany’s central role and the interdependence among EU economies. To be sure, the challenges faced in the process of economic recovery are huge, especially in [comparison to the economies of the US](#) and China which seem to be pushing ahead at a faster speed. Yet this only adds pressure on Europeans that they [must act together](#) – and that they are less likely to succeed if Germany focuses on maximizing national recovery.

Germany's Rising Military Role

Third, and perhaps more contentiously, Germany is big *and* small enough militarily for both Europe and the world. In 2020 Germany, according to [SIPRI data](#), spent as much on defense in absolute terms as did France, roughly US\$ 53 billion (measured in constant 2019 US\$) which was only slightly less than the UK (US\$ 59 billion). In comparison to 2010, however, German defense spending had risen faster than France's (from US\$ 41 compared to France's US\$ 48 billion). The UK's spending had actually shrunk from US\$ 63 billion in 2010. However, debates about defense spending within NATO and the EU focus almost exclusively on [spending as a percentage of gross domestic product](#) – and in that regard Germany continues to lag behind (with 1.4% for Germany in 2020 and 2.1% and 2.2% respectively for France and the UK).

Yet this preoccupation with percentages in general, and the fixation on NATO's decision from the [2014 Wales summit](#) to “aim” at spending 2 percent of GDP in particular, misses the fundamental point of a Kissingerian geopolitical analysis which would focus on relative military capabilities *among and between (actual and potential) allies and enemies* measured in *absolute terms* (i.e. the size and effectiveness of armed forces) and only secondarily on relative changes over time. This is no marginal point because Kissinger's classical “too-big-for-Europe” argument was primarily based on the indigestibility of German military might in the overall European balance of power of the late 19th century and into the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, it also had to be placed in the context of the then prevailing nationalistic and militaristic cultures in Europe as a whole.

The German Military, its Structural Flaws and the Ghosts of ‘Militarization’

Undoubtedly (and fortunately) German military might today does not pose any threat to any of its neighbours if the focus is on military capabilities for offensive military operations on a unilateral basis – Kissinger's “too-big-for-Europe” key reference point. Many think that the opposite is the case, i.e. that Germany's armed forces are structurally underfunded and partly even inoperable. More significantly, Germany is deeply embedded in NATO and European structures of collective defense and, hence, *structurally incapable to attack* in a double sense, materially and institutionally. Across the mainstream political spectrum from the Christian Democrats and Liberals on the one hand all the way to the Social Democrats and the Greens on the other there is, therefore, a basic agreement that the *Bundeswehr* needs to be enabled to actually fulfill its mandate.

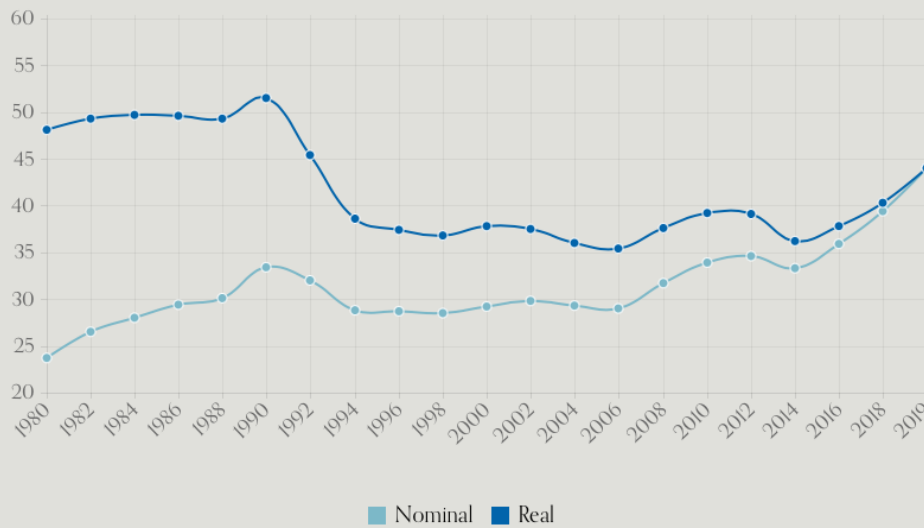
Yet experts disagree how much is necessary and indeed possible given the looming

financial burden of post-COVID-19 reconstruction and the competing demands from different segments of society. Chancellor Merkel has for long been ranked among the sceptics of bigger defense spending increases, [arguing explicitly](#) in front of the military brass in one of her rare appearances there in 2018 that “the 2% (goal) is no fetish” and, more stunningly, that “we all have to be a bit careful that the process towards two percent is not possibly interpreted as *a form of militarization* (sic!) of Germany”. This vocabulary which used to dominate the political discourse in the 1990s on the left but has even receded there during the last decade is a reminder of the lingering concern dating back to the times of the Bonn Republic. It is based on the belief that German power in general, traditionally manifested in economic and financial strength, and military power in particular, must remain checked in order not to arouse (or feed already visible) fears of German domination. Such concerns continue to be expressed across Europe (see [Hellmann 2016](#), pp. 5-7 for illustrations), the European publics’ vote of confidence vis-à-vis Germany referred to above notwithstanding.

The Push for Increased Defense Spending and the Detection of New Strategic Realities

Other German security experts and some allies, especially in the US, are forcefully arguing that Germany needs to move ahead faster than the official [1.5% goal](#) increase until 2024 and, more importantly, decouple defense spending from the artificial GDP percentage fixation from the Wales summit. This is because Corona produces relative *increases* without any additional Euro actually being spent on defense (and possibly even fewer) simply because economic growth rates fall. To be sure, defense spending is moving up in nominal as well as real terms (see Figure 1) and also more rapidly than in other NATO member states. Yet it does so from a low baseline and, more worryingly for both defense ministry insiders and the US, far less effectively as publicly promised as a [leaked internal document](#) from the defense ministry in February 2021 shows.

Figure 1: Nominal and Real Defense Spending in Germany (in billion EUR, constant prices 2019)



Source: Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft, raw data available [here](#).

Other experts, like Bastian Giegerich and Maximilian Terhalle in a pointed attack on “established positions” in Germany’s security discourse [published a few days ago](#), are going farther still in depicting the whole “strategic discourse” to be fundamentally flawed. Among others they diagnose widespread ignorance vis-à-vis security political “reality”, decades of “misapplications of history” in justifying a “civilian power” role, and “conceptual confusions” about what “strategy” is *really* all about. The title of the booklet, “The Responsibility to Defend”, is as smart as it is revealing: It tries to fuse the discourse of a collective UN-inspired “responsibility to protect” with the claimed “moral purpose” of redirecting Germany’s presumably short-sighted fixation on historical “responsibility” linked to the Third Reich towards a “responsibility” to “defend” itself and its allies more forcefully today. This is smart because it skillfully taps the receptiveness of the German public for a [“responsibility” discourse](#). It is also revealing because “responsibility” is now called forth for living up to today’s presumed “realities” of “power politics” where in the old days, most prominently when former German foreign minister Genscher negotiated the Two-Plus-Four Treaty on German unification with then Chancellor Helmut Kohl, [“responsibility politics” \(“Verantwortungspolitik”\)](#) stood for the *very opposite* of “power politics”.

Europe and German Military Leadership

I would venture to claim that such discursive shifts do not go unnoticed in European capitals. To be sure, these claims also have to be placed in a broader political context – and in that regard the mainstream political class and its enduring preference for the cautious Steinmeierian “facilitating” approach to leadership that has marked German foreign policy since Bonn Republic times continues to prevail. One of the most remarkable (and not sufficiently noticed) programmatic speeches along these lines has been given by (now) [President Steinmeier at the 2020 Munich Security Conference](#). In the speech Steinmeier emphasized that “Europe is not something that is merely nice to have or important when other partnerships wilt. No, it is *our strongest, our most fundamental national interest*. Today and tomorrow, Europe is *the indispensable framework for us to assert ourselves in the world*.” Steinmeier also reminded the global audience of world leaders that Germany’s Basic Law provides a definition of “national interest” in the Preamble: “to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe”. To put it pointedly: Neither in the German constitution, nor in international law is there a “responsibility to defend”. International law includes a “[responsibility to protect](#)” besides the “inherent *right* of collective or individual *self-defense* if an armed attack occurs” ([§51 UN Charter](#)) – nothing more and nothing less. How getting more skilled in “power politics” aligns with the preamble’s normative imperative of “equal partnership” is difficult to fathom.

Increasing Unease with (and Instrumental Confidence in) German Leadership

Therefore, whether getting more adept at “power politics” would help either Germany or Europe is questionable, to say the least. Just recall the turbulence at the sidelines of the recent NATO summit when the [Polish Foreign Minister bitterly complained about US President Biden hinting at his recognition of Germany’s central role in Europe](#) when he waived US sanctions over Nordstream 2 – despite strong bipartisan support in Congress and despite the fact that few of Germany’s allies support the pipeline’s completion. It is difficult to imagine that the current Polish Foreign Minister (or any of his colleagues from Central Europe) will hold another “Sikorski speech” in Berlin anytime soon.

Politically and militarily Germany is already a bit more “equal” than its European partners and certainly big *enough* for most of its neighbours. This does not

contradict the fact that some geographically more distant neighbours, especially in the Baltic republics, would appreciate a still stronger military commitment from Berlin – extremely [hesitant public opinion](#) in Germany notwithstanding ([ZMS 2020, p.71](#)). That US experts and politicians mostly see little reason to nourish doubts about German hegemonic ambitions is in part explained by different historical memories compared to Germany's immediate neighbours. More importantly, the often heard articulation of astonishment in American policy circles about remaining self-doubts among Germany's political class and the expression of "full confidence" in Germany is also instrumentally useful (and increasingly necessary) if the US wants to shift political as well as military resources to Asia. If one reads these statements in combination with the recent shift in US war-fighting planning from being able to fight at least two wars simultaneously to just one war against another great power – a move which US [defense experts](#) have identified as "the most significant departure in American defense strategy since the end of the Cold War" with "tremendous ramifications" – this is not really reassuring for any European ally of the US. To acknowledge against this background that there is a continuing need for an [American "pacifier" role in Europe](#) would be self-defeating for Washington given that everything seems to pale these days in comparison to the perceived threats emanating from China. To do so would feed the argument of American scholars like Hugo Meijer and Stephen Brooks who continue to argue that [Europeans cannot defend themselves](#), an argument which is increasingly challenged by realist colleagues in the US (such [Barry Posen](#) or [Stephen Walt](#)), among others for the reasons just mentioned. They do believe (and ever more US defense planners probably will feel the urge to persuade themselves to also believe) that Europeans could handle military challenges from Russia largely on their own. This is not a position widely shared among Europeans, Germans included. That Europeans *can* defend themselves may reasonably be argued *and* challenged based on a purely material basis and specific contingencies. Yet, that no EU member state *wants* the US to leave them on their own to largely organize their collective defense must not be reduced to mere comfort and politically convenient overreliance on the US. Simply ask the French and the Poles how comfortable they would be if Germany were to take over the US's traditional leadership role in the military field as well. As "[The Economist](#)" just reminded its readers, it contradicts post-war historical practice

that “America has always been the secret ingredient of European integration”.

Greatness and Smallness under EUropean Institutional Binding

Fourth, the attractiveness of *limited* German power is complemented by the fact that Germany is also *small enough* in significant other respects. Kissinger’s Europe, the Europe he had studied as a historian, was the paradigm case of great power politics and war. As a statesman he accompanied the early phase of EUropean integration, the time when he wondered “what phone number” one would have to call if one wanted to speak with an authorized representative of “Europe”. Institutionally EUrope has certainly not advanced as far as many potential non-EUropeans callers would prefer, yet the EU is quite a different beast today compared to the 1960s or 1970s. Most importantly, it has advanced institutionally to spheres of joint political and even military action with decision-making rules which tie down even the most powerful member state. In that sense EUrope, from the perspective of successfully “tamed German power”, is just one expression of German “small enoughness”.

The Beauties of Smallness

The beauty of German smallness, fifth, is perhaps best enshrined in the extension of EUropean practices of multilateralism to the global stage. Historically, and for the time being, the EU looks in many ways like the pinnacle of multilateral cooperation. In John Ruggie’s understanding of multilateralism European “integration” is simply one of its most advanced versions. Having internalized EUrope’s integration practices *and* successes – not least its vehicle function in helping Germany itself to make the transition from Europe’s prime rogue state after WW II to one its most respected and envied countries – positions Germany well for the world beyond Europe, precisely because it is *sufficiently* big by itself (politically and economically) and bigger still in acting globally as *part of EUrope*. Yet it is also small enough not to pose the type of threat to any other state which Kissinger had in mind in analyzing Germany’s past. Still it can draw on sufficient material as well as soft power resources to render “global Germany” talk sufficiently plausible in the “Chief Facilitating Officer” sense Frank-Walter Steinmeier offered.

Alliances for Multilateralism

The recently published official German White Paper on Multilateralism summarizes Germany’s self-understanding along these lines. It builds on the “Alliance for

Multilateralism” which German Foreign Minister Maas had launched together with his French counterpart in the fall of 2019. Both can be taken as an official answer to Henry Kissinger’s question what a “global Germany” might be like today – a fan of the political belief that world-political smallness has its attractions, the belief that such smallness is not only beautiful if looked at from the perspective of other not so great powers, but also that it is a “reality” for *any* state if one looks at it against the background of the global challenges associated with the looming global catastrophes of the anthropocene.

Lingering yearnings among some German politicians for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council have not been abandoned for good. Yet, whatever Wilhelminian dreams for a modern equivalent of “Germany’s place in the sun” may remain, Berlin by now seems to have found a satisfying substitute in positioning the country as a champion of multilateralism. In Richard Rorty’s description (“Achieving our Country”, p.3) this is reason enough to be “proud” in a novel fashion – not the “national pride” which in an earlier historical phase produced “bellicosity and imperialism”. Rather, it would be the type of comprehensive “emotional involvement with one’s country – feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of its history, and by various present-day national policies”. Both are “necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive” – and a lot of productive imagination will be needed in the years to come to tackle the proliferating global agenda. Mentally Germany is better prepared to make a contribution in addressing these problems than it was most times of its nation-state history when it tried to address problems it associated with “power” in the “power politics” sense.

Great Power Redefined

If you tend to discount philosophers’ advice on “strategy”, listen to the authoritative voice of Wolfgang Ischinger, the Chairman of the Munich Security Conference. Some twenty years ago when he was still politically active as State Minister in the German Foreign Office he gave a speech on Russia at the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing. In it he offered a new definition of what it meant to be a “great power” in the contemporary age. “Greatness”, he suggested, could no longer be defined in „traditional“ “power” terms. It had to be defined in terms of “strength to shape” something (“Kraft zu gestalten”). For a modern great power it would be “more important to persuade than to threaten, to embed or bind (“einzubinden”) rather than

dominate”, and “to win over partners rather than keeping adversaries in check. These are the commandments of the 21st century” (translated from [Friedensgutachten 2001, p.255](#)). Henry Kissinger might agree that this is a fitting redefinition – and that his understanding of a “global Germany” is compatible with it. In this light the second meaning of “Schicksal”, “destiny” easily complements the first, “fate”, as a determinate future shaped by damnation opens up as one of choice.

This is a slightly revised version of the one initially posted on 18 June 2021.

- 20 June 2021