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Policy Brief
December 2021, PB-53/21

Which German partner for Africa? The continent facing the Scholz government

By ***Dominique Bocquet***

Summary

In a country as stable as Germany, changes of Chancellor are a rarity. Angela Merkel stayed in power for sixteen years, as did Helmut Kohl in his time. The new three-party coalition (Social Democrats, Greens, Liberals) intends to shake up the country. How should Africa approach this new leadership? Can the new government bring momentum to Euro-African relations? Can Berlin bring about a clear understanding of Africa's development issues and geopolitical subtleties?

Germany caught in the middle

Recognizing the importance of Africa, Germany is somewhat of conundrum. On one hand, Germany seeks to act: signal its readiness and engage in dialogue. It currently is one of only a handful of industrialized nations complying with the global 0.7 percent GDP target for development assistance. On the other hand, the country is restricted by domestic realities that set it apart from other European countries.

It does not border the Mediterranean. Its colonial experience having ended in 1919, it has no language presence in Africa and no human ties similar to those of France, the United Kingdom or Portugal. These differences will certainly fade over time with globalization (the influx of foreign students will bring about other ties, as will labor immigration stimulated by the prosperity of German industry).

Other restraining factors are also however at play, including the principles that shape the Federal Republic's foreign policy. The Federal Republic was established in 1949 on the remains of Nazism. Germany rebuilt its identity enshrining concepts such as primacy of human rights and rejection of power politics...

Germany remains wary of geopolitics and willingly defers to United Nations positions to determine diplomatic policy. This often keeps it from "the practical analysis of

a specific situation" and leads to a stiffening of positions, as was the case for the Sahara.

Furthermore, the building of democracy and good governance in Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, are complex issues. They require pragmatic interpretation and gradual, occasionally nuanced, approaches.

Confronted by these subtleties, Berlin often finds itself at a loss: Navigating between its own sometimes inflexible principles, the diversity of situations and partner sovereignty? What is the right way to deal with changing power balances on the continent? For others, it is usually geopolitical realism, a concept that is frowned upon in the Federal Republic, that balances things out. This leads to lower engagement in dialogue and to lack of initiative...

A number of writers have cited these "contradictions" as essential to understanding German foreign policy.[1] The 2021 change at the helm does not erase these contradictions. But it does alter the way they impact decision-making circles.

The Scholz Cabinet

Traditionally used to two-party coalitions, Germany is for the first time ruled by a coalition of SPD social democrats, Bündnis-90 Greens and FDP liberals. The three parties negotiated extensively before reaching a coalition agreement based on a comprehensive government program for the four years ahead.

The SPD won the Bundestag elections (25% of the vote), owing to Olaf Scholz's popularity, and thus nominated him for the Chancellery, the government's highest office. The Liberals (13%), more committed to budgetary discipline than their partners, insisted their leader, Christian Linder, be in charge of finance.

The Greens, the second largest party in the coalition with 15%, obtained two major ministries, Foreign Affairs (a classic allocation for the second largest party in German coalitions) and a ministry combining Economy and Climate. Unsurprisingly, the party's two "co-leaders" got these portfolios: Robert Habeck for "Economy-Climate" and Annalena Baerbock for Foreign Affairs. Svenja Schulze, SPD, was appointed to the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development (a position that stayed open until the end).

Despite already being part of the previous coalition (grand coalition led by Angela Merkel's CDU-CSU), the SPD did not hold the cooperation portfolio. This means that all of ministries listed here changed hands, not only in terms of incumbency, but also in terms of political party affiliation. This favors a fresh look.

Atypical foreign policy operations

Before exploring respective positions, we should set aside a misleading perspective: foreign policy decisions in Germany are not made in the same way as in comparable countries (e.g., France or the United Kingdom). The trap of dialoguing with Berlin according to modalities inspired by relations with other countries and, above all, expecting similar responsiveness should be avoided.

The French president is the undisputed head of foreign policy. Constitutionally, he or she has the power to decide on military intervention without reference to Parliament. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom has plenty of leeway if he or she is in tune with the majority in the House of Commons, which is usually the case.

This is not the case in Berlin. For the German Chancellor, the foreign minister, almost always a member of a party other than his/her own (as is the case here again), is a contractual partner, not an agent. They are both bound by the coalition agreement, negotiated over two months by the three parties and involving three hundred experts. The agreement is specific in its content (177 pages in total) and binding in its orientation. Holding to it ensures sustainability for the coalition over the four-year term. To deviate from it is to threaten governmental stability. No chancellor has any interest in this.

However precise its guidelines, the coalition agreement does not provide for everything. Foreign policy takes up only a few pages, and those pages focus on politically sensitive issues between the parties involved. Things inevitably happen, sometimes upsetting pre-established interpretations, and sometimes causing disagreement. The process of developing government positions is not without substance.

1. Notably Hans Stark and Stephan Martens, referred to in the bibliography.

This elaboration is collegial and progressive. The Chancellor, as head of the government, can give impetus, encourage developments and support gradual change. But rarely can the Chancellor unilaterally change the country's positions overnight. He or she can only do so when major national interests are recognized (Kohl and reunification) or when national consensus is within reach (Merkel and the nuclear phase-out).

This is truer of Olaf Scholz than of his predecessors: the latter represented the "dominant party" in previous coalitions. In the new coalition, the Greens and the Liberals together account for more MPs than the SPD, which is merely the "leading party".

This modus operandi is no coincidence. The approach is in line with a set of fundamental choices that primarily reflect the country's unique history.

A country wary... of its own power

Germany lost more than a third of its territory in the two world wars. By way of compensation, it has since 1949 proclaimed a "virtuous" approach to international relations. In relation to itself, it is wary of the notion of "power," at least in political terms.

After the Second World War, Germany developed taboos, first towards the use of force, and also, more broadly, towards what it considers unilateral acts, or even towards the very concept of geopolitics...!

These taboos are primarily attributable to the trauma of Nazism, the virulent and racist form of imperialism responsible for unprecedented crimes (1933-1945). This experiment ended extremely badly for Germany itself, forced to capitulate, broken in two and plunged into international opprobrium.

But the roots of these taboos go back still further: they trace back to the 19th century, a historical depth that further entrenches them.

Lessons from the "first" German unification (19th century)

In the nineteenth century, Germany successfully became an influential nation despite late unification. The late achievement of political power did not prevent it from becoming an economic powerhouse. Once unified, it started off careful not to worry its neighbors. Chancellor Bismarck, who had the confidence of Kaiser Wilhelm I, exercised a measure of restraint, particularly in keeping the country away from colonial conquest and global ambitions that might have irritated England.

After his accession in 1888 and Bismarck's departure in 1890, Kaiser Wilhelm II abandoned this prudence. He initiated world politics (Weltpolitik), notably engaging in the arms race (navy) and in colonial conquests, all of this against a background of authoritarian democracy and the rising political influence of senior military staff. A quarter of a century later, came the First World War (1914-1918), with its bloodbath, then the first defeat, the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles, the loss of the colonies and of portions of European territory in 1919.

This historical precedent only reinforced the idea, formed after 1945, that the political logic of "power" does not suit Germany. Reunification in 1989, obtained peacefully with the end of the Iron Curtain, was not to challenge this notion.

Reconstruction resembling personality reconstitution

The Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949, emphasized moral and political principles to regain its place among nations. These principles became part of a national identity shaped in the 1950s by the Marshall Plan and European reconstruction. They confer a singularity that cannot be ignored. Transgressing these principles for expediency or mere political interest is frowned upon.

These principles are in part domestic: human rights, federalism, parliamentary government. Domestic principles are safeguards for compliance with external

principles and international rules of conduct. They draw on lessons learnt from past mistakes. It is therefore unwise for outside partners to underestimate the impact of such principles: the Bundestag is not a mere a constitutionally imposed institutional constraint the executive branch can overcome with a bit of patience.

A democratic approach to foreign policy ensures a peace-oriented policy. As Aurélie Filippetti[2] points out, an emphasis on moral values promotes ''serene political debate", which in turn largely contributes to the unanimously recognized quality of the country's democratic life. Morality goes hand in hand with seriousness. This is why the parties called upon to play a pivotal role in developing government agendas are staffed with expert resources. These resources are allocated to foundations associated with the parties - the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for the SPD, the Heinrich Böll Foundation for the Greens and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for the Liberals. Their action extends abroad in the areas of education, analysis and cooperation.

Some see the international role of these foundations as that of a German Deep State. Clearly such a channel should not be neglected to gain greater understanding in Berlin.

Pride in its economic success is another "identity" characteristic of the Federal Republic. This is a central theme dating back to the 1950s. It has implications for the substance of national interests: German exports and the prosperity of German firms are a central part of this. This supports the country's position on free trade and multilateralism. However, as regards bilateral economic interests, one should be wary of hasty generalizations: they are not promoted by Berlin in the same way they are by Washington, or even London, Rome or Paris.

Possible avenues for change in the German position

Taboos do not disappear with the new coalition. The Greens, and even the SPD itself, still defer more to UN positions than do center-right parties. At the same time, this coalition is less Atlanticist, and therefore not as sensitive to US views, as the previous Merkel coalition. It is, however, compelled to look to the future, and thus prepare Germany for greater responsibility, including in relation to Africa. So, what are the opportunities in this respect?

2. Article referred to in the bibliography.

The first channel for Germany to assume greater international responsibility is via the European Union.

The new government's commitment to Europe is clearly stated in the coalition agreement. Dynamic Euro-African cooperation is on the agenda. The same applies to the Mediterranean. Berlin is committed to the role of the European Parliament in defining common policies, including in foreign affairs. This however does not preclude discerning the limits of the Strasbourg Assembly's geopolitical vision. On an issue such as the Sahara for instance, the new government's European reflex will have it closely monitor the positions of France and Spain, countries it knows are attentive to the realities of North Africa. This is a possible source of change in long term German positions.

A second source of realism can, paradoxically, come from the Greens.

This party was initially founded by pacifists hostile to US nuclear weapons deployment in Europe in the 1980s. It opposed to the logic of balance of power, though essential to Europe's security in the face of Soviet danger. The party then realized these positions upset voters, distanced it from power and made it impossible for it to pursue its ecological program.

Hence the ascension within the Green Party of the so-called "realos", formerly embodied by Joschka Fischer. Foreign Minister in the Schröder government between 1998 and 2005, he lobbied for German participation in NATO military operations in former Yugoslavia. His reasons included proving the Greens' ability to govern. Annalena Baerbock is not averse to this approach. Over the years, she asserted herself in the Bundestag as a foreign policy expert. As her party won 15 per cent of the vote, she now must prove her ability to manage issues over the long-term to preserve this record.

A third source of German political realism lies in the economy.

As the largest exporter in the European Union and the third largest worldwide, Germany is eager to make it

easier for companies to do business and promote trade. Concerns about China and setbacks with Russia in the 2010s only serve to heighten the importance of Africa, a continent with striking growth prospects. Germany is keen on the future African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA). It is also attentive to Morocco's dynamism in forging a set of bilateral agreements, as it is to trends in East Africa.

Germany is not afraid to import its energy as a result of its trade surpluses. This makes it a natural partner for green energy export projects from the Maghreb (electricity, hydrogen, etc.). It is important to make the parties in the new coalition aware of these projects (they had been promoted by Christian-Democrat ministers). One point to note: economic issues are particularly attractive to the Liberals, the third party in the coalition.

Economic dialogue fosters curiosity, openness and involvement. But the concept of "give and take" should be avoided, as it is considered embarrassing in Berlin. German President Horst Köhler was forced to resign in 2010 for suggesting that participation in the NATO intervention in Afghanistan was in Germany's economic interests. Elsewhere in the world, such an assertion would have seemed trivial. The time ahead holds many opportunities. But, to advance with a country that loves patience and method, those same qualities will, more often than not, be required of it...

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He is the author of several books and reports, including "Génération Europe" (Editions François Bourin, 1989), in collaboration with Philippe Delleur; "France and Germany, a couple running out of ideas" (Notes from the Saint-Simon Foundation, 1996); What economic efficiency for Lomé? "(Report for the Minister of Economy, Finance and Industry, June 1998)" Bringing the EDF into the EU's Budget, a step forward in modernizing aid "(Report for the Minister for the Economy, Finance and Industry, July 2003). He also published a book on OECD, Reasoned Globalization, The Discreet Revolutions of OECD (La Documentation française, Paris, 2012).

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