
Kant vs Hobbes: elements of Germany's emerging grand strategy

Ulrich Speck | Senior Research Fellow, Elcano Royal Institute | @UlrichSpeck 

Theme

Putting its weight behind the status quo is at the core of Germany's emerging grand strategy. This involves keeping the EU up, the US in, and Russia and China out.

Summary

For decades, Germany has been embedded in three larger structures: (1) the transatlantic alliance; (2) European integration; and (3) the wider, US-led liberal international order. This international environment has been crucial for the country's success, allowing it to become a stable liberal democracy and one of the most powerful economies in a globalised world. As all three dimensions of this order are currently looking fragile, and as a more 'Hobbesian' international order seems to be emerging – the return to classical power politics –, Germany has become a more active defender of the existing international architecture. Three dimensions of its emerging grand strategy can be identified: (1) keeping the US engaged in Europe; (2) maintaining the EU intact; and (3) engaging the challengers to the status quo.

Analysis

(1) Change in the air: the four crises affecting Germany

In the past few years, Europe has been shaken by a number of crises, involving the Euro, refugees and Brexit. From a technocratic standpoint, it would be relatively easy to solve these crises by moving towards a more federal EU state, transferring more power from the nation-states to the EU institutions. From a political standpoint, however, it has become clear in the last years that neither governments nor electorates are ready for such a transfer of power. Crisis management has been led by the capitals of the big member states, not by the EU institutions. And nationalism and euro-scepticism have made a comeback in Europe. At least for the time being, European integration seems to have reached its limits.

The second crisis is the transatlantic crisis. Donald Trump has pledged radical change to his voters, also with regard to the relationship between the US and its allies. For him, the US in the past has cut a 'bad deal' with its allies, and he has been especially critical with Germany over its low defence spending and its trade surplus with the US. While his cabinet has steered the Trump White House towards continuity, towards a status quo in foreign policy, the President himself remains unpredictable and with him

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US policies. Even more crucially, Trump's criticism of the allies is shared by large parts of the American political establishment, and many voters want Washington to focus more narrowly on US interests. Overall it seems that the transatlantic relationship has lost its key importance for the US. And unlike Europe, the US has all it needs to be a major player in a more 'multipolar' environment, in which great powers cut their deals with little or no regard to less powerful countries.

This is an order which Russia and China apparently would like to see emerge: a more 'realist' world where the West stops emphasising liberal democracy and where the only international currency that matters is power, especially military power. Both countries see themselves as 'great powers', entitled to claim spheres of influence (or better, spheres of control). While the ruling elites in Russia and China depend on a functioning international economic order, they strongly resent its 'liberal' element, especially in two regards. On the one hand, they refuse to accept the element of equality between states that is inherent in the post-1945 international order; weaker states are not seen as sovereign. On the other hand, they fear democratic 'contagion', which is an existential threat to their polities. Both have become more assertive and aggressive in the last few years, with autocratic consolidation of power at home and a stronger push for spheres of influence abroad. The push, most visible in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea, is causing the fourth major crisis of the current order.

The fourth crisis is turmoil in the larger Middle East. The old 'social contract', according to which dictators redistributed parts of their countries' oil revenues in return for acquiescence to their heavy-handed rule is gone, but no new order based on a market economy and political participation has emerged so far. Chaos, violence and war are spilling over to Europe in the form of refugees and terrorism. Europe's response is largely focused on fighting terrorism and attempting to limit the influx of refugees. Europe must choose to either engage on a much broader scale or move towards a 'fortress Europe' scenario in which it is far more ruthless in combating the influx of migrants and refugees, despite this severely undermining its core European values.

(2) Germany in search of a strategy

The three dimensions of the international order that matter most for Germany are looking increasingly fragile: the European order embodied by the EU, the transatlantic relationship and the liberal international order. Born out of the ashes of the Second World War in 1949, and transformed through re-unification in 1990, Germany is perfectly adapted to the US-led multilateral order. For the 'Hobbesian' alternative –the kind of multipolar, power-based order that Russia and China prefer– Germany is badly equipped. Its international standing is based on economic power and soft power, international rules and institutions, and an open environment where the extensive cross-border movement of goods, capital and information is possible. And it continues to reject military power for other than narrowly-defined defensive purposes. In Europe, Germany needs the EU as a joint instrument to manage intra-regional relations. In the wider world, Germany needs basic stability and a functioning international market, which includes rules and infrastructure for transport and communications. Regarding its own security, Germany relies on an alliance with more powerful partners, especially the US.

In the last years, Berlin has increasingly realised that it has to step-up its international role in order to keep this international order intact. In its first decades, West Germany relied on US leadership; there was little space and little need for German initiatives. The break-down of the Soviet-Union confirmed and strengthened the Western –US– order, with large parts of Eurasia joining the West either fully or partly (integrating economically but not politically). Globalisation appeared to be a relatively natural, self-sustaining process, transforming countries almost effortlessly into liberal democracies and market economies, into stakeholders of the liberal international order. Today, however, the picture is rather bleak. The EU is being challenged from within as well as from the outside, the longer-term US commitment to NATO has become questionable, and globalisation and the corresponding liberal international order are being defied not only by Russia and –partly– China but also by the ‘America first’ agenda which took Trump to the White House.

These multiple crises have turned Germany into a leader by default. Economically, it is the strongest country in Europe and one of the leading global economies. With its geographic location at the centre of the EU, its culture of compromise and its strong commitment to European unity, it is the only country that has what it takes to build a European consensus. Germany plays an increasingly important role in NATO and is co-leading the EU together with France. It is a member of the G7 and seen by the US, Russia and China as the leading country in Europe. While large parts of the population remain sceptical of a stronger international role, the political leadership has realised that Germany must do more and there has been discussion about the country's ‘new responsibility’. Germany has, indeed, been playing a more significant role in the past few years. But what are its goals? What are the key dimensions of Germany's emerging grand strategy?

(3) The dimensions of Germany's grand strategy

(3.1) *Keeping the US engaged in Europe*

Germans have, as do most Europeans, a very negative opinion of Donald Trump. But for political Berlin there is a clear understanding that *Germany needs to continue to work closely with the US*, first because it relies on US security guarantees in Europe, secondly because the US remains the major player in almost every area and region that matters to German foreign policy, and third because Europe and the US remain close with regard to their interests and values, despite a number of disagreements. At the same time, there is a realisation that the transatlantic alliance is becoming more fragile: ‘There is no eternal guarantee for a close (US) cooperation with us Europeans’, Merkel said shortly after Trump's election.

One way to keep the US engaged is to share a bigger part of the defence burden. Germany has stepped up its role in NATO, playing an important role in the measures aimed at reassurance and deterrence for NATO's eastern flank in the last years. It has done so in response to two sources of pressure: from its Eastern neighbours, such as Poland, and from the US. Berlin has also committed itself to the goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence. It is clear for Germany's leadership that the only way to keep the US committed to European security is to step up Europe's own efforts.

The other way to keep the transatlantic relationship strong is to forge even stronger economic links. That is why Merkel has decisively supported the TTIP, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. While there is an economic interest in the TTIP, there is also a clear strategic dimension. The deeper economic transatlantic ties become, the stronger the incentives for the US to remain engaged in Europe and to care for it. Despite Trump having put the negotiations on hold, the process may not be dead.

Given Trump's massive unpopularity, keeping the transatlantic relationship alive is also a domestic challenge. For Merkel there was a considerable risk that during the election campaign she would be portrayed as Trump's poodle. While on the one hand she had to reach out to the new US President in order to protect German interests, on the other she had to make sure that she would not be seen as his best friend. To navigate between the two, Merkel has built up a relationship with Trump's daughter Ivanka, inviting her to Berlin. She has also had a number of personal meetings and held phone talks with Trump, at which they have discussed geopolitical hotspots including Ukraine, Syria and North Korea.

As continuity seems to prevail in the Trump White House, today the transatlantic relationship looks much safer than in the early days of the new Administration. But the fragility of the relationship transcends Trump. The greater the burden the US has to bear –for European defence as well as for the liberal international order– the louder the voices in the US calling for retrenchment. The safest way to keep the US engaged and interested is more European engagement, on both the regional and global levels.

(3.2) Keeping the EU intact

Germany remains deeply committed to the EU. For most Germans, the EU is not just a tool to reach clearly defined (economic) goals but is an end itself. European integration is seen as the ultimate insurance against the return of a sinister German and European past: against the return of the competitive geopolitics that dominated Europe in the first half of the 20th century. That is why the concept of European integration has been deeply ingrained in Germany's DNA for decades. Almost all political parties of any significance are pro-EU, even federalist in rhetoric. And the scant euro-scepticism there is, is very moderate in tone.

From a strategic standpoint, the EU is the platform which allows Berlin to jointly manage the European space together with its partners in the Union. This is beneficial not only in economic terms but also helps to overcome distrust and disagreements between European neighbours. Moreover, joint EU positions and action give the bigger member states the opportunity to multiply their weight on a global scale: by using economic tools such as trade agreements or sanctions, or by acting as a bloc in international institutions.

Keeping the EU intact currently means several things for Berlin. First, preventing a breakdown of the Euro; secondly, finding ways to deal with the refugee crisis on an EU level; and third, preventing Brexit from undermining the EU's cohesion. The way to achieve these goals is to broker a consensus at the EU level. Typically, Berlin first consults with Paris and Brussels –with the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council– in order to determine the contours of a compromise acceptable to the leading players. If

there is a joint position, there is a good chance for the others to buy it, a green light from the European Council.

Brokering a consensus is increasingly difficult, as the issues at stake at the EU level are increasingly politicised. Technocratic solutions have often worked in the past when the EU was largely about market integration. But when it comes to core economic policies, the treatment of refugees and migrants, or relations with Russia, finding a meaningful compromise is often difficult, since governments have little room for manoeuvre when key national interests or identities are being challenged.

(3.3) Confront and engage: dealing with challengers

For many years, Germany's approach to the dominant powers in the East, Russia and China, has been driven by the interests of German business. Over the past years, however, Berlin has taken a broader, geopolitical view of its relations with both. It was Merkel who took a lead in the Ukraine conflict, co-managing the Western response to Russian aggression in tandem with President Obama. Both framed the Western position as motivated by the defence of the liberal international order. Merkel said that with the Russian attack on Ukraine, 'the principles and methods of reconciliation of interests in the 21st century' are at stake, that Russia is threatening 'the entire European peaceful order'.

Merkel has also broadened Germany's agenda with China, by including geopolitical issues such as the conflict over the South China Sea in the bilateral talks. And while Berlin has often complained about its limited access to Chinese markets (a lack of 'reciprocity'), it recently started to take a more hard-line approach to Chinese investment in German and European 'strategic assets'.

When it comes to defending the principles of international order, Germany's instruments are those of a self-styled 'civilian power': mainly diplomacy and economic tools. Germany as a 'post-modern' power does not consider military means to be a part of its foreign policy toolbox (the deployment of German troops abroad only takes place in response to request from its closest allies –the US and France– and mainly involves 'soft-side' issues such as training, reconnaissance and air transport).

Furthermore, Germany typically softens confrontations with engagement. Merkel has not only pushed for massive sanctions against Russia but has also led diplomatic initiatives, talking far more with Putin at the height of the conflict than any other Western leader. And while Germany remains firm on sanctions and on its support for Ukraine, it is also poised to support a second Russian gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea, Nord Stream 2.

Conclusions and outlook

Germany is an economic giant, a major political player in Europe and beyond, but remains a dwarf in military affairs, deeply hesitant and unwilling to play traditional power politics. Unlike 'realists' expected in the 1990s, Germany has not used its newfound freedom of action to become a traditional power, more akin to France, the UK or Russia. Instead, Germany after unification was keen to remain embedded in transatlantic

relations, European integration and the US-led liberal international order. Western Germany's self-styled identity as a 'civilian power' has not been transformed by the post-Cold War era and it remains the leitmotif of German foreign policy.

Germany is using its new weight in order to defend the status quo. A future beyond NATO, EU and globalisation remains unthinkable both for Germany's elites and the majority of its voters. Defending the web of institutions that was built up in the US-dominated West during the Cold War, and enlarged and deepened afterwards, is at the core of Germany's grand strategy. For Germany the only way ahead is to preserve these structures; the nationalist, sovereigntist alternative that exists in France, the UK or Poland is almost non-existent in German discourse. And Germany would indeed be in deep trouble if a general shift towards power politics and a multipolar order were to take place. Its economic model is based on open borders and a functioning infrastructure for global trade, and its political mentality is with Kant, not with Hobbes.

Putting its weight behind the status quo is therefore at the core of Germany's emerging grand strategy. In other words, it involves keeping the EU up, the US in, and Russia and China out.