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► GERMANY AND TURKEY AFTER MERKEL

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InBrief Series

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The imminent end of the Merkel era has led to much speculation about a possible shift in German foreign policy. Because of the uncertainty about who will succeed Merkel as chancellor after the election that takes place in September and what kind of coalition he or she will lead, many analysts see German politics as entering a period of flux. In particular, many expect that, if the Greens are part of the next government – or perhaps even lead it – Germany would take a different approach towards the European Union and the EU might even take a different approach towards other powers such as Turkey.

It is particularly tempting to think that the end of the Merkel era might lead to a shift in EU policy towards Turkey because of the central role that she played in negotiating the refugee deal in 2015, which transformed the relationship between the EU and Turkey. In the six years since then, there has been much discussion about whether the deal is sustainable – and about the consequences of it for the EU's approach to Turkey. Some accuse the EU of a kind of policy of appeasement towards Recep Tayyip Erdoğan because it fears taking a tougher approach that might lead to another refugee crisis.

In reality, however, it is unlikely that German foreign policy will be dramatically different after Merkel leaves office. This is above all because of the broad consensus that continues to exist in Germany about economic and security issues – a consensus that includes the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats and the Greens. Merkel has to some extent created that consensus during the last 15 years, but she has done so mostly by following public opinion rather than by shaping it. Her political skill was to knit together positions on different issues based on popular preferences.

It is true that, after an extraordinary period in which there have been three grand coalitions in four electoral periods, there is now some movement in German politics. In particular, during the last few months, as Germany has struggled with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Christian Democrats have plummeted in the polls, which has in turn opened up a possibility that the Greens might lead the next government – perhaps in a “green-black” coalition with the Christian Democrats as junior partner. But it remains far from clear whether this will happen or even if it will be possible – according to the most recent polls, the Christian Democrats are once again ahead of the Greens.

However, even if the Greens were to lead the next government, it is unlikely that this will lead to a dramatic change of direction. It would still be a coalition, albeit with the Greens as the senior partner, and so they would need to negotiate a coalition agreement with the Christian Democrats. The role of the Bundesrat, the upper house of the German parliament, puts German governments under further structural pressure to reach a consensus even with parties that are not part of the coalition. In any case, what might be called the “Merkel consensus” would still remain – even if she is no longer in the chancellery.

As far as Turkey is concerned, this means that Germany is likely to continue to pursue the same approach as it has done since 2015 and above all to seek to prevent a collapse of the refugee deal. Many Turkish analysts are sceptical of Erdoğan’s threats to unleash a new wave of asylum seekers on Europe. After all, the Balkan route – through which asylum seekers made their way from Turkey to Germany in 2015 – is now closed. But a German government could not simply ignore a humanitarian crisis in Greece if Erdoğan were to allow a large number of asylum seekers to leave Turkey.

In any case, whether or not German policymakers are correct in their assessment of how real the threat from Erdoğan is, they are likely to continue to view Turkey through the prism of this fear of a renewed refugee crisis. This means in turn that the next German government – whether it is led by the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats or the Greens – would continue to take a cautious approach towards other issues like the dispute about oil drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Greens would instinctively take a tougher line on issues around democracy and human rights and would be more vocal in criticising political developments in Turkey. At the same time, however, because a Green-led government

would aspire to be more “pro-European” than the current government and in particular to show more “solidarity” towards debtor countries in the eurozone, it would be even more vulnerable to a threat by Erdoğan to create a humanitarian crisis in Greece.

To a large extent, Germany’s approach to Turkey is also driven by business interests. The importance of production in Turkey as part of German companies’ global value chain must be taken into account in analysing Chancellor Merkel’s “protective” approach to Turkey. For example, after the detention of an American pastor on charges of belonging to a terrorist organization led to a crisis in relations between Turkey and the United States, the German government expressed concern over a possible economic crisis in Turkey¹. Sources close to Merkel said that “If Turkey becomes unstable, we’ll have a huge problem in Europe.” The German economy minister subsequently went to Turkey with a 30-person business delegation.

Many foreign policy analysts urge Germany to take a more “strategic” approach to a range of questions. But the reality is that German foreign policy is already “strategic” in the sense that it reflects its national identity and the way it understands its national interests. Even after Merkel leaves office, there is little chance that German foreign policy will change dramatically from within. Those hoping for a different approach should look instead at the evolution of U.S. foreign policy – which is ultimately what could force German foreign policy to adapt.

After Donald Trump was elected as president of the United States, Europeans reached the conclusion that, as Chancellor Angela Merkel famously put it in a speech in May 2017, Europe must “take its destiny into its own hands” – in other words, it needed to become more independent of the United States. Since then,

¹ <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/germany-cosies-up-to-erdogan-to-prevent-economic-collapse-a-1224809.html>.

the concept of “strategic autonomy” gained momentum among EU policymakers. But attempts to develop EU defence initiatives have made little progress – and the election of Joe Biden as president has now taken the pressure off Europeans to achieve that vaunted “strategic autonomy”.

At the same time, however, the EU is asserting its independence from the United States in other areas including trade, investment, energy and technology in the name of “European sovereignty”. Led by Merkel, the EU pressed ahead with its Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China – even after incoming National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan pleaded on Twitter for “early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China’s economic practices”. The issue of participation by the Chinese technology giant Huawei in 5G networks is another source of tension with the United States. Germany has also pushed ahead with the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline despite opposition from the Biden administration.

The question is whether the United States will allow the EU to pursue these initiatives while continuing to depend on it for its security. Some in the Biden administration see the Transatlantic relationship as an end in itself and want above all to restore it. But others, particularly those who are focused on achieving American objectives elsewhere in the world, see the Transatlantic relationship in more instrumental terms – that is, as a mechanism for achieving those objectives – and would be willing to put more pressure on the EU to align it with them.

What this means for Turkey is unclear. There is a parallel between German and European attempts to assert their sovereignty while continuing to depend on the United States for its security and Turkey’s own attempts to increase its freedom of manoeuvre in the Middle East while remaining within NATO. Both Germany and Turkey are both strategically important but difficult allies for the United States. But this does mean they have shared interests. Rather, what may be emerging is a more dysfunctional NATO that is held together neither by ideology nor by shared interests.

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