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COMMENT

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A more self-assured Germany: the new white paper highlights Germany's readiness to bolster European security and defence

With partners looking to Germany for leadership in managing Europe's multiple crises, Berlin responds with a white paper that underlines its responsibility to actively shape international politics. Germany's input provides the basis for the EU's current efforts to strengthen its security and defence policy.

An update of Germany's foreign and security policy vision was long overdue. The previous German white paper on security policy was published in 2006. Since then, both Europe's security environment and Germany's status in Europe have changed radically. Having emerged as the continent's political leader, Germany is now expected, and has slowly begun, to play a much more active role in resolving international crises.

The new white paper reflects this change. It portrays Germany as an actor whose economic and political weight demands it to shoulder greater international responsibilities. Germany now sees it as its duty "to actively participate in shaping the global order" and "to assume leadership". This is unprecedented in a country in which the past weighs heavily on the political debate and provides a strong argument in favour of international restraint.

The shift in German thinking has, of course, not taken place overnight. The eurozone crisis, the confrontation with Russia, and the refugee crisis have each contributed to the process, demonstrating that standing on the sidelines is not a viable option for a country of Germany's size, resources and influence. As early as January 2014, the German

foreign policy leadership formulated what has become known as the "Munich Consensus", a call for a more active German role in international affairs. With the publication of the white paper, this position is now official – and remarkably untested internationally.

In order to resolve international crises, Germany continues to prefer a comprehensive approach, consisting of a broad range of civilian and military instruments. The difference is that Germany now aims to respond to crises earlier and in a more substantial manner. The challenge posed by Russia also looms large in the new white paper, resulting in a strong emphasis on deterrence and resilience. In order to prepare its armed forces for the new challenges, Germany is about to substantially increase its defence expenditure. In January 2016, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced a plan to spend a total of 130 billion euro on defence procurement over the next 15 years.

Apart from attesting to Germany's readiness to play a more active security and defence policy role, the white paper also underlines Berlin's willingness to reinforce NATO and the EU. For Germany, NATO continues to be "an indispensable guarantor of German, European

and transatlantic security" and the country vows to "strengthen NATO's European Pillar". In practice, Germany is concentrating on the Framework Nation Concept, which it introduced in 2013 to enhance defence cooperation between NATO countries. Germany has also increased its involvement in NATO's reassurance measures, pledging to lead the new NATO battalion that will be deployed to Lithuania.

As far as the EU's role is concerned, the white paper attaches particular importance to the Union's comprehensive policy toolbox: by orchestrating European diplomacy, trade policy and intra-EU instruments – such as digital policy, justice and home affairs policy as well as intelligence and police cooperation – the EU should be able to effectively combat terrorism as well as hybrid and cyber threats.

In order to push the EU's efforts in the security and defence field further, Germany proposes the long-term goal of a "European Security and Defence Union". Rather than calling for a European Army, the concept describes steps to enhance defence cooperation between the member states. Germany advocates the establishment of an integrated civilian-military headquarters, which would help speed up the EU's

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crisis management efforts – a plan that the UK has torpedoed in the past. A regular monitoring process should encourage member states to share and coordinate their plans regarding capabilities and spending. Finally, as Germany is strongly committed to both NATO and the EU, it encourages closer cooperation between the two, including interoperable capabilities.

The parties comprising Germany's current government coalition disagreed on some of the details of the white paper, such as the role of the German armed forces in internal security. However, all in all there seems to be a surprisingly broad consensus within the German political elite on the new, more active course. As a result, the upcoming Bundestag election is unlikely to lead to major readjustments. This does not mean that living up to the ambitious vision will be easy. Despite the recently announced increase in defence spending, the German armed forces are still recovering from an extended period of budget cuts. Moreover, while public acceptance of a greater German role might have gradually increased, German military engagement in particular remains controversial, and concrete plans for operations are still likely to lead to heated political debates.

An even bigger challenge is posed by the current state of Europe. On a continent reeling from the Brexit shock and grappling with a populist surge, it is unclear how Germany's plans for deepening European defence integration will be received. For Germany, a weak and disunited Europe is a problem. The white paper makes it absolutely clear that without its European partners, Germany is unable to ensure its security and to assume its new active role. This explains why Berlin is currently so actively seeking a way forward for the EU after the Brexit vote, as exemplified by the new Franco-German blueprint for a European defence union.