

Germany's power – what kind of power?

Gregor Schöllgen's new book

“Der Auftritt. Deutschlands Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne”

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Schöllgen, Gregor. "Der Auftritt. Deutschlands Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne", Berlin: Propyläen, 2003; 176 pages, 18,- Euro

Gregor Schöllgen, professor of contemporary history at the University of Erlangen, biographer of Willy Brandt, and teacher of career diplomats appears to have a favorite topic: the vexed relationship of Germany and power politics. His books' (German) titles are often paradigmatic of the author's message: *The Power at the Center of Europe* in 1992, which has to ask itself whether it is *Afraid of Power* in 1993. His latest "essay" (p. 8) is just as outspoken – it pronounces *The Grand Entrance: Germany's Return onto the World Stage*.

There he revisits a 1992 assessment of his: with the end of the Cold War, its full sovereignty and national unity regained, Germany has returned to the role of an *European Great Power*.¹ This proposition forms the background for Schöllgen's detailed review of German foreign policy from 1990 to June 2003.

The new status took the Germans and their political leaders by surprise and according to the author called for a historical process of un-learning their being oblivious of power.² Schöllgen is not surprised that the initial reaction was rejection (p. 58) and holding on to the tradition lines of multilateralism and the double integration in EU and NATO; only slowly and uneasily did Germany come to terms with its new weight. (p.75) Yet, all this already heralded the 'final liquidation of the old world order' and the 'end of the transatlantic era' which he sees consummated with Schröder's new, self-confident style as exemplified in the confrontations over Iraq. (p. 7)³

Schöllgen attributes the unprecedented rift in transatlantic relations (p. 99) to domestic factors – winning re-election in 2002 with a coalition Schröder expected to break apart in case of an involvement in Iraq (pp. 118, 127) – as well as situational and structural factors of the international environment. The author identifies long-standing resentment of American bossing-around of Bonn (pp. 109-115) as the powder-keg ignited by the spark of the Bush administration's rigidity and rough manners. He enumerates the known black-list of recent unilateral sins from Kyoto to the ICC, and the controversial National Security Strategy that brought the U.S. on a crash course with Germany as one of the chief proponents of a multilateral order. (pp. 120-125)

But in the end, it was the more assertive style, which according to Schöllgen, in this instance transformed Germany into the leading counter-power to the United States that others gravitated to, (p. 103) and motivated France and Russia to clarify their positions. Here, Germany is to have found its place among the great powers of the old continent, (p. 150) and to have drawn a line behind which no future government can regress. (p. 161)

Whether the validity of Schöllgen's postulation of the expiration of the transatlantic era (p. 159) has itself already expired with the rapprochement of Washington and Berlin, including their far-ranging common declaration of February 27, 2004 remains to be seen. There are, in any case, blind spots and inconsistencies in the analysis that draw his conclusions into doubt.

Most generally, the historian does not discuss how the sources of increased German power he identifies are translated into effective influence over desired outcomes: e.g. the continent's largest population and economy, its key role within the European Union, as well as its armed forces (pp. 25-29). He takes these signs of *raw* power and the renewed existence of a German nation-state as indicators that united Germany is a *European Great Power*. (p. 12) Can this, rather than a great European power, be a meaningful concept? What are extent and limits of an *effective* autonomous policy (if this is the distinctive sign of a great power) of an EU member country even as important as Germany. Whether and what kind of foreign and security policies could be Germany's transmission belt to attain its objectives in the context of the enlarging Europe and an imperfect international order remains unanswered.

The potential to 'sabotage' the functioning of the international system by abstention given Germany's weight in EU and UN may be an indication of great power status. (p. 29) However, Schöllgen implicitly admits that this can hardly constitute a sustainable foreign policy as it bears the risk of irreparably undermining the trust of allies and partners (p. 80).

Multilateralism, instead, is not merely an ideological imprint that Germany bears due to postwar re-education, as Schöllgen seems to imply at times (p. 128), but a proven, successful strategy for Germany to regain, expand and leverage its influence in the international order. A genuine 'force-multiplier'.

The influence that Germany may exert in this manner, decisively depends on its being perceived as desirable or even indispensable partner. Key variables are a history of cooperation, the possession of relevant capabilities and an 'extended self' of valuable alliances a nation brings along. The Federal Republic's balancing efforts between Paris and Washington were not mere genuflection in front of two powerful allies but provided Bonn with 'borrowed influence' from its special relationships with them. Adam Krzeminski is right to criticize Schöllgen for overlooking the importance of Germany's immediate Eastern neighborhood at the benefit of Russia.⁴ But what is more, even within the enlarging EU, the balancing task is getting more complicated than the old Atlantic vs European Europe paradigm can account for. The reactions to the perceived Blair-Chirac-Schröder triumvirate or the failure of the European convention gave a taste of this complexity.

If there is the need for a viable Europe on the international stage backed up by the necessary military capabilities, (p.163) Germany cannot afford to be continuously associated with one pole at the expense of others. This might cost its role as a motor of the process of integration. Recommending a closer alignment to Paris, (pp. 7, 150) eternally suspect of schemes of a *contrepoids* to the United States cannot be in the interest of Berlin's influence in European affairs. The rapid and harsh reactions of the Letters of the Eight and the Vilnius Ten illustrated the dislike of any such pretenses. Exchanging the role of explicit junior partner of Washington (p. 109) with implicit junior partner of Paris -as Schöllgen reluctantly admits was the case in the later stages of the Iraq crisis (p.144)- is not necessarily an improvement.

In particular, Germany must get its talk straight: it is striving for a multilateral not a multipolar order. Particularly, being seen as dealing too smoothly with actors like Moscow or Beijing, raising them to a status of powers as respectable and important as Washington (pp. 146f) is a sure way to undermine the credit Germany enjoys with partners in Eastern Europe and Asia. Leveraging Europe to a more equal status vis-à-vis the United States by way of upgrading Beijing and Moscow is a no-win gamble. Rather it is a sure bet to condemn Germany's multilateral endeavors to slow demise when they are drawn up in outright opposition to Washington.

In light of these problems, one is surprised at the generally positive appraisal that the chancellor receives. It is the supposed self-confidence and sometimes assertion that Schöllgen believes representative of a new generation and adequate of the country's position, which finds his unrestricted and reiterated praise. (pp. 7, 30, 128) Even more, this new tone is seen as an asset in Germany's foreign policy toolbox, and credited with having drawn some partners on Schröder's side, (p. 130) while any negative effects such as the above mentioned 'letters' are played down. (p. 30) The question whether an at least rhetorically assertive foreign policy is compatible with the sensitive issues of Common Foreign and Security Policy does not appear to trouble the author. The persistent opposition at Nice 2000 (pp. 96f) against a German foreign policy that was perceived as brusque and overbearing is not taken into account.

This attention to the psychological factors of self-confidence and resentment of U.S. 'imperialism' (p. 124) comes at the expense of other ingredients of Germany's power. Washington's supposedly increasing unilateralism is not being discussed from the angle of its significantly undermining effects on Germany's means of influence by outflanking key international institutions.⁵

But also on the domestic side, serious doubts about the longevity of the “German Way” were merited. Schröder's course was certainly not a consensus of the country's political elite, and Schöllgen's praise fully overlooks the divisions over style and content of foreign policy that regularly emerge among Schröder and his foreign minister.⁶

What is worse, if German foreign policy now has greater ambitions in the international sphere it is not putting its money where its mouth is. The combined budgets of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Development Cooperation have plummeted from 21.5% of the federal budget in 1990 to just 12% in 2003.⁷ The picture of Germany as a geronto-sclerotic “newly declining nation”⁸ is additionally subverting the country's desirability as a partner. These symptoms of crisis are not negligible in judging Germany's role today as Schöllgen suggests. (pp. 24f)

The recent re-adjustments and efforts to mend the transatlantic and inner-European rifts evoke the suspicion that the declamations Schöllgen focuses his applause on were exactly that: rhetoric. If it is all just about renewing the transatlantic cooperation as one of equal partners, (p.162), then noisy statements of sovereignty with an air of inferiority complex are of little help. Whatever words are coming out of Berlin, though, deeds to follow up on the rhetoric will increasingly be looked for if Germany wants to be taken serious. And there the country's foreign policy leaves the gravest desideratum, a strategy consistent with self-perception, aspirations and international environment.

While Schöllgen's highly readable essay provides a concise and yet impressively detailed account of reunited Germany's foreign and security policy⁹ that will be very valuable to anyone interested in the matter, its most important contribution probably comes from drawing attention to the discussion it avoids: to reflect, to begin with, on the nature and conditionality of Germany's power.

- ¹ Schöllgen, Gregor. "Die Macht in der Mitte Europas. Stationen deutscher Außenpolitik von Friedrich dem Großen bis zur Gegenwart." München: C.H.Beck, 1992, p. 169 and 176
- ² op. cit. p.176 Schöllgen here agrees with Hans-Peter Schwarz's criticism of this post-1945 anti-reaction of *Machtvergessenheit* to the earlier obsession with power (*Machtbesessenheit*).
- ³ Schöllgen is not alone: another recent publication supporting a self-confident emancipation within a European framework from a United States on its incompatible hegemonic trajectory came from the "Architect of Ostpolitik": Bahr, Egon. "Der deutsche Weg. Selbstverständlich und normal", München: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2003
- ⁴ Krzeminski, Adam. "Abschied von alten Denkschablonen. Ohne eine Beachtung der ostmitteleuropäischen Interessen wird Deutschlands 'Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne' scheitern" *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 2, 2003, p. B07
- ⁵ The interpretation that there was a structural trend for the confrontation to emerge may suggest itself when one follows the interpretation of Germany as a *Civilian Power* as developed by Maull in Maull, Hanns W. „Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers“. *Foreign Affairs*. Volume 69 No. 5, Winter 1990/91; p. 91-106; and his subsequent publications on German foreign policy
- ⁶ On this issue, see e.g. Kornelius, Stefan. "Der Gourmet als Kellner. Joschka Fischers langer Weg", *Internationale Politik*, Vol.58, No.9, September 2003, pp. 31-38.
- ⁷ Hellmann, Gunther. "Agenda 2020 – Krise und Perspektive deutscher Außenpolitik", *Internationale Politik*, Vol.58, No.9, September 2003, p. 44
- ⁸ Siebert, Horst. "Why Germany Has Such a Weak Growth Performance", Kiel Working Paper No. 1182, Kiel: Kiel Institute for World Economics, September 2003, p. 44
- ⁹ For a somewhat more critical and in-depth analysis of the Red-Green coalition's foreign policy 1998-2003 see Maull, Hanns W., Harnisch, Sebastian, and Grund, Constantin (eds.). "Deutschland im Abseits? Rot-grüne Außenpolitik 1998-2003". Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2003