

Germany and the Security Council: Neither too strong nor too weak

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Analyses of Germany’s membership in the Security Council in 2011–2012 are dominated by its decision to abstain on the use of force in Libya. But the fall-out over this controversial episode did not stop Germany pursuing a set of consistent goals on issues such as Afghanistan and the security implications of climate change. Overall, Germany remained a significant member of the Western bloc, and raised important questions about the UN’s ability to manage new threats and human rights issues. The Syrian crisis magnified these concerns, opening up divisions between Germany and non-Western powers. Germany is unlikely to secure a permanent seat on the Security Council in the near future, but it will probably be re-elected to the body with increasing frequency in the years ahead.

There are two common myths about Germany’s tenure as a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council in 2011 and 2012. One could be called “the myth of German strength”. The other is the “myth of German weakness”. Both are rooted in Berlin’s controversial decision on 17 March 2011 to abstain on Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force in Libya. Some have seen this as a sign of Germany’s growing willingness to assert itself, refusing to show deference to other Western powers. Others view it as a mistaken act of hubris that weakened the country at the UN. This article sets out to explore these perspectives about Germany’s performance and explain why neither is convincing. It then aims to find an alternative framework for analyzing Germany’s role in the Council.

To do this, the second half of this article shifts attention from Libya to Germany’s approach to other challenges facing the Security Council. Instead, its priorities included finding technical solutions to existing problems (such as a counter-productive sanctions regime against the Taliban and Al Qaeda) and trying to raise the Council’s awareness of new threats (such as climate change). Although these initiatives did not gain public attention, some created tensions with non-Western Council members.

This article concludes that the Germany was largely an agent of gradual change inside the Council, with a focus on adapting the institution to address specific threats and global crises more effectively. In debates in the UN General Assembly, Germany has been an advocate of

more dramatic change to the Council itself, continuing its long-running campaign to win a permanent seat alongside Brazil, India and Japan. This campaign has made little headway in the last two years. But this has not caused Germany to behave disruptively in Council debates, and it adopted a very different approach to the Syrian crisis – which dominated Council diplomacy from mid-2011 to mid-2012 – to that followed by Brazil and India.

Overall, the article concludes that Germany's stint on the Council was largely characterized by honest and honorable efforts to make the UN work better. Despite the difficulties over Libya, Germany's overall posture has broadly reinforced its ties to Western allies at the UN rather than non-Western powers. It raised questions over the Security Council's ability to tackle new threats, like climate change, that are of long-term importance to international security. In doing so, it was neither excessively assertive nor excessively meek, and the history of its time in the Council amounts to more than one abstention.

Two myths about Germany and the UN

The Libya abstention

Although this article argues that the legacy of Germany's abstention on Resolution 1973 has been overstated, it cannot be ignored – in part because it has been misinterpreted so often. This was a choice made in a period of intense confusion. Forces loyal to Colonel Gaddafi were pressing towards the rebel city of Benghazi. The U.S. had changed its views on the use of force almost literally overnight, and Berlin felt ill-informed of its biggest ally's decision-making. The European Union remained divided over how to act. The German government's decision to abstain – which many German diplomats believed was a miscalculation – was inevitably an *ad hoc* judgment call. Had the threat to Benghazi not necessitated a rapid decision, or had US policy been more consistent, Berlin might have adopted a different position.

While most diplomatic judgment calls are made quickly and on the basis of flawed information, however, commentators and historians inevitably like to search for deeper meanings behind each decision. In the case of Germany's Libyan abstention, two versions of history have emerged: "the myth of German strength" and its opposite, the "myth of German weakness". Neither stands up to scrutiny.

Germany's 'strength'

For believers in the "myth of German strength", the abstention was a demonstration of the country's increasing confidence on the world stage. Rather than follow the US, Britain and France it had voted with Brazil, China, India and Russia, the original BRIC countries (South Africa, the "Fifth BRIC", voted with the West against Gaddafi instead). To some commentators, this looked like an attempt by Berlin to realign itself with rising non-Western economies – or at least signal its autonomy from other Western powers. "The decision provoked speculation that

Germany wanted to shed its supporting role in the U.S.-led Western alliance,” Ian Bremmer and my colleague Mark Leonard have noted, “in favor of the more independent, non-aligned and mercantilist-driven positions taken by leading emerging powers.”¹

Bremmer and Leonard argue that this interpretation has been reinforced by recent disputes between the US and Germany over economic policy, some of which have become public. In private, American diplomats admit that they have had serious tensions with their German counterparts on economic issues. But, almost two years after the fateful vote on Libya, American and Western European officials based at the UN are broadly appreciative of the role Germany played at the Security Council. German diplomats moved quickly to undo the damage over Gaddafi, they note, and were good team players in the prolonged struggle to manage the Syrian crisis, coordinating closely with other members of the EU.

Germany's 'weakness'

So it is hard to argue that Germany's patterns of behavior in the Council suggest a fundamental realignment of its global view and loyalties, whatever happened elsewhere on economic matters. Some analysts see this as proof of the “myth of German weakness”. According to this story, the negative domestic and international reactions to the Libyan abstention showed Berlin that it had overestimated its power at the UN, forcing it retreat and stick as close as possible with its traditional Western friends.

This story was summarized by Ralf Neukirch in a brutal article in the German news weekly ‘Der Spiegel’ in September 2011, which argued that “Germany's record on the Security Council to date is worse than even the greatest pessimists had expected.”² The Libyan abstention not only reduced Germany's ability to act autonomously and innovatively on other crises, Neukirch believed, but also meant that “Berlin's declared goal of becoming a permanent Security Council member has receded far into the distance.” In the final analysis, “its election last year to the council has harmed more than it has benefited Germany.”

It is probably true that Germany's chances of securing a permanent Security Council seat have declined over the last two years. In March 2011, very soon after the Libyan vote, Brazil, Germany, India and Japan launched a drive for a General Assembly resolution supporting their ambitions to be permanent members of the Council. They were able to secure promises of support from a simple majority of states, but not from the two-thirds of UN membership they needed. Diplomatic observers noted that the US had been infuriated by the Brazilian, German and Indian abstentions over Libya, and Washington's displeasure certainly did not help their campaign. But the Obama administration had already decided that it was not going to invest in Security Council reform, and this cannot be attributed solely to Libya.

¹ Ian Bremmer and Mark Leonard, “US-German Relationship on the Rocks”, *Washington Post*, 18 October 2012.

² Ralf Neukirch, “Shrinking Influence: Germany's Woeful Security Council Record”, *Der Spiegel*, 21 September 2011.

More generally, it is difficult to sustain the argument that Germany's stint on the Security Council has done it irreparable harm. It has restored relations not only with its Western partners but with Arab countries that it angered by its failure to support war against Gaddafi. In September 2012, Germany signaled this rapprochement by hosting a high-level Security Council meeting on improving the UN's ties with the Arab League. And in November 2012 it won a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, garnering 127 votes from the UN's 194 member states (the US was marginally ahead, with 131). This is not the level of support that one would normally associate with a country that had lost its diplomatic credibility.

So the bare facts about Germany's time on the Security Council do not support either "the myth of strength" or the "myth of weakness". But is there a more convincing story to tell about its tenure?

Priorities: Afghanistan, climate change and children

At the end of Germany's tenure on the Security Council in 2012, a number of commentators offered more positive surveys of its role than that set out by Neukirch in 2011. Many emphasized that the German mission to UN – and in particular Permanent Representative Peter Wittig – had consolidated a reputation for solid, competent diplomacy. "The most remarkable feature of Germany's tenure was its top diplomat, Wittig," Helmut Volger has argued, describing the ambassador as "a calm, modest, soft-spoken diplomat who combines dignity and friendliness with toughness in striving for his goal."³

In private, non-German diplomats and NGO representatives endorse this view. The German mission was well-briefed and serious even on those issues, such as conflicts in Africa, in which it had no particular national interest or leverage. The respect for Wittig, who is widely believed to have opposed the Libyan abstention, is genuine too. But ultimately competence is neither a political philosophy nor a strategic goal. Did Germany demonstrate a broader conception of its role in the Security Council during its term?

In many ways, Germany followed a consistent set of priorities during its term, many of which were set out in an article by Ambassador Wittig in this magazine in January 2011. These included a focus on Afghanistan, climate change and the Security Council's efforts to protect on children in armed conflict. Although the Arab uprisings inevitably took up a good deal of the Security Council's time, Germany did manage to place emphasis on its pre-existing priorities, especially during its two months as Security Council president (July 2011 and September 2012). None of them proved entirely simple to manage.

Afghanistan

³ Helmut Volger, "Germany's 'Added Value' to the Security Council", *PassBlue*, 27 December 2012.

Of all the issues on Germany's agenda, the situation in Afghanistan was of the greatest immediate interest to Berlin. By early 2011, it was clear that the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan was approaching its final phase, but there was deep uncertainty about the country's future stability. Although the UN has been heavily involved in efforts to reconstruct Afghanistan after the initial fall of the Taliban it had been increasingly marginalized as the war wore on. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was stuck in an uncomfortable political partnership with the Afghan government. The Security Council's Al Qaeda/Taliban sanctions committee oversaw a single list of sanctions against over 400 persons and entities. But analysts saw the existence of a single sanctions regime covering both Al Qaeda and the Taliban as an obstacle to starting talks on a political settlement with the latter, as it effectively branded all Taliban as terrorists. The list of sanctioned individuals did not accurately reflect the insurgents' command structure and included around thirty individuals who were believed to be dead.

While the US was increasingly in the lead in military operations in Afghanistan, Germany took responsibility for efforts to fix the UN's flawed engagement with the country. Germany "held the pen" in the drafting of resolutions concerning Afghanistan, an unusual privilege for a non-permanent member of the Security Council. In this capacity, it orchestrated the division of the Taliban and Al Qaeda sanctions regimes in mid-2011 to ease potential contacts with the Taliban. Germany also initiated a major review of UNAMA. These steps improved the framework for managing NATO's (and Germany's) exit from Afghanistan, as did the December 2011 Bonn conference on the country's future. The Taliban sanctions committee – chaired by Germany – moved rapidly to revise its list of targeted individuals.

But many problems remain unresolved: UN officials reported in 2012 that the Taliban sanctions list still omitted a number of senior insurgents. While Germany also took steps to improve human rights safeguards for the stand-alone Al Qaeda sanctions list, the UN's special rapporteur on counter-terrorism has argued that these are still not strong enough. UNAMA, which has faced vicious attacks on its personnel, is set to undergo budget cuts in 2013 and it still unclear exactly what role the UN can play in Afghanistan once NATO takes leave. Progress towards serious talks with the Taliban has been halting.

Climate change and security

Germany can, nonetheless, take some credit for improvements to the UN's engagement with Afghan problems. Its decision to hold a Security Council debate on the security implications of climate change during its presidency in July 2011 produced fewer concrete results. The UK had organized one previous debate on the topic in 2007, creating a great deal of controversy over whether it should be on the agenda at all. The British had avoided returning to the matter. Germany's initiative to raise the issue reflected frustration with the failure of other diplomatic

mechanisms to manage global warming. At the time of the debate, the debacle of the Copenhagen summit in 2009 was still a very recent memory.

The German debate also came close to failure, although the goal was to agree a presidential statement on these challenges, a fairly modest ambition. Germany was aware that China and Russia in particular were opposed to having the issue on the agenda at all, and that many developing countries were also suspicious of the “securitization” of climate issues. The German mission produced a very carefully worded concept note that emphasized that the debate would focus “exclusively” on security issues, highlighting sea-level rise (threatening the “very survival” of small island countries) and food security.

This deliberately narrow focus did not placate China in particular, and for a time it appeared that it would be impossible to agree a statement. US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice reportedly told her counterparts that they were being “pathetic”. Eventually a compromise statement was worked out, although the majority of this was devoted to reaffirming the primacy of other UN entities - notably the strained talks under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – on the issue. Its sole actionable element was to direct the UN Secretary-General to ensure that climate-related drivers of conflict should be included in his reports to the Council. This has only been implemented patchily so far.

Children and armed conflict

Having tussled with China and other developing economies over climate change in 2011, Germany invited further controversy over the issue of children in armed conflict in 2012. Germany took over chairing the Council working group on the issue in 2011, and was credited with streamlining its work.

But tensions arose in September 2012, during Germany’s second Council presidency, after the Secretary-General tabled a report that addressed the situation of children not only in countries on the Council’s agenda but a number of others including Colombia, Pakistan and India. All three states sat on the Council, and all were displeased. Germany introduced a resolution – much of it based on previously-agreed texts – underlining the use of sanctions against violators of the rights of children. China and Russia abstained on this, as did Azerbaijan and Pakistan, and Colombia and India expressed reservations.

Interpreting Germany’s priorities

What does Germany’s pursuit of these three overarching priorities tell us? Three points stand out. The first is that, at least according to non-Western critics, Berlin had set a very Western agenda. Taking steps to improve UN engagement in Afghanistan clearly fitted in with Germany’s concerns as a NATO member. Its decision to raise climate change in the Security Council raised concerns among developing countries, which have often clashed with the EU in UNFCCC

debates (the exceptions were small island states concerned about sea-level rise). And its emphasis on children in armed conflict looked like part of a Western human rights agenda that countries like Pakistan and Colombia claimed failed to reflect the realities of their security problems. During the debate on children, China's ambassador argued that the Security Council was just creating "difficulties and problems" for Pakistan in its fight against terrorism.

Returning the "myth of German weakness" outlined above, it should be noted that Germany did not pursue any of these initiatives solely to rebuild its credibility in the West after the Libya episode. They were all on Germany's agenda when it joined the Security Council in 2011. If Benghazi had not reshaped perceptions of Berlin's diplomacy, pundits might be talking about its ultra-Western priorities at the UN.

This leads us to a second striking point about Germany's approach to life on the Security Council: it was quite prepared to pick fights on with rising powers and China in particular. In other international forums, such as the G20, Germany has made efforts to build close relationships with the Chinese. But in pursuing a broadly Western agenda at the UN it has accepted predictable clashes with Beijing. It is arguable that these clashes do not matter that much to either Beijing or Berlin. The economic issues discussed at the G20 are of central national importance to both. Thematic statements of principle from the Security Council are not. Nonetheless, most of the evidence from Germany's time on the Council suggests that it is not attempting to realign its stance at the UN to curry favor with non-Western powers.

What, then, was Germany trying to achieve? In the Afghan case, it was following clear national interests. In raising climate change and children in armed conflict, however, it appeared to be pushing (albeit very gently) at the boundaries of the Council's conception of peace and security. By emphasizing the issue of children's rights, Germany took a small step to embed core human rights principles in the Security Council's work. In raising climate change, it tried to initiate a broader debate about the shifting threats to international security, even if the resulting statement from Council was predictably tepid.

As I argued at the outset, all these efforts were contributions to making the Security Council adapt to new security challenges. A great deal has been written about the need for the Council to take non-traditional threats and human rights more seriously, but diplomatic progress towards this goal is typically a matter of slow procedural steps. The German initiatives outlined above fall into this category. But there are moments when the Council has to address the meaning of international security much more urgently. The Arab Spring has sparked a fierce debate over these issues. While Germany fumbled its response to the Libyan uprising, its broader response to the Arab Spring underlined its awareness of the need for the UN to adapt to new challenges – although China and Russia have refused to accept this.

The Arab Spring

Germany recognized early on that the Arab Spring could up-end many existing assumptions about the Security Council's priorities and responsibilities. In February 2011, while Egypt was in turmoil, Brazil convened a ministerial Security Council meeting on the links between development and security. The event was briefly notorious when it was reported that the Indian foreign minister has managed to read a large part of his Portuguese counterpart's speech by mistake. But German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle tried to use the occasion to address the events in the Arab and promise support for a democratic transition in Egypt.

At that moment, it was not yet clear that the UN would have a significant role in the Arab awakening. Nor could anyone predict that Westerwelle would sustain major political damage due to his advocacy of the Libyan abstention the following month. But German officials argue that the foreign minister's intervention foreshadowed the Security Council's involvement in attempting to guide Libya, Yemen and Syria towards peaceful political change through 2011 and 2012. Germany fully supported efforts to deal with the Gaddafi regime through non-military means including sanctions and the invocation of the International Criminal Court, mandated by Security Council resolution 1970 in late February 2011.

Although the ensuing debate over Resolution 1973 raised questions about Germany's attitude to the Arab Spring, it later emerged as a strong advocate of a peaceful transition in Syria – working closely with France and the UK – and made a particular point of demanding that the regime in Damascus should be held accountable for crimes against the population. Germany joined France and Britain in calling for action against Syria at the Security Council from mid-2011, despite American doubts about the value of an open confrontation with Russia and China.

French and British diplomats say that they treated their German counterparts as equals in discussions over Syria, even if they enjoyed additional leverage as permanent members of the Council. This was not absolutely consistent (Germany was not represented, for example, at ministerial talks in Geneva on the crisis in mid-2012) but the European powers generally maintained a united front. At no point did the increasingly rancorous debates within the EU over the Eurozone impact on their cooperation on Syria.⁴

German officials initially hoped that their abstention over Libya might give them additional credibility over Syria in dealings with Brazil, China, India and Russia. They were disappointed, as the big non-Western powers increasingly coordinated among themselves to prevent any serious action against Syria in 2011. Although India switched position in early 2012, this appears to largely be a response to pressure from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries opposed to the Syrian regime rather than European diplomatic efforts.⁵ Here we see a similar pattern to that we observed over climate change and children in armed conflict: rather than finding

⁴ Germany's abstention on Palestine's bid for recognition as a state in the UN General Assembly in 2012 was further evidence that Berlin is slowly moving closer to the EU mainstream on Middle East issues.

⁵ Brazil, which appeared more sympathetic to Western positions than India on Syria in 2011, left the Security Council at the end of that year.

opportunities to align itself with the BRICS countries, as over Libya, Germany has taken positions and raised issues that strengthen its ties with Western friends at the UN.

This has not harmed its relations with all non-Western governments: Berlin's position on Syria was welcomed by Arab governments and supported by a majority of all nations in the General Assembly. Nonetheless, in a period in which there is a risk of deepening tensions between Western powers and the BRICS at the UN, Germany's behavior over Syria again reaffirmed its basic commitment to the West.

Conclusion

By Germany's last day on the Security Council on 31 December 2012, it had arguably dispelled the myths that had grown up around its tenure. It had not followed a strategy of deliberate alignment with big non-Western powers. It had demonstrated its enduring influence at the UN with success in its campaign for a seat on the Human Rights Council. And it had shown itself willing to risk controversy with other major powers by raising contentious topics in the Security Council. In raising these topics it had also demonstrated a consistent belief in the need to improve the UN's performance through gradual change, whether in dealing with specific problems like Afghanistan or grand strategic issues like climate change.

This was certainly a more impressive performance than most temporary members of the Security Council. It is unlikely to hasten Germany's progress towards a permanent seat on the Council. After the failure of their 2011 drive for a General Assembly resolution on Council reform, Brazil, Germany, India and Japan continued to coordinate as a bloc on the issue. But there were significant differences over how to proceed. Indian officials in New York increased the pressure for reform, trying to pull together a group of developing countries behind them. Germany favored a more cautious approach, concluding that pushing the debate further would be counter-productive. It is likely that, after a period of intense but fruitless diplomacy on the topic, Security Council reform will get less attention in the next few years.

In the absence of reform, it is probable that Germany will run for another seat relatively soon. Indeed Brazil, Germany, India, Japan and South Africa may eventually become "semi-permanent" members of the Council simply by running for temporary seats on a more frequent basis than other countries. This is liable to arouse discomfort among smaller UN members, but many already accept it will be a fact of life.

But will Germany want to keep returning to the Security Council? If the Council cannot update its approach to issues like climate change and managing conflicts like those in Syria, it will increasingly be marginalized in world affairs. There may still be myths about Germany's recent behavior at the UN, but the biggest myth of all may prove to be that the Security Council is actually that important any longer.