INTERNATIONAL THEORY AND GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY

Edited by Jakub Eberle and Alister Miskimmon
The central aim of this book is to foster connections between scholarly discussions of German foreign policy and broader theoretical debates in International Relations and beyond. While there has been a lively discussion about ‘new German foreign policy’, this book argues that it has not engaged substantially with international and foreign policy theory, especially with respect to its more recent developments.

Reviewing the recent literature on German foreign policy, this book posits that the most discussed works are still largely provided by the ‘Altmeister’ (Maull, Szabo, Bulmer and Paterson) who were already dominating the field a quarter of a century ago. While there is a general decline in the academic study of German foreign policy, the chapters in this edited volume show that a range of novel, theoretically sophisticated but often disconnected scholarship, has appeared on the margins. This book contributes to this emerging work by providing conceptual interrogations, which question the existing research and provide theoretically grounded alternatives; initiating critical discussions and evaluations of the nature of Germany’s actorness and the environment in which it operates; and proposing applications of less familiar perspectives on German foreign policy.

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International Theory and German Foreign Policy

*Edited by*
Jakub Eberle and Alister Miskimmon
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This paper introduces the special issue on ‘International Theory and German Foreign Policy’, the central aim of which is to foster connections between scholarly discussions of German foreign policy and broader theoretical debates in IR and beyond. While there has been a lively discussion about ‘new German foreign policy’, we argue that it has not engaged substantially with international and foreign policy theory, especially with respect to its more recent developments. Reviewing the literature written roughly in the last decade, we argue that the most discussed works are still largely provided by the ‘Altmeister’ (Maull, Szabo, Bulmer and Paterson) who were already dominating the field a quarter of a century ago. While there is a general decline in the academic study of German foreign policy, we show that a range of novel, theoretically sophisticated but often disconnected scholarship has appeared on the margins. This special issue contributes to this emerging work by providing (1) conceptual interrogations, which question the existing research and provide theoretically-grounded alternatives, (2) critical discussions and evaluations of the nature of Germany’s actorness and the environment in which it operates, and (3) applications of less familiar perspectives on German foreign policy.

In the last few years, Germany’s foreign policy has once again become the subject of often hotly contested debates. The Munich Security Conference of 2014 is now conventionally considered as a landmark in this process, as it saw coordinated speeches by the then German President Joachim Gauck, as well as Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Ursula von der Leyen. Using carefully crafted language, they all painted a picture of a Germany that is much more proactive and engaged in solving global crises and propping up the liberal world order. Challenging the deeply engrained ‘culture of restraint’ (Baumann and Hellmann 2001; Williams 2019 in this issue), Gauck argued that ‘Germany should make a more substantial contribution, and it should make it earlier and more decisively if it is to be a good partner. […] Sometimes it can even be necessary to send in the troops’ (Gauck 2014). Steinmeier and von der Leyen followed suit by initiating strategic debates, which culminated in the publication of the Foreign Ministry’s review document Krise – Ordnung – Europa (Auswärtiges Amt 2015) and the Defence Ministry’s White Book (Die Bundesregierung 2016).
Parallel to these developments, observers from within politics, academia, think-tanks and newspapers started to talk about a ‘new German foreign policy’ (e.g. Hellmann, Jacobi, and Urrestarazu 2015). Germany’s power was seen as growing, bringing with itself new opportunities as well as expectations from others (Stelzenmüller 2016, 53; Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik and German Marshall Fund 2013, 30). New concepts have been devised to capture this transformation, labelling Germany as Europe’s ‘reluctant hegemon’ (Paterson 2011; Bulmer and Paterson 2013, 2019), a ‘geo-economic power’ (Kundnani 2011; 2014; Szabo 2015), ‘central power’ (Münkler 2015), ‘servant leader’ (Mangasarian and Techau 2017) or ‘shaping power’ (Sandschneider 2012; Hellmann 2016; for reviews of these debates see Maull 2018; Berenskött and Stritzel 2019 in this issue). Others, in the meantime, have argued that German foreign policy can still be best captured by the old concepts of a ‘civilian power’ (Maull 2011; 2018) or a ‘normative power’ (Crawford and Olsen 2017). As this multiplicity testifies, keeping up with the discussions on the course German foreign policy has been an exciting and often exhausting task.

However, has this debate been similarly rich also in its theoretical and conceptual underpinnings? It is true that in the past German foreign policy often served as a testing ground for battles between different IR theories, which had a detrimental effect on the empirical knowledge that was produced (Hellmann 2009). Arguably, the current literature seems to suffer from the opposite problem, especially in its mainstream form of debating different kinds of Germany as a ‘power’ (civilian, shaping, geo-economic, hegemonic etc.). There appears be too little engagement with international and foreign policy theory, especially with respect to its dynamic developments over the last two decades. This leads to a certain self-encapsulation of the debate. More importantly, it limits the range of possible interpretations of German foreign policy (as new angles are not explored sufficiently), as well as foreign policy and international politics in general (as insights from Germany are all too often not being generalised or linked to broader literatures).

The central aspiration of this special issue is to foster two-way connections between scholarly discussions of German foreign policy and broader theoretical debates in IR and beyond.¹ We wish to contribute to the advancement of a theoretically-grounded analysis of German foreign policy by reaching towards recent developments in IR and related cross-disciplinary inspirations in order to look at Germany afresh. By bringing together a group of scholars working in different perspectives and located in different institutions in Europe and North America we hope it provides greater theoretical depth, breadth and innovation than is currently the case. We aim to open the field of German Studies to new audiences by staging an encounter between empirical interest in the recent developments in German foreign policy and up-to-date theoretical developments in International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis (and, by extensions, also Politics, Sociology, Communication Studies or Organisation Studies). Through this, we aim to generate new insights on German foreign policy across a range of different fields. Finally, we hope this special issue aids reflection on generalising these insights, thereby potentially enriching the knowledge in the broader field of IR.

We use the remainder of this introductory contribution for two purposes. First, we review the state of the literature on German foreign policy that emerged roughly in the last decade. We do not aim for an exhaustive or comprehensive analysis of everything
that has been written, but rather establish what we consider to be the main trends and discuss their relationship to broader developments in IR. Second, we define the purpose and ground covered by this special issue, present its main contributions and outline the structure and key arguments.

A FIELD IN CRISIS? THEORY IN THE MOST RECENT DEBATE ON GERMANY’S ‘NEW’ FOREIGN POLICY

Let us start by taking a step back. What we have been witnessing recently is by no means the first debate about a supposedly ‘new’ course in Germany’s foreign policy. In fact, as a number of review articles written over the last quarter of century testify, there is hardly anything new in seeing Germany’s policies as ‘new’ in one way or another (Peters 1997; Risse 2004; Enskat 2015; Hellmann 2016). Intriguingly, the patterns identified in earlier overviews are strikingly similar to those characterising the current debates. In a review essay written more than twenty years ago, Ingo Peters summarised that the core argument of the literature is that ‘the changed international conditions present Germany with a grown potential for action’, but also with ‘new expectations’ with respect to addressing ‘new challenges’ (Peters 1997, 363). While referring to the situation after reunification, this phrase could be taken straight from the 2010s debates on Germany’s role in the crisis-ridden EU (Bulmer and Paterson 2013, 2019) or its supposed emergence as a global ‘shaping power’ (Sandschneider 2012; Stelzenmüller 2016). Peters also shows that there is nothing new about the proliferation of ‘power’ as a key concept that is supposed to describe Germany’s international role (see Maull 2018; Berenskötter and Stritzel 2019 this issue). In fact, three of the five books he discusses in depth have the term already in their titles, seeing Germany as a ‘world power’ (Hacke 1993), ‘European power’ (Rühl 1996) or ‘Europe’s central power’ (Schwarz 1994).

What does this say about the state of the academic debate? Back in the day, Peters was rather sceptical about the literature on ‘new German foreign policy’ (Peters 1997, 362, inverted commas in original). His recommendations for future research were clear: scholars of German foreign policy could do with a more thorough engagement with theory (and methodology), where theory is understood ‘not as a declaration of faith, but as a systematic cognitive tool’ for generating and organising knowledge (Peters 1997, 383). For the future, he argued, there should be more emphasis on ‘systematically conceptualised, theory-driven works on German foreign policy as a contribution to foreign policy analysis in general’ (Peters 1997, 384). In other words, in capturing the specificity of Germany as a research subject, the scholars should reach for clearly developed, transparent and generalisable concepts and methodologies. In this way, we could gain both more clarity with respect to how our claims regarding German foreign policy are constructed and backed up, as well as be able to distil some additional knowledge useful for analysing foreign policies of other states.

Indeed, Peters’ prescriptions are very close to our own approach in this special issue. How has the literature produced over the last few years fared in this respect? Based on literature reviews in this special issue (namely by Berenskötter and Stritzel 2019; and Eberle 2019) and elsewhere (Enskat 2015; Hellmann 2016; Maull 2018), a survey of approximately thirty explicitly theoretically grounded articles on
Germany’s foreign policy published in this journal in 2010–2019 and a sociological survey of German IR community (Wemheuer-Vogelaar and Risse 2018), the picture is mixed at best. While much interesting and important work has been done, the theoretical underpinnings of the mainstream have not changed very much since the time of Peters’ writing. While we would not go as far as to pronounce a ‘crisis of German foreign policy research’ (Enskat 2015, 604, fn. 19), there is certainly much left to be desired in terms of theoretical sophistication and plurality.

Above all, the mainstream of the debate lacks theoretical impulses in line with recent developments in IR and related disciplines. Arguably the most discussed concepts with academic ambition or at least some grounding in theoretical literature are provided by the ‘Altmeister’. It is still Hanns Maull and his ‘civilian power’, Simon Bulmer and William Paterson with their ‘reluctant hegemon’, and Stephen Szabo (and Hans Kundnani as the rare newcomer) with ‘geo-economic power’ that shape the debates. Of these three, civilian power arguments are most directly grounded within IR debates, but their basis very much remains the 1990s merger of constructivism and liberal institutionalism (but see Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010 for a reformulation). Bulmer and Paterson’s theorising of hegemony offers an eclectic synthesis of various sources from both IR and comparative politics, but the most important aspect is arguably hegemonic stability theory, which dates back to the 1970s (Kindleberger 1973). Most isolated from IR theorising is then the geo-economic power argument, which is based chiefly on a brief essay – a commentary rather than conceptual elaboration – by Edward Luttwak (1998 [1990]), published back in 1990. A sizeable chunk of publications, including on the pages of this journal, then operate largely with one or more of these concepts; applying them, testing or comparing them, proving their worth or rejecting them, as well as developing them further (Wolff 2013; Platte and Leuffen 2016; Matthijs 2016; Otero-Iglesias 2017; Crawford and Olsen 2017; Daehnhardt 2018; Wright 2018; Koenig 2018).

This is not so much a critique of these respective authors, as ‘new’ does not necessarily mean better. But looking at the debate as a whole, surely there is a need for new, theoretically elaborate and fresh impulses to complement and perhaps challenge the works of the Altmeister and contribute also to the broader debates within and beyond IR.

What remains mostly unreflected upon in the mainstream debates on German foreign policy is that the study of International Relations has undergone a profound change. Whilst in 2001 it still made sense to frame the debate on German foreign policy as a contest of realism, liberalism and constructivism (Rittberger 2001), the IR landscape is much richer and more diverse today (even though this may be less the case in Germany, where especially constructivism is overrepresented and remains a major point of reference, Wemheuer-Vogelaar and Risse 2018). Some ‘isms’ have remained in place as important referents (in particular realism), but underwent a transformation or at least a shift in emphasis (a good example is Tom Dyson’s neoclassical realist approach, see Dyson 2014; 2016 and 2019 in this issue). Previously marginalised or non-existent approaches, such as those gathered under the label of ‘International Political Sociology’, have become commonplace, if still outside the mainstream. An increasing number of scholars frame their study around concepts, rather than schools of thought, which enables them to travel across ontological and