

Germany: A shifting Weltanschauung

By Quentin Peel in Berlin

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Paymaster no more. Angela Merkel arriving at last month's Brussels summit, The chancellor once known as 'Mrs Europa' won her battle with fellow European Union leaders to resist an instant bail-out for Greece

When Angela Merkel first joined the government of Helmut Kohl as minister for women and youth affairs in 1991, the long-serving chancellor referred to the 37-year-old dismissively as "*das Mädchen*" – the girl.

Now she occupies his seat and she has a very different image. After her victorious battle in Brussels last month to [resist an instant financial bail-out for Greece](#), the German media could not quite decide if she had become the Iron Lady, like Britain's Margaret Thatcher, or the Iron Chancellor, in the tradition of Prussia's Otto von Bismarck. Whichever it was, they liked it. Bild-Zeitung, the tabloid newspaper, ran a full-page mock-up of a memorial to Bismarck – who forged modern Germany from Prussia in the 19th century – with the head of Ms Merkel upon it. "No more the paymaster of Europe", read the headline.

The greatest economic power in Europe, linchpin of the eurozone, Germany is not the country it was. Since 1990 – the year of reunification – it has become significantly poorer, with a lower per capita income and a lot less money to spare since pouring money into the former East Germany.

It has a new geographical perspective, too, as a central European rather than west European state. Its unquestioning adherence to the Atlantic alliance is no longer unquestioned. Its passionate commitment to European integration is also different. It has a new generation of leaders who never knew the second world war.

Does this mean Germany is no longer a reliable partner in the European Union and ally in Nato? Or does it just mean the country has become more normal, putting national interests first like its fellow members?

For Ms Merkel it is a tough balancing act. She has already proved herself a good European, the ultimate deal-broker in Brussels. But now she is [praised at home](#) for standing her ground over [Greece](#).

Joschka Fischer, Germany's pro-European former foreign minister, is appalled at the reaction to the Brussels summit. "One can hardly get one's head round the decline in historical consciousness in our country," he declared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "Neither Margaret Thatcher nor Otto von Bismarck were exactly models for Germany's European policy, and for very good reasons. Neither had much if any conception of European integration." The chancellor used to be praised as "Mrs Europa" for her pro-European attitude. She seemed to have reinvented herself as "Frau Germania", he said.

Mr Fischer is famously outspoken. But his accusation picks up on a theme being debated in other European capitals: has Germany lost its European vocation and abandoned its belief in an "ever closer union" of member states? Either way, what sort of Europe would it like to see?

"Joschka goes too far," says Volker Perthes, director of SWP, an international affairs institute based in Berlin. "He could say Gerhard Schröder, his former boss, was the first who tried to be Herr Germania. He was the one who said Germany would not be the paymaster of Europe."

Professor Perthes, like a majority of political analysts and diplomats in Berlin questioned by this correspondent, cautions against a simplistic view of a newly selfish Germany. But the country has undoubtedly changed. "The environment is a different one," he says. "We are not exposed on the eastern edge of western Europe. We are surrounded by a ring of friends. Germany is a bigger country, but it is also a bigger EU. What has remained is that Germany knows it needs the EU and Nato and the transatlantic relationship. The EU comes first. We know why we need it, but we are no longer prepared to be Mr Nice Guy, the big, fat paymaster, afraid of being accused of possible hegemony.

"What has changed is that the concept of national interest is no longer alien to the political vocabulary that Germans use. Our friends and neighbours always suspected that we had national interests. It is more transparent if we spell them out."

One of the most senior European ambassadors to Berlin, and a long-time Germany watcher, sees the same shift from the other side of the table. "The accusation is that they will no longer put European interests above national interests," he says. "I would like to hear of a single German chancellor who sacrificed German interests for Europe. Of course, Germany's interest was in returning to normality via Europe.

"Before the euro, the Germans never came to anyone's help in a financial crisis. They have never compromised their national interests for the sake of Europe. They [supported European integration] because they knew it was in their national interest – now, perhaps, more than ever."

Helmut Kohl, the passionately pro-European German chancellor who presided over unification, was born in the second world war, a historian by training and inclination. Ms Merkel grew up in East Germany and trained as a physicist, analytical and pragmatic. She is pro-European by persuasion not passion.

"Germany's European conviction today is still very clear," the ambassador says. "But it is no longer a great love. It is rather that there is no alternative. The heroic spirit has gone. It is now a matter of normality."

The questioning of Germany's role in Europe concerns not only its position as paymaster. It also affects that other pillar of postwar identity: Nato membership and total commitment to the transatlantic relationship. A senior French diplomat once described the country's attitude to the alliance as "more royalist than the king".

That is no longer true, says Constanze Stelzenmüller, head of the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund. "The odd thing about Nato is that the Germans have become deeply

conservative, reluctant to change," she says. "They don't want to change the old strategic concept. They don't want global alliances. They think the east Europeans exaggerate the Russian threat. But they are not being very innovative themselves."

Prof Perthes does not question the commitment to Nato but sees doubts about its purpose. "They certainly don't want to give it up," he says. "A lot of history ties us. We owe our independence and our unity to Nato. But the threat perception has changed fundamentally."

"The old Nato enthusiasm you find today in Romania, Bulgaria or the Baltic republics. They want protection against Russia. They wanted to enter a cold war Nato. For Germany, that has gone. We are uneasy about the path Russia takes domestically but the fear of a Russian tank invasion is no longer there."

Nor does Germany feel easy with the concept of an expeditionary Nato fighting wars around the globe, as in Afghanistan. Popular support for German troop involvement in that war is low, and waning, although Ms Merkel has agreed to a [modest reinforcement](#).

The chancellor went to the EU summit in Brussels last month with a clear agenda: no bail-out for Greece except as a last resort. She made no effort to involve the smaller members of the eurozone in the critical negotiations, but focused entirely on getting an agreement with France in which all her preconditions would be included. Then it was presented to the rest of the group as a fait accompli. It was classic German diplomacy but with a difference: she made virtually no concessions on her initial position.

Yet in Berlin, senior government officials are [adamant that it was not narrow national interest that motivated her](#). It was a conviction that hers was the only country determined to uphold the EU treaty and the stability of the euro. Any subsidised [rescue package](#) for Greece would amount to a "bail-out", she insisted, which would offend against the treaty. It would also fall foul of the constitutional court in Karlsruhe, the guardian of Germany's fundamental law.

The court's judgments on the Lisbon treaty, and before it on the Maastricht treaty that laid the foundations for EU economic and monetary union, and for the launch of the euro, are an important factor behind [Berlin's insistence that its room for manoeuvre is limited](#). It has ruled that stability is the absolute priority for the eurozone. It also ruled that the Bundestag, as the ultimate representative of German democracy, must be more closely consulted on EU legislation.

Ulrike Guérot, Berlin representative of the European Council on Foreign Relations, fears that both the court in Karlsruhe, and the Bundestag, are becoming more eurosceptic. "Germany has changed a great deal," she says. "There is not one purpose, it is not conscious, there is no master plan. But it is happening by default."

"The new Bundestag [elected last September] is full of 35-year-olds who have never looked at the Maastricht treaty. The concept of ever-closer union [in the EU] has gone for large parts of the political establishment. What members of parliament care about is whether the German language is used in EU institutions. They say: 'We put a lot of money into the EU, so why shouldn't we speak German there?'"

She sees a similar trend in Karlsruhe. "The law community is the most important elite community in Germany. They have turned anti-European. The problem is not the general population. It's the elites who no longer carry the [European] project."

On that score, she is more alarmed than most German commentators. As the representative of a generation brought up to refer to her country as the "Federal Republic" rather than "Germany", she perceives a creeping nationalism, although she admits it is not an aggressive one. "I am not saying it's not normal, but there's a huge change in political perceptions."

So what sort of Europe does Germany want? It is unclear. Ms Guérot says there is a lack of strategic vision. The commitment to a United States of Europe is long gone. Mr Kohl admitted as much in 1993. Joschka Fischer says – with regret – that it means the EU will increasingly develop as a weak confederation of states, and not a close federation.

Ms Merkel has not spelled out her vision in detail. But she believes Europe should argue with one voice on the world stage, and that a Europe of 500m, not a Germany of 80m, will matter most in global negotiations. It is a pragmatic choice, not an ideological one.

The chancellor still sounds more ambitious than any other European leader. She wants treaty change to reinforce the stability of the eurozone. If the leaders keep using their difficulties with getting the Lisbon treaty ratified as an excuse for inaction, they will bring the EU to a halt, she says. That does not mean she believes in the European Commission as a future European government, as true European federalists once did.

On that, Ms Merkel's advisers are perfectly clear. "The member states are the masters of the treaty," one said during the Brussels summit. "The Commission is its servant."

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HELMET KOHL

'Merkel learnt western policy like a foreign language from him'

The man most associated with Germany's commitment to Europe in recent decades is Helmut Kohl, chancellor for 16 years, and 80 years old last Saturday. It was Mr Kohl, a ruthless party politician, who presided over reunification. Angela Merkel, the young woman from the east, became his best political pupil. And, after a party financing scandal in his Christian Democratic Union, it was Ms Merkel who forced him into political semi-oblivion.

"She is the perfect copy of Helmut Kohl," says Professor Werner Weidenfeld of Munich university. "She learnt her western policy like a foreign language from him." That meant she learnt the importance of forging Franco-German agreements when the two governments were most divided while also cultivating coalitions with smaller European Union members.

The difference is that she is much less willing to open the national cheque book. As chancellor, Mr Kohl regularly bought political deals in Brussels with German generosity. To win agreement on the Maastricht treaty in 1992, for example, he was the lead donor to cohesion funds for Spain and Portugal.

Ms Merkel is better than him at mastering complex briefs but lacks his conviction about the need for European integration, Prof Weidenfeld says. She is also a better operator at an EU level than she seems to be in Berlin. "What she is missing is the deep power infrastructure in every segment of party life," he says. "He knew the personal connections and family history of every significant party member. She simply has not got that background or that memory."

AFGHANISTAN

A growing number of German military casualties in the Nato and US-led campaign in Afghanistan has steadily increased domestic concerns about its forces' role there. The latest round of soul-searching began on Good Friday after a German army unit based in the northern city of Kunduz was ambushed by the Taliban. Three soldiers died, taking the number killed in the seven-year-old mission to 39. In the ensuing skirmish, six allied Afghan soldiers were killed in friendly fire. This follows just six months after the army ordered an air strike on petrol tankers hijacked by the Taliban, killing or wounding 142 civilians, as a result of which

[Franz Josef Jung](#), then defence minister, was forced to resign. Both events have shocked a nation in which older citizens remember the horrors of the second world war and younger generations are raised with the mantra: "never again". The ruling Christian Democrats and Free Democrats still largely back the Afghan campaign but the opposition Social Democrats are turning against a mission they helped launch when in government. Volker R  he, defence minister in the 1990s, blames successive administrations for talking only about "armed conflict". His term would confront the nation with something it thinks it has put behind it: "war".