

## What the new German Government means for the European Union's External Action

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### Executive Summary

- > On 8 December 2021, the new German government of Social-Democrats, Greens and Liberals took office, ending the 16-year-long 'Merkel era'. Portraying itself as 'progressive', it has outlined a wide-reaching modernisation agenda for the country, with reform proposals ranging from digitalisation to climate and energy.
- > Effective external action, especially in the European Union framework, will be central to reaching the coalition's objectives. While the new government promises a certain continuity with its predecessor, especially in relation to security and defence matters, it appears more ambitious on other EU external priorities, notably 'Green Deal Diplomacy', trade and development, as well as relations with major powers.
- > As the new government's external policies will primarily be piloted by Greens and Social-Democrats, which hold inter alia the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Economy and Climate Protection (Greens) and of Defence (SPD), it seems a priori well-equipped to act in an ambitious and coherent manner. Yet, this prospect may find its limits in the need to compromise: key decisions will always have to be endorsed by all three coalition partners.
- > For its European partners, the change of power in Germany offers a window of opportunity to advance on the quest for strategic autonomy, which will feature high on the upcoming French Council Presidency's agenda, and on an ambitious and joined-up climate and energy diplomacy.

The German federal election of 26 September 2021 profoundly altered the political landscape in the European Union's (EU) most populous member state. It marked not only the end of the 16-year-long 'Merkel era', but also led to a sounding defeat of her Christian Democratic party. For the first time since 2005, the German government is now headed by a Social-Democrat, Olaf Scholz. Moreover, for the first time ever, his SPD will lead a three-party coalition with the Greens and the Liberals (FDP). Intending to "dare being more progressive" ("Mehr Fortschritt wagen"), the so-called 'traffic light' coalition negotiated an agreement bound to set Germany on a modernisation path in key domains (see SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021). Among them feature digital innovation, climate protection and energy transition, but also numerous social-welfare and socio-political reforms. Contrary to their limited role during the electoral campaign, external policies receive considerable attention in the coalition agreement, which emphasises Germany's "responsibility for Europe and the world" (ibid., 130). The coalition acknowledges that a successful implementation of its agenda depends on effective external action, notably within the EU framework. This policy brief adopts an EU perspective to ask what the coalition government means for the Union's external action in the coming years.

German foreign policy is strongly influenced by the Chancellor, who holds the authority to issue policy guidelines ('Richtlinienkompetenz'). Merkel exercised this competence on numerous occasions, both when it came to German foreign policy within the EU (marked by multiple crises, with the 'migration crisis' as an emblematic example) and vis-à-vis the wider world (e.g., transatlantic relations, EU-Russia relations). It earned her a favourable reputation around the globe, to the point of being seen as the last defender of the 'liberal order' after the end of the Obama Presidency. Despite this strong role of the Chancellor, Germany's post-war history abounds with foreign ministers that have equally decisively shaped the country's external strategies. Typically coming from the smaller partner in a coalition government, they have also often held the position of 'Vice-Chancellor'.

During Merkel's reign, mirroring her general approach to politics, German foreign policy was characterised by strong

continuity. Besides a solid embedding into the EU context, this meant a consistent commitment to the transatlantic alliance and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), at least prior to and after the Trump Presidency, but also the defence of Germany's economic interests as an 'export nation'. Of the three pillars of German external action (foreign policy, external economic policy and external cultural and education policies), external economic policy continuously featured prominently on Merkel's agenda. One hallmark of her chancellorship was the long-standing idea of fostering change via trade ("Wandel durch Handel") and the corresponding openness for dialogue with major, but difficult trading partners like China and Russia, despite at times strained political relations. Beyond the economic realm, Germany also gradually took on a more active role in the management of international conflicts, from the Iran nuclear programme to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief first discusses the new coalition's objectives on three EU external policy priorities: (i) common foreign and security policy (CFSP), (ii) trade and development, and (iii) 'Green Deal Diplomacy'. The objectives are derived from the coalition agreement and the three parties' electoral programmes, as well as public statements of their representatives. For each policy domain, it highlights the likely implications of the German aims for EU external action. It then considers the governmental team responsible for advancing these objectives: Chancellor Scholz and the first female (and second-ever Green) Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, but also additional key figures bound to have a bearing on how the EU acts globally. It argues that while the new government generally strives to offer a new impetus to an EU that is often perceived as inert – transforming the Union from a reactive force into a player capable of shaping global politics – this innovation capacity has clear limits. De facto, the coalition defends many positions that result from compromises struck between the three parties. As a result, it remains more moderate and in line with its predecessor's approach, notably in the security realm. A more change-oriented role may however be expected regarding the EU's 'Green Deal Diplomacy' and relations with major powers.

### The new government's objectives

The new German government brings together three parties with a strong commitment to the European integration process as such. Indicative of this is their call for developing the EU – through a Convention process – into a "European federal state" (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021, 143). This general approach is reflected in the way the coalition would like to see EU external action evolve.

The general principles for this external action include, first of all, an affirmation of the long-standing position of "defining German interests in the light of European interests" (ibid., 131; Spiegel 2021). Second, the coalition articulates strong commitments when it comes to turning the EU into a "solidly democratic, more capable and strategically autonomous Union" based on values (ibid.). Third, the government

perceives its action as a contribution to both the creation of a rule-based multilateral order and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Agenda 2030. Fourth, it intends to use all means available, notably the 2022 German G-7 presidency, to work towards progress in key domains ranging from climate change and digitalisation to security and trade policies. Fifth, a key component of the coalition's strategy relates to the cultivation of international partnerships, notably the transatlantic alliance, which are considered as central 'pillars' of its (and the EU's) external action. This section discusses how these principles play out in central EU external policy domains.

### CFSP and broader strategic debates

In the area of foreign, security and defence policies, the new German government strongly supports ongoing debates at the EU level, including work on the Strategic Compass and on the Union's strategic autonomy. It goes a step further than those discussions and previous German governments regarding calls for a reform of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the role of the High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Affairs, which it wants to see become a real 'European Foreign Minister' (ibid., 136-137). A major proposal concerns the introduction of the possibility of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Foreign Affairs Council. Its support for this idea might re-dynamise a debate that has so far remained unresolved at the EU level.

In the defence domain, the German government shows a strong commitment to NATO, explicitly intended to re-assure the Eastern EU neighbours (ibid., 143). During the election campaign, German NATO membership had been one of the few debating points related to external action. The potential inclusion of the pacifist, anti-NATO Left (Die Linke) in an SPD-led government coalition would have weakened Germany's role in the alliance. Scholz has always made it clear, however, that his foreign policy approach rested on a strong commitment to NATO. Despite the presence of a less transatlanticist left wing in the SPD, that position is now confirmed, also because both the FDP and portions of the Greens' powerful, pragmatic 'realos' wing are pro-NATO (e.g. Lee et al. 2021). In relation to the Alliance's 2% of Gross Domestic Product spending target, the three parties could only agree on a vague compromise of investing 3% of the gross national income (GNI) in "international action" (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021, 144). Yet, as a Finance Minister, Scholz never opposed an increase in military spending. In relation to EU-internal defence matters, the coalition plans to further invest into 'enhanced cooperation' among willing member states relating to training, capacities, specific missions and equipment. In this context, it also advocates for a common command structure and joint civil-military headquarters (ibid., 137).

The strategic debates in the broader security domain also pertain to how the EU should position itself vis-à-vis major powers. In this regard, the German stance on China might markedly change: whereas the Merkel government focused

on exploiting opportunities for the German economy, Scholz and some members of his government have made it clear that China is a “systemic rival”, a terminology taken from the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook (ibid., 157; Bundespressekonferenz 2021). The coalition agreement explicitly voices concerns about issues such as China’s relations with Taiwan, the integrity of Hongkong’s political system and human rights breaches in Xinjiang (ibid.). This shift might facilitate a common EU position on China if it ends Germany’s privileged bilateral relations with the country. This may be welcomed by EU members with a traditionally more critical stance towards China as well as many Members of the European Parliament. To reduce its economic dependencies on China, Germany’s no. 1 trading partner, the coalition plans to consolidate its relations with like-minded allies, notably the US. It remains to be seen whether this tougher political stance on paper will be followed up on in practice. This will also depend on what sort of economic ramifications it entails, and how Germany’s strong industrial lobby groups – and the pro-business FDP – will react to those.

In relation to Russia, the coalition agreement emphasises the importance of bilateral relations on the condition that Russia ceases to breach international law. Generally, the tone of the agreement admonishes Russia not to further aggravate tensions in Eastern Europe and to revert its territorial expansion, i.e. the unlawful occupation of Crimea (ibid., 154). Due to the diverging positions on Russia within the coalition, with the SPD traditionally in favour of stronger cooperation, and the Greens and the FDP open to a more confrontational approach, the first months in office will indicate whether the new government can realistically pursue a ‘hawkish’ stance vis-à-vis an important energy supplier in the face of soaring prices, or if economic pressures will cement the status quo.

Overall, the signal the new coalition is sending to its EU partners in the security and defence domain is one of reassurance and continuity, with opportunities for further integration and a new impetus notably in relation to decision-making in the Council and the prospect of becoming a more autonomous actor while keeping strong relations with NATO. At the same time, it exhibits a more principled stance on relations with major authoritarian powers, primarily China, but also Russia. Greater strategic autonomy seems to be considered as a precondition for adopting a tougher position.

#### *Trade and development*

The new German government subscribes to a more value-guided trade policy. This is exemplified by its support for the EU’s ‘due diligence’ regulation that aims to address human rights breaches and deforestation in supply chains (ibid., 34). This trend can equally be observed in relation to climate change, as the coalition calls for stronger enforcement mechanisms for ‘trade and sustainability chapters’ in free trade agreements (FTA) (ibid.). Concretely, this is reflected in its stipulated unwillingness, which transcends that of its predecessor, to sign the EU-Mercosur FTA in its current form.

A change can also be observed when considering the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021, 35). Its agreement in principle in late 2020 was celebrated as a success of the German Council Presidency by the Merkel government (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy 2020). While the European Parliament has announced that it will not give its consent, the Scholz government now joins this position for “a number of reasons” (European Parliament 2021; SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021, 35). This represents a clear departure from Merkel’s (and her predecessor Schröder’s) doctrine of “Wandel durch Handel” (Huang 2019, 185). Altogether, the new government’s positions on trade policy might thus give rise to a stronger German voice in the Council, advocating a trade policy approach that favours increased political conditionality and is less driven by the attempt to bolster exports.

In relation to development cooperation and aid, the coalition commits to a stronger multilateral engagement and support to the United Nations and its approaches, notably the ‘Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus’ and the ‘Grand Bargain’ (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and FDP 2021, 146). In budgetary terms, the coalition’s goal of devoting at least 0.7% of the GNI to official development assistance (ODA) was also present in the last coalition agreement, but the new government wants to dedicate an additional 0.2% ODA/GNI to least developed countries (as part of its pledge of 3% GNI in international action, ibid., 150). Simultaneously, it foresees a knowledge and technology transfer to small farmers which, in concert with more restrictive export rules for European agricultural producers, aims at increasing welfare in developing countries. Whether this proposal will find a consensus in the EU, given the contentious nature of the Common Agricultural Policy, is questionable.

All in all, as one would expect from a ‘progressive’ government coalition, the new German leadership places, at least rhetorically, greater emphasis on the value dimensions of trade as well as on a stronger investment into relations with the developing world. EU partners can thus expect Germany to advocate for a more norm-oriented approach to EU trade and development policies. At the same time, the coalition promotes the improvement of assertive trade policy tools, seeking to render the EU capable of attaining its goal of being more autonomous and able to design appropriate responses to counter unfair or politically driven trade policy by third countries. A case in point is the proposed EU anti-coercion instrument (Liboreiro 2021).

#### *Green Deal Diplomacy*

The issues regrouped under the EU’s ‘Green Deal Diplomacy’ – external climate, environmental and energy policies – were central to the German electoral campaign, albeit with a domestic focus. Climate change was the Greens’ no. 1 topic and a key theme for the SPD. The coalition agreement reflects the importance attached to the issue, acknowledging its embeddedness into the European Green Deal and global

frameworks, notably the Paris Agreement and the SDGs (ibid., 131). One of the arguments for the Greens to pick the prestigious Foreign Ministry over the climate policy-relevant Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure is the importance they attach to climate and energy diplomacy.

To develop a “consequential foreign climate policy” at EU level (ibid., 144), the coalition makes numerous proposals that fully align with European priorities but emphasises even more the potential of mainstreaming climate change and reinforced cooperation with third-country partners. On the one hand, it suggests increased attention to addressing climate issues across other foreign policy domains, including external cultural and educational policy. On the other hand, and potentially more importantly, it proposes to invest more into climate and energy partnerships, for instance with the Middle East and North Africa, and with African countries more widely. In a similar vein, the German government wishes to reinforce partnerships with major emitters, especially the US, but also Russia, and suggests using its 2022 G-7 Presidency for that purpose (Lee et al. 2021). In this context, the coalition also strongly supports the long-standing EU aim of adopting world-wide mechanisms for carbon-pricing as well as the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism coupled to the idea – initially floated by academia (e.g. Nordhaus 2015) – to form global ‘climate clubs’.

Altogether, climate diplomacy is bound to be of central significance to the German government. At the same time, major controversies – and potential inconsistencies – remain unaddressed. In external energy matters, the Merkel government had repeatedly broken ranks with the rest of the EU when pursuing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 (NS2) pipeline, reinforcing its energy ties with Russia against the will of several Central and Eastern European members, the Commission, Ukraine as well as the US. The prospects of completing the pipeline despite this resistance were boosted by a deal that Merkel struck with US President Biden in July 2021 (Federal Foreign Office 2021). While the new German government wants to reform the Energy Charter Treaty, considered to be too much of a ‘fossil-fuel treaty’, the thorny issue of NS2, which is both a fossil-fuel project and a geopolitical matter relating to the strained EU-Russia(-US) relations, is not touched upon in their coalition agreement. Large portions of the SPD are supportive of finalising the project, and Scholz feels bound by the Biden-Merkel Deal (Bundespressekonferenz 2021), whereas the Greens and FDP remain sceptical. The dossier has resurfaced during the initial foreign visits of Chancellor Scholz and Foreign Minister Baerbock to Poland, and may well become a first test case for the solidity of the coalition. Interestingly, and pursuing earlier initiatives, the new government suggests investing further into cooperation with both Russia and Ukraine on other energy policy projects, notably in relation to hydrogen.

In relation to Green Deal Diplomacy, Germany’s European partners can largely take the new government’s commitment for granted. The coalition is clearly willing to invest political

capital into stronger and more coherent climate, energy and environmental diplomacies based on concrete proposals and an a priori coherent team of Green and SPD ministers in charge of relevant portfolios, as discussed next.

### **Key foreign policy figures in the new German government**

The new government’s positions will be advanced by a diverse team of politicians with overall limited experience in external affairs. The division of governmental portfolios sees the responsibility for external policies especially in the hands of the SPD (Chancellor, Defence Minister, Economic Cooperation and Development Minister) and the Greens (Foreign Minister, Minister for Climate, Energy and the Economy, Environment Minister), whereas the FDP chose to concentrate on internal matters (Finance, Justice, Transportation and Digital Infrastructure, Education and Research). This section zooms in on the most crucial posts.

#### *Chancellor Scholz*

Olaf Scholz brings in considerable – primarily domestic – political experience as a former Member of Parliament, First Mayor of Hamburg, as well as Minister of Finance and Vice-Chancellor. In external affairs, he can be expected to initially position himself, as he successfully did during the electoral campaign, in the continuity of Merkel’s foreign policy. Among the rather general foreign policy positions he repeatedly articulated during his bid for chancellorship were the desire to develop the EU into a more autonomous and militarily capable actor and the support for a rule-based global trade system (Bundespressekonferenz 2021).

A rules-based global system has in fact been one of his key concerns. From the few external policy dossiers he actively worked on as Finance Minister, the global minimum tax of 15% for multinational companies, endorsed by the G-7 in June 2021, stands out. Concerning the relations with major powers like China and Russia, Merkel’s approach emphasising Germany’s commercial interests seems to be slightly less favoured by Scholz. On NS2, while he remains supportive of completing the project, he indicated being ready to halt Russian gas delivery, should Russia unduly pressure Ukraine. It is at this stage difficult to foretell whether Scholz will develop a stronger appetite for foreign policy once he grows into his role – as did the last Social-Democratic Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and as key representatives of his party would like him to – or largely leave this matter to Foreign Minister Baerbock. In the latter case, initiatives could deviate more strongly from the Merkel government’s approach.

#### *Foreign Minister Baerbock*

Originally the Green Party candidate for chancellorship, Annalena Baerbock has now secured the Foreign Minister post. A career politician without government experience, Member of Parliament and Party Co-Leader, Baerbock has lived and studied in the United Kingdom and the US, and has portrayed herself as a transatlanticist. With her campaign very much focused on climate and energy transition, she can

be expected to invest her political capital into strengthening the EU's 'Green Deal Diplomacy', including the mainstreaming of climate and environmental issues into other external policies, notably trade (Spiegel 2021).

Additionally, she has defended a very principled position in relation to the protection of the rule of law and human rights. On this matter, she has made it clear that she intends to take a tougher stance on authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. She expressed her opposition to NS2 so as not to increase Germany's energy dependence on Putin's Russia. In relation to China, she argued that the "telling silence" pursued by the Merkel government was not a form of diplomacy she envisages to continue (Lee et al. 2021). Instead, she advocates for a combination of "dialogue and toughness" (ibid.). This toughness could take a variety of forms. She evoked, for instance, targeted economic sanctions against products from Chinese regions where human rights are violated. This idea ties in with the EU's most recent proposals regarding the 'weaponisation' of trade, which include the option to impose 'counter-sanctions' to deter coercive economic policies by major powers (Liboreiro 2021). Most recently, Baerbock also pondered on the possibility of (diplomatically) boycotting the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing (Lee et al. 2021), a move that has since been announced *inter alia* by the US and the UK.

The tough and seemingly dogmatic rhetorical stance on regimes that disrespect human rights has so far been Baerbock's main hallmark in foreign affairs. With this focus, she is not the first Green German Foreign Minister to enter the office carrying the torch of strong normative convictions. Joschka Fischer, the first Green Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor between 1998 and 2005, came into office with a personal background as anti-militarist, a position that was also a Green Party line at the time. He abandoned that stance while in office, endorsing German participation in military interventions in Kosovo and later Afghanistan. The switch from opposition party into government has thus, at least in the past, led the Greens to pursue more pragmatic policies (Brunstetter & Brunstetter 2011, 73). Baerbock's performance will show if political history repeats itself. The need to cooperate with two coalition and numerous EU partners might make it difficult to uphold some positions.

#### *Other important ministers*

Several other key posts in the new German government are bound to have a bearing for the future of EU external action. The Ministry of the Economy, Energy and Climate Protection as well as the Environment Ministry are in the hands of the Greens Robert Habeck, Party Co-Leader and Vice-Chancellor, and Steffi Lemke respectively. They are joined by the former Environment Minister, Svenja Schulze (SPD), as Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development. Given their converging positions on environmental matters, a stringent cooperation among these figures should be within reach, making an effective EU Green Deal Diplomacy that goes hand in hand with trade and development policies more likely.

Regarding security and defence, the cooperation between Baerbock and the new Defence Minister, Christine Lambrecht (SPD), is less predictable. Lambrecht served as Minister of Justice under Merkel but has no record in defence. When she was presented to the public, she briefly expressed a desire to continuously evaluate the German military's missions abroad, which is in line with comments Baerbock made in the wake of the retreat of German troops from Afghanistan.

#### **Conclusion**

For the EU's external action, the new German government is likely to initially mean considerable continuity with the policies of the 'grand coalition' of the past eight years. The traffic light trio wants to strengthen the EU *per se*, domestically and externally, to make it more a capable global player. The willingness to support an EU foreign policy that is more flexible based on QMV in the Council, and enacted by a true EU foreign minister, is clearly articulated. Relatedly, the coalition wishes to decisively engage in the debate about the Union's strategic autonomy, a topic that will feature prominently on the agenda of the French Council Presidency during the first half of 2022. This enhances the likelihood of progress on this dossier. At the same time, the German stance on security and defence matters remains generally measured and in line with that of Merkel's government.

The same cannot be said about its approach to trade, development and Green Deal Diplomacy. More ambition, and a more normative, human rights-oriented stance, characterise the way the new government wishes to go about these matters. This comes with a somewhat more assertive, some would argue 'hawkish', stance towards authoritarian regimes. This confrontational and principled position towards countries like Russia and China represents probably the most significant break with the past. Some EU partners will appreciate this turnaround, which opens opportunities for further developing strategic autonomy. However, it remains an open question if this posture, notably by the German Greens, will be followed by corresponding action. The key posts relating to external action have been filled in ways that would allow for coherence between words and deeds.

Yet, the effectiveness of its external action depends also on the credibility of the coalition, which in turn relies on what it achieves internally, as well as on the solidity of the coalition itself. The presence of three parties with different world views in the Scholz government is bound to play a moderating role. As a result, the coalition's actual external action may end up becoming more pragmatic than some of the positions voiced so far would make observers presuppose. The first occasion to prove that this is not the case will be the G-7 Presidency in 2022. It offers the opportunity to, for instance, work towards progress on climate partnerships. Other early test cases include the relations with China and, notably, Russia around ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Belarus.

For its EU partners, the German government, inexperienced as it may be in external affairs, is here to 'play ball', willing to

cooperate within the EU, starting with its traditional partner, France (Bundespressekonferenz 2021). Indeed, within less than a week of taking office, both Scholz and Baerbock travelled to France, then Brussels, followed by Poland, to meet their counterparts from the Weimar triangle and the EU, emphasising the strong anchorage of their policies in the EU context (Spiegel 2021). Partners willing to make progress

on key EU policies may be well-advised to seize the opportunity of the new start to advance discussions on the issues discussed in this policy brief, before the reality of a tripartite coalition government might halt the initial momentum.

## Further Reading

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