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A RE-SET FOR GERMAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

by Annette Heuser

German President Joachim Gauck may lack the executive powers of his US counterpart, but his call today at the Munich Security Conference for a more active German role in global affairs is significant for the trans-Atlantic relationship. Berlin could now be at the threshold of a new era of global outreach, including military involvement.

Gauck defined nothing less than a new narrative for his country's position in the world. He argued that Germany reaps more economic benefits from globalization than most other nations and, consequently, must assume its foreign and security responsibilities. He urged Germany, which has been instrumental for more than 60 years in the formation and growth of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Europe, to use its recent history as the bedrock for a newfound self-assuredness: "...we are now permitted to have confidence in our abilities and should trust in ourselves. For we know that people who trust in themselves gain the strength to reach out to the world. People who trust in themselves can be relied on by their partners."

Gauck included in this outreach a military component firmly embedded in Berlin's western alliances. He labeled as a German duty the further support and shaping of a coherent European foreign and security policy. He reconfirmed a commitment to creating a European defense, albeit one that complements NATO. At the same time, he questioned current German capabilities to confront today's new threats and challenges, from cyber attacks to terrorism. Success on all these fronts, he insisted, requires Berlin to be more pro-active in its global interactions by pursuing a more balanced approach towards military engagement: "...when the last resort—sending in the Bundeswehr—comes to be discussed, Germany should not say 'no' on principle. Nor should it say 'yes' unthinkingly."

This process is actually already underway. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in welcoming Secretary of State John Kerry to Berlin, stated today that his country will join the US in playing a constructive role to help solve the crisis in Ukraine. In addition, German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen confirmed this week that Berlin is ready to bolster EU

troop strength in Mali and provide logistical support to the EU mission in the Central African Republic.

President Gauck's words nevertheless serve as a long-overdue and desperately needed demand for a comprehensive debate, among his compatriots, about a proper, more activist foreign and security policy. He rightly pointed out that "...foreign and security policy is not just a matter for the elite. Basic existential issues should be a matter for reflection in the heart of society. Matters that affect everyone should be discussed by everyone."

That undoubtedly includes Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has yet to become fully engaged on this issue. She is instead maintaining her reputation as a cautious decision maker. That is unfortunate in this case. Public backing of her president's, defense minister's and foreign minister's positions would propel the debate, which would be good news for Europe and the US, whose ties are now overshadowed by the NSA scandal. Merkel's support would provide a wider opening for a more solid defense and security partnership, which Gauck lauded. In any case, the chancellor cannot now contain the discussion about Germany's global interests, involvement and partners.

The president's speech was a catalyst for injecting energy into a near-moribund trans-Atlantic relationship whose members should welcome a more dynamic German foreign and security policy.

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