Between Hesitation and Leadership

29 APRIL 2025

Niklas Klingel



The Anatomy of the "German Vote"

This abstention was not driven by indifference but by internal coalition dynamics and electoral calculations. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, facing regional elections, opted for a course that minimized political risk at home. Yet the price was high: Germany's reliability as a NATO and EU partner was called into question, and it was excluded from the post-conflict diplomatic process in Libya.

Coordination Loops and the Politics of Ambiguity

The Libya vote was not an isolated case but emblematic of a structural tendency in German policymaking. Germany's federal and coalition-based political system encourages exhaustive coordination among ministries and party actors. Decisions on foreign and security policy pass through multiple layers of review—the Federal Chancellery, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, and parliamentary committees. This complex architecture leads to what insiders dub "Koordinierungsschleifen," or coordination loops, where decisions are endlessly circulated but rarely finalized.

A recent example occurred in 2023 when Germany nearly scuttled an EU-wide ban on internal combustion engines due to last-minute objections from the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a junior coalition partner. Although a consensus had been painstakingly negotiated, internal disagreement forced Berlin to delay the agreement, sowing confusion among EU partners. These instances reveal how domestic veto players can derail even well-articulated policy positions, leading to perceptions of German paralysis.

The Price of Ambiguity

Germany's reluctance to take decisive stances carries tangible costs. In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Berlin's initial hesitation to deliver weapons drew fierce criticism from Eastern European states. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki publicly rebuked Germany, stating, "It is up to Germany whether they want to join the mission and stop Russian barbarism, or whether they choose to silently observe". France, too, has grown impatient with Berlin's slow pace in implementing common EU defence initiatives.

This cautious posture also has domestic repercussions. Talented young professionals in Germany's foreign service often find themselves frustrated by a culture that rewards risk-aversion over initiative. Taking bold action can mean personal exposure without institutional backing. In such an environment, innovation is stifled, and continuity—rather than adaptability—becomes the default mode of governance.

Expectations of Leadership

Germany is not a small neutral state. As the EU's largest economy and a central pillar of transatlantic security, it bears responsibilities that extend far beyond its borders. Allies expect not domination, but dependability. A seat at the table, especially in institutions like the UN Security Council or G7, comes with the expectation of clear, timely decisions.

Paradoxically, while Germany seeks influence, it often recoils from the responsibility it entails. This has led to a leadership model defined by influence without initiative, presence without commitment. The Zeitenwende speech by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2022—promising a historic shift in German foreign policy—was widely praised. Yet its implementation has

been uneven, and the foundational habits of strategic ambiguity remain largely intact.

Breaking the Habit: Toward Strategic Responsibility

The "German Vote" is not merely a diplomatic strategy; it is a symptom of a political culture that must evolve. Leadership in the 21st century demands more than consensus-building. It requires clarity, courage, and the willingness to accept short-term risks for long-term gains.

Germany must streamline its foreign policy architecture, empower strategic decision-making bodies like the Federal Security Council, and invest in a political culture that rewards initiative. Moreover, it must recognize that abstention is itself a powerful message—one that often communicates indifference or indecision when what is needed is solidarity and resolve.

Conclusion: A Vote for the Future

In the final analysis, the "German Vote" reflects a deeper ambivalence about Germany's role in the world. Yet the global challenges ahead—from climate change to great-power competition—will not wait for perfect consensus. Germany's allies are ready to follow its lead, but only if Berlin is prepared to lead with conviction. As history has shown, those who shirk responsibility diminish their influence. Those who take a stand, earn trust. Germany must choose which legacy it wishes to leave.