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The New German Government & Berlin's New Role in the World (1100 words)

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After exactly 16 years and 16 days in office German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** stepped down on December 8, 2021, and retired from politics. The new German government is led by Merkel's former Finance Minister **Olaf Scholz**, who heads a "traffic light coalition" of social democrats, greens and liberals - three rather diverse political parties. Their cooperation is based on a 177 page long "coalition contract" negotiated over two and a half months and in great secrecy by senior party leaders and overwhelmingly approved by the membership base of each of the three parties.

Not surprisingly the detailed and somewhat anodyne document is largely consumed with domestic affairs. Already the election campaign preceding the general election of late September 2021 was dominated by navel-gazing with little attention being paid to the outside world. Indeed, the still escalating Corona crisis, disputes and public resentment about the large number of confusing vaccination requirements, potential new lockdowns, the tanking economy, spiraling public debts, disconcerting high inflation rates, and many other domestic issues need to be taken seriously.

Perhaps this explains why only 28 pages of the “coalition contract” deal with Germany’s future role in Europe and the wider world. Yet one of the most crucial issues at stake in the coming years is Germany’s and indeed the EU’s role in global politics. It is high time for Germany to assume a more relevant role in the world and overcome its well-deserved reputation of thinking and acting like a “geopolitical dwarf.”

Germany and the EU are threatened with being crushed in the economic and geopolitical “great power competition” between the US and China. A smiling Vladimir Putin is ready to take advantage of Germany’s confusion and uncertainty about how to avoid taking sides while still honoring its traditional closeness to the US.

The **New York Times** reported that the “buzzword” for the new German government “will be continuity.” In fact, we may witness a radical departure of German foreign policy though perhaps not quite in the way as many may hope.

Germany’s new foreign policy will be overseen by three female politicians. Above all, there is the 40-year old **Annalena Baerbock**, one of the Green party’s top leaders and the first female German foreign minister ever. Then there is the new Defense Minister **Christine Lamprecht** of the SPD, who as a former Justice and Family Minister has plenty of executive experience but no track record in the defense or foreign policy realms. The new Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development is the SPD’s **Svenja Schulze**, who also has plenty of governmental but little, if any foreign policy involvement.

Still, it will be mostly **Baerbock’s** and the Green party’s value driven foreign policy philosophy that will make a huge difference. **Baerbock**, however, has no governmental and no foreign policy experience either and some of her remarks during the televised election debates came

across as naïve and ill-informed. Yet she is a fast learner, a quick thinker with an impressive personality and, not least, she represents the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times) in international affairs.

The *Zeitgeist*, it seems, is hardline. **Merkel's** tendency to listen, integrate and patiently attempt to find compromises between competing interests is gone. What does this mean in practice?

Baerbock will pursue a foreign policy with a keen eye on making climate protection an important criterion for international deals and financial aid. She and her party, which has a strong pacifist tradition, will also be reluctant to modernize NATO, increase Germany's defense contribution or agree to German military engagements abroad. They will not hesitate to annoy the large German arms industry by curtailing arms exports. Germany, after all, is the world's fourth largest weapons exporter.

The new Foreign Minister can be expected to put a great emphasis on the rule of law and the human rights dimension in international affairs. This will lead to a further hardening of policies toward China and Russia but also toward countries such as NATO ally Turkey and EU members Hungary and Poland, which have all embraced increasingly autocratic ways of governance.

The Green party has strongly condemned the Nordstream II pipeline deal with Russia and is appalled by many of Putin's ruthlessly autocratic policies, including his imprisonment of political opponents, support of Belarus's inhumane weaponizing of migration and Moscow's escalating destabilization of Ukraine.

Not least, the Green party's emphasis on human rights will bring it into stark conflict with China. In fact, **Baerbock** agrees with the European parliament that the EU and Germany should not base their China policy on

engagement and economic cooperation but on focusing on human rights and the rule of law. It is thus unlikely that one of Merkel's major foreign policy achievements with China, the EU's *Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* (CAI) of December 2020, will be implemented any time soon. EU parliamentarian **Reinhard Bütikofer**, a former leader of the German Green party, is one of the EU parliament's leading China hawks.

Baerbock will thus find herself in agreement with the increasingly harsh China and Russia policies of the US, which will undoubtedly please the Biden administration. Yet, many within in the Green party view the US and its polarized domestic politics, including the potential return of Donald Trump, with great suspicion.

The Biden administration, moreover, has disappointed many in Germany and Europe. Washington's chaotic and ruthless withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Aukus deal with Australia and the UK, which sidelined the EU, and also the belated removal of transatlantic travel restrictions and import tariffs, has led to much frustration. And many of Germany's key companies, not least within the crucially important automobile sector, have made themselves highly dependent on the Chinese market and will do almost anything to avoid annoying the political leadership in Beijing.

Last but not least, according to the German constitution it is the chancellor who defines the "guidelines" of German politics, including the country's foreign policy. It can be expected that not unlike **Angela Merkel**, Chancellor **Scholz** will put himself in charge of policy making regarding the most crucial issues and countries. Foreign policy toward the US, China, Russia and the EU will above all be conducted from the Chancellor's office. And as a former Finance Minister **Scholz** is unlikely to overlook the fact that almost 44 per cent of German GDP is based on

exports of which approximately half go to the other EU countries and much of the rest to China and the US.

Perhaps we will soon witness a fierce battle for Germany's foreign policy soul between **Olaf Scholz's** mighty Chancellery and the formidable **Annalena Baerbock's** Foreign Ministry.

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Books just published by Klaus Larres:

Uncertain Allies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Threat of a United Europe (Yale University Press);

Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics (Routledge, edited book).

