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The Green transition — from pacifism to realpolitik

In foreign policy, the German Greens increasingly want to enforce their values by military means. But a division into good and evil doesn't solve conflicts

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – and the *Zeitenwende* (turning point) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced shortly after – has unsettled political parties on the left: Germany's left-wing party Die Linke is engaged in fierce internal debates about its relationship to Russia and how much the West and NATO are to blame. In contrast, the social-democratic SPD is struggling with the legacy of its *Ostpolitik* and a new security policy exemplified by a €100bn special fund for the German Armed Forces and its new claim to leadership.

Surprisingly, only within the Green Party does the radical change in German foreign policy appear to not have triggered any need for debate. The recalibration doesn't seem to warrant throwing paint bombs – like during the Green Party congress in 1999, when its Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer defended the German army's first foreign deployment in Kosovo. Interviewed by Germany's state broadcaster in late April 2022, Green parliamentary faction co-leader Katharina Dröge sounded a bit surprised by her party's unity.

In fact, the Greens began to transition from radical pacifism to realpolitik and change its stance on the use of military force when it approved military deployments to Kosovo in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001. However, that involved a lot of intense debate with the party base. The current pragmatic political consensus, abandoning the party's original radical pacifism, was a long haul: In 2014, a broad majority of Greens – led by parliamentary group leader Anton Hofreiter – voted against providing the Kurdish Peshmerga with weapons to fight ISIS; only a few members, including then Green Party leader Cem Özdemir and Joschka Fischer, voted for it. In 2021, while visiting eastern Ukraine, Robert Habeck was the first Green to call for giving the country weapons. He was promptly reined in by his party co-leader, Annalena Baerbock, who is now Germany's foreign minister.

From pacifism to interventionism

Meanwhile, fundamental pacifist convictions and military restraint are a thing of the past – including among party supporters. In a survey commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on attitudes toward the momentous change in foreign policy, more than half of Green Party voters advocated that Germany intervene militarily where necessary. Hence, Greens are more willing to intervene than the rest of the electorate: One third of CDU and FDP voters approve of military intervention, with only a quarter of SPD voters and just five per cent in Die Linke. From leaders to members, the party that emerged from the peace movement has not only begun to become pro-interventionist, but also generally accepts and cultivates the use of military force. That is very unusual in Germany.

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Aside from shedding its pacifist mantle, the Greens are introducing a new note to foreign policy as the survey on the *Zeitenwende* reveals: Some 84 per cent of Green Party voters favour a strongly normative foreign policy in which values count more than interests – despite possible negative consequences. SPD, FDP, and conservative voters are much less gung-ho.

Almost all Green Party voters would accept a loss of prosperity to reduce dependency on countries like Russia and China – compared to around three quarters of members of other parties. Of all voting blocs, the Greens are the least supportive of an interest-based foreign policy. Instead, they want theirs to be values-driven. Green supporters are also the least convinced of the need to cooperate with countries that do not share our values in the name of maintaining peace and security.

The contradictions of the Greens' foreign policy

The Greens' sharply defined foreign policy orientation, which is so unlike that of the other mentioned parties, did not begin with the war in Ukraine. In September 2021, the socialist magazine *Jacobin* published an article claiming that the Greens' foreign policy is to the right of the Conservatives. The Green Party platform for the Bundestag election was the most opposed to authoritarian states. With 'dialogue and rigour', they insisted on a clear stance in the competition between political systems. *Jacobin* described Green Party values-led foreign policy as 'full of

contradictions' and 'conflicts'.

Practical political necessities place values behind interests, with the most recent example being Germany's plan to compensate for the loss of Russian gas with gas from Qatar. Of course, the energy supply must be secured with pragmatic solutions. But morally speaking, it can't be 'right' to switch the energy supply from one authoritarian regime to another. With respect to values, that is either hypocritical or inconsequential – and sceptical self-criticism doesn't change that.

A pure values-based foreign policy cannot calm the perfect storm created by parallel and mutually reinforcing mega-crises. The climate crisis, social inequality, pandemic shocks, hunger, and wars will not be overcome by only cooperating with 'like-minded' countries. What responsibility do Western democracies bear for the 71 per cent of the world's population ruled by autocrats? What is the relationship between the ethics of purpose and those of responsibility? It will be interesting to see how the Greens proceed with *democratic* states: They are unlikely to keep opposing the CETA free trade agreement with Canada.

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Furthermore, it's not clear who is going to pay for values-based politics. A foreign policy that only cooperates with countries with compatible values is costly. We have to acknowledge that Germany's decades of prosperity have made us dependent on fossil-fuel sources, rare earth, highly specialised supply chains, and export-driven growth. But we should not maintain these dependencies: On the contrary. It's good for Europe to diversify. But we must recognise that independence is neither rapid nor cost-neutral and someone has to foot the bill.

The end of dialogue?

Finally, a normative foreign policy can make dialogue impossible. When political conflicts are either 'good' or 'evil', conflict parties are loath to sit down together to negotiate. Morally charged conflicts are especially difficult to solve. Focusing on interests makes it is easier to overcome differences.

This does not mean that German foreign policy should be blind to values and only concerned with interests. It wasn't in the past and won't be in the future. Values and interests are part and parcel of foreign policy. The war on Ukraine is forcing us to reconsider their relative weight. Although

once it was in our national interest to supply households and industry with the cheapest possible energy, we now must reduce one-sided dependencies and diversify our energy sources as quickly as possible – admitting that complete self-sufficiency is neither possible nor in our economic interest.

As a community of shared values, the EU will have to use all its resources to oppose the autocratic backlash and defend European democracies from their domestic and foreign enemies. The EU cannot combat crises of global proportions by restricting itself to the shrinking club of democracies. It must forge alliances by making targeted, attractive proposals to semi-authoritarian states. Values and interests should be viewed as equally important not as mutually exclusive.

It's interesting that the clear contradictions in Green Party foreign policy appear to not bother its supporters: The leaders' communication strategy seems a resounding success. But to make foreign policy for all voters and not just their clientele, the Greens should strive to better balance values and interests and not be too quick to ditch their pacifist principles, including the readiness to dialogue.



Catrina Schläger
Berlin

Catrina Schläger leads the Political Consulting Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Prior to this, she held various roles within the Foundation's international operations.