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The outline of the Merz doctrine: Germany as a global player

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On 8 September, Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU) opened the annual ambassadors' conference in Berlin identifying security and the competitiveness of the Federal Republic of Germany as priorities amid the systemic conflict between liberal democracies and the autocratic axis. He announced plans to build a new European security architecture based on NATO, with a strengthened European pillar and a key role for Germany, justified by its economic weight and geostrategic location on the European continent. Germany's foreign policy is to be pragmatic and focused on the pursuit of interests. Within the EU, France remains a key partner, while across Europe cooperation with the United Kingdom is also of major importance. The United States continues to be Germany's most important non-European partner, but cooperation will be adapted to Washington's current course. Merz reaffirmed support for Ukraine on its path towards a 'just peace' and warned against Putin's imperial ambitions and mounting pressure from China. Cooperation with the PRC is possible, but only if diversification of supply chains and raw materials is achieved. Germany intends to strengthen ties with non-European partners and remain active in multilateral forums, including the United Nations, where it is seeking a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for the 2027–2028 term.

The declaration of changes in foreign and security policy delivered by the chancellor to the diplomatic corps should be regarded as a powerful symbolic message directed to both foreign and domestic audience. The last time such a speech was made in this context, before this kind of audience and with a similar emphasis on the need for greater assertiveness and ambition in German policy, was in 2000 by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Merz's message about Germany 'taking over responsibility' signals the adoption of an ambitious agenda. However, at present, Berlin lacks both adequate military capabilities and sufficient political legitimacy to assume the lead role in European security.

Commentary

- **Chancellor Merz's speech marks a shift in Germany's perspective on foreign and security policy – towards an ambitious strategy focused on advancing Germany's own interests as a global player.** Merz distances himself from the traditional language of moral universalism that has defined Germany as a 'civilian power', describing that approach as 'moral arrogance' born of economic success, and instead calls for hard realism. Alongside declaratory multilateralism, the language of national interest, strategic partnerships, and assertive shaping of the international order according to rules and norms now comes to the fore. A notable novelty in this emerging doctrine is the strong emphasis on economic sovereignty as a political instrument. Germany intends not only

to diversify its sources of raw materials and supply chains, but also to actively contribute to the creation of a new global trading system, independent of dysfunctional institutions such as the WTO. Combined with its global ambitions and a redefinition of partnerships beyond the West – from Mercosur to Central Asia and Africa – this portrays Germany not merely as a participant in the international system, but as a country aspiring to reshape it in line with its own interests and values.

- **Merz is willing to cooperate with the United States, but his message is clearly one of emancipation: Europe must act in pursuit of its own interests.** He calls for an 'adjustment' of European policy to reflect the evolving global role of the US, pointing to the declining self-evidence of the transatlantic partnership. This emancipatory rhetoric highlights the gap between Berlin's growing ambitions and its actual capabilities. The idea of building a 'new, lasting security architecture', treating China as a systemic rival, while simultaneously pursuing policies towards Beijing based on the interests of German industrial giants, remains internally contradictory and strategically unconvincing. Merz's speech also reveals other tensions. Berlin avoids clearly defining the extent to which it is willing to share power with its European partners. Importantly, there is no mention of any proposal for EU reform or for improving the bloc's functioning.
- **Poland remains outside the main focus of Germany's new strategic vision.** Merz's speech sends an ambiguous signal. On the one hand, the strongly anti-Putin rhetoric and declarations on the need to strengthen NATO's European pillar could suggest a growing alignment between German and Polish interests. On the other hand, Merz's complete omission of Poland as a strategic partner is striking. Throughout the address, he repeatedly emphasised the special role of France (the 'heart chamber of Europe') and the United Kingdom as key allies. He also stressed the priority of forging relationships with countries of the Global South, from Brazil to Central Asia. Poland, by contrast, was not mentioned either as a partner in shaping a new international order or as a reference point in discussions on the security of NATO's eastern flank. This omission is all the more telling given that, during his election campaign, Merz had signalled a desire to rebuild trust with Warsaw and to place greater value on Poland's role in the region. Consequently, in the chancellor's speech Poland was not featured as an equal partner.