

A new game of dominoes

The world's focus on Germany this week has prompted some to ask about Germany's focus on the world.



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The new American ambassador to Germany, Philip Murphy, introduced himself to Berliners recently in an Obama-style town-hall meeting at Humboldt University. "The relationship between Germany and America", he declared, "is the most important relationship of the past 60-plus years." That may have been true when the Berlin Wall still stood, just west of where Mr Murphy was bonding with the city's youth. But it stopped being so when the wall fell 20 years ago.

So long as the wall was there, West Germany was on the front line of the West's confrontation with the Soviet Union. Its fall, commemorated by European leaders this week with fireworks and the toppling of 1,000 hand-painted dominoes, increased Germany's population by a quarter, its territory by two-fifths and its economy by a tenth. France and Britain were not alone in fretting lest Germans return to their overbearing ways. In fact, Germany's relative importance has diminished. Today it is a medium-sized power whose influence looms large within Europe but is spotty beyond it.

Angela Merkel, who is just starting her second term as chancellor, knows this. But she also wants Germany to remain relevant. Diplomacy is one of her favourite pursuits and a source of her popularity. Germany's biggest task in the next 20 years, she told an interviewer this week, is to help resolve conflicts outside its borders. It is the European Union's biggest country by population and GDP, and by both measures ranks second only to America in NATO. Ms Merkel may not run a superpower but she has as good a claim as anyone to being the top second-tier leader.

In her first term she was cautious and selective. She was a front-runner on climate change, a position she intends to keep at next month's Copenhagen summit. She gave warning early that unfettered financial speculation was dangerous and, since the crisis broke, she has championed tighter regulation. To avert another crunch, she preaches, the world should adopt Germany's tempered version of capitalism, its social-market economy.

But in matters of war and peace Germany has yet to shed its inhibitions. It has the third-largest contingent of troops under NATO command in Afghanistan, but they are largely confined to the less violent north of the country. Germany trades more than America with such troublemakers as Russia and Iran, which potentially gives it influence but also reasons not to confront them. Its armed forces are “the least deployable, mobile and sustainable of NATO’s and the EU’s leading armies”, according to a recent essay by Christian Hacke, a foreign-policy analyst.

Ms Merkel is starting her second term in a changed world. George Bush has yielded to Barack Obama, who wants to “reset” relations with Russia and talk to Iran. Germany has a new foreign-policy team. Guido Westerwelle, leader of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), is keen to make his mark as foreign minister. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the new defence minister, is one of Germany’s most popular politicians. And the EU will shortly equip itself with a new president of the European Council and a beefed-up high representative for foreign policy.

Ms Merkel and her colleagues have dropped hints that policy may change a bit, too. This week she went to Paris to join Nicolas Sarkozy to commemorate the end of the first world war, a first for a German chancellor and a nod to those (especially in Paris) who crave a new era in Franco-German relations. A week earlier she gave a speech to America’s Congress, the first by a German chancellor in 52 years, and she used her toughest language yet on Iran, vowing “zero tolerance” for nuclear weapons in its hands and “tough economic sanctions” if dialogue fails. There is speculation that Germany may do more in Afghanistan and Pakistan, perhaps even defying public opinion by sending more troops. Asked recently if the government would change the terms of the mandate for the Afghanistan mission, which expires in December, Mr zu Guttenberg answered vaguely enough to keep his options open.

At Mr Westerwelle’s behest, the new government proposes to negotiate the removal of remaining American nuclear weapons on German soil, a modest-sounding idea with big implications. The tactical weapons, which number in the dozens, serve little military purpose; their removal would complement Mr Obama’s long-term aim of eliminating nuclear weapons. But it might unnerve allies such as Turkey that rely on American nuclear protection. Removing them from Germany “must be part of a bigger shift inside NATO” that could involve extending nuclear deterrence in the Middle East, argues Henning Riecke of the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Accused of timidity in her first term, when her Christian Democratic Union was in a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party, Ms Merkel wants to start her partnership with the FDP on a bolder note. In her first statement to the Bundestag on November 10th, she was blunt about the damage from the economic crisis. Tomorrow’s walls will be overcome, she said at the post-Berlin Wall festivities, only if states are willing to “give up powers to multilateral organisations, whatever it costs”. This was aimed at Copenhagen, but it could apply also to NATO and the EU. Perhaps Ms Merkel realises that Germany matters only if it is a team player.

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