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An African Perspective: Pointers for Germany's Foreign Policy Direction in Africa

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Bonn, Duisburg, 26 February 2014. A debate has been emerging on the direction of Germany's global engagement. Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Defence Minister von der Leyen urged for a more active, decisive and responsible engagement with global crisis and challenges elsewhere. The rhetoric seems to suggest that Germany's long tradition of civil global engagement is no longer tenable and that appropriating greater responsibility will somehow transform Germany from a 'reluctant hegemon' to a potentially active emancipatory beacon. It is not unusual for a new government to roll-out ambitious policy directions with a global flair. Yet what appears unsettling in the pronouncements is the almost unapologetic hint at military interventionism.

Germany has had a unique, almost non-temperamental engagement with the world. From this, it has nurtured strong relations driven by a subdued allure of national interests considerations. But adventurist foreign policy especially one that privileges military intervention in Africa runs the risk of eroding Germany's respectable neutrality and authority. While the ethos, and indeed direction, of any foreign policy is a matter for governments, engagement with Africa must however, be framed around what I perceive as the three elemental features of a transformative engagement, reformulating the usual western approaches.

The first, mutuality in partnership, is to see Africa not as a distant land susceptible and receptive to western interventionism, but rather, engage African states as mutual partners. Doing so has the potential of shaping a just and fair global order where people can live in dignity. Germany should view Africa as a valuable partner whose inputs and enormous potentials can be deployed to tackle problems of genuine global concern such as climate change, poverty, disease, energy and trade. Admittedly, Germany's soft engagement is often perceived as the receptacle to mutuality in partnership which could defuse tensions, mistrust and accusations of hegemonic dominance. It is illogical to abandon this approach for the allures of politically intensive and confrontational grand policy ambitions.

Second, Germany's Africa engagement must be anchored on instrumentality in cooperation. By this I mean the formulation and consolidation of a kind of an engagement which serves as a means of influence and non-military corrective purpose. Indeed, the problems and challenges of Africa are vast and their effects increasingly interwoven with larger global challenges. But the solutions to these problems lie

not in the hands of technocrats but can be found in community networks, social institutions and public outlets in Africa. Empirical evidence has shown that when people have the means to pursue their dreams, they often utilize them to great value. There is a compelling need, therefore, for a cooperative engagement that will create opportunities, boost skills and techniques, create and expand labour markets.

Third, a Germany Africa policy must advocate for, and be subsumed from, a sense of prudence in relations. Africa has always served as the abiding template for interventionist western foreign policy. This is often justified on the basis of national security and the need to help contain violence and build frameworks of rule of law. Mali is mentioned these days, as the 'poster-boy' of the positive elements of intervention. Yet it is often forgotten, that Mali's post-coup crisis was pretty much a collateral effect of the intervention in Libya. Of course, some have already argued for the consideration of military intervention only as the last resort. This is not enough. I will go even further to argue that western military intervention must not be the last resort. It should not be the resort in any case! There are enough institutional structures in Africa to handle crisis of whatever scale and nature. What they lack is the resources to implement their respective mandates. The African Union Constitutive Act of 2002 is one of the most progressive of any international organization. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States) has a fairly strong institutional arrangement which could confront conflicts, famine, and other catastrophes. A German Africa policy should help to enhance the capacity of regional institutions and expand their outreach and operational efficiency.

Germany has much to gain from a revamped foreign policy. Transformations in global politics and the increasing globalisation necessitate a review of foreign policy. In the context of Africa, Germany's foreign policy should address inadequacies in current engagement rather than inaugurate interventionist grand policies. It is my belief that a reflection of the three elements will generate a more meaningful relationship with Africa. Perhaps, Steinmeier and von der Leyen need to be reminded also, that Africa is also going through its own internal self-assurance, and is becoming increasingly assertive. It will almost certainly reject adventurist interventionism.

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