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Germany's Foreign Policy following the Parliamentary Elections

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The results of the September 24, 2017 German parliamentary elections were hardly optimal for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, even with her election for a fourth consecutive term. Merkel went into the elections as the leader of a broad coalition government that held 70 percent of the seats in the parliament, whereas the leader of the opposition, the Die Linke party, held only 8.3 percent of the seats. However, while she won the largest number of seats in the parliament (33 percent), Merkel's faction, which includes the Christian Democratic Party and the Christian Socialist Party in Bavaria (CDU/CSU), lost 20 percent of its electoral strength. Moreover, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which in recent years has been a partner in Germany's broad national unity government, will most likely not join Merkel's next government, as its leader Martin Schulz, has announced his party's intention to move to the opposition. In light of these constraints, it appears that Merkel will head a narrow coalition - along with the Greens and the Liberal Party (holding 9 percent and 10.7 percent, respectively) - that will control 52 percent of the seats in the parliament. At the same time, she will face a relatively broad opposition, including the SPD party on the left, which holds 20 percent of the seats in parliament, and the radical right wing populist Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which won 12.6 percent of the seats, becoming the first radical right wing party to enter the Bundestag since World War II.

This small coalition will be a stark change from the coalition stability that Merkel has enjoyed in recent years. This stability is what enabled her to formulate the foreign policy she used to stabilize the European economy during the global economic crisis that began in 2008, and to assume the lion's share of the burden of refugees that arrived in Europe from the Middle East between 2015 and 2016. These measures positioned Germany as the primary fulcrum of the European Union. It also positioned Merkel as the EU's senior political leader and the individual most responsible for preserving the EU in light of the many challenges it has faced in recent years.

The main question is whether the limited mandate Merkel now holds will result in change to the dominant foreign policy that her government has led in recent years, both inside and outside the European Union. Although after the elections Peter Wittig, Germany's ambassador to the United States, stated that "there will be a lot of continuity in Germany's role in Europe and the world" and that "the chancellor has said she wants to continue her successful economic policies of...free trade and...[her] clear view of reforming the European Union," it is unclear whether Merkel's coalition will allow her to pursue a policy that will encourage the loss of additional votes to the radical right wing AfD. The AfD was established against the background of Greece's bailout from its economic crisis and branded itself as an opponent of the European Union. Its electoral consolidation stemmed from bitter opposition to Merkel's decision to open Germany's gates to the recent wave of immigrants.

Fear of a resumption of mass immigration is liable to impact directly on the foreign policy Germany can be expected to conduct vis-à-vis Erdogan's government in Turkey. The agreement Merkel signed with Turkey, which committed Turkey to allow the immigrants to remain within its borders, temporarily silenced the nationalist criticism voiced by members of the radical right wing in Germany. However, in recent months, the tension between Germany and Turkey has intensified as a result of Erdogan's policy of repression against his opponents following the failed coup that took place in the country in the summer of 2016, as well as the results of the Turkish referendum that expanded Erdogan's presidential powers. In the course of the election campaign, Merkel indicated that she was interested in arresting the talks regarding Turkey's entry into the European Union, and in response, Erdogan called on the Turkish population in Germany, which numbers approximately three million, to vote against the major parties. A Turkish vote for the marginal parties or the absence of a Turkish vote should be interpreted as another sign of failure of the integration of Muslims in Germany and will likely increase support for the AfD. Concern regarding this trend stands to motivate Merkel to continue her cooperation with Erdogan on the issue of the refugees, despite the tension between the two leaders.

US President Donald Trump is likewise presumably not perturbed by the erosion of Merkel's support among Germany's citizens. Trump, who has attacked Merkel on a number of issues, most prominently her immigration policy, is closer in policy to the radical right wing parties in Europe than to Merkel. The electoral strengthening of the AfD at the expense of the conservative CDU indicates that the values that Trump has preached bear similar weight among Merkel's traditional voters. The mass electoral support for the radical right wing party is likely to signal to Merkel and her coalition that the public has grown tired of liberal ideology and to constrain her policy. It could also decrease the chances of Germany coming to the aid of another country in the Euro bloc in

the event that it finds itself in a financial crisis. At the same time, the end of the election campaign in Germany – during which Merkel branded herself as the leader of the liberal world by voicing severe criticism of Trump's policy on issues of trade, human rights, and the United States withdrawal from the Paris Agreement – can be expected to thaw the frosty relations between Germany and the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to have been a primary beneficiary of the outcome of the German elections. Despite Germany's ongoing attempt to build a strategic partnership with Russia and its significant dependence on the export of Russian natural gas, Russian foreign policy forced decision makers in Germany to conclude that their fig leaf approach would not be reciprocated. The aggressive approach taken by the Kremlin in the past few years – as exemplified in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the downing of the Malaysian Airlines plane over Ukraine by pro-Russian rebels (2015), and Russian involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine in general – led the Chancellor and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel to announce the end of their strategic partnership with Russia. Germany then mediated between Russia and Ukraine (the Minsk process) and led the formulation of sanctions against Russia. Although Germany opposed the sanctions that the US Congress ultimately imposed on Russia, Berlin is still considered to be the primary obstacle to the expansion of Russian influence in Europe.

Against this background, reports regarding Russian activity on the social networks in the days preceding the parliamentary elections, aimed at support for the AfD, should come as no surprise. Russia's intervention in the election campaign in Germany can be viewed as a direct extension of its open and active intervention on behalf of radical right wing populist parties that support the renationalization of Europe as part of the strategic perception that a weaker European Union would mean an increased sphere of Russian influence. Especially after Trump's election, Angela Merkel remains among the only leaders in the West committed to preserve the stability of the EU. The weakening of her standing within Germany will, to some extent, detract from her ability to work to preserve the Union, as she has done in the past.

Regarding the special relationship between Israel and Germany, Merkel, who has expressed her unconditional support for the security of Israel, will presumably maintain Germany's close relations with Israel and fight the anti-Semitism that has been on the rise in Germany in recent years. She can be expected to maintain this course despite the political potholes that have cast a shadow over German-Israeli relations over the past year. Indeed, the German government's freeze on the submarine deal with Israel did not stem from a change in German-Israeli relations, but rather to allow for the completion of the legal proceedings underway in Israel and Germany regarding the legality of the decision making process. Moreover, the departure from the government of the SPD,

which promoted a critical approach toward Israel, is liable to result in the selection of a German foreign minister who is friendly toward Israel – that is, friendlier than outgoing Foreign Minister Gabriel, who frequently was critical of Israel in the context of the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian political process.