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Emerging Contours of German foreign policy in the post-Merkel era

Angela Merkel's successor Social Democratic Party (SDP) leader Olaf Sholz, the new chancellor of Germany, assumes office after having had to enter into a 177-page coalition deal with partners Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens. The length of the document signals several sharp divisions among the coalition partners on major economic, fiscal and foreign policy issues especially concerning energy security, Russia and China.



The new cabinet is an interesting one. Heiko Maas, foreign minister for the past three years and a keen advocate of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is replaced by Annalena Baerbock, co-leader of the Greens, who has been opposed to the Nord Stream 2. The new Economic Minister is Robert Habeck, again a Greens leader. He

will oversee the regulatory approval process for Nord Stream 2. Things were different with his predecessor Peter Altmaier, who lobbied on behalf of Russia and was instrumental in getting the controversial Nord Stream project through. Whether Robert Habeck will do so, seems unlikely because Greens view Nord Stream 2 as symbolic of Germany's subservient relationship to Moscow.

Not Scholz himself, but other members of his Social Democrats Party have been close to Russia. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (from SDP) has been Putin's chief international lobbyist as well as the chairman of the Nord Stream 2 Company. But with radically opposed Economic and Foreign Ministers, the earlier relationship with Russia will get challenged. The success of Scholz's coalition will depend to a large extent on whether he can distance himself from his party's Putin loyalists and define a new, more equitable relationship with Russia.

An array of interesting facets emerge in Germany- China relations. Under Merkel's chancellorship, Germany became the country's biggest trade partner in Europe. However, the Greens have been more critical of Xi's regime with some of their MPs being currently subjected to sanctions by the CCP for critiquing China's human rights violations. How will Scholz coalition maintain close ties with China under prevailing conditions, will be a matter of interest. Scholz recently drew flak from CCP when he unveiled a program for the government that includes surprisingly strong language on China, pledging to call out China on human rights and backing Taiwan's entry into international organisations.

The bigger tension lies in the nature of the coalition parties themselves. While the Social Democrats want to increase social spending, the pro-business FDP reject

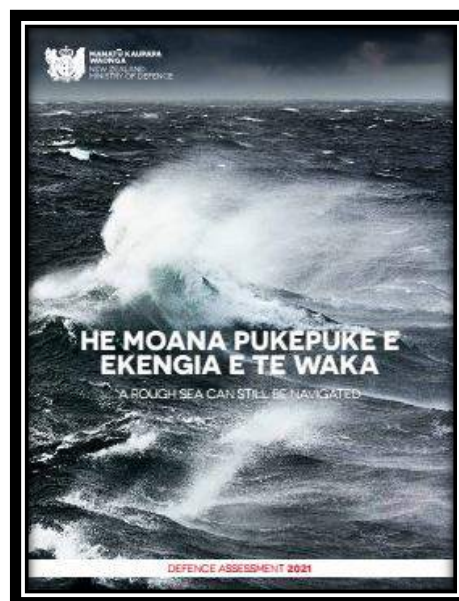
higher taxes. At the same time, the coalition, on the whole, in a massive effort to transition to renewable energy wants to spend €50 billion annually to accelerate the transition to green energy and modernise the outdated public infrastructure. The July 2021 US-Germany green energy deal that aims to invest more than 200 million euros in energy security in Ukraine as well as sustainable energy across Europe is too fresh to show sustainable results. Hence, the mutually exclusive policies among the coalition partners have to work out an equilibrium. Without the money to put into the green energy transition, Germany will continue to be reliant on natural gas from Russia.

Scholz coalition's commitment to the Indo-Pacific is heartening. The coalition agreement lays out plans to build relations with key players in the region like Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India as part of Berlin's fledgling Indo-Pacific strategy that effectively protects its economic interests in what China considers its backyard. A rules-based order, freedom of navigation and upholding multilateralism are the essence of Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy.

New Zealand's Defence Assessment 2021- Charting a safe course in turbulent geopolitics

The Defence Ministry of New Zealand laid out a sobering analysis of New Zealand's national security situation in the Defence Assessment 2021 published on 08 Dec 2021. The document has been headlined with the Maori proverb "He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka: a rough sea can still be navigated" and the first sentence of the assessment begins with a recognition that "New Zealand faces a substantially more challenging and complex strategic environment than it has for decades."

Through a rather cogent and insightful analysis, the document argues that "strategic competition" and climate change are the principal drivers of this deteriorating environment. Strategic competition between America and China was singled out as a "major driver" of increased insecurity. The ministry characterised the Indo-Pacific as the "central global theatre for strategic competition". In the Indo-Pacific region, the Defence Assessment finds the most significant conflict risks – the points where strategic competition is most acute – are the Taiwan Strait, the South and East China Seas, the Korean Peninsula, and space/cyberspace.



In a rather clear departure from previous versions of this report, The Defence Assessment 2021 makes clear that China's rising power and challenges to the

rules-based international order are the chief drivers of strategic competition in this region. While U.S.-China tensions feature prominently in the “strategic competition”, the report highlights New Zealand’s unease with China’s growing footprints in its neighbourhood. The report references China when it expresses anxiety about the “establishment of a military base or dual-use facility in the Pacific by a state that does not share New Zealand’s values and security interests.”

Wellington’s assessment of China’s rising power and strategic influence has significantly evolved in the last decade. The Defence Assessment 2010 had argued about China being focussed on becoming a responsible international citizen. While the assessment in 2014 had identified the unprecedented pace of China’s rise in influence as a key factor driving tension in the region, it had also argued for “peaceful accommodation of China’s rise within the existing rules-based international order”.

It is apparent that many officials and observers in Wellington have taken a more hawkish view of China in recent years and pushed for a closer security partnership with America. The remarkably explicit warning in the Defence Assessment 2021 included a detailed discussion of China’s military modernisation and emphasised the importance of New Zealand’s deep security relationships with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia and other countries in the region.

The report also highlights the re-emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“the Quad”) consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the United States as a particularly significant and visible example of states seeking collective action to reinforce the international system. In addition, Wellington’s position on AUKUS seems to have evolved to some extent. The assessment recognises AUKUS as an example of collective approaches which builds on long-standing practices of defence and security cooperation between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The report recognises that New Zealand’s current defence policy settings, based on an approach developed for a less threatening world, will not necessarily support New Zealand’s national security interests in the future. The assessment recommends a shift from a predominantly reactive risk management-centred approach to one based on a more deliberate and proactive strategy. In sum, the Defence Assessment 2021 appears to signal that New Zealand is not a bystander when it comes to ‘strategic competition’.

Significance of Saudi Crown Prince’s Visit to Qatar

The spectacle was astounding. Amid flashing cameras, the beaming Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, welcomed the smiling Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman (popularly known as MBS), at the Doha International Airport on the night of December 8, 2021.



This was the first visit by MBS after Saudi Arabia and its allies lifted an almost four-year-long economic and travel blockade of Qatar in January 2021. It has been reported that the visit by the de facto Saudi ruler was a lead up to the 42nd summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to be held in Riyadh in mid-December. Apart from stated items of intra-Gulf political and economic cooperation, it is speculated that the summit would

discuss the implications of a prospective US-Iran nuclear deal, the ongoing conflict in Yemen and other contentious regional issues.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been on the mend since MBS embraced the Emir of Qatar at the signing of a momentous declaration in the Saudi city of AlUla on 5th of January 2021, which formally ended the dispute between the feuding sides.

It was in June 2017 that Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed travel and trade restrictions. They were later joined by Jordan and a few other Muslim states. Their charge against Qatar was that it harboured “wanted terrorists” and provided them financial and logistical aid. The Saudi-led coalition then issued a sweeping 13-point ultimatum to Qatar, which included demands as the closing of Al Jazeera television channel, reduced cooperation with Iran, shutting down Turkey’s military base in Qatar and severing of ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Qatar did not accept the ultimatum and managed to withstand a 43-month blockade, largely because of its global pre-eminence as a natural gas exporter. Strains in relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar started emerging after the Arab Spring when the Kingdom disliked Qatar’s support for revolutionary Islamists. Saudi Arabia was also wary of Qatar’s close relations with Iran, cemented by their shared ownership of the world’s largest natural gasfield, viz. the South Pars/North Dome Gas-Condensate field.

However, it is the Kingdom and not the Emirate which eventually initiated the process of rapprochement, a climb down attributed to changed regional circumstances. Saudi Arabia regards its conflict with Qatar as a subset of the Saudi-Iran proxy conflict. When the Trump administration’s so-called “maximum pressure” policy against Iran failed to take punitive action against the 2019 drone attacks on key Saudi oil facilities, the Kingdom started doubting US security guarantees and initiated indirect and now direct talks (held on October 3, 2021) with Iran. With the Biden administration planning to further draw down its forces from West Asia and seeking a new Iran nuclear deal, MBS’ visit to Qatar reflects a continuation of Saudi efforts to build bridges with its permanent neighbours and not depend on distant friends to settle its regional feuds.