

More to EU Than Germany

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Is the Europe that is emerging from the euro crisis a German one? During the euro crisis, power in the European Union seems to have shifted toward national capitals in general and toward one national capital in particular — Berlin. But with Germany introverted, France downgraded and Britain semi-detached, the big story in European foreign policy is that the time has come for the little guy who thinks big.

In this Europe, the important moves are now sometimes made in Stockholm or Warsaw, not only in Berlin, Paris or London. And with major foreign policy issues on Europe's doorstep — whether in Egypt, Belarus or now Syria — useful European initiatives are to be welcomed, regardless of where they originate.

Germany, in foreign policy as well as in economics, can exert decisive leadership in the EU — when it wants to. For example, together with Poland, it led the EU's attempt to develop a coordinated approach to Russia, and it flexed its muscles on Serbia. But on other issues — for example, Libya — Germany did not so much lead as use its newfound room for maneuver to follow its own preferences in the face of other EU members.

So the answer today to former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's famous question about whom he should call when he wants to speak to Europe, is not necessarily "the German chancellor." While Berlin is increasingly imposing its economic preferences on others in the euro zone, it is not prepared to use military force as a foreign policy tool, as it demonstrated in the case of Libya.

Moreover, Germany, it seems, is becoming a "geoeconomic power" driven by the needs of its export sector. By using economic means to pursue its foreign policy ends, Germany is gradually turning its back on its European partners.

Meanwhile, as France experiences a loss of power relative to Germany on economic issues, it continues to play a decisive role in foreign policy. France led the Libya operation and is doing much the same with attempts to impose stronger sanctions against Iran.

But France's unilateral approach often antagonizes its European partners. For example, French President Nicolas Sarkozy preempted a common European position on the Palestinian statehood bid at the United Nations in September. In other words, even when France leads, it does not always do so in a constructive way.

Apart from the decisive role that it played in Libya alongside France, Britain is becoming increasingly marginal in European foreign policy making. Even before it vetoed a plan by euro-zone countries to create a "fiscal union" at the European summit in December, it was playing less of a leadership role than it traditionally has on key European foreign policy issues.

Britain has continued to support EU enlargement, closer links with Turkey and development in Africa, but it has not launched any creative initiatives to bring other member states along or change the terms of the EU debate. On other issues, such as engaging "strategic partners" — China and Russia in particular — Britain is often a follower as well.

Poland, too, is emerging as a foreign policy leader. Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski have particularly taken the initiative on the EU's strategy toward Russia, where Poland has largely overcome its differences with Germany and is now at the forefront of efforts to develop a genuinely comprehensive approach. Poland has also led on European defense, although it declined to take part in the military intervention in Libya. This reflects the strength of the Polish economy, which is expected to grow by more than 3 percent in 2012 — faster than almost anywhere else in the EU.

Germany might be getting all of the attention in this time of crisis, but the last year has been a reminder that Europe is most effective and influential when the small countries get involved and join forces with — and even lead — the big ones. For example, on Iran (with exceptions like Greece), Europeans have united around a clear policy and collective positions, such as an oil embargo.

So the message to Poland and Sweden is: Europe needs your leadership. But that might not be enough in an EU with more than 500 million citizens. Other EU states need to follow their example to make European foreign policy truly effective and influential.

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