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Don't Panic!

How to Give Germany's Crisis Management Strategic Footing

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Crises cannot be predicted. But that is no excuse for being unprepared. By evaluating how previous crises were handled, governments can improve future crisis management and give it strategic footing. This paper presents reforms based on past experience, and it shows how they might fit into Germany's planned National Security Strategy (NSS). As such, it rethinks the relationship between crisis response and strategy.

– **Crisis response and strategy-making are often viewed as separate, even antithetical processes. A heavy focus on crisis management is taken as proof that strategy-making is futile, and the latter often happens only when states lose faith in their ability to respond to unexpected crises.**

– **Crisis response can be improved and even made routine with some relatively straightforward reforms. These are a first step to helping a state steer a strategic course. They prove that crises need not be stressful, destructive or lead to action for the sake of taking action.**

– **There are other reasons to view strategy-making and crisis management as mutually reinforcing. Both are increasingly about coping with the way international dependencies and geopolitical rivalries affect matters previously viewed as strictly domestic, local, and technical.**

– **The NSS could thus usefully overcome the false dichotomy between crisis response and strategy by refocusing its attention on anticipating domestic crises arising from geopolitical shifts.**

LEARNING FROM CRISES IS DIFFICULT BUT ESSENTIAL

In the public mind, crises are characterized by social upheaval, economic stress, and political ad hockery. Indeed, for ordinary Europeans these days, a shared sense of stress is almost the definition of a crisis. But it need not be so if states were better at readiness. Admittedly, experience shows that no planning survives the first phase of a crisis.[1] But crisis readiness and management are nevertheless possible. Without readiness, the initial official response is almost always no response at all, but rather paralysis. World Health Organisation Executive Director Michael Ryan says:

Like a car accident, you don't know exactly what's happening to you. This shock can paralyze you. That's why it's so important to rehearse these types of situations. Soldiers, paramedics and firefighters train so that when it comes down to it, they don't have to think.[2]

This initial inaction soon gives way to the reverse - panicked action just for the sake of doing something. Instead of a cool, fact-based response, states try to create the impression they are taking charge of the situation. Different bodies produce proposals for new measures, entities, and structures, but without examining the actual usefulness of the proposals. Functioning structures and entities are of course important, and where they are lacking, they must be created. But creating parallel structures in the middle of a crisis is often a sign of panic, and these have been a feature of most recent European crisis responses. Given that international crises now often affect all levels of government across all policy fields, the scope for parallelism is huge.

The state apparatus alone cannot handle crises of today's depth and scale. One obvious antidote to governments' rush for "action for action's sake" thus lies in the careful engagement of civil society and the private sector whether hosting refugees or finding useful supplies for basic needs. This popular involvement is often key to a country's resilience in crisis. It helps people combat a feeling of hopelessness and works to counter any popular backlash against the state by damping social upheaval and economic stress. But channeling the surge of goodwill and engagement from society is hard for states and, although many governments are indeed engaging more with civil society and the private sector, they have not done enough.

Instead, politicians and officials in Europe have too often tried to excuse their fly-by-night crisis response by adopting a "crisis-as-opportunity" narrative. Once they overcome their initial paralysis, some government officials tend to present a crisis as a chance to take far-reaching action that might be difficult in normal times due to political circumstances. Individual citizens and businesses follow their lead and go on to use the crisis to their personal benefit, as Gerhard Schindler, former head of Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, complains.[3] This selfishness has a negative impact not just on domestic resilience but on foreign relations – whether as bottlenecks in medical supplies or effects on the food situation due to refugee movements or war-related destruction.

POOR COMMUNICATION AMPLIFIES POOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

For European societies, this cycle of paralysis and frenzied activity can be exhausting – and indeed each crisis cycle of the last decade has ended in exhaustion and complacency. The repetitive pattern of inertia to "action for action's sake" is exacerbated by a faulty communications policy, which is often too shrill. In the din of the all-consuming crisis, the quieter but differentiating nuances become lost. "What falls by the wayside is the complexity of the challenges, especially their interdependence," writes Wolfgang Schäuble, former German Minister of Finance and Minister of the Interior.[4] Often these subtle aspects are vital to understanding the overall picture. Without them, a comprehensive view, and thus solution, is not possible.

Poor communication again has societal drawbacks and prepares the ground for fake news, conspiracy theories and popular backlash against the state. But the provision of reliable public information is a confidence-building measure and is one of the most effective ways to channel public ener-

1 Or, as Helmuth von Moltke wrote (1890), „No operational plan extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main enemy force."

2 "Zeit Online"- "*Die Pandemie wird enden, wann wir es wollen*" Interview with Dr. Mike Ryan, November 15, 2021.

3 „I find it intolerable to talk about opportunities in the crisis while people are dying and economic livelihoods are being destroyed." In Gerhard Schindler, *Wer hat Angst vorm BND?* (Berlin, 2020), p.249.

4 Wolfgang Schäuble, *Grenzerfahrungen* (Munich, 2021) p. 13.

gy and international cooperation. Often this is bolstered by a strong narrative about a positive future and the country's ability to achieve it. Here, moderation is essential, as exaggerated and sensational communications, or press conferences geared to self-promotion, lead to "oversaturation" in public debate. Listening is as much a part of dependable government communications as is a messaging strategy. The inability to listen attentively makes good crisis management impossible.

It is worth noting too that policymakers and spokespeople often forget that a crisis is a protracted event, characterized by both progress and reversal. Once they have set a high tempo in their communication, governments often feel obliged to maintain this high level of intense activity. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrates this. The familiar pattern of over-communication and fatigue (of "panic and neglect," in the words of El Hadj As-Sy, former IFRC chief) is once again proving true: The two-year pandemic marathon has segued into a new crisis – the Russian war in Ukraine – and complacency is again giving way to paralysis. Public discourse is now focused almost exclusively on the new challenge and messaging around the Covid-19 pandemic is all but silent.

EXPERIENCES FROM RECENT CRISES – CRISIS MECHANISMS AND MEASURES

Now is in fact the time not only to see the Covid-19 crisis through to the end but also to prepare for future crises across multiple areas, not least in the field of pandemics. Unfortunately, this is being stymied by disillusionment about the ability of governments to foresee the next crisis. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, in the wake of the 2015-6 migration crisis in Europe, many experts called for better readiness and forward-looking action. They used the instrument of "strategic foresight" to construct relatively detailed future scenarios and work through the implications. Some of these actually envisaged pandemic scenarios before Covid-19 struck. However, only those governments that had experienced epidemics in the past actually acted upon the scenarios. This perceived failure is at the root of public disillusionment.

But that experience does not mean readiness is impossible. Foresight, even when it produces accurate scenarios, is still not the same as prediction. Strategic foresight can only ever guide us to upcoming challenges. And when looking for a guide for the future, it is surprising how disinclined we are to look to the past. For all their obvious differences, the international crises of recent years have many commonalities in terms of the mechanisms and measures for dealing with them.[5] For the pandemic, large-scale disorderly migration, Islamist terrorism, environmental disasters such as the flood in the Ahr Valley in 2021, cyber-attacks, or military challenges, the following measures would have improved readiness across the board:

Now is the time to prepare for future crisis across multiple areas

- **The recruitment of personnel capable of handling multiple forms of crisis.** This means creating a personnel reserve; in particular, expanding civilian staff. In addition, there is a need for greater exchange and use of knowledge among the institutions frequently at the center of German crisis response (THW, the civil protection organization, or the Ministry of Defence) and the creation of training opportunities. The Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) has, for instance, created the Federal Academy for Civil Protection and Civil Defense (BABZ) (formerly the Academy for Crisis Management, Emergency Planning and Civil Defense, AKNZ).

- **Exercises and simulation games**, i.e., training for specific crisis situations, and regular practice of crisis management and response. The results and experiences of these exercises must be implemented in further planning. Even though evaluations of management and crisis preparedness usually take place immediately after crises, their recommendations are often not taken into account.

5 This was recently shown in a conference on „Whole-of-State Resilience-State Action in Crisis Situations and Disasters" held by the Studiengesellschaft der deutschen Gesellschaft für Wehrtechnik, DWT, on February 9, 2022 in Bonn.

- **Specific, crisis-relevant materials** (medical equipment, for instance). In preparedness, the issues of stockpiling, supply preparedness, and reserves, i.e., ensuring the availability of critical supplies, should be addressed expeditiously. First, the necessary materials must be identified. Then, what, if anything, can be produced or stockpiled in Europe must be clarified. Finally, the supply chains must be diversified.

- **Mechanisms for crisis detection such as early warning**, monitoring, and surveillance. This is a common thread in all crisis-related developments. Here, greater use of AI-supported systems is worthwhile. Better interconnectedness and use of early warning apps could help in early reaction to floods and weather-related emergencies. Or, for example, as a result of the 2015 migration experience, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI), is today more closely monitoring developments in crisis regions that could lead to mass migration.

- **A central, comprehensive ("all hazard") situational picture.** The various dimensions of security must be considered together; domestic and external, economic and social. This is a basic observation, but a central body for this is currently lacking in Germany. As the Inspector of the Bundeswehr Armed Forces Base, Lieutenant General Martin Schelleis, said, there is "…. currently a lack of staff … that can build up a higher-level or whole-of-government situation picture and plan and implement appropriate measures."[6]

- **Reliable information and comprehensive, up-to-date data.** The lack of data prevents a clear picture of the situation. This applies both to the phase of the crisis itself and to crisis preparedness. To this end, the German Foreign Office has initiated the development of an AI-based forecasting system with the so-called "preview system."

Lastly, the risk of multiple simultaneous crises requires us to make provisions for more complex situations. Not only will crises arise more frequently due to global interconnectedness, but interactions between challenges will also grow, increasing the impact at all levels of government and society. Hybrid threats and attempts by hostile states to "weaponize" these interdependencies will further escalate affairs. All the more reason, therefore, to use networked approaches in responding to such crises. Systematic, interdepartmental, regular monitoring of (international) developments in the course of strategic foresight should be part of a security strategy and resulting improved structures.

SETTING CRISIS MANAGEMENT ON A STRATEGIC FOOTING

Certain technical steps will therefore make crisis management more forward-looking and better prepared. And good crisis management can alter the experience of crises. It can improve communication and societal engagement and save governments the criticism of failing to prevent or predict them. And it can turn the handling of crises from something disruptive and stressful into something more routine, with little departure from a positive chosen course. But can crisis management be put on a strategic footing? The question is pressing: The German government is currently drafting a national security strategy (NSS), partly as an antidote to a decade of crisis-driven, executive-heavy muddling through.

At present, crisis and strategy are often viewed as mutually antithetical – the recurrence of crises is even taken as proof of the failure or even the impossibility of strategic behavior. But this is because Europeans have often been confronted with bad crisis management, and bad crisis management certainly harms strategy. As we have seen from the past 15 years, poor crisis management renders governments reactive to international developments, and nullifies their broader strategic documents and goals. There is indeed no point in a government writing a security strategy like the NSS if is not capable of handling an unexpected crisis – especially if it tries to use the NSS as an alternative to crisis response and to start predicting future shocks.

But good crisis preparedness and good strategy-making can be viewed as mutually reinforcing for far more reasons. Strategy-making and crisis management are of course two different endeavors. They occur on two different levels of abstraction and action, but they can be effectively intertwined. The process of drawing up a strategy (and ensuring that it is enacted) closely mirrors that of preparing for big systemic crises, from the lesson-learning phase that considers Germany's past performance through

6 Reinhard Müller, „Sind Fake News schlimmer als Krieg?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 11, 2021.

to the strong communication of a national narrative about the future. By the same token, current reforms to Germany's crisis preparedness can help strengthen the strategy process, from drafting through implementation to review:

A federal strategy: Almost all government actions these days aspire to be "comprehensive." But comprehensive from the perspective of which body or level of governance? The creation of a national security strategy answers that question. The NSS will attempt to define German interests, set national priorities and make proposals as to which measures should be taken to meet the security challenges to Germany. This national angle might seem like the kind of "self-focus" we warned of above as detrimental to crisis management in a global context. Yet international crisis preparedness and prevention are all the more successful if they are part of a nationwide and "all-of-government" approach. The NSS will be expected to provide orientation – both internally and externally – in a crisis, and principles of good cooperation should be embedded in it.

International crisis preparedness and prevention are successful if they are part of a nationwide and "all-of-government" approach

A joined-up strategy: Due to the increasing complexity of the environment, almost all government action involves large numbers of authorities and stakeholders. A clear assignment of national responsibilities is thus necessary when it comes to strategy-making. But this is more easily achieved if authorities have already learned to think together. Crisis preparedness obliges them to do so. Conducting crisis exercises (among government, civil society, and the private sector) and simulations of emergencies can provide valuable insights into possible shortcomings of those bodies charged with crisis response. Such simulation exercises can lead to a communality of interests, and avoid stakeholders creating "wish lists" for the NSS that could lead to the creation of new structures and policies. Usually, strategy drafters will not participate in such exercises – but this should be remedied.

A far-sighted strategy: The task of dealing with the unpredictable and with multiple unknowns is common to both crisis preparedness and to strategy-making. As we have seen, the first step toward improved crisis response often involves taking an unsparing eye to past challenges and their handling and identifying potential new challenges and risks. This echoes the preparatory steps for the NSS, but lessons learned from crises tend to result in technical tweaks and seldom flow into strategic processes. The drafting of the NSS would be the time to remedy this, with an eye to ensuring that lessons from past crisis management failures help maintain a strategic track. Furthermore, far-sighted strategy occurs not just across time but also space, so it is equally important to look at the interactions between domestic and foreign policy.

An action-oriented strategy: Bad crisis management is often preceded by early paralysis. Although governments know this, they struggle to remedy it because it requires not technical tweaks but certain strategic choices to be locked in and pre-decided. The NSS could usefully identify "action triggers" that automatically lead to action. The German government has set up bodies that are meant to act when crisis breaks out – the response centers of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (for internal affairs) and of the Federal Foreign Office (for international crises). The NSS could create a National Security Council based at the Federal Chancellery to elaborate measures to be carried out under the leadership of the ministry with thematic lead (e.g., health when it concerns a disease at the national level etc, Foreign Office jointly with Interior Ministry, when it concerns cross-border emergencies in Europe; however, – always including experts from all relevant sectors).

A well-communicated strategy: Rapid information and speedy analysis are hallmarks of good crisis communication, and Germany is increasingly well set up for this on a technical level. But the creation of an overarching, whole-of-government situation-

al picture and crisis narrative again requires strategic choices. So, too, does the effort to push back against the creation of new structures for public relation purposes during a crisis – as indeed does the improvement of existing government structures to include actors necessary for good communication (including civil society and the private sector). Opportunities for this include regular, cross-sectoral situation reviews, which can provide assessments and different perspectives (cross-sectoral to take into account interactions between different sectors). But the results belong in the NSS.

A routine strategy: Mechanisms of crisis surveillance and monitoring tend to operate in "real time" rather than over the extended time horizon that the strategy drafters might find useful. But these mechanisms remain relevant and can feed into regular strategic reviews and even the creation of a German "strategic culture." In between the peaks of crises, Germany still lacks a mechanism to ensure regular discussion of developments that could result in crises. Situation comparisons can be carried out under specific thematic focal points, but it is important that all relevant departments are involved and that their results are brought together at a central point (again: perhaps a National Security Council). Mechanisms of crisis surveillance and monitoring – in close networking with national, regional, and global actors – and the preview system of the Foreign Office should be better used and expanded.

CONCLUSION

As the year progresses, we are likely to face new concurrent crises. After all, the number of crises of different nature is increasing – the world faces not only a war in Ukraine, but also a food crisis, an energy crisis, an ongoing pandemic, the climate crisis – all increasingly interdependent. There is thus an urgent need to improve crisis management – with effective mechanisms for regular observation of (international) developments from a broad perspective of actors and sectors and to feed this knowledge into a central body situated in the Chancellery. It is possible for the German government to intertwine such crisis preparation measures and the development of a National Security Strategy, rendering the NSS more oriented towards operations and making crisis preparedness more strategic.

One theme of all these concurrent crises is the way that local, technical affairs in Germany – the reception of asylum-seekers, the provision of medical care, the screening of foreign investments in infrastructure – have become geopolitical. Geopolitical tensions are exacerbating Germany's negative interdependencies in fields dealt with by local or domestic authorities with little experience of tough international affairs. One major question for the drafters of the NSS will be how to prepare for these difficult geopolitics and how to link Germany's response to that of its European partners. The process of writing the NSS should thus take into account the efforts of member states and the EU to produce their own strategies. The NSS should be linked to mechanisms such as situation assessments and strategic foresight as a building block of European foresight.

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