

Thursday, September 23, 2004, p. 6
<http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php?file=540081.html>

Germany's place in the sun: The rising ambition of a declining power

Gunther Hellmann

FRANKFURT For Germany, the opening of the UN General Assembly this week also marks the end of Germany's two-year stint on the UN Security Council. Joining the backbenchers will be especially hard for Germany's UN representative, Gunter Pleuger, who has been spearheading Germany's effort to return to the table of great-power politics over the past two years of UN crisis management over Iraq.

Pleuger belongs to the very best and brightest of Germany's diplomatic service. He is also the personification of Berlin's most important foreign-policy project these days: to secure a permanent seat on the Security Council. Pleuger has been pushing this since the early 1990s.

Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl did not support the campaign. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, by contrast, is more than ready to. For Schröder, the campaign for a permanent seat is part and parcel of his long-term objective to "normalize" German foreign policy. His foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, is with him on this.

In his address to the General Assembly on Thursday, Fischer will most likely reiterate the argument that the Security Council needs to become "more representative" and that, presumably, Germany is best qualified to meet this criterion. (Never mind that Europe, including Russia, already occupies three out of five permanent seats while representing less than 10 percent of the world's current population.)

This is yet another powerful symbol of Germany's far-reaching post-unification transformation. Fischer, once the country's most prominent anti-establishment "internationalist," has joined ranks with his diplomats in insisting that Germany be granted its modern-day version of a "place in the sun."

It is a remarkable development indeed. Germany's most left-leaning coalition since the early 1920s is pushing a prestige-politics agenda as never before in the Federal Republic.

What is more, Germany's ambition is rising at the same time as its power is in decline by

almost any traditional measure, be it population, economic prowess or military muscle. Current demographic trends predict a steady decline of Germany's aging population. At the end of this century it will have shrunk from its current level of almost 80 million to about 50 million.

Moreover, in a newly released study, the Kiel Institute for World Economics forecasts that long-term trends in economic growth are likely to decline further from Germany's already low rates. Finally, German defense spending has also fallen to the lowest level ever. Measured as a percentage of GDP, Germany spent only 1.2 percent on defense in 2003, according to recent NATO figures. Rates are lower only in Spain, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Europeans may think that they have been there before - a declining Germany with rising ambition. The good news about modern power politics in Europe is that it does not kill. The bad news is that it complicates an already difficult agenda of intra-European as well as trans-Atlantic politics.

Italy, Poland and Spain will do Germany a favor in standing up against yet another permanent seat at the UN Security Council for a European nation state. All four of them would do Europe a favor in letting France and Britain know at the same time that their permanent seats will not last into eternity.

Current planning for long-term UN reform, therefore, should include power-sharing arrangements that aim beyond the nation-state. Realistically, not much will be achieved this time around. However, it is a worthy long-term objective. Nobody is better equipped to push this idea than the EU. And nobody would carry greater weight in bringing this idea to fruition than Germany. It ought to start working on it now.

Gunther Hellmann teaches political science at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt.