

This was a brief weekend, but well spent.

The UK and Germany share fundamental beliefs in the superior virtues of the market economy, in the welfare state, in limited government and in the advantages of open borders. Crossborder trade and investment are flourishing. Both countries, however, differ markedly when it comes to defence. This is true not only in practical terms – Britain a nuclear power, Germany distinctly not – but also in the underlying philosophy and the unspoken assumptions.

Those differences were less visible during the Cold War when NATO's defence posture clearly overruled individual countries' reservations about ends and means, esp. in the nuclear dimension. In Germany, the Green party came late, mostly an answer to NATO's INF –strategy, but far exceeded both in organisation and psychological impact, the anti-nuclear moods in the British public, Easter Marches and the rest. In 1982, Helmut Schmidt's governing coalition of Socialists and liberals fell apart over the stationing of US-Pershing IIs – and an excess in public borrowing in response to the second oil price hike.

Since 1990 united Germany embraced, more than most European countries, the “end of history” message from the US, while Britain stuck more to the Pentagon's warning that the world is “still a dangerous place”. There was, and still is, an undercurrent of unconditional pacifism in the German polity that took various forms: From seeking refuge behind the Grundgesetz and its condemnation of “Angriffskrieg” to pretending, in Afghanistan, that digging wells and protecting little girls on their way to school was not really war. The brutal truth emerged only when a growing number of coffins with dead soldiers kept arriving at Bonn/Cologne Airport.

In real world terms, Germans, government and the public, were very willing to cede leadership to others – notably soldiers and diplomats from the US and the UK. Germany presents itself to the outside world as – to cite the “Economist” - a reluctant hegemon in financial and fiscal matters. But when it comes to the rough and tumble of international affairs the German instinct is to keep out of harm's way. Governments are reluctant to engage.

One theme kept coming up time and again: Pooling and sharing or, in the fashionable terminology of NATO-Brussels, “smart defence”. While Germany ranks high among the world's exporters of advanced weaponry, the politics of joint-ness are underdeveloped. That makes Germany difficult to predict not only for the outside world, but also for the Germans themselves. Recent history recalls a few instances where allies, especially the UK, were kept wondering. Abstaining in the UNSC in March 2011 is one example, refusing any part in the stabilisation of Mali two years later another one. While conquering the moral high ground, the hurly burly was left to others.

Is this a viable policy in the long term? As long as the US is filling the void this will do. But the “pivot to Asia” is not just a rhetorical extravaganza from Washington D.C. It is a geopolitical shift, conditioned through both China's rise and rise and US imperial overstretch. The implications for European security and defence are serious, possibly existential. This is appreciated more in the UK than in Germany, but it will, in the not too distant future provide ample material for many more meetings and discussions like the one we had at Ditchley. European thinking, by and large, is far behind the shifts in global insecurity.