

German Feminist Foreign Policy: An Inside-Outside Perspective¹

By

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When Annalena Baerbock was appointed to the position of Federal Foreign Minister, social media broke into an ecstatic frenzy: Germany finally had its first female foreign minister.

The Minister has not disappointed. The [coalition agreement](#) of 2021 (between the SPD, Greens, and FDP) had stated the following:

“Together with our partners, we want to promote feminist foreign policy rights, resources and representation for women and girls worldwide, and social diversity. We want to send more women into international leadership positions implement and further develop the National Action Plan for the Implementation of [UN Resolution 1325](#) and further develop it.”

Baerbock has duly prioritised this task by advancing the development of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) for Germany. Under her leadership, the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) has developed the formula of 3R+D (the promotion of rights, representation, and resources of women and marginalized groups, and the enhancement of diversity). Minister Baerbock is, moreover, not alone in this endeavour. Sweden, France, Canada, Mexico and Spain have announced similar policies committed to “feminism”; support for an FFP is growing in [India](#), also in light of its upcoming G20 presidency; #WomenInDiplomacy and other such hashtags are frequently trending on Twitter. Baerbock is to be credited for reflecting an important *Zeitgeist*, and building it further.

That said, the role of scholars is not to reinforce existing trends. It is not to amplify the prominent voices in influential echo chambers, even if this is sometimes the easier option³. Rather, the role of the academic is to question, provoke, and perhaps also to offer additional and alternative perspectives that may be useful to practitioners. This is the spirit in which this article is written.

Following this brief introduction, I point to the serious exclusions that even a well-intended initiative such as this can result in. In the same section, I also offer some simple solutions to the problem. In the following section, I suggest ways in which the existing kernel could – and should – be developed into an even more ambitious agenda for foreign policy. Such an agenda has the potential to thrive especially under the leadership of a Green Party, and could have far-reaching, positive consequences for Germany and globally.

“If half of the population are unable to have their say as equals...

... no society can fully attain its potential,” said Minister Baerbock. And of course she is right. Except that there are many other ways in which the demographic pie can be cut.

¹ I am grateful to Thorsten Benner, who first invited me to write an article for GPPi using this perspective in 2020. I should add that this invitation was somewhat unusual in its embrace of both my identities in Germany as an insider (I lead a major research institute in Germany, and often engage closely with the German policy-making community, media, and interested public at large) and an outsider (I am originally from India, and was trained as a scholar and educator at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge).

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³ Amrita Narlikar, ‘How not to Negotiate: The Case of Trade Multilateralism,’ *International Affairs*, September 2022.

Race and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, disability and a variety of other criteria can be used for demographic classification. In some instances (such as income distribution and class), considerably larger distributions than 50% of the population find themselves marginalized from senior positions in policy, business and academia. Nor is this solely a question of proportions of national population shares. Despite claims to the pursuit of excellence in German academia, it is remarkable to note the virtual [absence of ethnic diversity or internationalisation](#) at the top echelons of leadership. For instance, of the eighteen Social Sciences institutes of the Leibniz Association (a research organization whose motto is *Theoria cum Praxi*, and thus has implications also for the German policy scene), only one Leibniz institute is led by a President of non-white ethnicity and not from the Global North. The German think-tank scene – with its connectedness to the development and implementation of German foreign policy – is similar: commendable improvements have been made on closing the gender gap, but the “whiteness” of leadership remains striking.

Even from the recipient’s viewpoint, it is obvious that women are not the only victims of policy excesses and thus deserving of support. It is not only Ughyur *women* who face horrific abuses in Xinjiang. Indeed, depending on the context, there are different victims of abuse, and they can include men, women, transgender people, the elderly, children, and animals. And as foreign policy, by definition, cannot restrict itself to domestic problems, it is important to not only be aware of these problems but also *signal* awareness of them.

Diverse voices – of different ethnicities, different origins from the world-regions, different backgrounds of intellectual training, and different cultural traditions – need to enter the mainstream of German foreign policy-making. And not only because it makes the scene “colourful” and is the politically correct thing to do. Some of the most serious blindspots in German policy arise because we fail to take into account perspectives from the world-regions. We might perhaps have been less prone to embracing the myth of *Wandel durch Handel* had we been more interested in the perspectives of China’s neighbours (which have lived through long and difficult histories of border incursions and maritime adventurism from China). We might have also have dealt more effectively with the reluctance of many key players (including India) from the [Global South](#) to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, had we been more aware of the constraints that they faced. Installing more (white) women in leadership roles and implementing various cascade models will not solve these problems.

The official answer to this critique is the 3R+D formula: the German FFP is supposed to extend to marginalized groups and enhance diversity. But the problem with a “feminist” foreign policy is that it marginalizes – through its very name – all the other already marginalized voices of other names (active, but alas often made invisible in German academia and policy), and which could, in fact, greatly enrich the German policy-making space. Intersectionality is only a part of a much bigger problem. Names matter. Frames matter. [Narratives](#) matter. Reducing inclusiveness to feminism is an important – and counter-productive – signal to be sending, both internally and externally, if the Federal Foreign Office is serious about the “+D” part of the formula and intends to go beyond tokenism. A first, corrective step would be to rename the policy, for instance perhaps as an “Inclusive Foreign Policy”, and with explicit follow-through to reach out to diverse groups. Second, simply having a growing list of groups and categories – and interactions among them – could be an improvement on the current perspective, but it would still not be the answer: instead, a genuine openness to hear diverse voices with diverse sets of qualifications, some of which go against the mainstream and the Berlin bubble, would be needed. And with the good intentions that probably underpin the FFP initiative, the Federal Foreign Office can go further than that.

Developing a genuinely Inclusive Foreign Policy for Germany

Both the FFP itself, and the critique and suggestions offered in the previous section, use *people* as a reference point. But especially with a leader from the Green Party in charge that prioritizes climate change mitigation, the Federal Foreign Office can do better than that: we can have an inclusive foreign policy that is less anthropocentric and more climate-friendly.

Western narratives about climate change are usually framed in terms of protecting the planet for “our children and children’s children”. [But the planet does not belong only to us or future generations of humans](#); it belongs to all the sentient beings for whom this planet is home. Just as foreign policy cannot be only about gender justice if it is to be fair, climate policy cannot be solely about intergenerational justice. Paying attention to considerations of trans-species justice would not only help the voiceless species that are put through so much abuse, but would also help address issues of biodiversity and climate change.

Concretely, a non-anthropocentric and inclusive foreign policy would involve: building momentum and coalitions with countries from both the Global North and the Global South to tighten international law, for instance on the protection of wildlife as well as oceans. It would also require toughening up trade laws that factor in not only human rights and environmental standards, but also animal ethics. The Federal Foreign Office could lead such an initiative, bringing in other relevant ministries (such as agriculture and nutrition, as well as economic affairs and climate action), just as it had successfully done with the Federal Government White Paper on Multilateralism⁴.

Adopting a genuinely inclusive approach would require a more explicit discussion on values – something that has been coming up increasingly in German foreign policy debate in recent years, but still not systematically enough. Such a discussion would separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of allies. It would not happen overnight, but with the necessary effort and resources, powerful coalitions could be built towards having reliable – and “humane” – supply chains.

Get this discussion right and we could see a grand strategy emerge, which encompasses existentially important issues of climate action and national security. There is a desperate need for such a strategy – both from the perspective of saving the planet and for the purpose of national security. The moment for a real *Zeitenwende* is ripe. Will Minister Baerbock seize this opportunity and lead the way?

⁴ My team and I had the pleasure to contribute to this initiative.