



*Centre for
German
Transnational
Relations*



What the new German government should learn from the UK about warning and early action in foreign policy

Ana Maria Albulescu and Christoph O. Meyer*

An edited and somewhat shorter German translation of this article as been published by *Internationale Politik*, 1 September 2021, 5/2021, pp. 73-77: "[Britisches Vorbild: Was die nächste Bundesregierung vom Vereinigten Königreich über kritische Selbstreflexion und außenpolitisches Handeln lernen könnte](#)"

"Only a fool believes in learning from their own experience. I prefer to avoid making mistakes in the first place by learning from the experiences of others". Variations of this quote have been attributed to Otto von Bismarck, popularised in a German translation of a French book about Napoleon III from 1872. Yet, learning from other countries is not so easy in practice. If learning happens at all, it stems from reflections on one's own failures and misfortunes. After 1945 West Germany benefited hugely from the opportunity to learn after its moral, political and military failures of the Nazi era. Less well-remembered is the humiliating military defeat of the numerically superior Prussian army against Napoleon's forces near Auerstedt in 1806. The lessons learnt by military officers led to a comprehensive modernisation of Prussian defence and strategy, which paved the way for its victories in the so-called German unification wars of 1864 and 1871.

Without the pain and shame caused by one's own failures, societal demand to learn inconvenient lessons is much reduced. Leaders may well support learning in principle, but political or bureaucratic resistance is not far from the surface. If politicians fear the costs of learning from others, motivated reasoning tends to produce multi-faceted reasons for why these countries are so different that lessons cannot and should not apply at home. Valuable lessons could have been learnt by Germany for cybersecurity from Estonia's experience with Russian cyberattacks back in 2007. If Europe had drawn the same lessons as East Asian countries after the pandemics SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009) and MERS (2015), it would have weathered the storm of COVID-19 as well as these countries with much lower casualties and economic damage.

With a new German chancellor and coalition government due to take office, the openness to learn is never higher than at the beginning of the legislative cycle. It represents a unique opportunity for Germany to look beyond its own borders for lessons on how to avoid or at

least mitigate future unpleasant surprises in foreign and defence policy. We argue that the UK is not a bad place to start with.

The island nation has been, for good and for worse, at the forefront of international peace and security for at least two centuries, 75 years of which as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. During that time, it experienced a fair number of surprises, some of which were traumatic for its own foreign policy elites and institutions such as the Suez Crisis and the subsequent retreat from empire. Others were failures of warning intelligence even if some of these were compensated for with successes of crisis management such as Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands. As part of the five-eyes intelligence cooperation, the UK has for decades exchanged information and analysis with America's huge intelligence community, especially during the Cold War when Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan took most decision-makers by surprise. More recently, the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, followed by poor decision in the aftermath of the war triggered a huge amount of controversy and introspection.

Crucially, the UK intelligence and foreign policy community has developed a culture of post-action reviews or postmortems in order to identify and subsequently learn lessons from these surprises and failures. These exercises typically include access to highly classified material and frequently extensive interviewing of witnesses. Some of these postmortems remain classified or only the conclusions are published. An example is the 1982 Nicoll report on the lessons the Joint Intelligence Committee should learn from previous warnings about foreign acts of aggression. Other milestones include the public 1983 Franks report on the Falklands crisis; the 2004 Butler review of intelligence on WMD, and, finally, the three-volume Chilcot report of 2016 about decision-making and planning before and after the Iraq intervention. In addition, the House of Lords and the House of Commons often launch quite soon after surprises or alleged failures, smaller scale but usually quicker inquiries with less public access, but extensive written and oral witness evidence. One example is the report by the House of Lords on EU-Russia relations after the annexation of Crimea or the Intelligence and Security Committee report on intelligence related to Russia.

These inquiries and the reports emanating from them typically receive a substantial amount of media visibility and reach and can thus promote learning far beyond a small set of officials immediately concerned with the country, region or type of threat. It also means that lessons identified are more likely to be actually learned as media, think-tanks and academics can hold officials and politicians accountable for not doing so. Furthermore, with more publicity, it is less likely that lessons once learned are too easily forgotten again – although the UK has not managed to avoid this common problem altogether either.

The first lesson is that Germany should develop a similar culture of systemic review, self-criticism and learning. This is not say that Germany has not made efforts to learn after the instability in the Middle East created by the Arab uprisings, the Russian aggression against Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, or the problems experienced in Afghanistan. After 2014, the new foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier initiated a review exercise, followed by the Ministry of Defence with its Whitebook, the Guidelines for Conflict Prevention in 2017, and the recent *Eckpunkte* paper for the future of the Bundeswehr. They contained a lot of accurate analysis and some important recommendations, some of which related to cross-country

analysis and stronger warning, foresight and early responses structures have been implemented.

However, all of these reviews were initiated and led from the top of ministries. Such inquiries fall short of the independent forensic analysis that independent inquiries can bring as well as their impact on public awareness and knowledge that comes with the media coverage of witness hearings through experts or MPs as we have seen in the UK. In the UK parliamentary inquiries are often supported by seconded or part-time academic experts as special advisors or led by eminent external experts as panel members or chairs. In Germany it is too easy for ministers and senior intelligence officials to avoid openly acknowledging mistakes made and facing difficult questions.

For instance, the recent 220 page Implementation report on the Guidelines for conflict prevention is rich in analysis of conflict dynamics, self-praise and aspirations to do better, but poor in critical self-reflection of mistakes and hard choices made. The German state has still not conducted a full review of its engagement in Afghanistan or its policies relating to the Syrian war. Foreign Minister Westerwelle was one of the first to call for President Assad's resignation, thus closing off many channels of influence as Sönke Neitzel and Bastian Matteo Scianna argued in their book on the Syria war. Were these statements actually supported by ground-level intelligence assessment at the time? Why was the BND President so confident in his public predictions that Assad would fall? Did he accurately represent the conclusions of the in-house experts or overrule them? And if the analysts got their estimation wrong, was this an innocent error giving limited information and inevitable uncertainty or one that could have been avoided even without the benefit of hindsight?

Germany currently lacks the right instrument to answer these questions. In the past, the closest alternatives have rarely managed to promote good learning. For instance, parliamentary committees of inquiry are widely considered a problematic instrument for learning because of the high degree of partisanship involved and their predominant focus on accountability for specific scandals rather than broader learning from crises. They have made so far little contribution to improving foreign policy and might benefit a review of its legal basis by looking at the UK's 2005 Inquiries Act as an example. A similarly tainted instrument is the system of parliamentary questions ("Kleine Anfrage") which occasionally reveals important new information, but tends to treat foreign policy crises such as Ukraine as an integral part of the political battle between the government and the opposition.

A more bipartisan instrument by parliament is the so-called Enquete commission. However, it has so far dealt with relatively broad topics and has never been used so far to look at foreign and security policy problems. It might, however, be reformed to enable the conduct of postmortems in foreign and security policy if it was appropriately resourced, led by independent experts and given powers relating to access to documents and calling of witnesses. In this context, Germany should seek to learn from the UK's freedom of information law which compels public institutions to provide information and documents on public interest grounds. As a result public authorities are far less restrictive than German ones to requests from news media for instance. The third option is for public inquiries not to be instituted by the state or parliament, but by think-tanks or civil society organisations. Germany has some excellent think-tanks with international outlook, who have looked in their

research at past crises, but running an inquiry or public expert task-force is an endeavour of a different nature and magnitude.

The second lesson offered by the UK are the benefits of developing the right kind of relationship between those who provide knowledge, especially the intelligence community, and those in charge of foreign security and defence policy. At the heart of this process of delivering the advice and, if necessary, warnings to policy-makers is the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), originally created in 1936. It evolved over time, but consistently seeks to present policy-makers with the best possible view of current and future national security threats drawing on all-source intelligence assessment from all agencies. It is supported by an assessment staff which produces the papers and is chaired by a senior official who has the stature and independence to confidently “speak truth to power”.

One of the recommendations from the Butler review was that the chair should be close to retirement so that he or she would not be interested in career progression anymore. Another key feature of the JIC is the participation of policy departments in the process, even though JIC products deliberately steer clear of making policy recommendations. In this way, intelligence is always policy-aware and relevant, but avoids the risk that customers perceive intelligence to be slanted in a desirable policy direction. Furthermore, the JIC seeks and usually achieves consensus for its assessments in clear contrast to the frequent minority views in the US system where intelligence agencies compete for attention and resources. The key benefit is that decision-makers cannot easily cherry-pick the advice they like.

The second lesson is that better warning and early response depends on strategic direction and coordinated decision-making from the heart of government. It needs to be clear from the outset which countries and types of threats the intelligence community should concentrate resources on and how it should handle lower priority regions. Government departments often argue vigorously over the right angle and level of priority for a potential threat, so a strong coordinating body with the authority of the Prime Minister is required to reach a decision. One of the first actions of the 2010 Coalition Government of Tories and Liberal Democrats was to create a National Security Council, chaired by a National Security Advisory and supported by a strong secretariat. It created a degree of permanent, regularity and seniority for joined up discussions over national security between both civilian and military experts. According to our research it worked fine despite the unusual situation of coalition government. Against this background one should regard with some scepticism the frequent objection that creating a German equivalent of a National Security Council would falter because of party-political turf-wars and polarisation. Good warning and early action needs strategy clarity and priority setting about what is to be warned about as well as accountability at political level about who should act on warnings. To slightly paraphrase a former UK intelligence analyst: “it is not enough to be good at passing the ball, it also needs to be clear who is supposed to score the goals”.

While some prioritisation is necessary for effective warning and response, it is important to avoid the perils of over-reaction in resource shifts towards containing a particular threat after major attacks or failures that generate substantial media attention. The UK parliament’s Intelligence Security Committee criticised the government for directing too much resource to the fight against international terrorism after the 2005 terror attacks. In 2006/07, MI5 devoted 92% of its effort to counter-terrorism work, with MI6 (foreign intelligence) and

333% for GCHQ (signal intelligence). As a result, the remaining resource was spread too thinly, including the issue of hostile state activity from Russia or China. It is important to resist media pressure and ringfence sufficient resource for other known threats as well as horizon-scanning for currently unknown ones or newly evolving ones.

Another lesson about difficulties to avoid comes from the UK's commitment not to direct intelligence to the analysis of the foreign policies of allies or ones' own government. This is perfectly understandable for a number of reasons, but does create a blind spot in understanding and anticipating threats which are partly or mainly caused by allies' foreign policy choices or actions. The UK faces the particular dilemma of being the closest European junior partner to the US in security and defence and as such benefits from privileged access to its intelligence resources and foreign policy process. However, the UK also suffers from any mistakes the superpower makes, for instance, the policy of de-baathification after the fall of Saddam Hussein or the US support for the sectarian government under prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, both of which created grievances and resentment that helped the rise of ISIS/Daesh. Sometimes warning and conflict prevention means looking closely at what friendly states and allies and indeed ones' own government are doing and alerting them clearly and if necessary loudly to the dangerous consequences of it.

Anyone who regularly follows UK and German public debates about foreign policy is struck not just about how different they are in terms of their manifest content, but also the sheer prominence of foreign, security and defence issues in public discourse. There is more and more prominent coverage of foreign affairs, more expert commentary and more MPs specialise as experts of foreign, security and defence policy. These things go together as MPs tend to specialise only in areas that have some public resonance. This greater degree of attention as well as breadth of expertise does not necessarily mean policy is better and earlier, but there is more praise for things going well and more criticism and demands for accountability if they do not. A functioning warning and response process does not need to happen in public, but anticipatory foreign policy does need a culture of informed and if necessary robust public debate and a commitment to learn lessons from surprise, however painful they may be. The UK offers some lessons on how Germany might get there.

***About the authors**

Ana Maria Albulescu has a PhD in War Studies from King's College London. She is postdoctoral researcher at the Romanian Centre for Russian Studies, University of Bucharest

Christoph Meyer is a Professor of European & International Politics at King's College London. He gratefully acknowledges support from the ESRC for the INTEL project.