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# Involvement or restraint?

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Findings of a representative survey  
conducted by TNS Infratest Policy Research  
on German attitudes to foreign policy

## **The Körber Foundation**

The Körber Foundation is currently focussing on five social challenges with its operational projects, in its networks and with cooperation partners: Dialogue with Asia, Engaging with History, STEM Promotion, Potential of Old Age and Music Education. Fathered in 1959 by the entrepreneur and instigator Kurt A. Körber, the foundation is now active both nationally and internationally from its locations in Hamburg and Berlin.

## **International Affairs**

As an independent institution, the Körber Foundation contributes to international understanding and the strategic capability of German and European foreign policy. We initiate open and unbiased dialogues for decision-makers to exchange points of view and develop possible courses of action. The main focus is on the prospects of German and European foreign policy in three regions: Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

## Involvement or restraint?

These are the alternatives which dominate the debate about Germany's role in the area of foreign policy. For many decades Germany's foreign policy was characterized by moderation and restraint. However, since the end of the 1990s Germany has witnessed the emergence of a proactive kind of foreign policy and stronger military engagement. At the beginning of 2014 Federal President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen issued appeals to the effect that it was time to recognize Germany's greater political and economic significance, and to pursue a more visible kind of foreign policy.

But are people in Germany actually prepared to assume greater responsibility? What are the areas on the international stage in which Germany can and indeed should become proactive? And what are the goals and tasks that German foreign policy should pursue? In April and May 2014 TNS Infratest conducted a representative survey of 1,000 people over the age of 18 that was devoted to these issues and commissioned by Körber Foundation. Its findings provide important information about German attitudes to foreign policy.

- ♦ There is a keen interest in foreign policy issues. However, there is only rather lukewarm support for greater international involvement, and it has declined noticeably over the last 20 years. People in Germany are particularly sceptical when it comes to missions that involve the participation of German soldiers.
- ♦ The global protection of human rights and the maintenance of world peace are the most important tasks and goals of German foreign policy.
- ♦ Germans clearly prefer foreign policy involvement of a civilian kind.
- ♦ In addition to closer cooperation with EU member states such as France, Poland and the United Kingdom, Germans favour greater cooperation with China.
- ♦ The younger generation is not particularly interested in foreign policy, though it is the cohort that displays the greatest willingness to embark on more international involvement.

In order to identify changes that have taken place in recent years, we compared the findings to those of a 1994 Infratest survey commissioned by the RAND Corporation. This examined German reactions to the foreign and security policy role that emerged as a result of German unification.

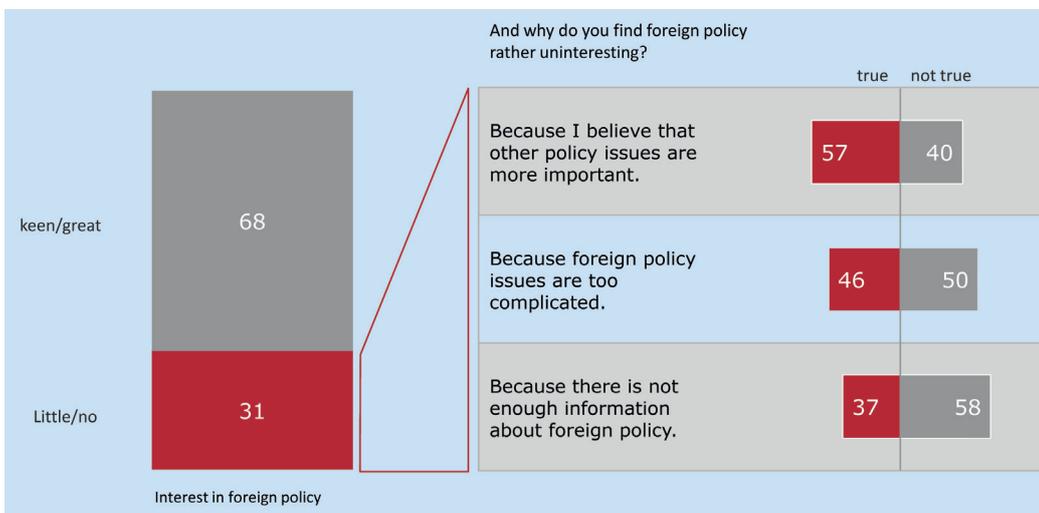
A volume of tables containing detailed results can be downloaded from [www.koerber-stiftung.de/umfrage-aussenpolitik](http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/umfrage-aussenpolitik).

# 1. Keen Interest in Foreign Policy

On the whole Germans take a keen interest in foreign policy issues. Thus 68 percent of the respondents stated that they took a keen (12 percent) or great (56 percent) interest in foreign policy. Older people in particular and those with a higher level of education are especially interested in foreign policy issues. Younger respondents with lower educational qualifications are far less likely to display an interest in the subject.

Those who have 'little' (26 percent) or 'no' (5 percent) interest in foreign policy justify the fact by saying that other issues are more important to them (57 percent), or that the subject is too complicated (46 percent).

## Reasons for a lack of interest in foreign policy



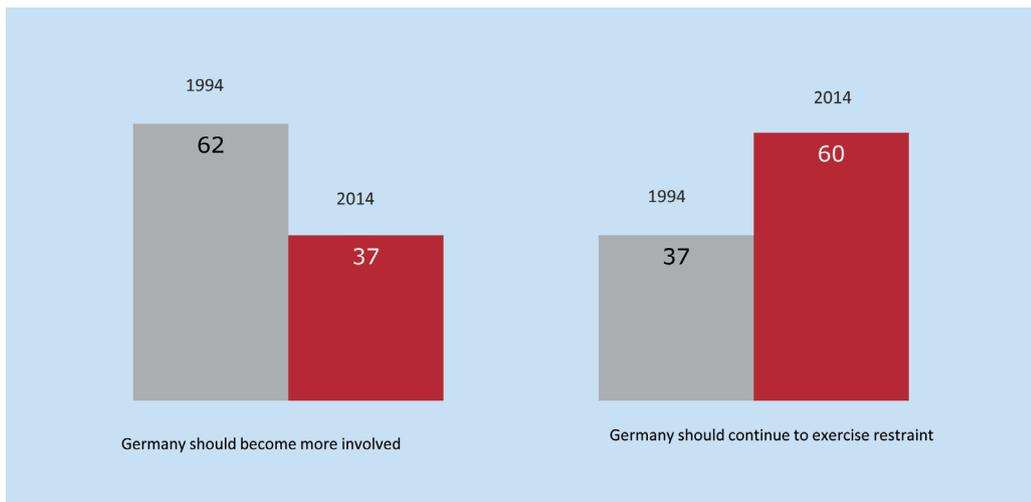
Data in percentage format

Since the survey was conducted in April and May 2014, the respondents tended to describe issues such as the Ukraine/Crimean crisis and Russia as the greatest problems in international politics. Other issues such as Syria, Afghanistan, the NSA affair or the Eurozone crisis played a relatively minor role.

# 2. Not Willing to Embark on Greater Involvement

If one asks Germans to state whether or not they agree with German politicians who have called for greater international involvement, one gets an unequivocal answer. 60 percent believe that Germany should continue to exercise restraint in the area of foreign policy, whereas 37 percent are in favour of greater German involvement. The positions have changed dramatically when we compare current attitudes with the views expressed in 1994. Twenty years ago only 37 percent were in favour of German restraint, whereas 62 percent were in favour of assuming greater responsibility.

## Assumption of Responsibility in International Crises: 1994 and 2014



Data in percentage format

In the current survey 73 percent of the respondents state that the main reason why they are in favour of greater restraint is that Germany has enough problems of its own, and that it should try to resolve them before dealing with other issues. 50 percent justify their reticence by referring to German history, and this is a stance that tends to be taken in particular by respondents over the age of 60. 37 percent believe that Germany's influence in the world is too small to make much of a difference.

The 37 percent who are in favour of greater involvement adduce the following arguments in support of their views:

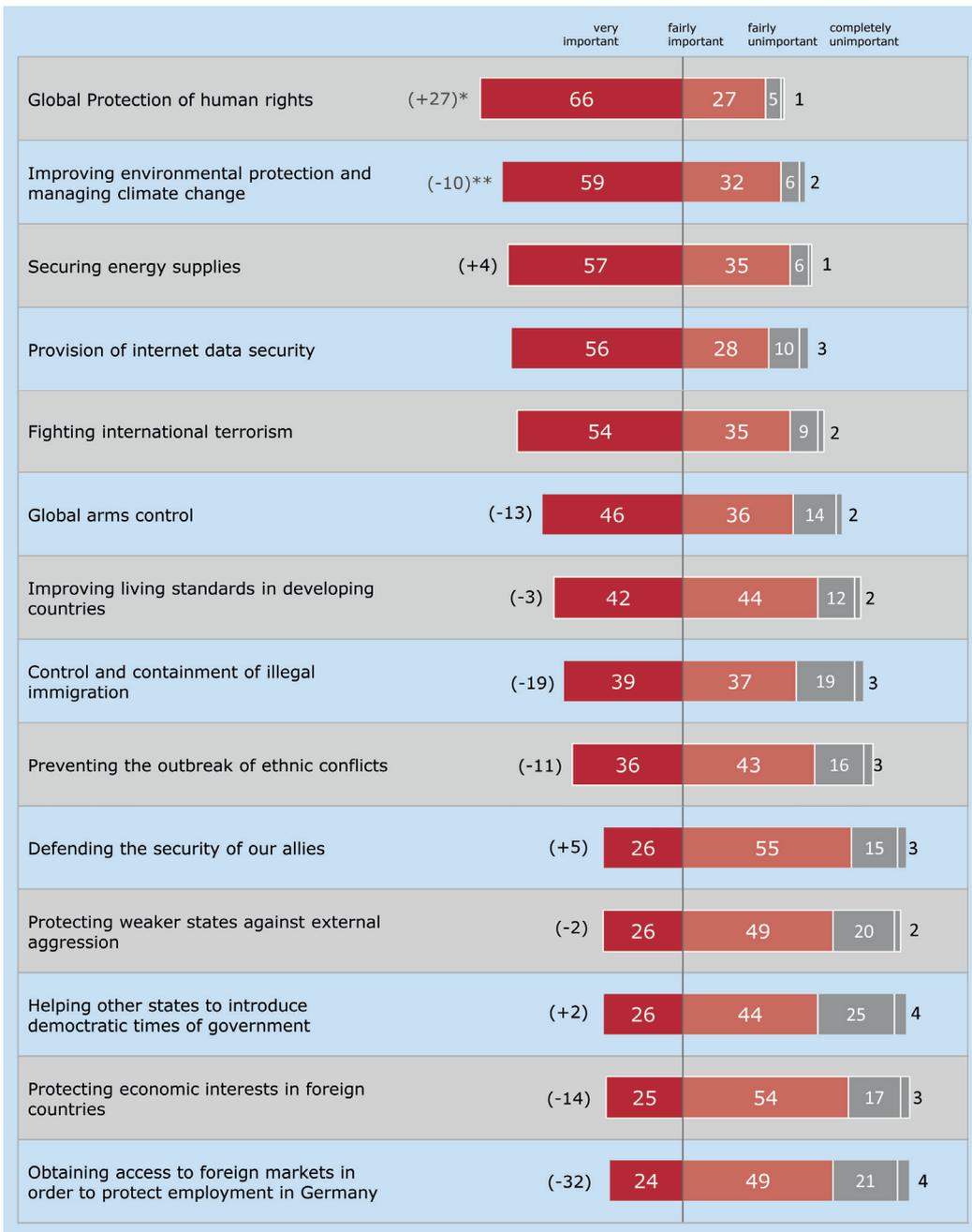
- ♦ Germany owes its economic prosperity to international trade and should thus make a contribution to world peace and global security (93 percent).
- ♦ Germany's greater political and economic significance should be reflected in the assumption of more international responsibility (89 percent).
- ♦ Germany is globally respected as a mediator (85 percent).

### 3. Clear Priorities: World Peace and the Protection of Human Rights

51 percent of the respondents in all age and educational cohorts irrespective of party preferences describe the maintenance of 'world peace' as the most important goal of German foreign policy. Other issues such as security (23 percent), freedom (15 percent) and prosperity (8 percent) attain lower scores.

Germans believe that the most important task facing German foreign policy is the global protection of human rights. 66 percent consider this to be important, 27 percent more than in 1994. Furthermore, respondents are of the opinion that foreign policy should pay especial attention to environmental and energy policy issues. Defending the security of one's allies and protecting weaker states against external aggressors are fairly low down on the list of priorities.

# German Foreign Policy Priorities



\* 1994 version: Supporting and defending human rights in other countries  
 \*\* 1994 version: Global improvement in environmental conditions  
 Don't know/no response = differences between totals and 100%.

Data in percentage format  
 Data in parentheses:  
 changes since 1994

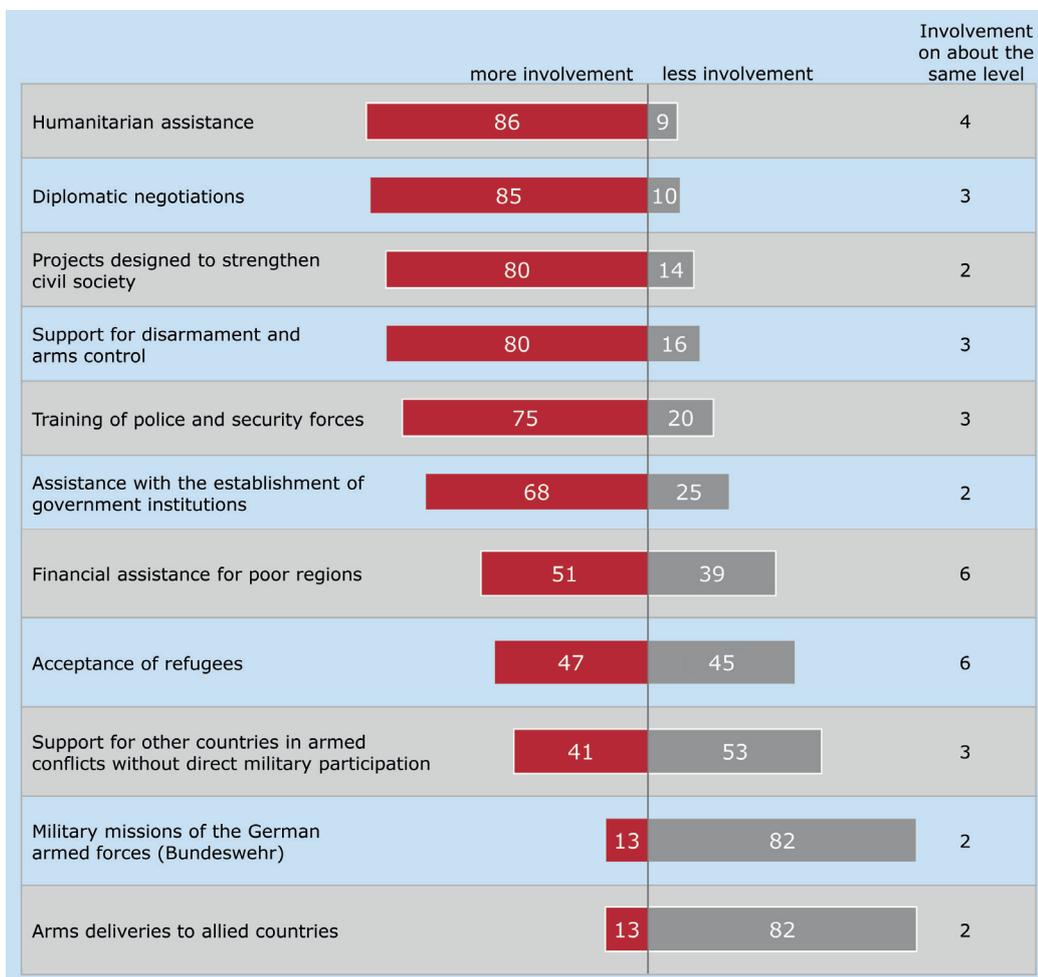
It is noticeable that at the moment (and especially when one compares the data with 1994 figures) the issues of defending economic interests in foreign countries and obtaining access to foreign markets play a rather subordinate role. As far as Germans are concerned, economic considerations are no longer as crucial to foreign policy as they used to be.

## 4. A Preference for Civilian Kinds of Foreign Policy Involvement

It is a surprising fact that on the one hand respondents reject greater German involvement, but on the other hand there are very high scores when it comes to the question of the areas in which German foreign policy should play a greater role.

The respondents believe that Germany should become far more involved in the case of humanitarian assistance, in diplomatic negotiations, in civil society projects, in disarmament and arms controls, in the establishment of police and security forces, and in the establishment of government institutions. This positive attitude changes significantly when respondents are asked to comment on military intervention and arms exports.

Where should Germany become involved?



Don't know/no response: differences between totals and 100%.

Data in percentage format

## 5. Little Support for Military Missions

A clear-cut majority of 82 percent of respondents is in favour of cutting back on German military missions (see previous diagram). This attitude of rejection occurs in all age groups and on all educational levels, and has nothing to do with party preferences or differences between West and East Germany. However, it is particularly noticeable in the case of respondents over the age of 60 (90 percent). A small majority rejects support for other countries in armed conflicts without direct German military participation, and a clear majority is even against arms deliveries to allied countries.

Respondents would support intervention by German armed forces only if peace and security in Europe were directly threatened, for humanitarian purposes, in the case of a direct threat to Germany's allies, in the context of peacekeeping measures based on international agreements, and in order to prevent genocide and the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

### German Armed on Foreign Missions



\*1994 version: to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons  
Don't know/no response: differences between totals and 100%.

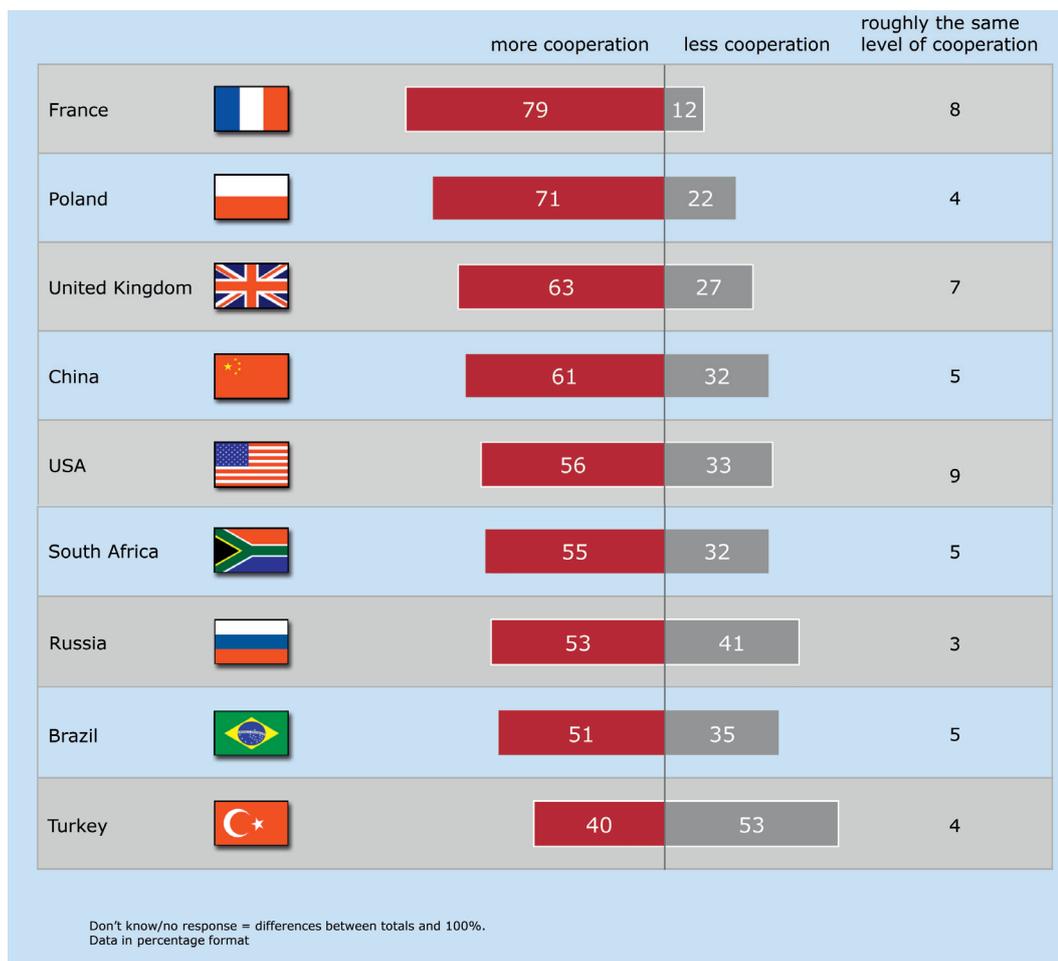
Data in percentage format  
Data in parentheses: changes since 1994

Although the protection of human rights is considered to be the most important task of German foreign policy, and genocide an important reason for military intervention, a majority of Germans (66 percent) are not prepared to give their blessing to a military mission for humanitarian reasons without the requisite UN mandate. Only 33 percent would support intervention for humanitarian reasons in the absence of an appropriate mandate from the UN Security Council.

## 6. Calls for More Cooperation with China

Germans would like to cooperate even more closely with France and Poland, Germany's partners in the Weimar Triangle. They are also in favour of closer cooperation with the United Kingdom. China turns out to be the fourth most popular country if people were asked to name states with which Germany should cooperate more closely in the area of foreign policy. This view is shared by many of the respondents irrespective of age, educational level and party preference. Thus it is slightly ahead of the US, which younger voters view with a certain amount of scepticism. Despite the current tensions, Germans still think that it is necessary to cooperate with Russia. Respondents think that there should be a reduced level of cooperation with only one country in the survey, and that is Turkey.

Should Germany cooperate more or less with these countries?



Don't know/no response: differences between totals and 100%.

Data in percentage format

## 7. Young Voters Tend to Be in Favour of Involvement

An age structure analysis of the survey data shows that younger respondents are far more likely to support greater international involvement. Even if younger voters under the age of 29 are generally less interested in foreign policy than older voters, they are more willing than anyone else to support foreign policy involvement.

Most young citizens would support military intervention for humanitarian reasons even in the absence of a UN mandate. They do not adduce historical arguments and clearly believe that the protection of human rights is one of the basic tasks of German foreign policy.

### Policy Recommendations

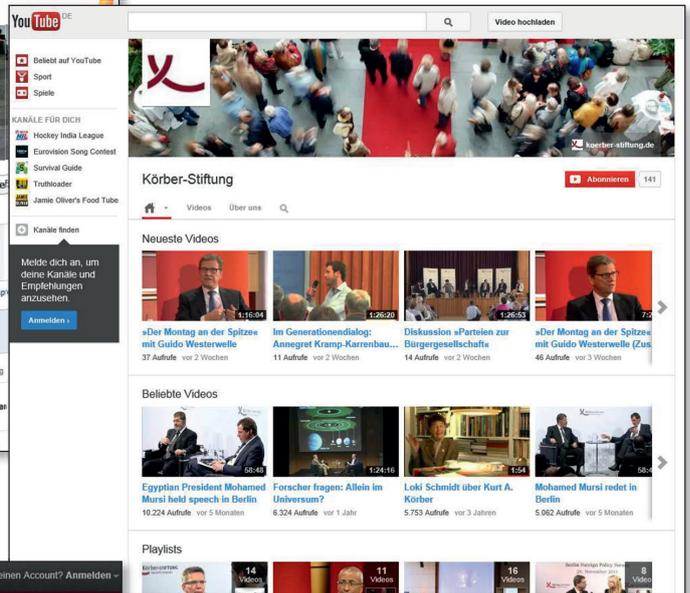
The analysis of the survey data leads us to make the following recommendations for German foreign policymakers:

- ♦ Among the general public the issue of greater German involvement is closely associated with military intervention. In the public debate on the subject greater emphasis should be placed on civilian instruments and diplomatic resources that are available in the area of foreign policy.
- ♦ It needs to be pointed out that Germany's prosperity and security are more dependent than ever before on international developments, and that the defence of German interests can be of benefit to our country.
- ♦ What is at stake needs to be stated with far greater clarity. And this includes the enunciation of unpleasant truths. Goals such as 'the protection of human rights' and the 'maintenance of peace' cannot be reached free of charge, nor can they be attained by exercising restraint in the area of foreign policy.
- ♦ Young citizens should be encouraged to take a greater interest in foreign policy issues. This calls for the development of innovative forms of communication. Moreover, the subject of foreign policy should be accorded greater importance in schools..

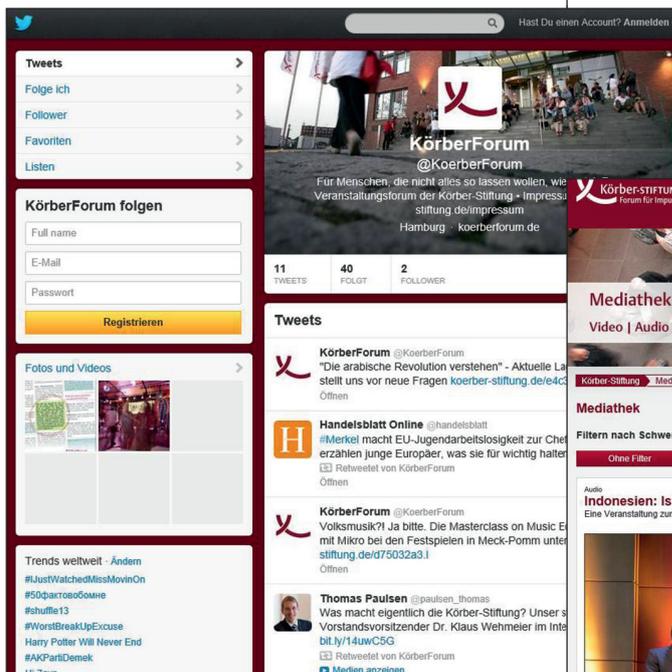
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**Imprint**

Survey 'Involvement or restraint? German attitudes to foreign policy'  
Findings of a representative survey conducted by TNS Infratest Policy Research,  
commissioned by Körber Foundation, May 2014. © Körber-Stiftung 2014

**Editor** Körber-Stiftung, Hamburg

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**Design** [groothuis.de](http://groothuis.de)