Twitter Thread by Tobias Schneider



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A few half-baked thoughts on Laschet and Syria and some such.

First off, it's revolting to see any mainstream politician spread what appear to be conspiracy theories about atrocities committed by the Assad regime in the Syrian war. In fact, to *volunteer* them. Unprompted. /1

> I have a genuine question for people who support Laschet: Are you not bothered by his foreign policy views? Even Syria conspiracy theories aside, his views on Russia are deeply worrying to me. Do you happen to agree with him or do you just think other things are more important? https://t.co/22Xke53jgv
>
> — Marcel Dirsus (@marceldirsus) January 14, 2021

I stopped counting the dozens of friends, colleagues, officials from around the world, but in particular, the Middle East, who have sent me his tweets over the past week. The common response from Berlin appears to be an uncomfortable "well, he's not a foreign policy guy..." /2

But he is! I think it's easy to underestimate the man and his jovial, slightly pudgy and self-deprecating persona. There's also a tendency in Berlin and outside to confuse regional politics (and accents!) for provincialism. But Laschet is from Aachen - in the heart of Europe. /3

His first job in politics was with Hans Stercken, then-chairman of the Bundestag's foreign affairs committee, in the tumultuous mid-late 80s. As a new member of Bundestag in 1994, he joined the committees for int development, EU affairs, and foreign affairs (as an alternate). /4

Some headlines refer to him as a "Merkel-loyalist". At least when I flipped thru his record from the 90s, I got a sense of a man with profound convictions: A passionate European. But also an early proponent of CDU-Greens rapprochement based on a shared moralistic worldview. /5

A telling instance may be the 1995 Velayati-affair, when Laschet and a group of CDU parliamentarians defected to join a Green motion calling on foreign minister Kinkel to rescind an invitation to the then-Iranian foreign minister who had praised the assassination of Rabin. /6

That one almost led to the resignation of foreign minister Kinkel and was, pardon my French, politically ballsy (a number of now-known faces were part of that one!). And again, apparently grounded in a well-considered, moral reading of international politics. /7

He subsequently joined the European parliament, where he specializes in foreign and security affairs with, judging from his various speeches on the matter, an apparent emphasis on the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I read them, they are informed, considered. /8

All that to say, he's not bumbling out of line or character to tweet at John Kerry. So what's with his views? A number of comments note his apparent tolerance for Assad, Putin and Xi. I'll leave the latter as general German proclivities. His stated position on Syria however... /9

... puts him very much outside the mainstream of German and CDU politics. It's also apparently hard to square with his reputation as a staunch defender of Merkel's welcoming refugee policy (e.g. yesterday Turkey's Anadolu Agency called him the "pro-migrant candidate"). /10

And again, he's been consistent: He vocally protested Germany's political and material support for opposition factions starting in 2013 and subsequently, in various ways, recommended the West align with Assad and Russia in what he considers the common fight against Islamists. /11

In my reading, and I know this may be controversial so please don't yell at me, the answer may lie in his abiding Catholicism. Laschet (as well as his key advisor) is a genuine believer, a former editor-in-chief of the local Church paper, deeply embedded in these networks. /12

If you check his remarks, he invariably justifies his position in terms of concern for the fates of the region's Christians or "religious diversity" - be it Syrian clergy or Egypt's Coptic minority (he referred to Sisi's bloody 2013 coup as the country's "Second Revolution"). /13

(As a quick aside: I think the Curia's role in Syria, and its attempt to shape Europe's perception and response to the crisis, remains very much understudied and underappreciated. Germany's Catholics are famously independently minded, but these networks nonetheless run deep.) /14

Anyhow! The fact that he was willing to voice these views out of turn and against prevailing sentiment suggests, to me, a little more than passing error of judgement. This is a genuinely-held concern consistent with his worldview. But then why the crude and crank conspiracy? /15

Unfortunately, that part's just Germany for you! Look no further than mainstream news and debate programs or non-fiction bestseller lists for real whoppers. Not just Lüders and Todenhöfer, but respectable ageing correspondents, former diplomats painting with broad brushes. /16

So finally: What's the risk assessment? As many have pointed out: This is just one of many facets of Laschet - the dedicated European and staunch Transatlanticist who apparently also sees little upside in confrontation with Putin or the CCP. Maybe we'll learn more soon or ... /17

... maybe we won't! Because apparently, as has been pointed out, hardly anyone really cares. Germans, by and large (and justifiably!), feel safe and sound and foreign policy simply is not a hot-button issue, neither in the leadership race nor national politics generally. /19

He also still has quite a road ahead: He's the presumptive favourite for the CDU nomination - and he'll try! - but there are others, with higher approval ratings, waiting in the wings. Finally, even if successful, there await constraints of coalition (and cabinet) government. /19

The implication of Laschet's views (and persona) on those are far more complex and for another day. /20