

## A Different Strategy for Transatlantic Relations (October 2017)

### Abstract

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Two journalists for the weekly *Die Zeit* respond critically to the Transatlantic Manifesto (also in this chapter). Atlanticists, they claim, neglect the significance of long-standing strains in transatlantic relations. Germany and Europe needed to shoulder more responsibility in tackling policy and security issues.

### Source

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#### Something New in the West

Under President Trump, America is calling the postwar values common to the U.S. and Europe into question: That's why it's high time to chart a new foreign policy after Atlanticism.

One could almost be grateful to Donald Trump: By undermining the transatlantic partnership, he has heightened Germans' recognition of how much this relationship has benefitted them. No other country has so profited from the American-led world order more than the Federal Republic. Atlanticism was the umbrella under which politically and morally ruined Germany could be rehabilitated and re-integrated into the West. Being anchored in the West, along with Germany's division, allayed the fears of Germany's neighbors, and finally dispensed with the European nightmare known as the German question.

It was through the transatlantic partnership that West Germany, and after unification the whole country, accessed Western modernism with its three core elements: capitalism, cultural liberalism, and the concept of (for Germany, the decisively new) pro-active, self-confident citizenship. This contributed to the end of the German militarism, worship of the state, and the mentality of subservience.

In addition, Germany received a security architecture in NATO, a status that enabled it to participate in the officially demonized nuclear weapons regime. And the Americans could live with the Germans' cultural arrogance, which supposedly stood in contrast to the Americans' ostensibly superficial lifestyle. They endured the anti-Americanism and bet on the soft power of their attractive social model. All of this resonates today when it comes to the future of the transatlantic relationship.

But now the whole situation has been reversed in a crazy way.

Today Atlanticists have to deal with the paradox that the attack on the foundations of the liberal international world order founded by America comes from the White House. In the West Wing sits a nationalist and confessed enemy of multilateral politics, one who sympathizes with authoritarian leaders and undermines the EU by supporting Brexit.

The fact that the constants and principles of German foreign policy—European integration, multilateralism, engagement in the name of human rights and the rule of law, rule-based globalization—are questioned by the American government constitutes an enormous intellectual and strategic challenge. In the future, Europe now, out of necessity, has to do this by itself without the aid of the U.S., or perhaps even against the U.S. government.

It's ridiculous to believe that Angela Merkel should compensate for the failure of the U.S. president by

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assuming the mantle of “leader of the free world.” And yet there’s a kernel of something there: Germany, more than other actors, is tied to the liberal international order. This is the new German question: Germany is so large that it cannot flourish without this order, and yet it’s too small to guarantee it alone. For the foreseeable future, German foreign policy will suffer this contradiction. Since the previous guarantor of this order is becoming increasingly irrelevant, the question of the Germany’s contribution has to be posed is radically anew.

Those who think we can just wait for the U.S. to return to its old role after Trump are deceiving themselves. Indeed, the transatlantic crisis didn’t begin with Trump, and will not end with Trump. Why don’t the Atlanticists want to see this?

[...]

### **The wobbly world power gradually loses control**

[...]

Either way, the U.S. can no longer and will no longer be the stabilizer and protector of Europe; the former guarantor of freedom and democracy is itself democratically out of control, and one must pray that it will get its act together at some point.

The Atlantic community is now down to its last hope: that the Trump phenomenon is a temporary aberration. There’s not much to support this because Barack Obama had already begun to withdraw from the conflicts involving Europe’s neighbors. He saddled Merkel with the Ukraine crisis. In the Middle East, he did as little as possible (which allowed the Russians to penetrate.) He also left the EU alone with the refugee crisis, which was a result, not least, of the chaotic U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Even if the United States were to return to reason in domestic policy, little will change in these foreign policy retreats, simply because America is overwhelmed by its role in global leadership. It is not just since Trump that the wobbly world power has gradually lost control over the Middle East, more and more over East Asia and Latin America.

This sweeps away the two pillars of German Atlanticism: The U.S. is, firstly, no longer a guarantee of democracy; it is just as endangered as any other Western nation. And, secondly, the U.S. has forfeited any moral, military or political leadership.

Unfortunately, most Atlanticists refuse to accept this reality. Instead, they take refuge in argumentative acrobatics. They’re against Germany or Europe liberating themselves from the U.S. But it’s exactly the other way round: the Europeans haven’t begun or concluded the separation – but rather the U.S. has. Father moved out, childhood is over.

Secondly, Germany’s not in a position to take over the West’s leadership. Thus we still have to rely on the U.S. strategically. It’s right that Germany can only lead if leadership is defined in a completely different, more cooperative, partnership-based way. Apart from that, just because Germany is too weak for conventional leadership, doesn’t mean that the U.S. will be more sensible, stronger or altruistic.

### **What would a post-Atlantic Western policy look like?**

Thirdly, the Atlanticists are of the opinion that Germany, which currently stabilizes the EU, is not as stable as it appears. This may be so, but this skepticism can’t hide the fact that the U.S. is currently experiencing the worst possible democratic regression of all of the great Western nations and that it is

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sowing instability for the rest of the world.

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What then would the outlines of a post-Atlantic Western policy look like?

A list of new foreign policy priorities could thus begin like this: support France without condescending to it; manage Brexit without punitive fantasies; limit Trump's damage to the West; rigorously defend against Russia's aggression; keep Turkey in the European game; reduce the appeal of Europe to Africa's aspiring population and simultaneously allow for controlled immigration; bring in China, wherever it is indispensable (free trade, climate policy, North Korean crisis), and confront where it acts unfairly (intellectual property, dispute in the South China Sea, human rights.)

German foreign policy will increasingly have to do things at the same time that are contradictory at first sight. For example: Germany has to spend a lot of money on (and in) Europe; deal resolutely with the European neighbors in the east who clearly oppose the softening of the liberal order, but not with the attitude of the über-democratic schoolmarm. Give more Africans legal chances in Europe, while at the same time better protect the borders. Take a stand against the authoritarian metamorphosis in Ankara, and yet design in advance an active Turkey policy for the post-Erdoğan era. In short, in European affairs Germans must be more accommodating and tougher at the same time.

Germany has little experience in strategic foreign policy because for a long time it could enjoy a framework guaranteed by others. Now there's a new demand because Western policy is off the tracks. Berlin can't just sit back and watch while others do the heavy lifting. Indeed, today the others look first at what Berlin is doing.

Act more confidently, fine-tune strategic thinking. Yet, there's something else, perhaps the most demanding. In a sense, the West – including Europe and Germany -- must reinvent international politics. After all, it's not just that the U.S. has grown weak; the rest of the world has grown stronger. Now, long-drawn-out and seldom addressed questions crop up: How can one insist on the universal validity of human rights while at the same time giving up one's own supremacy claim? Or, positively expressed: What happens when countries which are democratic cease to act autocratically in world affairs? More practically: what effect could it have if the gap between the depth of intervention and the depth of knowledge in Western politics were no longer so great, if the interveners were interested in detail in the countries and people that they seek to influence and change?

Visiting Germany, Emmanuel Macron, summed it all up when talking about the Middle East: "We've failed to think about this region in our neighborhood in terms any different than do neoconservatives." Europe had failed to develop alternative foreign policies. Now it can. Because it has to.

One more thing: All this only applies if the U.S. does not start a war against Iran or North Korea. For in this case, the new transatlantic distance would grow into a geopolitical conflict of the first order. With Trump's first shot, the West would be dead.

*Translated by Paul Hockenos*

Source: Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich, „Something New in the West“, *Zeit Online*, October 25, 2017.  
<https://www.zeit.de/politik/2017-10/foreign-policy-germany-atlanticism-relationships-values>

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