

A Transatlantic Manifesto (October 2017)

Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States has challenged fundamental principles of the liberal international order on which transatlantic relations were built. The resulting uncertainty has led to discussions about the future of these relations. In the first of three articles, renowned German policy experts call for a long-term and differentiated strategy in relations with the United States.

Source

“In Spite of It All, America”

1. International Order—the new German-American conflict of interests

One of the new German government’s premier challenges will be to manage the trans-Atlantic relationship during Donald Trump’s presidency. Its success in this endeavor will be one way to measure its overall performance. We, a group of foreign policy experts from civil society, would like to offer some ideas.

The liberal world order with its foundation in multilateralism, its global norms and values, its open societies and markets—is in danger. It is exactly this order on which Germany’s freedom and prosperity depends. The order is being challenged from various directions and sources: rising powers strive for influence; illiberal governments and authoritarian regimes are ascending; anti-modern thinking is gaining traction and influence even within Western democracies; Russia is challenging the peaceful European order; and new technologies are disrupting old economic structures.

Lastly, the United States, inventor and—until recently—guardian of the liberal order, currently does not see itself as system guarantor. Donald Trump is the first U.S. president since World War II to fundamentally question the ideas and institutions of the liberal international order. He opposes this order by advocating a system of raw power and national interest. In his alternative system, small and medium sized countries play a role as dependent and secondary actors. Donald Trump is skeptical of any and all of the United States’ commitments to multilateral institutions and norms.

With its preference for stable treaty-based alliances and long term, multilateral commitments, Germany sees the current international order as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. For Germany, Donald Trump’s foreign policy creates a previously unknown conflict of interest with its most important ally.

Since Germany’s as well as Europe’s security and affluence rest upon the current international order even as President Trump charts a different course for the United States, an increased responsibility falls to the European Union and its member state Germany to safeguard and strengthen the international order.

2. A president sui generis

It is impossible to ignore that President Trump was able to attract the support of 60 million voters. It is also true that unilateral foreign policy, protectionist moods, and periodic calls for “America First” policies have a long tradition in the United States. Still, Donald Trump is a president sui generis whose ideas about international order do not fit within the modern American politician tradition. These ideas are supported by few in the United States. His disdain for international alliances and institutions is not

even shared by many in the government he leads, much less by those outside of government. Donald Trump's positions on global order are outside the mainstream of the foreign policy expert community in the United States. It is unclear, maybe even unlikely, that his strategy of undermining the international order will ever succeed in the United States and become his country's policy.

3. Dangerous consequences

Some analysts and political actors in Germany would like to draw far-reaching conclusions from this period of uncertainty about the direction of the United States. They endorse a strategic reorientation for Germany. Some strive to decouple Europe's foreign and security policy from the United States. Others place their faith in a German-French mini version of Europe. Sometimes, European aspirations only disguise German nationalism as a response to American nationalism. Some recommend that Germany should focus on ad hoc coalitions or maintain equidistance between Russia and the United States. Some even recommend that Germany should go further, and align itself with Russia or China in the future.

All of these propositions are costly or dangerous—or both.

4. The United States remains indispensable

Turning away from the United States would bring insecurity to Germany and ultimately to Europe.

The bond with the United States was born from dependence, but it has long been in Germany's core national interest. Today, no other actor in the world can offer the same advantages to Germany that it gains from its alliance with the United States. No other power takes on such far-reaching security guarantees and offers such comprehensive political resources.

As a liberal hegemon, the United States made European integration possible. The majority of the political establishment in the United States continues to see the country as a supporter of European integration—also because it suits its own interest. The country needs allies that share its values and interests.

If Germany wants to be an effective actor in Europe, it needs the United States. If the ties to the United States are cut, with them go the reassurance that other European countries need in order to accept a strong Germany in the center of the continent. The more leadership that Germany can and should take on, the closer the coordination must be with the United States.

Decoupling from the United States would fundamentally question one of the most important political and cultural achievements of the past 70 years: Germany's integration in the West.

In aligning itself with the West Germany also committed itself to the values of freedom and democracy, and to cooperation with all those who stand for these values. Freedom is the precondition for human beings to lead a self-determined and dignified life. Germany has committed itself to this set of ideas in its constitution, the Basic Law. Its anchoring in the West gave Germany the steadfastness to resist the Communist regimes and make possible Germany and European reunification. A departure from this trans-Atlantic orientation will renew the threat of a special path (*Sonderweg*) of Germany, it will strengthen nationalists on the left and the right, and it will endanger the peaceful European order.

The West, even today, does not exist without the United States, neither as a concept, nor as a political subject. America is the anchor of liberal universalism and the open world order. Even if Donald Trump's presidency carries significant risks for the liberal order, these perils will not diminish if Germany puts its strategic partnership with the United States at stake. A strategic decoupling from the United States would ultimately endanger the liberal international order more than prudent cooperation with a United States whose leadership currently rattles this order. Autocracies such as China and Russia can be

important ad hoc partners for single projects; the United States, however, must remain the strategic partner for a democratic and European Germany.

The relationship with the United States is a values-based partnership built on our democratic political systems. Even if the current U.S. president challenges significant elements of the political system, the United States remains a democracy. President Trump is not America, nor is the illiberal movement for which he stands a solely American phenomenon. In Europe too it has made its mark. What we see today is not a divergence between Europe and the United States; it is a conflict within the West unfolding on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, the economic, scientific, and cultural linkages with the United States are far stronger than with any other region in the world. The interplay with the United States remains a central element of Europe's capacity for innovation.

5. Yet, no business as usual

So, how do we engage with the United States in times of Donald Trump?

Even if turning away from the United States is not a responsible option for Germany, business as usual is not an option with the current presidency either. It would be equally unhelpful to stay silent and look the other way, waiting until this presidency is finally over and a successor occupies the White House. Four or even eight years is too long to sit it out, especially since there will not be a return to the supposed good old times.

6. Ideas for a new U.S. Strategy

German policy now requires something that it did not need before: a U.S. strategy.

A responsible policy toward the United States must be long-term and build a bridge into the post-Trump age. This policy must look beyond an exceptional period of U.S. skepticism toward any multilateral commitment. However, Germany must not fall prey to the illusion that there will be a return to the status quo ante following the Trump Presidency. Several political trends in the United States will outlive Trump's time in office—for example, the demand for more balanced burden-sharing between Europe and the United States within NATO. However, the end of the Trump presidency should be the end of the inner Western conflict about the fundamentals of the world order. Once this fundamental consensus is reestablished policy disagreements can be resolved or bridged more easily and more constructively.

[...]

Germany should not succumb to illusions: large scale joint projects with the Trump government will have little chance for success in policy areas that are central to President Trump's populist agenda. Trying to do too much in these key policy areas will only cause new disagreements.

In short, Germany's U.S. strategy must allow for multitasking: to actively pursue key national interests in collaboration with the United States, to moderate conflicts, to avoid unrealistic ambitions, and to thus build a bridge to a better future for trans-Atlantic relations.

This nuanced approach will have different consequences for the different policy areas.

7. Trade policy—aim only for conflict management

Soberingly, the signs are not favorable for larger projects in several policy areas that would actually be vital, such as trade policy. Despite all controversies, the strategic and economic reasons for a trans-Atlantic free trade agreement (TTIP) have not disappeared since November 2016. [...]

There are signs already that the United States and the European Union might be headed toward trade disputes. The European Union must react to punitive tariffs. But it should do so *exclusively* in a legal, proportional, and symmetrical manner. Everything else could trigger an unwanted escalation.

8. International refugee policy—no chance for a joint vision

Joint initiatives regarding international refugee policy do not look very promising either. The global system of protection, however, urgently needs to be reformed to cope with modern conditions. The rights of refugees need to be protected while illegal migration needs to be curtailed, organized trafficking should be combated so that the universal refugee regime is not undermined. Equally important will be a push toward new and improved United Nations' resettlement programs. However, it appears difficult to imagine that the Trump administration will agree to such initiatives. Consequently, Europe must become active itself here—as best as it can.

Therefore, *trade and refugee policies* fall in the category of currently difficult, hardly resolvable issues. The best we can expect is limited progress, but no large scale initiatives.

9. Security policy—strive for progress, also with President Trump

Security policy is a different matter. Without the United States there will be no security for and in Germany for the foreseeable future. This applies to territorial as well as alliance defense within NATO, but also to nuclear deterrence, to combating cyber crimes and money laundering, and finally to counterterrorism and the cooperation of intelligence agencies. No single European country, not Germany, not any other country, and not the European Union, can provide the necessary resources to guarantee the continent's security. Therefore, the existing cooperation must be strengthened. Remaining committed to NATO also provides a way to integrate the United States into the structures of multilateral security policy and may dissuade Washington from going it alone.

Alliance defense is the most cost-effective form of defense. Germany should thus take seriously the call for fairer burden-sharing within the alliance. Acting against its own core interest, Germany has not done enough in this respect. Germany still has a long way to go until it's NATO goals and commitments are met. To be clear: Germany agreed to increase its defense expenditures toward 2 percent of its GDP. Germany should keep its word. To present this commitment as a threat to the military balance in Europe is to get it backwards. It is precisely our European neighbors and partners that are asking for more German commitment within the NATO framework and within European defense policy.

It would be even better if Germany were to invest an extra percentage point of GDP into development assistance, international police operations, UN missions, conflict prevention, and diplomacy. With this linkage, nonmilitary aspects of security would also be upgraded. This would substantially strengthen European defense capabilities within the trans-Atlantic alliance. Germany would do something that is in its own interest and would stabilize the trans-Atlantic alliance at the same time. It would address concerns of the Trump administration and build good will for the time after Donald Trump. The chances of success for this strategy are high: Despite all of the skeptical rhetoric about NATO, the Trump administration has fulfilled America's NATO commitments so far.

[...]

10. Energy security policy—giving up Nord Stream 2 is in Germany's interest

There is one more policy area in which the German government should reconsider its position to open the door for productive cooperation: *energy security policy*. The United States has identified Nord Stream 2, the planned pipeline running through the Baltic Sea to Russia, as a geostrategic project. They are correct. More important: This pipeline project is not in the joint European interest. Nord Stream 2

contradicts a policy of greater energy independence and undermines the envisaged European Energy Union. We should try to identify a joint approach with our European partners and the United States.

11. Climate, energy and digital policy—manage conflicts responsibly

After having addressed the solvable issues and set aside the unsolvable issues for now, one will need to turn to those policy areas that require responsible conflict management. It would be useless to try to convince the U.S. administration of the importance of the Paris Climate Agreement, but it is equally wrongheaded to isolate President Trump on international climate and energy policy. Necessary criticism should not turn into dogmatism.

Instead, Germany should seek concrete steps forward in climate protection together with the United States. Germany does not need President Trump in order to engage with partners who are interested in climate policy cooperation. [...] Political, scientific, and technical cooperation with local partners is possible. There is no shortage of potent allies on climate policy in the United States, in the private sector as well as in civil society. [...]

Digital policy is another policy area where confrontation is possible—about regulatory questions as well as about market shares. It is important to identify points of contention as soon as possible and to avoid unnecessary escalation. Sealing off Europe's and the United States' digital markets from each other will seriously damage the outlook for jobs and growth on both sides of the Atlantic. European consumer and data protection standards might be able to be maintained globally if they have U.S. support, but certainly not without it.

12. Final point—more Europe within the Alliance

Making progress with the Trump administration wherever possible, moderating conflicts and avoiding escalation, expanding the spectrum of trans-Atlantic partners beyond the current U.S. administration—these are all core aims of a U.S. strategy that can preserve the trans-Atlantic partnership with and if necessary against this American President, and function beyond his time in office. The United States has proved its capacity for self-correction repeatedly. America remains the indispensable power for those countries that stand for freedom and democracy and strive for an open world order. But Europe—and thus Germany—must do more to support and preserve these values. More European self-reliance is imperative. It would be an error of historical proportions to play out “more Europe” against the trans-Atlantic alliance. The new German government's foreign policy will be measured by how clearly it pursues this course.

Source: Deidre Berger et al., “In Spite of It All, America,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2017.

Recommended Citation: A Transatlantic Manifesto (October 2017), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5343>> [July 10, 2025].