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Germany and the US in the age of Trump

Why the transatlantic relationship is still worth fighting for

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Read this article in German / Russian

In recent weeks, the German press has published several articles on the country's relationship with the USA under the Trump Administration. They reflect the well-founded concerns of many experts on both sides of the Atlantic about possible harm to all key USA-Europe relations – from close political and crucial security cooperation through the no less significant economic interdependence to the very productive cultural contacts.

Earlier discussions focused on bilateral and security policy considerations. This article stresses that German interests regarding the USA must be viewed as 'four dimensional': they will be determined bilaterally in the context of NATO, the EU and increasingly also through global policies – on climate protection through universal development goals to acute crises such as developments in Iran and North Korea. German interests are directly influenced by its perception of partners' interests.

The following theses proceed from the assumption that any strategy for dealing with President Trump is basically a strategy for dealing with reinvigorated nationalism, which is not just happening in the USA. Nationalism is celebrating a comeback in many places and guises: right-wing populist parties, separatist movements, conflicts with neighbours (such as the annexation of Crimea) and protectionism.

Old certainties no longer seem to hold – or only to a limited degree. In both Europe and the USA, the post-World-War-II international order created by the USA is not threatened so much from external as from internal attacks.

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All types of chauvinistic nationalism are essentially exclusive not inclusive, potentially aggressive and always divisive. They define access to resources, social benefits, participation and power ethnically, linguistically or on the basis of religious affiliation. The inability to compromise and 'zero-sum games' create only winners and losers. Including the interests of others and being ready to compromise are seen as weaknesses.

The authors of this article consider that more unites than divides the transatlantic partners. Citizens, scientists, and business and political representatives on both shores of the Atlantic are increasingly concerned about how basic values, such as democratic standards and respect for universal rights, freedom and equality, and progressive principles such as establishing and expanding international law, are questioned. Framing rules for globalisation and boosting international cooperation in an era of transnational problems like climate change and migration seem to be well-nigh impossible.

We start by formulating the following theses for a new form of transatlantic global cooperation, which derives from the closely intertwined German, European and American interests.

Learning from our errors

Social, economic and political realities often lag far behind the noble political values and goals of a liberal international economic order. Even progressive elites in Europe and the USA have misjudged the gap between expectations and reality, the costs of globalisation and the growing temptation of right-wing populist explanations and policies. For too long, they too believed that progressive achievements were irreversible.

Many voters' current disillusionment is to some extent understandable. But recourse to new forms of nationalism is wrong, dangerous and, given long-term challenges like climate change, a dead end.

The ambiguities of economic globalisation, which creates both winners and losers but in the last decades has generally exacerbated inequality, create insecurity. 'Market-compliant' democracies no longer persuasively assess the results of market-driven economic processes or correct them when necessary. Instead, communities are pushed to adapt to the demands of international markets.

At the same time, the vulnerability of this economic and political model has become abundantly clear in Europe and the USA. Globalisation has increasingly become a matter of technical administration, benefitting business but costing democracy and societal development. It is in urgent need of politically guidance.

Europe and the USA could collaborate on key projects such as taking responsibility for climate policy, regulating global capitalism though trade and finance policies, promoting the global energy transition, reducing the reasons for people to flee, developing migration policies and recreating trust in politics by strengthening regional and global institutions – not least the United Nations.

It is hard to address these subjects with the current US administration. But that is no reason to stop. It is still necessary and possible to develop new approaches in international networks – with Americans.

Transatlantic partners – not just governments but also civil society networks – benefit from joint analysis and debate about what led to the electoral success of supporters of the Brexit, US president Donald Trump, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and other right-wing populist parties in Europe. It is also important to discuss political approaches for dealing with the rise of nationalist policies and how to enhance international cooperation.

On both sides of the Atlantic people are asking: how can solidarity be re-established in and between increasingly multi-ethnic (immigrant) societies that also have to cope with growing inequality and reduced social mobility?

This is not just about preserving liberalism and cosmopolitanism; it is also about expanding social welfare and stability within these societies and with the countries of the Global South.

Defending our institutions

When international cooperation becomes difficult, every setback and each pull-out feels like one more discouraging signal. It is particularly important to take brave stands on controversial matters. Doing so affirms and promotes the value of multilateral standards and bodies and their contribution to peace.

We must begin by defending existing institutions and treaties (as Angela Merkel, Theresa May and Emmanuel Macron did with regard to the Iran

nuclear deal) and continue with the reform and innovative use of multilateral structures. In light of the existing challenges, simply pulling out of the United Nations system is wrong. Instead, we should seek to make these bodies 'fit' for the tasks ahead.

Only reacting to the rising tide of destructive nationalism by reinforcing or building defensive dams is not enough. We must bring innovative ideas into the debate about core values – with the courage of positive vision. This approach makes it possible to realign the forces of good will that are ready to engage but who feel anxious and frustrated by current developments.

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When revisiting difficult issues, we have to adopt a positive approach. This is not about being 'against Trump' or other politicians with nationalist ideas, but rather advocating positive goals. Standing up for one thing is also acting against something else. Promoting a positive goal is far more helpful for political orientation und mobilisation than just being scared and angry (which risks copying the style of the very actors who are so unsettling).

Using 'convening power'

The challenges ahead – from creating an intelligent policy toward chauvinistic nationalism to working on transnational problems – cannot be shouldered by a single person, institution or country. Yet the actions of every single person, institution and country are crucial. Each constructive attitude and act can have an effect.

Germany is not in a position to replace the USA as the mainstay of an international liberal order. However, as a conscientious member of the EU and the global community, Germany's 'convening power' should not be underestimated: it can invite, convene, assemble and create not just content but also formats for collectively tackling more complex and larger tasks.

Long accustomed to leaning on America, Germany now has a special responsibility in light of the course taken by the current US government. The continued existence of a liberal international order and preserving the peace are crucial – and not only for Germany.

It makes sense for Germany to exert itself to defend these

accomplishments, but without making any special claims. Particularly in difficult times, Germany should use its integration with the West to help other countries.

That means Germany should demonstrate its attachment to the values of freedom, democracy and international cooperation through clever and calm policies – neither overestimating its strengths nor shirking its responsibilities. Germany must also demonstrate a new kind of cooperative and fair leadership – beginning in the EU.

Inclusion not exclusion – working in multilateral networks

When we champion international cooperation, we have to clearly show what we hope to achieve. We are developing concrete measures for transnational, not national, networks. It is necessary to return to using multilateral, and often interdisciplinary, networks. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) is active in such networks and can define exactly the type of platform needed – for example, an international workshop for developing strategic proposals. To this end, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, which is located in Vienna, is developing concepts with multilateral networks and the OSCE that can then be presented for politicians and experts to discuss in the particular countries.

We are not suggesting that Germany develop a strategy that is either for or against the USA. Rather, we recommend developing an effective strategic focus and collaborating with all who stand for international cooperation – against those who want to lead the world toward national egoism and the resulting exclusion and confrontations.

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Both Europeans and Americans should be involved in formulating policies to cleverly react to forces like those used by President Trump. It is not 'we Germans' or 'we Europeans' against 'the USA': That's just a variation of the game that we find so disturbing. We seek to unite all forces that support humane policies – regardless of nationality.

Long-term thinking and long-term

commitment

At the same time, there are also short-, medium-, and long-term political tasks we should be tackling. Ending the present crisis depends on how ready we are to think and commit ourselves to the long haul.

It's not the crisis that is decisive but rather the reactions to it. Forward-looking, progressive policies will help us learn important lessons from the crisis and find new solutions. Without them the crisis will act like acid, corroding ever more areas and creating a catastrophe. We need tireless advocacy for a humane and sustainable world order.

We also must publicise the efforts of all those in many places – in the USA, too, of course – who are defending the values of a liberal and social (world) order. Although the political reality often does not do justice to core values like human rights, democracy and the rule of law, that does not mean they are irrelevant or meaningless. On the contrary: in tumultuous times, they point the way.
