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# The erosion of the German-US relationship

There are ways to deal with divergent interests, says German MP Metin Hakverdi, but not with conflicting values

*Read this interview in German or Russian.*

**In declaring a national state of emergency, Donald Trump has caused a full-blown constitutional crisis. Will the fever that has seized US democracy finally break?**

The current situation in the United States of America is something I would call 'extreme polarisation' – and in essence, it's nothing new. Long before Donald Trump was elected president, the country's opposing political groupings had a habit of pushing both institutions specifically and the political discourse generally to extreme positions, with a view to maximum polarisation and thus mobilisation among supporters. That many Americans take this partisan approach as proof that 'Washington is broken' is, by the same token, not a recent development.

What's new, however, is Trump's role as a third pole in this febrile democratic climate – and that he's taking on a radically critical position regarding the institutions of liberal democracy themselves. Right at the beginning of his presidency, in his first speeches to Congress – both houses were still majority Republican – the president made this highly revealing statement: "I am negotiating on behalf of the American taxpayer with Congress."

This says a lot about how Trump thinks – and shows that this 'constitutional crisis' is actually a development that has been happening for a while: since he was elected, Trump has repeatedly taken every opportunity to see whether he can reshuffle the deck of democratic institutions and keep his 'me against the elites' narrative alive. The border wall is just another chapter in this series.

**If this is a long-term trend, can we still rely on the ability of a democracy to heal its own wounds?**

I don't think that democracy can heal its own wounds – either in the US or in other democratic systems. It doesn't just 'get better'. Rather, the health of a democracy is the sum of many smaller, daily decisions taken by individuals and institutions. As such, rather than hoping for democracy to heal, we need to take responsibility for its health. This concerns everyone – primarily the Americans, of course, and their institutions: their Congress, representatives, federal states, businesses and, last but not at all least, their voters.

It also concerns us as international partners. Specifically, that means we must always attempt to involve the United States in the cooperative, multilateral system, and apply pressure if necessary. What we can't do is simply shrug our shoulders and say: 'Oh well, the Americans will manage it by themselves in the end.'

**According to a survey by the German-American transatlantic think-tank Atlantik-Brücke, 85 per cent of Germans now see their country's relationship with the US in a negative light; only 13 per cent want closer relations. And Trump is pushing 'America First'. To paraphrase Willy Brandt: isn't this just something breaking apart that never belonged together?**

I can confirm the results of that survey from my own experience: we are seeing an erosion of the German-American relationship – and by erosion, I mean this is a gradual process that began some time ago. Think about the Iraq War, the Syrian disaster, the continuous polarisation within Nato and the very, very controversial '2 per cent goal'. Especially in conservative parts of the Republican side in the US, I hear appeals to judge Trump by what he does, not by what he says. But that is, in my view, misleading, because words mean an awful lot. There is, after all, a difference between John F Kennedy saying 'Ich bin ein Berliner' and Trump saying 'I couldn't care less about you: it's America First now!' There is a difference between Ronald Reagan coming to Berlin to say 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!' and somebody retreating back into themselves and saying 'We don't care about the rest of the world anymore.'

**It's not just a war of words, though, is it? There is a long list of specific conflicts of interest between Germany and America, starting with Nord Stream 2 and Afghanistan. In fact, you have to look hard to find common interests.**

Concrete divergences of interest aren't actually the greatest problem we are currently facing: we have often had conflicting goals at various

points in the past. What I am concerned about are common values. Take the World Trade Organisation, for example, or perhaps free-trade agreements. The core of the issue isn't what we think about how America chooses to tax its companies in their domestic economy – that is a matter for the US, I get that.

For our part, we think about how we can protect our economy from dumping. What is crucial, though, and this is the big question: do we have a set of rules we keep to and a referee we respect to help us find compromises? Do we have a culture of reaching mutual agreements? The discord isn't an issue of differing interests, but rather the process by which we have negotiated and agreed on various issues is now being put in question by the current American administration.

**At the same time, isn't it true that the crisis of transatlantic relations is as old as transatlantic relations itself? There are a lot of deep-seated prejudices: two centuries ago, the German poet Heinrich Heine was already decrying America as 'the country of mob rule'. Isn't European criticism of America sometimes driven by long-standing snobbery?**

Yes, that's also true. But it's equally the case with other societies, not just the US. What's more, I would contrast your Heine quote with something the former leader of the German Social Democrats Franz Müntefering once said: 'After the war, American GIs gave me chocolate, so I'm not an objective observer, but rather a friend of America.' If we are going to look at history, that's also part of it. When the generation that liberated Germany and was liberated by America passes, however, we will have to think about what our shared story is. We are all finding this difficult.

It's important that we don't neglect other key players on the world stage who share our system of values. We don't ask about religious affiliation, ethnicity or whether you were born in the Global North or South; we don't care whether your parents had a prominent role in society or not; we respect individuals and uphold the balance of power, deferring to an independent judiciary and living under a secular constitution. Those are the core values of the West – of the United States, too. I am delighted that this group of nations is no longer measured geographically, but rather on the basis of values alone, allowing us to expand our focus to include countries such as South Korea – which, thus far, have been neglected in our discourse about transatlantic values. The same is true of some African states, too.

**This doesn't get us around the question of how to respond to this president and his rhetorical attacks, however. Ben Rhodes, one of Barack Obama's closest advisors, has just released a book about his**

**time in the White House. His proposal is quite simple: we shouldn't dignify everything that comes out of Trump's mouth with a response.**

That's an interesting idea. After all, what's the point of rising to every single one of Trump's manifold provocations? It reflects the current debate among Democrats: should we initiate impeachment proceedings or not? Would that kind of polarisation help us mobilise our own support or would it not, in the end, be of more use to the other side? That's the logic as viewed from within the domestic politics of the United States, and there is no reason it needn't apply in an international context, too. It is by no means certain that it does, however. In my view, the key question has to be: what effects does a given course of action have for us? There are now members of the German Bundestag who are openly agitating for 'Dexit' – for Germany to leave the European Union. Barely believable, but true.

Speaking of Europe: before we go pointing out what the US is doing wrong, we need to get our own house in order. We also need to agree strong joint European positions – not just in foreign and defence policy, but in questions of economy, employment and social welfare, too. Importantly, this also applies to a political consensus with regard to our shared values – a consensus that is, as we have seen, not always easy to reach with certain member states at the moment, to put it mildly. My message to my party, to the SPD, is that we must put ourselves at the forefront of this movement and present our own visions rather than waiting to see how things are received in Beijing, Moscow, or Washington.

**'Europe First'?**

No. 'European values first'.

*This interview was conducted by Michael Bröning.*

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**Metin Hakverdi**
Berlin

Metin Hakverdi is a Member of the German Parliament, spokesman of

the discussion group US/North America of the SPD parliamentary group and deputy European political spokesman of the SPD parliamentary group.