'We won't get anywhere without China'

To create a safe and sustainable future, we need to find ways how to cooperate with China, explains Germany's former foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel

After the Trump era, Germany and Europe expected a lot from President Biden. They quickly led to disappointment, especially in view of the two major unilateral moves by the US in recent weeks. Eight months after Biden took office, what is the state of the transatlantic relationship?

I think that the Europeans are at least starting to see the relationship more realistically. Joe Biden's famous phrase was 'America is back.' From his point of view it was meant to express the idea that America is back in the world and intends to assume political leadership against the advancement of authoritarian states. In Europe, this has been misunderstood to mean that the old America is back, so to speak, one that continues to try to uphold the liberal world order across the globe, and that a partnership is re-emerging as it existed for the previous seventy years. That was a huge misunderstanding right from the start, because Biden is the first president to draw conclusions from his predecessors' speeches about the 'pivot to Asia' and to actually implement them.

Does this also mean a permanent shift by the US away from its interventionist policy?

Even before this, it had already become clear that in the United States there is a great deal of fatigue across political parties with regard to these interventions taking place around the world. 'Stop the Endless Wars' was first coined as a campaign slogan by Bernie Sanders – not Donald Trump. The Americans will also simply have to concentrate their military forces. Economically, they are no longer the dominant force in the world. With China, they now have a major competitor. This also means that they do not have endless resources to engage militarily everywhere in the world. Their future focus will be more on the Indo-Pacific region than Africa, the Middle East or Europe.

The relationship between the US and China has become much more confrontational in recent years. Is a new "Cold War" looming?

The comparison with the Cold War is somewhat misleading, because it was characterised by a military confrontation where were far superior economically and technologically. That is not the case with China. In some respects we are tied or even inferior. China is a kind of 'frenemy', that is, a political opponent on the one hand and an economic partner on the other.

If you look closely, this also applies to the US, because there too, economic relations with China are considerable. Even if the rhetoric in the US is now tougher and the lines of confrontation are emerging more clearly, ultimately the United States depends on an economically functioning China, and conversely, China also needs a prosperous United States. Both countries would be directly affected if one of them encountered major difficulties.

That's why I hesitate to use the term 'Cold War'. But there is no doubt that it can come to a head. This will, for example, depend on whether the US will stick to its one-China policy – which, in my opinion, would be sensible to maintain the balance with regard to Taiwan. If the Americans were to recognise Taiwan as an independent state, the conflict could escalate.

Against this background, how do you assess the newly declared AUKUS alliance?

Taking the facts into account, the decision is understandable from the Australian point of view. The French submarines would have been launched with diesel technology after 2030. Using them to be active in this region means military inferiority to the Chinese naval forces. Switching to nuclear submarines from the US and the UK shows that the Australians have become more nervous about China and its military capabilities. The way this decision was communicated is, of course, further evidence – and grist to the mill of the critics of the 'old West' – that we are no longer capable of discussing things like this with each other. That was a tough blow. But it also shows that this format with Australia and Quad as well, where India and Japan are also included, have meanwhile become more important for the US than NATO.

The real question that this raises, however, is whether we are now experiencing a race for nuclear propulsion in the region and whether this will lead to the development of regional capabilities for uranium enrichment and thus for the construction of nuclear weapons with this technology. Australia has explicitly stated that it will not move in this direction. But whether the same is true for all other states in the

region is yet to be seen. The proliferation of nuclear weapons technology is a rapidly growing risk.

What conclusions do we Europeans need to draw from this?

To begin with, we have to realise that what we are experiencing is actually quite normal. First, it is normal for a country like China not to be content with being the cheapjack for its former colonial states. A country with 1.4 billion people also wants to be a technology exporter and have something to say in the world. For now, this is something normal. It was not so normal for the United States to have defined the world in a quasi-unipolar way for the past thirty years. That was very convenient for us Europeans – but if you look at the balance of power in the world, it is rather the exception.

Second, we must ask ourselves whether we will be able to find solutions with China on essential security issues that will save us and the West from a military confrontation. The central issues here are the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and Taiwan. In my opinion, the chances are good because in the end, neither side has an interest in getting into a real military confrontation. Economically there will be fierce competition, but it will be over the question of 'Who is first?' and not about whether one can bring the other to their knees.

The third point is that Germans in particular talk an awful lot about climate protection. We won't get anywhere without China. And the likelihood that we will work well with China on climate protection whilst being in conflict with it in all areas is zero. That's why we will have to find ways of cooperating with this large country, which is so very different from us and wants to gain influence in the world. Otherwise we will not get the pandemic, nor climate protection, nor the proliferation of nuclear weapons, under control.

Let's take a look at the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. After twenty years of deployment, the Taliban are once again triumphant. What does this mean for the future direction of our values-driven foreign policy?

We Germans tend to swing from one extreme to the other. First of all, I take it for granted that a democracy has underlying values that should guide it. The question is whether we can use military intervention to impose our own values that we consider universal – human rights, civil liberties, democracy – on others. That approach has now gone wrong again after Iraq, Libya, and Syria. In fact, it only worked really well on two occasions – after World War II in West Germany and in Japan – and to some extent in Yugoslavia. All other

attempts at humanitarian interventionism have failed.

I am convinced that with these experiences in Afghanistan, the era of humanitarian interventions, which also included or even required the use of the military, is over. The military is back to what it always was. It serves national interests – either for their own defence or the protection of friendly states. But the military does not serve in order to enforce morals and values. It was necessary for us to see that so-called values-driven foreign policy can leave just as big a trail of blood as the much-maligned *realpolitik*. Of course, that does not mean that we shouldn't care how the world works and that we should turn a blind eye to great injustices. But we as the West will have to formulate our goals in a much more humble way than we have done in the past. That is the lesson to be learned from Afghanistan.

What does this mean in concrete terms for future German military missions abroad?

In view of the way the Americans got out of Afghanistan, I think it is very unlikely that in the next few years there will be majorities in the German Parliament voting in favour of new military missions. One of the great blunders made by the Americans with regard to Afghanistan is that through their actions, while not completely destroying political support in Europe – especially in Germany – for such military operations for a long time, they did fundamentally call it into question.

What consequences do you see for NATO?

NATO, as a territorial defence alliance, is not affected by this for now. The era in which NATO was involved in operations that were intended to do more than just stop a war or stop terrorists is now over. NATO will have to clarify what it is there for. The Poles and the Baltics have an immediate answer, in the light of what is happening in Ukraine and Russia. The Germans tend to downplay that somewhat. But I am convinced that NATO remains an essential pillar of our security – and that also includes its nuclear potential. The SPD always finds it a bit difficult to acknowledge this.

What do you think of Josep Borrell's idea of a European rapid response force?

That always sounds so wonderful. Who would want to say no to that? But the joint European capabilities that we already have never been deployed. They practice diligently, but are never put into active service. If something happens in the Persian Gulf, we Europeans are not even in the position to send a joint observer mission. The member

states would then need to do that on their own.

And why do we always start with the most difficult task, that we have to develop Europe further, and not even sort out the smaller things? European politics wants to play a part in every master's tournament but doesn't even manage mini-golf. For five years now, CETA, a fully negotiated free trade agreement with Canada, has been in the German Parliament. And we are not ratifying it! How are we going to agree on the armed deployment of European troops if we are not even able to ratify a mini-free trade agreement with a state that is more European than some EU member states?

What is the reason for its failure?

Very often it's Germany's navel-gazing. Among other things, a prejudice is cultivated that this agreement with Canada will bring on global capitalism while destroying the social market economy and the ecological framework in Germany. This is utter nonsense. There is a lack of political will to lead. What is the rest of Europe supposed to think of a country like Germany, which is doing well economically, just blocking an agreement that many others would benefit from? They're probably thinking that the Germans are so big and fat that they can even afford to do without free trade. In the European Union, we are too self-centred. That's why this talk about a European army is hard for me to bear, when you see how little we manage to get done in much simpler areas.

How do you rate the cohesion in the EU? Can we still speak of a community of values when you look at the dispute with Poland and Hungary, for example?

In Germany, people always like to imagine the United States of Europe coming about right away. They forget that the struggle for a nation, for example in Poland, was identical to a struggle for freedom that lasted two hundred years. What sounds threatening to us – nationalism, the nation – is a symbol of freedom there. We will not get anywhere if we do not try to understand why others are actually different from us, and instead always object to what they are doing wrong from our point of view. You have to put yourself in the other's shoes. That doesn't mean approving or justifying everything. My impression is that this willingness to recognise and understand the differences has, if anything, decreased.

What worries me more than Poland and Hungary is that we are not pushing ahead with what we could easily implement, for example the further integration of the internal market and the Capital Markets Union. These are essential steps on the way to becoming economically

sovereign. This also includes developing the euro into an international reserve currency, which means that it has to be jointly guaranteed. These are steps towards European sovereignty that we are not taking. They fail not because of Poland or Hungary, but in large part because of Germany.

What needs to change in Germany for the EU to make progress on these issues?

First of all, the narrative that Germany is a net contributor has to change. Germany benefits from the so-called 'transfer union'. If you are the European export champion, you are selling more to other countries than you are buying from them. This means that you have more money flowing into your own country. For me this means that we are the winners in Europe. We have to stop telling people the opposite and have to be ready to invest more in Europe. That also means further developing the euro and not always pushing the ECB as the last man standing.

If we do not do that and economic development in Europe continues to diverge, foreign powers will try to come in and take advantage of that. We are seeing this with China in Greece and Hungary and to some extent also in Italy. And of course with Russia among the anti-Europeans. We saw that with Trump as well, with his attempt to create ties with the Eastern Europeans. The more disunited we are, especially in economic terms, the easier it will be for others to divide us. For me one of Germany's greatest tasks in the coming years is to prevent this division of Europe.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck



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