

ISSUE BRIEF

# The United States, Germany, and World Order: New Priorities for a Changing Alliance



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and then U.S. Vice President Joe Biden shake hands after a statement to the media before talks in Berlin February 1, 2013. *REUTERS/Tobias Schwarz*

JANUARY 2021 RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ AND JEREMY STERN

Most recent analyses of US-German relations do not consider the possibility that the two countries simply disagree on many matters of international security. This much was clear as far back as 2003, when Berlin joined Paris and Moscow in public opposition to the US-led war in Iraq, and in 2011, when it joined Moscow and Beijing in abstention from the UN Security Council resolution imposing a no-fly zone over Libya. The United States' reaction in each case was to more or less ignore Germany, a policy that seldom incurred significant costs. In hindsight, glossing over the expanding portfolio of disagreements between Washington and Berlin was a mistake.

Treating each divergence in security policy as an isolated incident allowed policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to ignore the unpleasant fact that the United States and Germany have increasingly disparate perceptions of threats and strategic cultures. This was perhaps sustainable under conditions of US unipolarity and a stable global order, when no US-German disagreement was significant enough to upset the larger system.

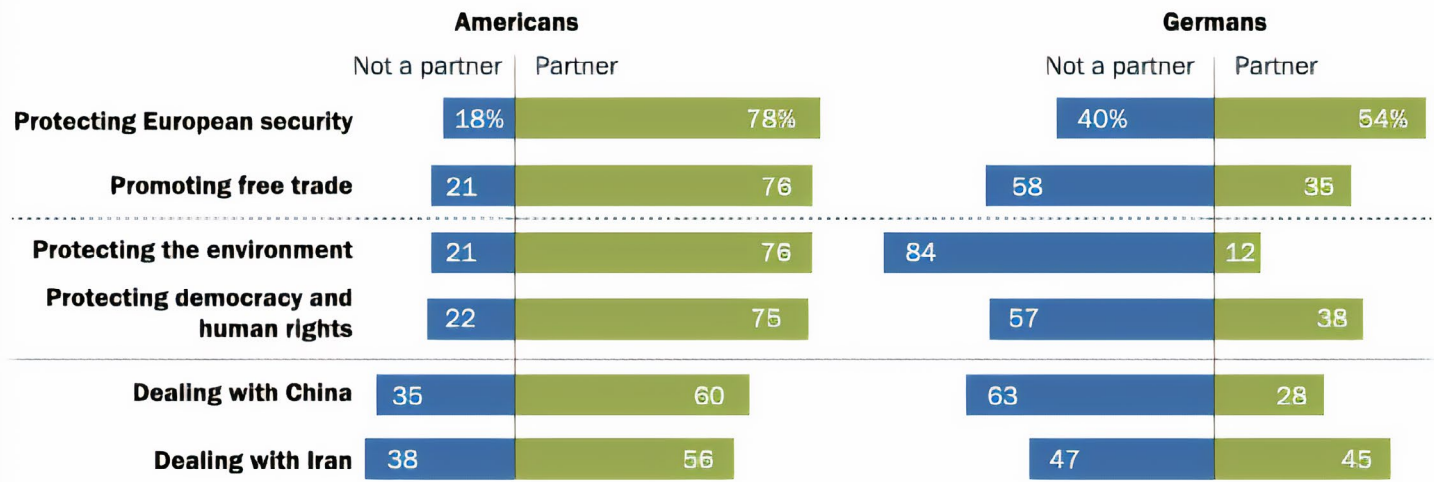
That is no longer the case. Relative to its unipolar moment, US power is now under significant strain, and German power has grown. In this context, the fraught nature of US-German relations has broader implications. Disagreements now have a greater impact on the global balance of power than they once did.

Even policymakers who recognize these changes have had trouble moving past the assumptions of the previous era, when the US-German relationship was based on a clear division of labor: The United States took care of order, security, and the international financial system, while Germany focused on economic development, reconciliation with its neighbors, and European integration.

The Europe Center conducts research and uses real-time commentary and analysis to guide the actions and strategy of key transatlantic decision-makers on the issues that will shape the future of the transatlantic relationship and convenes US and European leaders through public events and workshops to promote dialogue and to bolster the transatlantic partnership.

# Germans less likely than Americans to see other country as a partner on key issues

% who say Germany/U.S. is (a) \_\_\_ on ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.  
Source: Pew Research Center survey conducted in the U.S. Sept. 22-28, 2020. Q5a-f. German results from Körber-Stiftung survey conducted Sept. 10-17, 2020.  
"Americans and Germans Head Into 2021 With Divergent Opinions on Transatlantic Alliance"

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This dynamic was successful while it lasted, but it also had a dulling effect on German foreign policy. In the minds of most Germans, geopolitics ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the spirit of economic liberalism and globalization freed them to concentrate on wealth creation. Secure under US protection, Germany came to resemble an enlarged Switzerland, leading Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski to claim in 2011 that he was starting to fear "Germany's power less than her inactivity."

Germany thus went from an ally that multiplied US power in Europe to one that made only certain limited contributions to it. But an alliance between the world's policeman and its most ardent salesman has not found a neat fit. In fact, common objectives between Washington and Berlin have been elusive in many areas of policy, from geopolitics (China and Russia), to security (defense spending and burden sharing), to technology (telecommunications, Internet regulation, digital taxation). The two countries, it seems, no longer share a perception of threats, or a mechanism for joint policy outside of NATO. Without an agenda for

common interests beyond shared moral commitments to democracy and human rights, both Washington and Berlin have struggled to muster either the resources or the will to develop common policies.

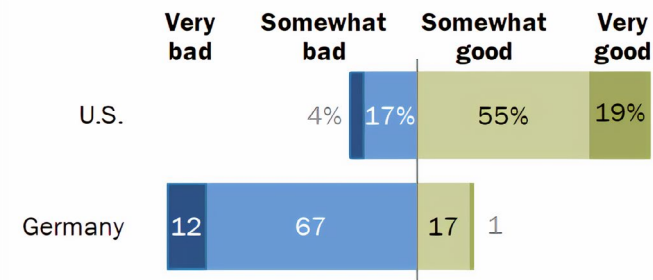
From the US standpoint, this deterioration stems from the impression given by Germany that it is less interested in its own security than the United States is. To many Americans, Berlin's habit of regarding US-German relations as a series of unilateral US guarantees is what enabled Donald Trump's otherwise destructive diplomacy to nevertheless reap a bipartisan consensus in Washington on defense spending, Nord Stream 2, Huawei, and trade.

From the German point of view, the decay in bilateral relations is, in large part, attributable to frequent unilateral changes in US policy, and to the toxic cycle of US presidential politics, wherein each new administration dedicates itself to the reversal of its predecessor's legacy. Whether it was justified or not on grounds of policy alone, the recent US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear

1 Radoslaw Sikorski, "I fear Germany's power less than her inactivity," *Financial Times*, November 28, 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/b753cb42-19b3-11e1-ba5d-00144feabdc0>.

# Germans see poor relationship with U.S.; Americans see relations as good

% who say relations today between the U.S. and Germany are ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.  
Source: Pew Research Center survey conducted in the U.S. Sept. 22-28, 2020. Q2. German results from Körber-Stiftung survey conducted Sept. 10-17, 2020.  
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Forces Treaty and the Treaty on Open Skies proved that US allies can no longer trust even Senate ratification above mere executive orders.

There is truth in both the US and German accounts of why relations have frayed, but neither gets at the larger geopolitical cause: Washington and Berlin understand each other less and less, even as Europe becomes less central to global politics.

When US-German relations as currently known began, the Atlantic area truly was the world's geopolitical center of gravity. For half a century, Berlin itself was the most probable flashpoint for a showdown between the world's superpowers. But today, a collapse of the international system and the destruction of great-power peace seem likelier to take place in a number of hotspots in the South and East China Seas than anywhere in Germany or Europe. Despite recent attempts to breathe new life into the transatlantic relationship by extending its responsibilities to the Indo-Pacific, most Germans simply do not perceive threats to their security or prosperity there. In the German domestic debate, in fact, the United States and China are often portrayed as coequal hegemony fighting over nothing but power. Provided that the conflict does not harm business interests, a purely commercial (some would say mercantile)

actor like Germany does not see itself as having a stake in the Sino-American game.

This mix of outdated self-perceptions and changing circumstances has complicated the other deep paradox of US-German relations: When Germany was divided and vulnerable, it was inevitable that it would play a supporting role in a greater US drama. As Germany became united and wealthy, however, it did not assume the responsibility imposed by its international heft.

In his speech to the 2014 Munich Security Conference, former German President Joachim Gauck urged Germans to embrace that responsibility. But dearly held identities lag transformations in reality. Even as German power has risen and US power is challenged in the emerging global disorder, Germany has retained the habits of a country living in the shelter of a superpower, while the United States has retained the habits of unipolarity. Thus, Germany's impotence in security matters does not befit its rising economic and political status, while the United States' predominance in security matters does not reflect its overextension and weakness at home.

This dilemma has perhaps been hardest to accept for US and German policymakers who lived most of their lives in the previous era. Free from much of the historical baggage, it may be emotionally easier for the rising generation of US and German leaders to shepherd the alliance into a more stable and effective future.

To arrive at a steadier state of affairs, the United States will have to do more than repair damaged personal relationships, and Germany will have to do more than win a mostly illusionary debate between "strategic autonomy" and continued dependence on Washington. More useful would be the creation a new relationship based on common interests as presently (rather than historically) conceived, with Germany assuming the responsibilities commensurate with its power, and the United States coordinating multilateral policy commensurate with its dependence on alliances.

A Joe Biden administration more committed to cooperation with US allies, and a new German government more geopolitically active and responsible than Angela Merkel's, could usher in a transatlantic Alliance geared for the 2020s. But both sides should take care not to mistake improved personal relationships for a stronger Alliance, or the multiplication of aims for an effective one. As seen in the final days of 2020, Donald Trump is not the sole, nor even the primary, cause of US-German disagreements.





President-elect Joe Biden stands with his nominees for his national security team at his transition headquarters in the Queen Theater in Wilmington, Delaware, U.S., November 24, 2020. (L-R), are: Antony Blinken to be secretary of state; Jake Sullivan to be U.S. national security adviser; Alejandro Mayorkas to be secretary of Homeland Security; Avril Haines to be director of national intelligence; John Kerry to be a special envoy for climate change; and Ambassador to the United Nations-nominee Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who stands behind Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. *REUTERS/Joshua Roberts*

The European Commission’s settlement with China on a comprehensive agreement on investment (CAI)—rushed through by Merkel during a Christmas holiday in which most Europeans were in lockdown—speaks volumes in this regard. It sent quite a message to the incoming Biden administration, which had offered a common front on China, and which the European Union (EU) itself had begged for in preceding months with a new EU-US Dialogue on China.

The European Commission, which had proudly proclaimed itself a “geopolitical commission,” largely let German economic deal-making push the agreement forward with little geopolitical understanding to show for it. Now that the EU will be in the throes of finalizing and ratifying the CAI over the next two years, it is unlikely that Brussels will join

Washington in any common front against Beijing. In fact, the EU already announced that it will delay a review of its China strategy into 2022.

For its part, even a unified US government under the care of genuine transatlanticists will not get far in convincing Berlin or Brussels to forget the previous four years, during which Europe was hardly consulted in the formulation of US China policy even as America’s Europe policy became almost cartoonishly hostile. Falling in line with the new White House would only give the appearance of a concession that Europeans spent the Trump years assiduously avoiding: That its foreign policy is subject to nonreciprocal “consultations” with Washington. Pressure on European officials to gain “strategic autonomy” from the appearance of such

dependence—even if mostly at the level of symbolism—will only grow after the January 6th storming of the US Capitol.

Washington might therefore have to accept that 2021 will not be the year for a new alignment on geopolitics with Germany. For fifteen years, Merkel has been the one constant in German politics ensuring a strong partnership with China—pushing forward with the CAI and back against the exclusion of Huawei in Germany’s fifth-generation (5G) network. In 2021, moreover, Germany has entered a *Superwahljahr*—a year full of elections, including six regional votes and the federal election in September. International affairs traditionally play no role whatsoever in German political campaigns. Likewise, the Biden administration will be hard pressed to focus on its own domestic agenda, advancing the vaccination rollout, revitalizing the US economy, and unifying the country.

In this sobering context, a realistic agenda for Washington and Berlin might focus first on bilateral and certain “soft”

issues. Fixing world order may have to wait until a new German administration in 2022.

**Priority #1: Sustainable Security Contributions**

Germany has steadily increased its defense budget in dollar terms, and the German political establishment is more open now than in the past to greater military activity. But it remains unlikely that Germany will meet its 2-percent target of defense spending in any relevant timeframe. In the meantime, the United States and Germany should work together to find security contributions that both reflect German strengths and can be sustained by the current state of German domestic politics. Instead of trying to field more rapidly deployable combat brigades or purchasing massive fighting platforms, Germany should submit readily achievable plans for scaling up rapidly deployable units in combat-support roles such as field medicine, bomb disposal, and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) defense. Becoming NATO’s doctor and disaster-prevention



A view of the US military airbase in Ramstein near Landstuhl, Germany, July 20, 2020. *REUTERS/Kai Pfaffenbach*





German Chancellor Angela Merkel holds a video news conference with European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen following a virtual summit with China's President Xi Jinping, at the Chancellery in Berlin, September 14, 2020. *REUTERS/Michele Tantussi/Pool*

expert is likelier to survive the vagaries of German politics than trying to become NATO's junior doorkicker overnight.

Priority #2: Responsible Public Diplomacy

With Germany having retreated from geopolitics over the years, the average German voter has developed a significant disdain for taking such matters seriously. Coupled with the fact that the United States is perceived as an omnipresent hegemon, a strain of anti-Americanism runs through parts of German society. President Trump's aggressive style of diplomacy only amplified those German factions that saw themselves as resisting the reach of US power in Europe. Both the Biden administration and the German government will need to reverse this unhealthy trend. For its part, the

Biden administration should take care to make cooperation with US policy a non-lethal pathway for German politicians. The German government must also take responsibility for the anti-American strain of German popular thought. The next chancellor, in particular, will have to take it upon himself to level with German voters about the security and economic threats they actually face.

Priority #3: An Ambitious Climate Agenda

With the Biden administration having pledged to bring the United States back into the Paris Climate Agreement, the United States and the European Union would be well-advised to launch an ambitious transatlantic climate agenda. This should include working together on emissions trading

and carbon pricing, developing a common financial architecture for green finance, promoting a common climate agenda at the WTO and establishing a green-tech alliance where both sides cooperate on green-tech research and development (R&D) and setting common green standards worldwide.

Priority #4: Group of Technological Democracies

President-elect Biden has promised to host a gathering of the world's democracies in early 2021, a summit idea destined to offend some countries and confuse others. (Is Turkey still a democracy? Is it wise to spurn a country as vital as Vietnam just because it's not?) It would be better to convene a summit of the world's leading technological democracies: the United States, Germany, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Israel, Sweden, Finland, Britain, France, and Canada. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, Jared Cohen and Richard Fontaine propose this T-12, an informal grouping akin to the Group of Seven (G7) that can coordinate investments, export controls and Internet regulations, and—most importantly—cooperate on technological programs and standards specifically designed to compete with Chinese initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Such an initiative should find support among EU member states, given that the European Commission has also proposed a Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council to counter China in the critical field of technology. A Group of Technological Democracies is also necessary if forthcoming technological breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, for instance, are to reflect the norms and preferences of democratic societies.

Priority #5: Infrastructure and Connectivity Alliance

The economic balance of power is shifting decisively toward Asia, and China stands to benefit most. The People's Republic of China is the most important trading partner for more than one hundred countries in the world, and its Belt

and Road Initiative is designed to expand dependencies in Africa and Southeast Asia. To meet this challenge, the United States and EU should pool their resources in support of the Indo-Pacific region's economic development. Certain partial initiatives already exist, such as the US Blue Dot Network, the EU's Connectivity Strategy, the Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership, and the Japan-EU-Infrastructure and Connectivity Agreement. In lieu of full "decoupling" from China, a US-German-led initiative that combines these efforts would be significantly more effective for both providing crucial infrastructure services for the region and countering China's economic penetration. Such an approach would also be in Germany's national interest of advancing economic development and simultaneously allow the country to diversify its economic relations in Asia beyond China.

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The views expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg.

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The Atlantic Council would like to thank General Atomics for its generous support of its work on Germany.

2 Jared Cohen and Richard Fontaine, "Uniting the Techno-Democracies: How to Build Digital Cooperation," *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-13/uniting-techno-democracies>.



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