

## Atlanticist and “Post-Atlanticist” Wishful Thinking

By Hans Kundnani and Jana Puglierin

The publication of an Atlanticist manifesto by a group of leading German foreign policy analysts has prompted a lively debate about whether or not Germany, and by extension the European Union, should “preserve” the transatlantic partnership or decouple itself from the United States and pursue a “post-Atlanticist” foreign policy. Both sides of the debate make important points. But the Atlanticists underestimate the long-term shift taking place in U.S. foreign policy and the “post-Atlanticists” underestimate the ongoing significance of military power and the dependence of Europeans on the United States in security terms.

Both sides of the argument reach the same conclusion about the approach that Germany and the EU should take toward the United States while Donald Trump is president: compartmentalization. But this approach is much more problematic than they recognize. The dilemma that Europe faces is thus more intractable than either the Atlanticists or the “post-Atlanticists” suggest. The uncertainty about U.S. engagement in Europe forces Europeans to move quickly toward greater “strategic autonomy.” But taking steps to becoming more independent may further undermine U.S. commitment. In short, Europe is between a rock and a hard place.

The publication by a group of leading German Atlanticist foreign policy analysts of a manifesto, “In Spite of It All, America,” has prompted a lively debate about whether or not Germany, and by extension the European Union, should “preserve” the transatlantic partnership or decouple itself from the United States and pursue a “post-Atlanticist” foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> There are important points — but also wishful thinking — on both sides of the somewhat polarized debate. It seems to us that, in the end, both the Atlanticists and the “post-Atlanticists” underplay the enormity of the challenge that Germany and the EU now face.

The signatories of the manifesto warn against turning away from the United States, because it “would bring insecurity to Germany and ultimately to Europe.” A reasonable policy toward the United States “must look beyond an exceptional period of U.S. skepticism toward any multilateral commitment” and “build a bridge into the post-Trump age.” In response, Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich of *Die Zeit* write that the Atlanticists have “lost touch with reality.” They argue that the “transatlantic crisis didn’t begin with Trump, and will not end with Trump” and that “the U.S. can no longer and will no longer be the stabilizer and protector of Europe.” Germany and Europe should therefore pursue a “post-Atlantic Western policy.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff et al, “In Spite of It All, America,” October 16, 2017, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/spite-it-all-america-transatlantic-manifesto-times-donald-trump-german-perspective>.

2 Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich, “Something New in the West,” *Die Zeit* Online, October 25, 2017, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2017-10/foreign-policy-germany-atlanticism-relationships-values>.



We are by instinct Atlanticists too. But we think the authors of the manifesto are underestimating the current crisis in transatlantic relations. In particular, they exaggerate the extent to which Donald Trump is an anomaly. They write that Trump is “*sui generis*” and that his ideas about international order that do not fit within the modern American tradition, are “outside the mainstream of the foreign policy expert community” and “are supported by few in the United States.” Trump’s thinking on alliances and trade does indeed represent a dramatic break with the assumptions of U.S. post-World War II foreign policy. But although it is true that Trump is not America, neither is the foreign policy establishment, as the Atlanticists seem to suggest.

“ **There is a much more long-term structural shift in U.S. foreign policy taking place than the Atlanticists recognize.** ”

Long before Trump, political realities had put the foreign policy establishment consensus under pressure. The United States has in the past acted as security provider and consumer of last resort, but has become gradually less willing to provide these two global public goods.<sup>3</sup> What Dan Hamilton has called “selective burden shedding” had already begun under President Barack Obama, who promoted “nation-building at home,” initiated the “pivot” to Asia, “led from behind” in Libya, delegated the management of the Ukraine crisis to Germany, and declined to defend red lines in Syria.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Obama believed he had liberated himself from the Washington foreign policy establishment, or what his advisor Ben Rhodes called the “blob.”<sup>5</sup>

The Atlanticists are also insufficiently critical of German security and economic policy. In particular they do not elaborate enough on the role of Germany

in contributing to the backlash against the “blob” consensus. Even compared to similar EU member states, Germany has been particularly guilty of “free riding” in both security and economic terms.<sup>6</sup> U.S. criticism of Germany for “free riding” began way before Trump: U.S. politicians and officials have long criticized Germany for underspending on defense; already under Obama, the U.S. Treasury put Germany on a currency manipulation watch list. Trump put this critique of Germany in simplified terms, but it is shared by a wide range of foreign-policy experts in Washington, DC who describe the German–American relationship as “unhealthy” and accuse Germany of not bringing enough to the table.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, the “post-Atlanticists” are right: There is a much more long-term structural shift in U.S. foreign policy taking place, driven by political realities, than the Atlanticists recognize. The manifesto does warn against “the illusion that there will be a return to the status quo ante following the Trump Presidency” and acknowledges that the demand for “more balanced burden-sharing between Europe and the United States within NATO” will continue. But it argues that “the end of the Trump presidency should be the end of the inner Western conflict about the fundamentals of the world order.” The implication is that once Trump is gone, the United States will see sense again and commit wholeheartedly to the liberal international order.<sup>8</sup>

However, this underestimates American skepticism about multilateralism — which predates Trump. It also overlooks the extent to which the permissive consensus behind the liberal international order has eroded in the United States. In particular, globalization is increasingly questioned. Moreover, it is impossible to separate U.S. commitment to the “liberal international order” and the role it has itself played as what the Atlanticists call the “guarantor” of that order since the end of World War II and, in particular, since the end of the Cold War. It is exactly

3 See Hans Kundnani, “The New Parameters of German Foreign Policy,” *Transatlantic Academy*, February 2017, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/publications/new-parameters-german-foreign-policy>.

4 See Daniel S. Hamilton, “Trump’s Jacksonian Foreign Policy and Its Implications for European Security,” *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, May 2017.

5 On Obama and the “blob”, see Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

6 Kundnani, “The New Parameters of German Foreign Policy.”

7 Quotes from a series of interviews by Jana Puglierin with leading American foreign policy experts in Washington, DC, November 11–18, 2017.

8 On the complexities of the concept of the “liberal international order,” see Hans Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, May 3, 2017, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/what-liberal-international-order>.

this role as global hegemon — in other words as a provider of public goods — that was questioned not only by Trump but also by Obama. In any case, the United States will be increasingly focused on Asia. Germany and Europe should therefore get used to the idea that the United States is likely to be less engaged in Europe and its periphery and less tolerant of European passivity in the long run.

We hope that the next U.S. president will be more committed to the values on which the transatlantic relationship has traditionally been based — in particular democracy — than Trump is. The history of U.S. foreign policy after World War II is a cyclical one alternating between periods of activist intervention and less active pragmatism: Every period of great engagement has been followed by some sort of downsizing. It is therefore possible that the next U.S. president will again seek a more interventionist foreign policy with deep engagement in Europe. But even if this does happen, rising powers will by then have filled the power vacuum that the United States had left — Russia's reemergence in the Middle East is a good example.

While the Atlanticists overlook the deeper shift taking place in U.S. foreign policy, the “post-Atlanticists” are unrealistic in a different sense: They radically underestimate the ongoing significance of military power and the dependence of Europeans on the United States in security terms. “Post-Atlanticism” is nowhere near as straightforward as they seem to think. In particular, the “post-Atlanticists” underestimate the degree to which Germany specifically is dependent on the United States in security terms and will continue to be so for a long time. As the Atlanticists put it: “Without the United States there will be no security for and in Germany for the foreseeable future.” The United States thus remains “indispensable.”

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A good example of this tendency to downplay German dependence on the United States, especially in security terms, and to exaggerate the country's potential is Mark Leonard's contribution to the debate. He rejects the idea that Germany can replace the United States as a defender of the liberal international order, but argues that it can “protect Europe.”<sup>9</sup> But the reality is that, to a number of EU member states, Germany is seen as part of the problem rather than the solution. During the eurozone and refugee crises, the German government was accused of pursuing its own interests against the wishes of the other EU member states — the opposite of protection. When it comes to security, Germany cannot even protect itself and depends on others for its own security. The “post-Atlanticists” do not engage with the difficult questions of security and imply — without really arguing the case — that military power is no longer relevant in international politics.

Leonard's portrayal of the EU as a “*Kantische Insel der Kooperation und des Friedens*” (“Kantian island of cooperation and peace”) in a Hobbesian world idealizes both the EU's capabilities and its internal cohesion. Europeans will face huge difficulties in filling the security vacuum left by the United States in Europe's periphery. With the United Kingdom leaving the EU (though it remains committed to European security and NATO), France is the only nuclear power and the only major conventional military power in the EU. But if Germany wants to rely heavily on France to defend Europe, it will have to make concessions in other areas such as economic policy as a quid pro quo — which it does not seem willing to do.

In any case Germany itself will also have to spend much more than the 1.2 percent of GDP it currently spends on defense in order to improve its own conventional military capabilities. Even more importantly, it will need to play a much more active role in, and make a commitment to, European security that matches its economic and political weight. So far, Germany has only made some initial steps toward taking

<sup>9</sup> Mark Leonard, “Die letzte Bastion des Westens,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 6, 2017, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/aussenansicht-die-letzte-bastion-des-westens-1.3737172>.

more “international responsibility,” and the silence on Germany’s foreign and security policy during the recent election campaign is not very promising. As remarkable as the progress in European defense in the last few months may be, it is insufficient relative to the security challenges that the EU is increasingly facing.

The “Kantian island” of Europe is far less united, especially when it comes to foreign and security policy and the role of the United States, than Leonard assumes. It is hard to imagine Poland and the Baltic states rallying behind an EU led by France and Germany that is eager to liberate itself from the United States. Transatlantic rifts are always also intra-European rifts. This is especially likely to be the case now, because EU member states are so divided about the type of EU they want to build and are struggling domestically with Euroscepticism. Enthusiastic “post-Atlanticists” also tend to forget that the U.S. security guarantee was the precondition for European integration after 1945. Thus, questions of European security are inextricably linked to the wider set of difficulties the EU has faced at least since the euro crisis began. But the “post-Atlanticists” do not engage with these difficult questions and assume a European subject that does not (yet) exist.

Interestingly, however, both sides of the argument reach the same conclusion about the approach that Germany, and by extension the EU, should take toward the United States while Trump is president: compartmentalization. They both suggest that while Germany and Europe will continue to depend on the United States for security, they can and should take a tough approach in other areas such as climate change, trade, and the Iran nuclear deal. The Atlanticists write in their manifesto that Germany may need to “enter into a limited conflict” with the United States. Leonard writes that Germany and Europe must be prepared to use “negative as well as positive

sanctions” and take “counter-measures” when the United States threatens its interests and values — and even to work with China and Russia in doing so.

Both sides of the argument take it for granted that this kind of compartmentalization is possible in relations with the United States. But it is much more problematic than they recognize. It is one thing to take such an approach to China or Russia, but another to do so with the power on which one depends for one’s security. Even with a “normal” U.S. president in the White House, taking such an approach has always been difficult. (It is worth remembering that during the Cold War there were linkages between economic and security policy — in the 1980s, for example, Japan, which was conscious of its dependence on the United States in security terms, imposed voluntary export restraints in response to U.S. criticisms of its economic policy that were similar to those now made of Germany.)

With Trump, however, it will be even harder to compartmentalize in the way both the Atlanticists and the “post-Atlanticists” suggest. One thing we know about Trump is that he is prepared to make linkages and puts everything on the table as leverage. (Perhaps the best example is the way he seemed to see Taiwan as leverage in relations with China.) Even if Germany and Europe tried to avoid escalation, as the Atlanticists suggest they should, Trump might escalate. Why do the Atlanticists have such confidence that, were Germany and Europe to take a tough approach to the United States on an issue like trade, Trump would not respond by further weakening the security guarantee on which they depend? It is easy to imagine Trump tweeting a threat to Europeans in such a situation.

The dilemma that Europe faces is thus even more intractable than either the Atlanticists or the “post-Atlanticists” suggest. The uncertainty about U.S. engagement in Europe forces Europeans to move quickly toward greater “strategic autonomy.” Yet, despite the current excitement in Europe about the progress in defense integration, the most they will realistically be able to do, even in the medium term, is to increase their capacity to undertake interventions in their own neighborhood without U.S. help. Worse,

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# Policy Essay

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even taking steps to become more independent, such as developing their own defense industrial base instead of buying American, may create a sense in Washington that Europeans are going their own way and thus further undermine U.S. commitment. In short, Europe is between a rock and a hard place.

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## About the Authors

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GMF's initiative on the future of the liberal international order seeks to preserve the open, rules-based system the transatlantic allies built together — and to develop a comprehensive action plan to reform and strengthen it. We must address today's political and economic turbulence in a manner that is attuned to long-term economic, technological, political, and power dynamics. Before we can act, we also need to understand what is happening. What liberal international order are we defending? What are the driving forces (from populism to technology to globalization) behind the fraying consensus and what scenarios could lead the international order to unravel or adapt? What can we learn from history? Are there models for success we can learn from? All of these questions and more inform our work on the liberal international order, and our aim to identify a way to reinforce and adapt it.

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