



Can Merkel Close the Deal?

By Karen Donfried and Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

Germany and France Coordinate Scripts

WASHINGTON, DC — Chancellor Angela Merkel is returning to the Trump White House. Her first visit, back in March 2017, was marked by buzz about how President Trump ignored her suggestion for a handshake. For many observers, the reported slight captured the dismal level to which the German–American relationship had sunk. The chancellor herself seemed convinced that the president simply did not hear her given the overall din in the room. That is classic Merkel: Let go of the small stuff, focus on what matters.

In the cast of transatlantic leaders, she is the archetypal anti-Trump. The president loves melodrama and being the center of attention; she is steadfastly restrained, rational, and circumspect. The chancellor's return on April 27 follows in the wake of President Trump's first state dinner on April 24, an honor bestowed on French President Macron. Some Germans worry that Merkel's visit will be obscured by the afterglow of the Trump–Macron “bromance.” Again, for Merkel, such a concern is small stuff. There is too much big stuff on the agenda to allow an absence of pomp and circumstance to get in the way.

The big stuff includes two serious items on which President Trump will reach decisions in May. First, the chancellor is sure to press the European Union's case that the president should exempt the EU permanently from the steel and aluminum tariffs, which the Trump administration suspended until May 1 for the EU. Second, the visit comes shortly before a May 12 deadline for President Trump to decide whether the United States will continue to be a party to the international agreement negotiated to curb Iran's nuclear program. Both Merkel and Macron are staunch supporters of the deal, believing that it enhances global security.

No doubt that on both trade and Iran the German and French leaders will coordinate fully their respective scripts. The most important call Macron will make on his flight back to Paris will be to Merkel. He will relay what issues President Trump is most exercised about, what arguments got the most traction, what frame of mind she will find him in, and what deal they can broker.

The beauty of the Merkel–Macron double act is that these are not competitive visits. Each leader is unique. Each has a fundamentally different relationship with Donald Trump. Merkel will use the good will that is certain to result from Macron's continued courting of the president at Mount Vernon and the White



House to nail down positive policy consequences for Germany, for France, and for Europe. In so doing, she will also show that she is not as weak as the press has suggested in the wake of last September's German election and the ensuing difficulty of forming a government.

The asks the chancellor has of President Trump are clear, on trade and on the Iran deal. Given that she will be meeting with someone who regards himself as the consummate deal-maker, she would be wise to also offer something the president cares about. Why not defense spending? President Trump is pressing all NATO Allies to hit the 2 percent spending target soonest. Germany spends 1.2 percent of its GDP on defense, but unquestionably has the financial wherewithal to do more. Why not announce during the visit that Germany is taking a meaningful step closer to that goal? The immediate reason would be to give President Trump a win. The more fundamental reason is that it is in the national interest of Germany to spend more on defense and build up its capabilities. Expressing frustration with Washington last May, Merkel herself stated that "we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands." Europe can achieve that goal only if Germany takes on ever greater foreign and security policy responsibility.

Without sentimentality or fuss, Chancellor Merkel gets "stuff" done. The open question is whether President Trump wants to resolve these issues in order to restore close cooperation with European allies or if he would prefer to further disrupt that cooperation. If he chooses the latter, he will create yet more evidence that "America first" does mean America alone. He will also ensure that the number of Germans who see the United States as a trustworthy partner drops even lower than the current dismal figure of 28 percent, a number 64 percentage points below France and only 2 percentage points above Russia. That is surely not where we Americans want to be.

-Karen Donfried, President, GMF

The Globalist Trump Loves to Hate

BERLIN — Angela Merkel is on her third U.S. president in her long tenure as chancellor of Germany. It is no secret that she sees the current resident of the White House as a "difficult partner." Her return to Washington this week, by all accounts, will be a juggling act.

German and American leaders do not need to like each other. Actually, sometimes they don't. Richard Nixon mistrusted Willy Brandt. Helmut Schmidt did not think much of Jimmy Carter. And Merkel herself did not exactly enjoy honeymoons with George W. Bush or Barack Obama after the rows over the Iraq war and the NSA surveillance scandal, respectively. But in the end, the logic of the national interest and the pull of the transatlantic partnership taught leaders to get along. At some point in their tenure, they started to trust and rely upon each other. Some even became friends.

In this respect, as in so many others, Donald Trump might turn out to be different. He just doesn't feel it. He doesn't feel the transatlantic pull. He doesn't feel what U.S. presidents for 70 years have considered to be in the best interest of the United States. History, to him, is not what you remember, rely on, and build on — history is what you make. It is now and here. No looking back, but also no lessons, no learning.

What startles his German interlocutors is not his insistence on burden-sharing in the NATO Alliance or his sense of an overstretched United States needing some breathing space to take care of things at home. Donald Trump shares these convictions with his predecessor, and he will likely share them with his successor.

What is baffling to Germans is Donald Trump's re-definition of the U.S. interests. Absent is any trust in multilateralism, and absent is a belief that international institutions are legitimizers and force multipliers of U.S. action. Alliances are seen as a drain, not as a boon to America. Whatever comes with an acronym and requires U.S. membership

Transatlantic Take

or support, meets Donald Trump's skepticism. Take your pick: UN, UNESCO, UNFCCC, WTO, TPP, NAFTA, TTIP, even the EU.

That the United States would neglect, critique, even abandon the world it once built, is unfathomable for all those who have come to embrace it, first and foremost the Germans. They are the poster children of the postwar order, its most ardent adopter. They have understood that the preservation of a liberal and rules based system is the single most important national interest of a medium-sized trading nation with limited military capacity.

Donald Trump seems to challenge this key German interest. Himself a supporter of bilateralism, he has it out for the rules based order, and for the Germans. While the Germans see themselves as champions and increasingly as guardians of the U.S. built order, Trump sees the Germans as the ultimate free riders. He does not try hard to hide his animus against the "bad, very bad Germans." Tweets and public remarks about the behavior of the Germans keep coming regularly.

It is against this backdrop that Angela Merkel travels to Washington. She is the picture perfect globalist that Donald Trump loves to hate. During her first visit, the absence of a public handshake caused a stir. This time, it could be the absence of a common purpose and a common agenda. Trump wants to talk Nord Stream and defense spending. Merkel wants to talk trade and Iran. Trump wants to tell his German counterpart what to do. Merkel wants to tell her American counterpart what to quit doing.

While this sounds like there is a showdown in the making, there is also grounds for hope that a clash between allies can be avoided. While it is still unclear what — if anything — President Trump will bring to the table, Chancellor Merkel has already started to embark on an accommodation course, in accordance with Germany's long-term interest in this key relationship. She is willing to compromise on Nord Stream. She is pushing the EU's trade negotiators to accommodate Trump on key demands like car tariffs. It is certainly not a coincidence that — just 72 hours

prior to the visit — a shopping list of additional big ticket items for the German Armed Forces was leaked to the press. Angela Merkel might also be open to the American request to invest in military infrastructure to transport troops and equipment in Europe.

Her problem might not be the substance of any of these course corrections. Her problem could be the public at home: Simply caving into a roughneck in the White House will not be received well by her electorate. She will be seen as weak and has to be careful to balance foreign policy needs with domestic requirements.

President Trump is happy to exploit the power differential between a super power and medium-sized and small countries. In the short term, he might get much of what he wants this way. However, history suggests that over time there is a climbing cost for bullying allies.

-Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff, Vice President, GMF

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