

Germany's Last Chance to Partner with the United States in Leadership?

Liana Fix and Steven Keil

In 2014, Germany's political elites committed the country to take on a greater leadership role in foreign and security policy. It has since modestly stepped up, holding the line in the EU on Russia sanctions and increasing defense spending, among other moves.

The Biden presidency is an opportunity for Germany to step up and shore up the transatlantic partnership that it should not miss. Domestic U.S. factors and geopolitical pressures are likely to alter the framework in which their relationship will function in years to come.

Now is the time to strike a new transatlantic bargain that seeks convergence between Europe and the United States, with Germany playing a key role. Otherwise, the likelihood of strategic divergence will increase.

Some areas will be critical in determining Germany's ability to partner with the United States in leadership: its approach to security policy, its relations with Russia, its engagement with the Indo-Pacific, and the makeup of the governing coalition after this fall's elections.

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After a tumultuous period in transatlantic relations, President Joe Biden stated at this year's Munich Security Conference that "America is back." Given his career of transatlantic engagement and his deep commitment to Europe, Biden's presidency provides a window for Germany to step up and deliver its long-held intention to assume more responsibility for its and Europe's security—one that it should not miss and is unlikely to see again soon. In light of pressures facing U.S. foreign policy and changing geopolitical realities, future administrations may engage Europe differently—through benign or intentional neglect. This could be Germany's best, and perhaps last chance, to be a partner in leadership with a U.S. administration that is rooted in the experience of 20th century transatlanticism.

Now is the time to strike a new transatlantic status quo that seeks convergence between Europe and the United States, with Germany playing a key role. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for September, it is crucial that German policymakers find concrete ways to pursue an ambitious agenda in the interest of the country, Europe, and the transatlantic partnership. If the current opportunity is missed, the likelihood of strategic divergence between Germany (and Europe) and the United States will only increase as geopolitical forces pull at a common transatlantic approach. This, in turn, would undermine the very framework for Germany's foreign and security policy.

For nearly a decade, Germany's debate on foreign and security policy has revolved around questions of responsibility and leadership. As traditional concerns of other countries about its dominance in European politics diminished, they were replaced by collective frustration with its reluctance to lead—particularly in security policy. Much of Europe has by now internalized the well-known line from Poland Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski in 2011 that he feared German power less than German inactivity. Addressing the Munich Security Conference in 2014, then President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen articulated Germany's intention to take on greater foreign

and security policy responsibility, which became known as the Munich Consensus. From driving sanctions toward Russia to increasing defense spending, Germany has since modestly stepped up, but with a mixed track record.

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The last four years have made such efforts even more challenging. Donald Trump's presidency shook the foundations of Germany's foreign and security policy, creating a real dilemma for Berlin. After decades of caution and restraint, the country's political elites were converging on a stronger German leadership role in foreign and security policy in the years prior to Trump's election. Yet, the institutional order within which Germany was able to exercise leadership—the transatlantic alliance and the European Union—was at risk of crumbling away.¹ Trump's presidency precipitated an increasingly fractured relationship with the United States. Although Trump's attitude to several European nations as well as the EU was difficult, his most acerbic rhetoric was reserved for Germany. While his administration's criticism that Germany needed to do more was not new, the tone and tenor came as a shock and caused whispers in Berlin that Washington may not be as interested in the country's and Europe's security as it once was.

Around the same time, the United Kingdom—one of Europe's most capable foreign and security policy actors—formalized its departure from the European Union. As a result, the dynamics between Germany and France have become central in catalyzing EU efforts. In some policy areas, this has worked, with the agreement on the coronavirus recovery fund as a prominent example. But in the security domain, this

¹ Liana Fix and Steven Keil, [Berlin's Foreign Policy Dilemma: A Paradigm Shift in Volatile Times](#), The Brookings Institution, February 2017.

has complicated developing more ambitious efforts, particularly as France seeks a more forward-leaning security role for the EU than Germany does and considers the possibility of a post-American European security architecture.

Biden's presidency is the time for Germany to demonstrate that it can shape the new geopolitical reality jointly with the United States, and lead in Europe. Here, three issues are of central relevance: the development of Germany's security policy, its relations with China and Russia, and the contours of its foreign policy after Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves office. How each of these issues unfolds will have long-term ramifications and influence whether Germany will finally fulfill the aspirations of its Munich Consensus.

The Evolution of Germany's Security Policy

When Germany's policymakers agreed on the Munich Consensus in 2014, the security landscape was shifting significantly. The United States was going through the process of drawing down its forces in Europe, Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity was in full swing, the Syrian civil war entered its third year, and Islamic State was ravaging large swaths of northern Iraq and parts of Syria.

Facing this reality, Germany committed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales to increase its defense spending with the aim of reaching 2 percent of GDP and it agreed to lead a NATO battlegroup in the Baltic states as part of the alliance's Enhanced Forward Presence. While it still lags significantly on the 2 percent commitment, the change in real terms is significant. Germany's defense expenditures reported to NATO rose from around €34 billion in 2014 to €51.4 billion in 2020.²

Germany has also supported the EU training missions in Somalia and Mali as well as contributed to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. It has also participated in the training and equipping of Kurdish forces in Iraq, starting in 2014, in their

campaign against Islamic State, and it joined the U.S.-led global coalition to defeat the group in 2015. This was no small shift in approach as both decisions were approved by the Bundestag without the UN Security Council mandate traditionally required for such measures.

In 2019, Germany proposed instituting a safe zone in Syria, but its failure to get the United States and other allies to agree underscored the limits of its leadership in security policy absent more military capability. It has also tried to play a more meaningful role in Libya, hoping to pave a path to a ceasefire. These efforts culminated in a summit in early 2020 in Berlin, but—while Germany has participated in efforts to enforce an arms embargo—the conflict has raged on.

As Germany tried to take on a greater security policy role, the institutions buttressing this process—particularly the transatlantic alliance—grew increasingly volatile. Trump's ire directed toward NATO and Germany—from his comments that “we are getting ripped off by every country in NATO” to singling out the country on multiple occasions—brought concerns about the U.S. commitment to Europe to the fore. This prompted fundamental questions in Germany about the character of U.S. foreign policy and the resiliency of the transatlantic partnership. Even as Biden has reversed course on some issues, like the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Germany, some lasting damage is likely to remain.

The discussions around the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, and nuclear weapons more broadly, is a case in point. The treaty prohibited the development of such weapons by the United States and Russia. After continual violations by Russia, the United States decided to withdraw from it in 2019. Germany and other NATO members eventually came to support the U.S. position, but the way in which the decision was first announced caught them off-guard. For Germany, this also stoked a renewed debate about the stationing of U.S. nuclear forces in the country and Berlin's role in the NATO nuclear-sharing agreement. Last year, the parliamentary group leader of the Social Democratic Party, Rolf Mützenich, called for

2 Leah Carter, “Germany reports record €53 billion in NATO defense spending,” Deutsche Welle, February 7, 2021.

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the removal of U.S. nuclear forces from the country. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who is from the same party, countered that Germany would not unilaterally do so.³ But, since this position is shared by the Greens and resonates with the German public, it is likely to become part of the foreign policy debate during the elections campaign and beyond. Such a decision would have significant implications not only for NATO, but also for how the United States and other European nations perceive Germany's security policy. The fact that the discussion has risen to such prominence illustrates the complexity Germany's leaders are facing in security policy, caught between domestic and international expectations, and dealing with the aftermath in transatlantic relations of four years of Trump.

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These tensions trickle down into Germany's defense procurement discussions, particularly when it comes to the replacement of its nuclear-capable Tornado fighter-jet fleet. A decision has been made to replace them with a new-generation, Franco-German fighter jet. But these will not be ready until 2040, while the current fleet of Tornados need to be replaced after 2030. An interim solution must be found to ensure Germany can continue to contribute to the NATO nuclear-sharing agreement. Here, the broader skepticism in public discourse complicates meeting specific procurement needs and Germany's choices are limited. It has decided not to purchase the nuclear-capable U.S. F-35 and other options are not yet certified to carry a nuclear payload.

With the Biden administration now in place, those in Germany who over the previous four years

predicted there would be brighter days in the transatlantic relationship feel vindicated. Despite the feeling of strategic estrangement with the United States during the Trump presidency, many German officials and experts held firm to Washington's key role in German and European security and described the transatlantic discord as temporary.⁴ Germany was cautious of calls for greater European autonomy from the United States in security policy and risked a split with France on this issue. For instance, President Emmanuel Macron publicly said he profoundly disagreed with Germany's Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's claim that "Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as security provider."⁵ These differences have not disappeared. They will remain a feature of the transatlantic dialogue as Germany navigates its role in security policy.

The memories of uncertainty during the Trump presidency are now built-in in the transatlantic dynamic, and they have impacted the policy and public discourse in Germany. The question remains present as to whether the transatlantic commitment of the Biden administration is a return to normalcy and can be built upon, or whether it is the exception to a new rule of transatlantic divergence. While there is reason to believe relations between the two countries will be smoother in the coming years, differences on critical issues like China and the Nord Stream II pipeline still signal difficult days ahead. Biden's approach will also be to ask for more leadership from Germany, to push it for less ambivalence on key issues of geopolitical importance, and to seek for it to share a greater amount of the security and defense burden in and around Europe. While the tenor and tone of the relationship has significantly changed already, much of

3 Deutsche Welle, "[Heiko Maas against unilateral removal of nuclear weapons from Germany](#)," November 22, 2019.

4 Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, "[Four Game-Changing Challenges Facing Transatlantic Security](#)," in Erik Brattberg and Dan Baer (ed.), [Reimagining Transatlantic Relations](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2020.

5 Hans von der Burchard, Joshua Posaner, and Jules Darmanin, "[Berlin stresses US ties after Macron knocks minister's pro-American op-ed](#)," POLITICO, November 16, 2020.

the substance and the challenging topics remain on the table.

The China and Russia Test Cases

Transatlantic coordination on China will be a defining element of Germany's cooperation with the Biden administration and a test case for its leadership ambitions. If competition between the United States and China will be the organizing principle of international relations for decades to come, Germany must shape a common European approach to the latter while coordinating with the former. This is particularly true given its role as China's largest trade partner in Europe. To be effective in this, its driving interests must move beyond trade and economics to include the systemic challenge Beijing poses. This also means being more outspoken about the human-rights situation in China.

Germany was in a relatively comfortable position vis-à-vis China over the last four years. Trump's approach to China was widely perceived by policy-makers as overly aggressive and hostile. For Germany, this justified a balancing act and hedging became the primary principle of its policy.⁶ The Biden administration will work more closely with Europe while retaining a tough line on China. In this context, the differences in the U.S. and German positions will be apparent. Being tough on China has become one of the rare bipartisan positions in U.S. politics, but the debate in Germany and Europe is slowly and fitfully catching up. This was reflected in the EU's 2019 strategic outlook document that describes China as simultaneously a partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival,⁷ but it also demonstrated the EU's difficulties in taking an unambiguous stance on China.

The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) is a key example of this. Negotiated for seven years, its sudden conclusion at the end of 2020—reportedly due to China's wish to wrap up

the negotiations before Biden took office⁸—failed to convince skeptical European countries and surprised the United States. Germany pushed the agreement through during the last stretch of its EU Council presidency, despite signals from Biden's incoming national security advisor that the new administration would like to closely coordinate with the EU on the issue.⁹

For the EU, the CAI reflects hopes that this kind of engagement can influence China to act more responsibly within the existing international order—similar to hopes about its accession to the World Trade Organization, which were eventually disappointed. It also reflects the “My way” approach described last year by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, in which the EU should shape its approach toward China independently from the United States.¹⁰ In this regard, some view the investment agreement as an expression of European strategic autonomy.

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Germany must decide whether it will maintain a primarily economic interpretation of its China policy (and if that will be apart from the United States) or if it will broaden the scope of its approach to address the geopolitical and systemic challenge that China represents. A first sign of the latter is that Germany and other EU members, notably France and the Netherlands, have broadened their focus beyond China to the Indo-Pacific. Last year, Germany also adopted Indo-Pacific guidelines that reflect awareness about the need to diversify relations beyond China and a willingness to engage with countries in the region that

6 Noah Barkin, “[What Merkel Really Thinks About China – and the World](#),” Foreign Policy, December 31, 2020.

7 European Commission, [EU-China – A strategic outlook](#), March 12, 2019.

8 Ishaan Tharoor, “[The awkward timing of Europe's deal with China](#),” Washington Post, January 5, 2021.

9 Jake Sullivan, “[The Biden-Harris administration would welcome early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices](#),” Twitter, December 21, 2020.

10 Josep Borrell, [The Sinatra Doctrine: Building a United European Front](#), Institut Montaigne, September 9, 2020.

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feel pressured by Beijing's growing economic and military clout.¹¹ An EU equivalent might follow. Germany also plans to send a frigate to the Indo-Pacific to become a more visible actor in the region.

Before the CAI, the most problematic issue on the transatlantic agenda with China was the participation of Huawei in the 5G rollout in Germany and in other European countries. While Germany's new draft IT security law does not exclude Huawei individually and entirely, it now sets political hurdles for the access to 5G for any company. Depending on how it is enacted, it could demonstrate that Germany can take difficult decisions on China if necessary. But greater coordination on China is needed if Germany is to be a partner to the United States in leadership in a new geopolitical era.

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While “change through rapprochement” still defines its China policy, any illusions in Germany about such a policy's effectiveness vis-à-vis Russia are long gone. Since the annexation of Crimea and the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Germany has assumed an unprecedented leadership role in Europe on economic sanctions against Russia. Most recently, it welcomed Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny in Berlin for treatment after his poisoning in Russia.

However, critics point to Nord Stream II as a core weakness of Germany's Russia policy, suggesting a contradiction or insincerity in its approach. Opposition to the project in the United States is bipartisan and Congress will continue to pressure Germany and to sanction companies related to the project. Provi-

sions of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Clarification Act (PEESCA) were included in the National Defense Authorization Act Congress enacted by overriding Trump's veto last December. The law expands the threat of U.S. sanctions to companies involved in testing, inspection and certification as well as ship services.¹² Sanctions introduced under PEESCA have targeted so far only Russian companies, which signals a willingness for compromise with Berlin. In response to this legislation, the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern—where the pipeline arrives in Germany—has set up an environmental foundation, primarily financed by Gazprom, to finish the construction of Nord Stream II and to protect companies against sanctions.¹³

The European Commission and Eastern European governments have voiced harsh criticism of Nord Stream II, claiming it counters efforts to forge a common, diversified EU energy policy and threatens Ukraine's security. Critics argue that the pipeline will negatively impact the security situation there as Russia will no longer rely on Ukraine as a key gas transit country. Acknowledging Ukraine's financial losses in transit fees and the risk to its security, Merkel facilitated a short-term transit agreement between Ukraine and Russia in 2019.¹⁴ However, the future of this agreement beyond 2024, when it expires, remains unclear.

The pressure the Trump administration put on Nord Stream II backfired in Germany. Rather than dissuading proponents, it reinforced a narrative that German and European sovereignty is at stake with the extraterritorial sanctions applied by the United States.¹⁵ For its supporters, Nord Stream II is now not only an energy policy choice but a matter of principle. They also suggest that sanctions are simply a means

11 The German Federal Government, [Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together](#), September 1, 2020

12 United States Congress, [H.R. 6395 - The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021](#), January 1, 2021 (enacted).

13 Vera Eckert, “[Northern German state plans foundation to help complete Nord Stream 2 gas link](#),” Reuters, January 6, 2021.

14 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “[Russia, Ukraine Reach Five-Year Gas-Transit Deal](#),” December 31, 2019.

15 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, “[Nord-Stream-Sanktionen nicht klar rechtswidrig](#),” September 28, 2020.

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to boost the United States' narrow interest around its liquified natural gas. The challenge for both governments is to find a way out of this impasse that takes into account how unpopular the project is with Democrats and Republicans alike in the United States as well as with many in Europe, and at the same time allows Germany to save face. Such a compromise could include political conditions linked to the servicing of the pipeline; for instance, a snapback mechanism that stops gas transit through it in case of further escalations in eastern Ukraine.

Another area where the United States and Germany, together with other European countries, should lead on Russia is cyber security. The cyberattack on the Bundestag in 2015 and the recent SolarWinds cyberhack on U.S. government agencies originated in Russia. There is clear convergence on the challenge posed by Russian cyber and espionage activities, and this should be a top priority. A robust transatlantic response mechanism is necessary to deter such attacks.

German Public Opinion and the Elections

The Biden administration and the current government in Berlin have a few months to seek cooperation and convergence in these policy areas before Germany's elections in September. After this, the country will have a new chancellor for the first time in 16 years and there will be more questions around its foreign and security policy. In particular, will Merkel's successor seek to fulfill Germany's unrealized foreign policy ambitions? And what role will public opinion play in these policy discussions?

According to the most recent survey by the Körber Foundation in cooperation with the Pew Research Center, Germans are divided on the question whether Germany should become "more strongly involved" in international crises, with 44 percent saying they are in favor and 49 percent saying they prefer restraint.¹⁶ Since 2014, these numbers have fluctuated only slightly. Respondents also say France remains Germa-

ny's most important partner, with the United States in second place—a position that was strengthened after Biden's election. However, 53 percent say that last November's election weakened their trust in U.S. democracy, and 51 percent say that Germany and Europe should become more independent from the United States. On the other hand, 45 percent still say Germany and Europe should continue to rely on the United States and 78 percent say the partnership will normalize during Biden's presidency.¹⁷

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These numbers reflect a challenge and opportunity for a renewed transatlantic leadership. Foreign policy debates in Germany in the past have demonstrated that public opinion is malleable and can shift quickly if guided by clear political leadership that explains difficult decisions convincingly. Such polls signal the need for more public debate and clear messaging from German policymakers, not inaction. The next chancellor, in particular, will play a critical role in shaping this debate over the coming years.

The upcoming parliamentary elections are by far the most open in the last 16 years. Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats together with their Bavarian sister party (the CDU and the CSU) enjoyed high approval ratings at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, primarily due to Merkel's management of the crisis. By contrast, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the other half of the current governing coalition, has not. The Greens have overtaken it as the second strongest party in polls, but the Greens are still wading through intra-party dynamics and have not yet decided their candidate for the chancellorship, unlike the SPD which picked Finance Minister Olaf Scholz. If

16 Körber Stiftung, "[The Berlin Pulse: German Foreign Policy In Perspective](#)," November 2020.

17 Körber Stiftung, "[The Berlin Pulse: German Foreign Policy In Perspective 2020/21](#)."

the Greens were to end up as the second-largest party in the Bundestag in September—which is a possibility given current poll numbers—this would likely usher in a conservative-greens coalition government for the first time at the federal level. However, it is uncertain if the CDU/CSU can maintain their approval ratings once voters realize they are not voting for Merkel anymore. The prospects for such a coalition will also depend on the former's choice of candidate for the chancellorship. This will likely either be the recently elected CDU party chairman Armin Laschet or the Bavarian CSU party chairman Markus Söder.

If Berlin wishes to be more ambitious, exerting leadership in the domestic debate and convincing the public of difficult diplomatic and security choices will remain a crucial task, in particular for Merkel's successor.

In foreign and security policy, the CDU/CSU has a long track record of prioritizing transatlantic ties. Defense Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer has been particularly active in advancing the debate on Germany's and Europe's future role in transatlantic relations, claiming that the country must become a “much more active upholder of the Western order.”¹⁸ Her proposal for a safe zone in Syria demonstrated this ambition, even if it was rebuked by Laschet.¹⁹ The SPD has endorsed the Munich Consensus since 2014, but its recent more left-leaning positions in security policy, such as in the debates about armed drones and nuclear sharing has left observers wondering whether the party would approve the military resources needed for taking on more international responsibility. In contrast, despite criticizing NATO's 2 percent defense-spending goal, the Greens have moved toward the

center in foreign and security policy, which helps pave the way for their potential return as a governing party in a coalition with the CDU/CSU.²⁰

The only political parties outside the mainstream of foreign policy thinking and the Munich Consensus are the left-wing Die Linke and the right-wing Alternative for Germany. The latter supports a strengthening of the German Bundeswehr but also advocates closer relations with Russia. Die Linke has in the past put into question Germany's NATO membership and is critical of military deployments abroad.

Consequently, there is plenty of reason to expect continuity in Germany's foreign policy after Merkel's departure. But given how concentrated at the chancellery foreign and security policy is, this will depend as much on who is the chancellor as on what exactly the governing coalition will be. If Berlin wishes to be more ambitious, exerting leadership in the domestic debate and convincing the public of difficult diplomatic and security choices will remain a crucial task, in particular for Merkel's successor.

Conclusion

Germany decided to wait out the uncertainty in transatlantic relations during the Trump presidency. Rather than pursuing a break from the status quo—as other European countries like France may have wished for—Merkel and her government opted against experimentation. This was not an easy approach, particularly as the other key pillar of German foreign policy—the European Union—was simultaneously changing with the exit of the United Kingdom. The security picture was uncertain.

Now, Germany looks to the United States with increased optimism, hoping the more confrontational phase in their relationship is over. The Biden administration views institutions like NATO and the EU differently than its predecessor. The tone of U.S.-German relations has already changed. Yet, there is still significant distance between Washington and Berlin on some

18 Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, [Presentation of the Steuben Schurz Media Award](#), October 26, 2020.

19 Die Welt, [“Laschet kritisiert Kramp-Karrenbauers Syrien-Vorstoß deutlich,”](#) October 26, 2019.

20 Jens Thurau, “Germany's Greens focus on foreign policy as political winds change,” [Deutsche Welle](#), November 15, 2019.

key priorities. Germany will have to navigate disagreements with the United States on various geopolitical issues, while simultaneously keeping Europe together and going through its own domestic election period, which will be the most significant one in a decade-and-a-half. At the same time, uncertainty about the future of transatlantic relations after Biden remains.

Finding ways to coordinate and deconflict approaches on important and contentious issues will be critical if the United States is to remain an enabling pillar of a more ambitious German foreign policy. Germany must also take a hard look at the regional and geopolitical challenges it faces, understanding them not just through an economic lens. Security debates, like Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's intention to revisit NATO's strategic concept, will force Germany to confront several of the issues that create diverging opinions in Europe and across the Atlantic. It will also give Berlin an opportunity to assume more leadership.

President Gauck's initial framing of the 2014 Munich Consensus asserted that "the consequences of inaction can be just as serious, if not worse than the consequences of taking action."²¹ Now is the moment for action for Germany. It will not be able to address the significant geopolitical shifts ahead on its own. The Biden presidency provides an important window for it to take on more European and transatlantic leadership. It may be Germany's best, last chance to deliver the promises of the 2014 Munich Consensus. This will become more difficult with presumably less transatlanticist U.S. administrations in the future, and the potential for strategic divergence in the transatlantic bond will only increase. Rather than waiting any longer, the present moment offers an opportunity for Germany to step up and partner in leadership with the United States.

21 Joachim Gauck, [Speech to open 50th Munich Security Conference](#), January 31, 2014.

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