



## Merkel's Defense of the Liberal Order

*By Ulrich Speck*

Angela Merkel's speech at the Munich Security Conference last Saturday has widely been seen as the highlight of the meeting. Rarely has Germany's chancellor, well known for keeping her cards tightly to her chest, spoken so emotionally and frankly. What she said was really a restating of the views that have shaped her foreign policy: if we, the leaders of the world, understand our true interests, we can bridge our differences and work out solutions together.

This cooperative vision was popular in Munich, but it is at odds with the new dynamics of competitive great-power politics – and with the views of the current president of the United States. At the same time, though, Merkel also revealed that Germany is not yet ready to consider an alternative to U.S. international leadership.

Merkel's remarks captured a kind of world that existed when she worked with George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Yes, there were disagreements and differences between the transatlantic partners, and conflicts with Russia and China, but what guided efforts such as the formation of the G20 was the understanding that ultimately all sides would be ready to compromise in their well-understood self-interest.

That was a world on the path to convergence. Despite many setbacks on the path of transformation,

ultimately Russia and China would become much more like the liberal West in their political and economic systems. Or at least the fact that they were autocratic would still, somehow, be compatible with constructive international cooperation with them; their domestic and foreign affairs could somehow remain distinct from each other.

Things have changed. Russia has doubled down on its attempts to weaken the liberal order, pursuing spheres of influence, or more accurately spheres of control, intervening militarily on behalf of a mass-killing autocrat in Syria, and trying to undermine the West's coherence and ability to act. China's rise has not led to more democracy and a market economy. Instead its leadership has become more authoritarian while relentlessly pursuing a regional strategy of domination and a global strategy of influence.

Russia and China act along the lines of great-power competition, and use the liberal international order only as instruments to achieve their direct interests in this context, considering rules and institutions only as a means to constrain others and increase their own power. While under Obama the United States acted as a counterbalance to this transactional view of international order, the Trump administration has at least partly joined Russia and China in such a view of international rules and institutions.



## Europe's dilemma

Merkel's view of international politics as deep and permanent cooperation based on joint interests is at odds with the emerging new paradigm of international affairs, which looks very much like the old one of unrestrained competition— exactly what the liberal international order was supposed to overcome.

In response to the new paradigm, and the related decline of U.S.-German relations, Merkel has reluctantly joined the chorus of those calling for “Europe” to become a

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more autonomous and more relevant actor, capable of playing in the global power league. But it is significant that she did not lay out in her Munich speech a roadmap toward more European unity and capability to act. Merkel has always been a realist, not a visionary. Her reluctance shows that, despite her analysis of the global challenges, the German chancellor does not think that a path toward Europe as a united, coherent power exists.

In Merkel's world, there is simply no alternative to U.S. leadership, and to U.S.-led international cooperation, and great-power competition is an anachronism in the world of the 21st century. She has a 1990s worldview: economic globalization, political cooperation, spread of democracy, transformation of the former communist world – all with the United States as the locomotive. Her goal is to keep alive as much of that spirit as possible.

Merkel's Munich speech was peppered with anger,

directed toward Trump (which brought her plenty of applause). In her view, the United States has the duty and the interest to underwrite the liberal order with its power. For her, there is simply no realistic plan B. Trying to protect elements of the liberal order and hoping that Washington comes to its senses is the only way ahead.

Since her time in office is running down, it will be up to Merkel's successor to shape a German strategy for the new geopolitical environment she spoke of in Munich. And yet that person will face the same fundamental, nagging uncertainty: whether the United States is willing to let the liberal international order fall apart and fully embrace great-power competition as the new paradigm. Germany will have to put its weight behind the liberal international order more decisively than it has done so far; at the same time, it will have to reduce its vulnerabilities in case this strategy does not work on a permanent U.S. military base in Poland, which is expected in the spring.

Brexit will also make its mark on Poland. It will strive to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the rights of Poles in the United Kingdom. At the same time, its best strategy will be to play along with EU partners and fill the vacant place left by the United Kingdom. In this scenario, the Number One European partner for Poland could again be Germany. But, since anti-German sentiments are an essential part of the PiS identity, this would require much effort on behalf of the current government.

Germany was a very important partner for Poland until 2015 when PiS pivoted to prioritizing the relationship with the United Kingdom. But Brexit has complicated that strategy just as much as Germany's lack of decision on Nord Stream 2 complicates rapprochement between the two neighbors.

## About the Authors

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