



WAKE UP, BERLIN!

TO SAVE THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE, GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO CHANGE RADICALLY

Yascha Mounk

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Cover photo: A Donald Trump supporter's homemade billboard in West Des Moines, Iowa.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under the leadership of Donald Trump, the United States can no longer be considered a reliable partner to Western Europe. This poses a particular problem to Germany, which has long relied on the United States to assure its defense. But while German foreign policymakers are starting to acknowledge the extent of the challenge, they have so far refused to rethink the strategic direction of their foreign and military policy. The best response to a situation of radical uncertainty, official Berlin has been saying, is to wait and see.

This is a big mistake. By remaining inactive now, Germany creates three big risks for the long-term survival of the transatlantic alliance. First, it is foregoing an opportunity to bind the United States to Europe by increasing the military might it can bring to the table. Second, it is increasing the likelihood that future German governments will have to appease Trump's America because of their deep military dependence. And third, it may even raise the incentive for Germany to take a position of neutrality between East and West if the United States really should take an isolationist turn.

To maximize the chances of preserving the transatlantic alliance, Germany should instead undertake a radical transformation of its foreign policy. To this end, the country should rapidly and radically increase its military spending with the goal of significantly improving its defensive capacity. Recognizing that populists might come to power in the capitals of Europe as well as North American countries, Berlin should jettison its commitment to a European defense strategy that makes it impossible for the *Bundeswehr* to operate effectively without buy-in from multiple European countries. And understanding the danger in being open

to blackmail from Russia, it should finally embrace energy independence as an urgent strategic imperative.

1 TAKING TRUMP SERIOUSLY

It is as yet impossible to understand the full ramifications of Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States. Perhaps, as some optimists have argued, his furious rise will turn out to be mere sound. Without a loyal following in Congress, he may find it hard to enact his most radical campaign promises, like a ban on Muslim immigration or a wall with Mexico. And though the U.S. president enjoys much more power in foreign than in domestic policy, there are some good reasons to think that he will make even less of a mark in that realm. Trump's utterances during the campaign have raised the worrying prospect of a United States that is cozy with Russia, dismissive of NATO, and unconcerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. But given the strong hostility to each of these positions among the moderate Republicans whose support Trump needs to push through other parts of his agenda — and the fact that his core supporters give far less importance to foreign than to domestic policy — the isolationist pivot may, in practice, not amount to much.

So far, this is the optimistic scenario. Sadly, the pessimistic scenario is much more plausible. The first weeks of Trump's presidency suggest that the radical rhetoric of Trump's campaign will, as the pessimists have argued, turn out to be a rather accurate preview of the actions he takes in office. At home, he may build on his repeated attacks on core democratic traditions by attempting to undermine liberal norms and institutions that limit his power, from the independence of the Supreme Court to the freedom of the press. Abroad, his consistently laudatory comments about dictators like Russian President Vladimir Putin may turn out to presage a seminal shift in the company the United States keeps. The United States has long

had a strong preference for forging its closest alliances with other liberal democracies; under the leadership of a would-be authoritarian strongman, it may instead come to discover common ground with autocracies like Russia.

After decades in which the most important aspects of U.S. foreign policy were highly predictable, the huge gulf between these two scenarios poses an urgent problem to long-time allies of the United States, including Germany. Should they assume the best, leaving their foreign policy largely unchanged for the time being — and risk being caught unprepared if the worst does come to pass? Or should they assume the worst, formulating a radically new foreign policy strategy — which, some fear, might deepen the transatlantic rift and hasten the demise of an alliance that has helped to keep them safe for many decades?

In this paper, I argue that Germany will need to change its traditional foreign policy in drastic ways if it is to save the transatlantic alliance. Paradoxically, it is only by gaining much greater autonomy from Washington — and Moscow — that Berlin can avoid the rising temptation to look East, give the current leadership of the United States a reason to forge a closer bond with Germany, and safeguard the core values of the liberal world order. To this end, Germany needs to increase military spending much more rapidly and considerably than is currently being discussed; pivot away from European defense projects which would make military operations dependent on the assent of multiple partner states; and recognize energy independence as the pressing strategic imperative it is.

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2 GERMANY REMAINS FAR TOO RELUCTANT TO REVISE ITS FOREIGN POLICY

While it is perfectly sensible for Germany to seek continued good relations with the United States, it is striking that Germany does not seem to be rethinking its long-term strategy.

So far, Germany's small and cohesive foreign policy community seems to be choosing the course of inaction. While concern about Trump's victory runs deep, most politicians, civil servants, and think tankers have sought to maximize continuity with the policies of the past. The dominant approach is to wait and see.

Chancellor Angela Merkel gave the most eloquent expression to this attitude on the day after the election:

"Germany and America are bound by values — democracy, freedom, as well as respect for the rule of law and the dignity of the individual, regardless of their origin, creed, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or political views. On the basis of these values, I offer close cooperation to the future president of the United States of America, Donald Trump."¹

The implication was clear. Despite her evident differences with Trump, she would, for the time being, give him the benefit of the doubt. Unless he started to attack head-on the values on which the cooperation between Germany and the United States has historically been based, Berlin and Washington would continue their close cooperation.

But while it is perfectly sensible for Germany to seek continued good relations with the United States — and for the Chancellor to sound measured in public statements — it is striking

that Germany does not seem to be rethinking its long-term strategy. Instead, most suggestions have been in the realm of the miniscule. According to one senior member of Germany's foreign policy community, the right response to Trump's rise is to revisit a recent policy paper that advocates a closer cooperation with France in matters of border security and sharing of crucial biometric information. According to another senior member, it is to equip the member states of the European Union with better tools to tackle cyber security. Together, these suggestions are representative of a wider reluctance to call existing policy into doubt: nearly all the ideas that are now being seriously discussed double down on a course of action Germany wanted to embark on even before the election of Donald Trump.²

The absence of proposals for real change has been most striking in the realm of military policy. When a friendly superpower that has long guaranteed a smaller country's security undertakes a radical political shift, and its president repeatedly calls his willingness to protect his erstwhile ally into doubt, it might be expected that this country would scramble to beef up its own defenses. But instead the story emanating from Berlin has been to emphasize that Donald Trump's election doesn't change much: Germany has in any case pledged to increase its military spending to 2 percent of GDP in its 2016 White Paper. Because of the long timeline of defense projects, there is no effective way of doing this rapidly. And the real future of Germany's security in any case lies in beefed up cooperation with its European

¹A. Merkel, "Press statement by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on 9 November 2016 on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election," German Federal Government, November 9, 2016, https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2016/2016-11-09-statement-merkel-us-wahlen_en.html;jsessionid=2D0660ECF9CB7257B351CA34287A6C12.s6t2.

²T. De Maizière and B. Cazeneuve, "Europe generates added value in security-related matters," German Federal Ministry of the Interior, August 23, 2016, <http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Kurzmeldungen/EN/2016/08/joint-statement-de-maiziere-cazeneuve.html>.

partners, which will of necessity move slowly.³ So, for now, Trump's victory (supposedly) doesn't change much of anything.

This reluctance to call for radical changes to Germany's foreign policy stems from two noble causes and one not-so-noble one.

The first noble cause is the hope of preserving the close partnership between Germany and the United States in the interests of preserving the liberal world order. Since World War II, the erstwhile enemies have built a close relationship that includes both a formal political alliance and strong personal links at the political as well as the cultural level. As a constitutive part of the wider transatlantic partnership, it is one of many building blocks of an international order that sets global norms, provides public goods, and protects human rights. German politicians thus see their close alliance with the United States both as a cornerstone of their foreign policy and as a key contribution to global public goods like a stable regime of international norms — and are understandably reluctant to undermine it.

The second noble cause is the deep way in which Germany's relationship to the United States is bound up with the country's past, and its thoroughgoing commitment to democratic governance. In the postwar era, Germans went from seeing defeat at the hands of the Allies as a catastrophe to seeing it as a liberation “from the inhumanity and tyranny of the National-Socialist regime”; saw their economy boosted by the Marshall Plan; West Berlin defended in the airlift; and Soviet expansionism contained by

³D. Keohane, “Policy or Project? France, Germany, and EU Defense,” Carnegie Europe, August 2, 2016, <http://carnegieeu-rop.eu/strategieurope/?fa=64222>.

the promise of American arms.⁴ As a result, the country's political elites have not only come to see America as a vital ally for strategic reasons. Rather, they also see their partnership with the United States as an important testament to the country's embrace of democratic values and its political orientation toward the West.

The not-so-noble cause is that Germany's foreign policy community is small, highly consensual, reluctant to engage in long-term strategic thinking, and has strong institutional incentives to advocate an orthodox foreign policy of cooperation with the United States. For many German foreign policymakers, the transatlantic partnership has been the intellectual cornerstone of their country's strategy, even as the institutions explicitly devoted to the maintenance of the transatlantic partnership have been the foundation of their personal careers. To rethink the future of this relationship would thus signify both an intellectual and a professional risk — one that most of them seem unwilling to take.⁵

⁴R. Von Weizsäcker, “Speech during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny,” Office of the German Federal President, May 8, 1985, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985-englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

⁵W. Wemheuer-Vogelaar and T. Risse, “International Relations Scholars in Germany: Young, Internationalised, and Non-Paradigmatic,” *German Politics*, November 24, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2016.1253683>.

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3 WAIT AND SEE? MORE DANGEROUS THAN IT LOOKS

It is only by reorienting its foreign policy — and creating the conditions under which it can be more critical of the current U.S. administration — that Germany can maximize the chances of repairing the transatlantic relationship in the long run.

There are good reasons to hope that Germany's close relationship with the United States will survive the current crisis. In the interests of preserving that relationship, a wait-and-see policy seems like the logical — and safe — course of action. The reluctance to propose radical measures is thus understandable. And yet, there are three important reasons why Germany should rethink its foreign policy in a more radical way than has been seriously entertained in the past months.

In the new environment, Germany can no longer count on the United States for its own defense. If it is to help maintain the liberal world order against resurgent authoritarian regimes like Russia during the years in which the United States is unlikely to take the lead on this crucial task, Germany needs to radically rethink its foreign policy. And, paradoxically, it is only by reorienting its foreign policy — and creating the conditions under which it can be more critical of the current U.S. administration — that Germany can maximize the chances of repairing the transatlantic relationship in the long run.

For decades, Germany has to all intents and purposes outsourced its own security to the United States. While the *Bundeswehr* would have made a significant contribution if Germany had come under attack, it was clear that the country's security ultimately depended on NATO and the U.S. nuclear umbrella. And while German secret services have slowly developed their own networks of informants, the country's ability to prevent major terrorist attacks still depends on shared information from the United States. With Trump casting doubt on his willingness to come to his allies' defense, and exploring the possibility of striking some kind of deal with

Vladimir Putin, Germany is therefore looking less secure than ever. In the era in which German foreign policymakers knew that the world's hegemon would steadfastly stand by them, and were comforted by the belief that the country was in any case "surrounded by friends," a realist view of foreign policy seemed of little relevance to the country's defense policy. But now that there is less reason to count on the protective power of the United States than at any point since World War II, now that Putin's Russia has proven its willingness to engage in adventurism across Eastern Europe, and now that neighboring countries like Poland and Hungary are rapidly veering away from liberal democracy, German policymakers urgently need to think about how they can assure the country's defense.

A major rethink is not only in the interest of Germany — but also in that of other liberal democracies across Europe. Germany's commitment to the United States has long been a commitment to a liberal world order. With the supposed leader of the free world less committed to that order than any predecessor in living memory, Germany's commitment to these values would best be expressed through its willingness to do more to fight for them independently from the United States. This is by no means an abstract concern: Russia has already breached the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia. An increase in German military capacity is urgently needed if Russia is to be deterred from going on similar adventures in the Baltics or in Central Europe.

Even more importantly, it may seem as though a wait-and-see attitude is much more likely to preserve Germany's relationship with the United States than a sudden determination to

become more autonomous. But the opposite comes closer to the truth. For if Germany increases its ability to defend itself, and to come to the assistance of other liberal democracies around the world, it will be less tempted to strike an alliance with autocratic regimes in Russia or China in an hour of need. Conversely, if Germany does not take the necessary measures to become militarily self-sufficient, the United States does turn out to weaken its commitment to NATO, and autocratic regimes continue to project their force, the country could suddenly find its foreign policy subject to blackmail. Faced with threats from Moscow or Beijing, a weak Germany would have strong reasons to take a neutral role between East and West.

For these three reasons, Germany should act immediately rather than waiting for the international situation to deteriorate further. In concrete terms, Berlin should increase its military strength with maximal haste, become less reliant on military cooperation with European partners that may themselves fall prey to illiberal leaders, and pursue energy independence as an urgent matter of national security.

4 THE THREE MAJOR CHANGES GERMANY SHOULD ADOPT

If the United States becomes increasingly unpredictable and Europe remains militarily weak, European countries will grow more and more vulnerable to forms of blackmail from dictatorial powers like Russia and China.

Rapidly Increase Military Spending

Like his predecessors, Donald Trump has called on U.S. allies to make a bigger financial and military contribution to NATO. Unlike his predecessors, he has suggested that his willingness to honor the mutual defense pact may be conditional on their willingness to pull their weight. Speaking to NATO defense ministers at a closed-door meeting in Brussels, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, long seen as someone who might slow the pace of change in Washington, reiterated that message in striking terms: “I owe it to you all to give you clarity on the political reality in the United States and to state the fair demand from my country’s people in concrete terms,” he said. “America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to the alliance, each of your capitals needs to show its support for our common defense.”⁶

This sea-change gives European countries two — superficially contradictory yet ultimately complementary — reasons to spend heavily on their militaries in the coming years. First, a rapid increase in military spending by European countries would maximize the chances of holding together the Western alliance. Since Trump is less guided by shared values than former presidents, the relative military prowess of his European allies is going to play a much larger role in his decisions about how to treat them. If Europe wants to keep Trump invested in the Western alliance, it must do all it can to strengthen his incentives.

⁶D. Lamothe and M. Birnbaum, “Defense Secretary Mattis issues new ultimatum to NATO allies on defense spending,” *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/15/mattis-trumps-defense-secretary-issues-ultimatum-to-nato-allies-on-defense-spending/?utm_term=.f578fa7607f6.

Second, the same tactic that helps to keep the Western alliance together in the short run can also double as a strategy for making European countries better able to provide for their own defense in case such efforts ultimately prove futile. Given radical uncertainty about the U.S. administration’s future course, making a plan for a future in which the alliance with the United States can no longer be taken for granted should be at the top of the agenda of every European leader. And, though it largely goes unspoken, the ultimate upshot of losing America’s shield would be obvious: Europe would then need enough military strength to provide for basic forms of self-defense on its own.

At first glance, it may seem as though pondering the possibility of a European defense system that no longer relies on a partnership with the United States betrays a lack of investment in the survival of the West as a moral and strategic entity. But that is not the case. If the United States becomes increasingly unpredictable and Europe remains militarily weak, European countries will grow more and more vulnerable to forms of blackmail from dictatorial powers like Russia and China. Accepting that democracies in Central and Eastern Europe should fall under Russia’s sphere of influence — or indeed that democracies in Asia should fall under China’s sphere of influence — may then start to look like a reasonable moral price that largely defenseless Western European countries have to pay for their own physical safety. Preparing for the day when the United States might prove unreliable therefore should not be seen as an abandonment of the hope that the Western alliance might be preserved or re-established; rather, it helps to make a radical — and deeply destabilizing — realignment of alliances less likely even if the worst should come to pass.

Avoid Military Dependence on European Partners

Investing in military spending is an important first step toward becoming less dependent on domestic developments in other countries amidst less stable times. But the greater versatility that is now needed should take many other forms as well.

The first of these is the recognition that no country is immune to the rise of illiberal populists like Donald Trump, nor to the prospect that populist leaders may radically change alliance systems that had been relatively stable for many decades. In the United States, Trump shot to power in an astoundingly short space of time. In France, Marine Le Pen now has to be considered a serious contender for the highest office. This means that German leaders should seriously worry not only about the future actions of France or the United States; they must prepare for the possibility that even countries that still look highly stable today may suddenly be captured by illiberal populists in the future.

One concrete upshot of this is that Germany should critically rethink common defense projects that make the country deeply co-dependent on its neighbors. Given the considerable gaps both in the availability of sufficient military personnel and in the quality of existing military materiel, it is obvious why European countries have increasingly opted for a form of co-dependency. This is reflected not only in forms of joint command for specific army units but also in a strategy that sees different nations take on responsibility for different aspects of their mutual defense: the logistics

come from Sweden, the transport planes from the Netherlands, the soldiers from Italy, and the medical personnel from Germany.⁷

In calmer times, this division of labor was a sensible use of sparse resources — a way of making one plus one add up to more than two. But in the politically uncertain times we have now entered, this division of labor may only succeed in ensuring that European defense capabilities go unused in an hour of need. For if each country contributes some core function to European defense capability, then every country enjoys de facto veto power over the missions all countries can undertake. And this, in turn, means that the ascent to power of one far-right populist allied with a President Putin (or, in the case of the disintegration of the transatlantic alliance, a President Trump) could in effect neutralize the capabilities of all European powers. In the age of the populist's veto, one plus one plus one plus one runs the risk of adding up to zero.

This does not mean that Germany should forego all military cooperation with its European allies. The *Bundeswehr* should, by all means, augment its ability to fight alongside its partners in a modular manner. But while the ability to cooperate is good, the country needs to build the capacity to fight on its own if needed.

Pursue Energy Independence

Military versatility is key. But taking seriously the need for strategic flexibility in uncertain times will also require a radical reorientation in

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⁷A. Von Voss, C. Major, and C. Mölling, "The State of Defence Cooperation in Europe," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_DefenceCooperationEurope_Voss_Major_Moelling_Dez_2013.pdf.

If the United States should have friendly ties with the Kremlin, the ability of Putin to blackmail Europe's remaining liberal democracies by threatening to cut off gas supplies to those countries would vastly increase.

other policy areas. Perhaps the most obvious is that the potential rise of illiberal populist powers within Western Europe vastly increases the strategic risk of energy dependence on Russia. If the United States, as well as some Western European nations under populist leadership, should have friendly ties with the Kremlin, the ability of Putin (or his successors) to blackmail Europe's remaining liberal democracies by threatening to cut off gas supplies to those countries would vastly increase.

This possibility is still widely dismissed in German foreign policy circles. Russia, they argue, is deeply dependent on revenues from gas sales in Western Europe in general, and Germany more specifically. But Russia's ability to blackmail Germany by cutting off supplies is more robust than they admit.

First, especially in moments of crisis, dictators tend to prioritize short-term over long-term considerations. This is especially true in countries in which a dictator's loss of power may well entail his loss of life. If Vladimir Putin, or some successor, should start to feel that their hold on power is threatened, and that ratcheting up international tension is the best way to ensure his (literal and metaphorical) survival, he may well be willing to inflict very serious economic damage on his own country. Russia's dependence on Western oil revenue thus translates into less energy security than German policymakers usually assume.

Second, any scenario in which Russia either cuts off gas supplies, or can credibly threaten to do so, would create a huge political crisis in Germany. Russia, lest we forget, supplies over one third of Germany's gas supplies. If Russia should cut off gas delivery for long enough,

German pensioners would start to die of cold in their own homes. This would create huge damage to any government and give it strong incentives to make painful foreign policy concessions if that's what it takes to get the gas flowing again.

Germany thus needs to think of energy independence as an urgent matter of national security — and should adopt an all-of-the-above approach that rapidly develops a mix of energy forms. This includes continued subsidies for the installation of clean forms of energy as well as much greater investment into research and development of technologies than can economically compete with fossil fuels in the long-run. But it also includes more politically contentious measures, which are well outside the bounds of mainstream political debate at the moment: among other measures, Germany should reassess its nuclear energy policy and invest into the port facilities that are necessary to receive shipments of oil and gas from across the Atlantic.

5 COOPERATE WITH THE UNITED STATES BUT DO NOT APPEASE TRUMP

Even if the two countries should no longer be united by a deep commitment to liberal democratic values, Germany and the United States will continue to share some key security and strategic interests — like countering jihadist terrorism and managing China’s rise. NATO has in the past included countries that fell far short of liberal democracy, including Turkey under military tutelage or Portugal under Salazar. For similar reasons, even a U.S. government that turns to the hard right should not automatically prompt Europeans to disband NATO or discontinue all forms of intelligence sharing.

But at the same time, the desire to cooperate even as things take a turn for the worse will tempt Germany to soft-peddle its criticisms of U.S. domestic developments, or to forego whatever limited opportunities may present themselves to strengthen Americans who fight for a survival of basic democratic norms. This would be a great error, both morally and strategically. Morally, Germany should feel deep loyalty to the U.S. liberal-democratic tradition, not to the government of the day. And strategically, the United States will only return to being a reliable ally if far-right populism is defeated in the long-run. A tactical willingness to continue a longstanding alliance thus must not transform into strategic complaisance with illiberal populists like Donald Trump.

A responsible German foreign policy in the age of far-right populism must therefore have two concurrent goals: It must work to lessen the risk that populist governments decide to break with the values-based alliances that have been so crucial to peace and stability in the West. At the same time, it must prepare for a future

in which remaining liberal democracies can defend themselves if these alliances do prove to be beyond salvation.

In the era of *Ostpolitik*, German foreign policymakers famously hoped that a closer cooperation with the Eastern Bloc might pull it in a democratic direction. The slogan which Egon Bahr invented for this hope was *Wandel durch Annäherung*, or change through rapprochement.⁸ At this unexpected and rather scary historical juncture, with the United States less committed to liberal democratic values than at any point in since World War II, the inverse slogan might help to guide German foreign policy. What the country now needs is *Annäherung durch Wandel*, or rapprochement through change. What I mean by that, of course, is not that Germany should emulate Trump’s America. On the contrary, Germany needs to recognize that, in the wake of Trump’s victory, only a willingness to rethink its foreign policy in a radical manner can preserve the possibility that the transatlantic relationship will survive the coming years.

Morally, Germany should feel deep loyalty to the U.S. liberal-democratic tradition, not to the government of the day.

⁸E. Bahr, “Wandel durch Annäherung: Speech at the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing,” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, July 15, 1963, http://www.fes.de/archiv/adsd_neu/inhalt/stichwort/tutzing_rede.pdf.

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