

Why Trumpism Will Not Prevail

By Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

Many German policymakers believe that President Trump's nationalist foreign policy will become the blueprint for American strategy. But that assumes Trump's unilateral approach will succeed at home and abroad and overlooks the likely failures and costs of his policies, as well as the growing backlash against them. A caution against the dangers of linear thinking and a plea for a flexible response to Donald Trump's anti-internationalism.

U.S. President Donald Trump has dedicated himself not to maintaining and nurturing the liberal international order on which Germany's current peace and prosperity are founded, but rather to destroying this order. Consequently, the Federal Republic now needs something that was previously unnecessary: an America strategy.¹

Here Germany faces a strategic dilemma: the country cannot live with the giant would-be destroyer of the international order along with all of his anti-German impulses. But at the same time, Germany cannot survive without America — above all not without the American security guarantee. Any German citizen furtively hoping for this president to fail will fear a great American failure on the world stage just as much. This is the tension facing Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. His new America strategy² does more to illustrate this dilemma than to resolve it.

Three Goals of the Maas Policy

Maas wants three things: first, to work with the United States where possible and necessary, especially in security policy; second, to fill gaps left by America's withdrawal from the international order, in particular by building an "alliance of multilateralists" (see for example Ulrich Speck in the September/October issue of Berlin Policy Journal); and third, to "form a counterweight" where America "crosses red lines." With this plan Maas is

¹ This article was originally published in Berlin Policy Journal as "Where Heiko Maas Is Wrong," October 30, 2018, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/where-heiko-maas-is-wrong/>.

² Heiko Maas, "Wir lassen nicht zu, dass die USA über unsere Köpfe hinweg handeln," *Handelsblatt*, August, 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DcGcVk>.



trying to pull off a gravity-defying feat: Germany is supposed to be a “counterweight” to its own security guarantor and most important partner outside of Europe. Maas wants to build this counterweight together with European partners that are more likely to want to be a counter-counter weight the further east they are located. Maas calls this construction a “balanced partnership.” He’ll certainly need good balance for this high-wire act.

Moreover, Maas’s strategy is based on the widespread, but dubitable assumption that American foreign policy will outlive Donald Trump’s presidency and form a blueprint for future U.S. foreign policy. Trump, so the theory goes, gives voice to long-ignored preferences of American voters and merely continuing the process of withdrawal from the world (and especially from Europe) that Barack Obama initiated. According to this argument, Trump is not the cause of the change but a symptom of it. Thus, nobody can foresee if and when the nationalistically tinged self-isolation of the United States will end.³

The Linear Theorists

At first glance this point of view has something to it: after all, Donald Trump is not the first one to realize that America is overextended. The turn away from internationalism began before the Trump era, as did criticism of free trade or allegedly free-riding NATO allies. People across the wide American heartland have long wanted an explanation for why America must continue to give Europe a security guarantee 70 years after the end of World War II.

This line of argument has many supporters, including inside the United States. It allows those who support Trump to argue that the President is not, in fact, a revolutionary, but within (or at least near) the

mainstream.⁴ In Europe, above all in Germany, the so-called “Post-Atlanticists” are devoted to the assumption that Trumpian nationalism will be an eternal feature of U.S. policy⁵. These are self-identified Atlanticists who feel abandoned by the United States. They are also linearists who believe that the US has permanently said goodbye to Europe, the defense of the NATO alliance, and the defense of democratic norms.



Linear theorists ignore something essential: the strategic goal of American action.”

In December 2017 then-foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel joined the ranks of the linear theorists when he described the “uncomfortable world” of the future in a speech. “The U.S. withdrawal cannot be traced back to the policy of an individual president. It will also not fundamentally change after the next election.”⁶ His successor Heiko Maas sees things similarly. His “America strategy” is informed by the assumption that the changes in U.S. foreign policy “began well before Trump’s election — and will outlast his presidency well into the future.”⁷

The continuity argument is based on apparent similarities of phenomena and relies on the maxim that what looks the same must be the same. The linear theorists concentrate on the point of departure, namely the American overstretch that, they argue, Trump and Obama both recognized. But they largely refuse to acknowledge the elements of discontinuity and even rupture. They ignore something essential: the strategic goal of American action. Here, there are

³ Cf. Sigmar Gabriel, *Europa in einer unbequemen Welt*. See also: Nikolas K. Gosdev, “Inexorable Changes in U.S. Foreign Policy,” FPRI, August 14, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/08/inexorable-changes-in-u-s-foreign-policy/>.

⁴ Cf. Thomas Donnelly and William Kristol, “The Obama-Trump Foreign Policy,” *Weekly Standard*, February 9, 2018, <https://twi.io/208Fydn>. Kristol has been an important conservative thinker for years, yet he is not a supporter of Donald Trump. Nonetheless, he concludes that the president’s foreign policy comprises “more continuity than change.” See also: Freddy Gray, “On foreign policy, Trump is More like Obama Than He Would Like to Admit,” *The Spectator*, April 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Jk3xFu>. Ross Douthat, “The Obama-Trump Grand Strategy,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2MqB8z0>.

⁵ Cf. Bernd Ulrich and Jörg Lau, “Im Westen Was Neues,” *Die Zeit*, October 19, 2017, <https://bit.ly/20QCesl>. See also: Klaus Brinkbäumer. (Edition November 2018). *Danke, Donald! Der Spiegel*.

⁶ Sigmar Gabriel, “*Europa in einer unbequemen Welt*,” Federal Foreign Office, December 5, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ReVZHa>. While Foreign Minister Gabriel is no longer a member of the new federal government, his prognosis for a new continuity of American foreign policy in the Federal Foreign Office still applies.

⁷ Heiko Maas, “Wir lassen nicht zu, dass Amerika über unsere Köpfe hinweg handelt,” *Handelsblatt*, August 8, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2D6xGYL>.

dramatic differences between the two presidents. The goal of Trump's foreign policy is the destruction of the liberal order to help bring about a world of great power competition with zones of influence. The goal of Obama's policy was virtually the opposite: the preservation of the liberal international order while reducing American input.⁸ Obama saw allies as power amplifiers; Trump sees them as encumbrances, as a drain on resources.

The linear theorists overlook or ignore this fundamental shift in American foreign policy. Especially for NATO allies, though, it is decisive.

Vulnerable Europeans

Any head of government who deals personally with Donald Trump intuitively notices that something major has changed when relating to a U.S. president. European statesmen see themselves as equal partners, and that is why they are so stung by Trump's accusations, belittlement, and insults. At the June 2018 NATO summit, the European heads of governments responded by behaving like hostages suffering from Stockholm syndrome.⁹ They were relieved that Trump did not take more swipes at Europe, and even expressed understanding for his abuse. Almost submissively, a few of them credited Trump's arm-twisting for increases in defense budgets.¹⁰ They seem to have forgotten that their own defense budgets were already rising before Trump took office since the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in east Ukraine had changed Europe's strategic situation.

⁸ It is only on the basis of this insight that it is possible to explain why President Obama supported the French and Germans from the second row in response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, although Americans actually favored a more robust stance. This is also the only way to explain why the Americans supported the French and the British in the Libya intervention without taking the lead themselves. And finally, it also explains why Obama created and supported an anti-ISIS coalition in Syria, but avoided any deeper intervention. Incidentally, it was the same Obama who invested almost his entire presidency in two multilateral projects, which his successor, a spurner of multilateralism, has torpedoed: the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal.

⁹ Karl-Heinz Kamp, "Das Stockholm-Syndrom der NATO," *Behörden Spiegel*, September 19, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2z3XA15>.

¹⁰ Cf. Jens Stoltenberg, "Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Bilateral Breakfast," The White House, September 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2N3D7sv>. European heads of government have adopted a similar approach as NATO General Secretary Stoltenberg.

Trump's foreign policy simply doesn't distinguish between friends and enemies — rather, as political scientist Ivan Krastev aptly put it, between "fans and enemies."¹¹ If you're not an enemy you're a vassal, a lackey, part of a fan club. Sycophant is the role that a head of government of such client states is supposed to play. In Trump's view, such a weakling shall be educated and disciplined, not listened to.

Unlike his predecessors, Trump has no reservations about exploiting differences in power, even among traditional allies. He wants vertical integration based on power hierarchies, not horizontal integration between nation-states with equal rights. He seeks not allies but followers. Institutions and their rules seem to handcuff him. Only the other great powers are equals in his world, and with them, he seeks bilateral deals (Russia) or conflict (China). This is not, as is often suggested, isolationism. It's closer to imperialism. It represents, as Robert Kagan writes, the transformation of a benevolent hegemon into a "rogue great power"¹² bound by few values beyond the drive for national power and grandness.

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Any leader who believes that imperial posturing will be America's default behavior in the future is bound to draw conclusions. In his home country, such a leader will want to initiate a debate about national self-respect, about sovereignty, about acceptable and unacceptable American behavior, about red lines, about setting boundaries to a U.S. president and thus about a more nuanced and eventually a more circumspect and distant relationship with the United States.

¹¹ Cf. Ivan Krastev, "Sorry NATO. Trump Does Not Believe in Allies," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2mbYqfW>.

¹² Robert Kagan, "Trump's America Does Not Care," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2CCWoPz>

A Concept with Consequences

Therefore, the assumption that American foreign policy will continue in a straight line from today, is not just fodder for foreign policy pundits. This idea could — should it carry the day — bring with it significant strategic consequences. These consequences could have their own dangerous consequences, and it might be all based on induction from a faulty premise.

It is not too early to point out that the theory of continuity is dubious, and not only because it ignores the fundamental break between Obama's and Trump's foreign policy. It also disregards how new, how unique, how radical and how outside of the political mainstream Trump's

definition of American interests is. The continuity theory mistakes extremism for the mainstream of American policy. It underestimates how far Trump's policies go beyond many voters' real criticism of America's overstretch. And it falsely assumes that, in the long term, Trumpism is the only possible response to voter preferences. It ignores the polycentric structure of American foreign policy in supposing that Trump and his controversial policies will prevail. And finally, it disregards the power of the opposing forces that Trump's extremism is either giving birth to or visibly strengthening.

America's foreign policy simply cannot be understood as the extrapolation of the present straight into the future. Trump doesn't have enough support at home for his imperial efforts and stands well outside many of America's most important intellectual traditions. Rather, the theory of continuity is the expression of a new fatalism about America.

On the contrary, the future of American foreign policy has never been more uncertain. No one can predict exactly what will happen when America comes out of its Trump misadventure as if waking from a bad dream. But one thing is already foreseeable: if what analysts from Niccolo Machiavelli to Henry Kissinger

“ **America's foreign policy simply cannot be understood as the extrapolation of the present straight into the future.** ”

have written over the centuries continues to be relevant, Trump's successor will, first of all, have to deal with the failures of this president's foreign policy, perhaps even its utter failure.

Trump's Cardinal Mistakes

President Trump is committing at least four cardinal mistakes. First, he misunderstands the intentions of both his opponents as well as his allies and partners; apparently, he is not even interested. Not surprisingly, he reaches dubious conclusions. Second, he overestimates America's ability to bend others to its will. Third, he underestimates the ability of opponents, allies, and partners to ignore, divert, water down or withstand American pressure or bond together to oppose it. And fourth, he undervalues the importance of alliances of equal states in order to help achieve one's own objectives. As Harvard Professor Stephen Walt writes, “bullies don't win at diplomacy.”¹³

These mistakes inevitably tempt Donald Trump into an ineffective use of American power. And they will lead the President into foreign policy failures, perhaps even catastrophes, into trade wars, as we've already seen, and perhaps hot wars. It is unclear when and how the consequences of his miscalculations will become visible and the failure obvious. Nor is it clear how long domestic policy successes (impressive economic growth, for example) can mask foreign policy failures. With a superpower, the unmasking process can take a long time.

If Trump's policy does culminate in disappointment, America's foreign policy will be marked not by straight lines and continuity — as the post-Atlanticists assume — but rather by shocks and disruptions. The next president, whichever party he or she is from, will want to do things differently, will want to correct and repair. And he will justify his course correction by setting himself apart from the unilateral and imperial affectations of his predecessor. He might even denounce Trump as *sui generis* and his policies as an aberration.

¹³ Cf. Stephen Walt, “Bullies Don't Win at Diplomacy,” *Foreign Policy*, June 7, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Mcdfeu>.

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German policy should prepare for such a moment. Instead of glorifying fatalism and bemoaning the end of Atlanticism or even multilateralism, policymakers should assume that Trump is not the end of (American) history. This means pursuing a policy that keeps its distance from the incumbent in the White House, but at the same time builds bridges to the future. For this, though, one must first avoid burning the very bridges that might be needed later.

Novel Activism from Berlin

Since Heiko Maas sees Trump not as an extremist but as a symptom of a tectonic shift, he doesn't want to waste time. He wants to push back against Trump rather than elude him. He wants to forge a new path into the future, not maneuver and bide his time. He wants Germany to withstand Trump, not avoid him. He does not want to delay, distract, deflect, obfuscate, ignore or appease Trump. He does not seem to seek tactical compromises in hopes of subsequent corrections.

Any student of post-war Germany's foreign policy traditions will be surprised at such activism. Wherever the national interest is at stake, the Federal Republic of Germany has so far shown a great deal of strategic patience. German foreign policy usually elects continuity, even when important partners find themselves in phases of indeterminant internal turmoil. It put up with Silvio Berlusconi for eleven years without "balancing" Germany's relationship with Italy. During France's period of stagnation under President Francois Hollande, Germany chose "shutting up" to be its new policy and did not question the Franco-German partnership even as it produced nothing of relevance for five years. At the moment Germany is putting its Poland policy on ice for what looks like eight years, without questioning the long-term partnership. Anyone declaring after 18 months of the Trump administration that Germany is now a "counterweight" to its most important post-war partner should expect to be questioned about the wisdom of this policy.

That said, Heiko Maas has plenty of reasons to rethink Germany's policy towards the United States. Donald Trump's imperial radicalism demands it. The

president's behavior has essentially turned the idea of joint initiatives on core questions of international relations into an exercise in wishful thinking. And Trump's hostility to institutions and aversion to rules-based international relations is forcing Germany to finally do what's long been necessary: taking on more responsibility for the liberal international order that has bestowed upon Germany an extraordinary phase of peace and prosperity.

Produce More West

It is simply no longer enough to belong to the political West. Germany must produce more "West". Maas's idea of an "alliance of multilateralists" is helpful in this regard, provided he can fill it with substance. And the idea of investing more in Germany's own foreign policy instruments and in Europe's ability to act independently is gaining traction in Germany. One day Trump may deserve a thank you note for giving the Germans as well as all Europeans cause to finally create their own hard power instruments. Yet, as long as one has not acquired such instruments, there is little use in talking about them. All that such loose talk produces is counterpressure. The irony is that even becoming more autonomous actually requires American support.

Heiko Maas deserves some credit: in the face of Trump's attacks on the international order, he has at least offered a response that seeks to differentiate between areas of cooperation and disagreement. Going forward, he will need to nuance his strategy and rule out a misperception: that working without America will mean working against America. It is simply not in Germany's national security interest to be seen as positioning itself against America. It would be a blatant and obvious overreach and would turn Germany into a fringe player on the European stage. Rather, Germany should ensure that all hard power instruments it invests in, be they military or economic, can pass a dual-use test: they must make Germany a better Atlantic ally and at the same time make Europe more capable of independent action.

As uncertain as the future of America's foreign policy may be, and as adaptable as Germany's answer to it must be, one thing is clear: there will be no status quo

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ante, no return to the “good old days” of American parenting in Europe. There are three reasons for that: first, it won’t be possible to return to a pre-Trumpian state of affairs post-Trump. The work of the great wrecking ball from Washington cannot be undone. Second, the special role America plays for Europe has been rooted in a Eurocentric world that no longer exists. And third, that role is also rooted in an American hegemony that too no longer exists.

Such changes will certainly undercut the rationale for what Tom Wright of the Brookings Institution calls “deep engagement” in Europe. “Deep engagement” is America’s intense involvement in European affairs, its effort to help Europe help itself, both with its internal and foreign-policy challenges.¹⁴

After World War II the American economy made up about half of world economic output in terms of purchasing power parity. At the end of the Cold War it made up a quarter; and today, according to American political scientist Graham Allison’s calculations, makes up only a seventh.¹⁵ In any country, such a major shift of economic might must lead to a fundamental rethinking of strategy. This, by the way, is the rational reason for American voters’ skepticism of interventionism and assumed free riding of allies. And these sentiments may very well outlast Trump and his foreign-policy mistakes.

But the fact that a well-founded critique of American overstretch is likely to be long-lasting does not mean that radical nationalism and bullying of allies is the natural response. On the contrary: it is precisely the realization of America’s relative decline that will create a new appreciation of the fact that America will eventually need more allies and reliable international rules, i.e. multilateralism.¹⁶ This insight might be the basis of America’s future relationship with Europe. It is possible, perhaps even likely that, after Trump,

the United States will become more like-minded — though no longer Europe’s almighty protector and the grand arbiter of intra-European conflicts. For Europeans it might be an utterly confusing reality to face a United States, that is close, but no longer deeply engaged rather than the other way around.

The United States, on the other hand, will face a double challenge: responding to the collapse of the post-war consensus on America’s expansive role as protector of the Western-led world order while subsequently dealing with the failure of Trump’s nationalistic response to the collapse. A new equilibrium will be sought, one that takes into account the limits of the country’s power and the limits of its population to engage globally. It must reconcile the fact that the world’s policeman is tired of going on patrol with the necessity of working with others in the name of America’s own national interest. Nobody can know today how successful the search for a new formula of American foreign policy, a new happy medium, will be.

¹⁴ Cf. Tom Wright, “A Post-American Europe and the Future of U.S. Strategy,” Brookings, December 2017, <https://brook.gs/2l06CzR>.

¹⁵ Cf. Graham Allison, “The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 2018, <https://fam.ag/2KP8RAc>

¹⁶ David Frum, President George W. Bush’s former speechwriter, summarizes this insight: “America First is America alone; America alone is America defeated.” David Frum, “The Republican Party Needs to Embrace Liberalism,” *The Atlantic*, November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2NkHpeN>.

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