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A European Realignment: German-American Responses

BY KIRSTEN VERCLAS

What are European and American views on Russia in 2009 and what might be some challenges in German-U.S. cooperation toward Russia?

How do the U.S. candidates view NATO and where do those views diverge from Germany's?

What will be the role of the EU in the transatlantic partnership in 2009?

Introduction

German and American relations with Russia; European and American energy security; and the future of NATO and the European Union are all pressing issues which will confront the new U.S. president in 2009. Germany, in the lead-up to its parliamentary elections in fall 2009, has its own interests in all three areas. While Germany and the U.S. agree on several foreign policy choices, policies on NATO enlargement, the role of NATO, and especially the role of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan, as well as appropriate policies toward Russia, could become some of the stumbling blocks on the road to improved transatlantic relations in 2009. With the Lisbon Treaty, the EU was expected to play an even larger role in determining a coherent European foreign policy. However, the Irish rejection of the Treaty has cast a doubt on the EU's ability to develop a common foreign policy—an inward-facing Europe would also impact German-American relations. While both presidential candidates have expressed their interest to further improve the tone of German-American relations, U.S. demands on its European partners may be similar or even more challenging than during the last eight years. After briefly describing current German and U.S. positions on Russia, energy security, NATO, and the role of the EU, this Issue Brief lays out the presidential candidates' views in these areas. It then examines what these positions will mean for the transatlantic relationship and German-American relations in 2009.

Russia and Energy

U.S. and German policy vis-à-vis Russia has been—and will likely remain—one of the more complicated and contentious issues in German-American relations. NATO enlargement, Kosovo's independence, and energy policies are only a few issues on the Western-Russian agenda. With the Russian presidential election in spring 2008, American elections in the fall of the same year, and German elections a year later, Russian-German-U.S. relations are going through a phase of transition. Unless the German government shifts to a left majority in 2009, Germany is likely to maintain its current policies toward Russia. The U.S. presidential candidates, however, differ immensely on their Russia policies, some of which could potentially cause great frictions with Germany.

Germany

Germany, lacking its own natural energy resources, depends on other nations to deliver its gas and oil needs. Of Germany's gas imports, Russia provides by far the largest share with about 46 percent.¹ Additionally, German-Russian trade relations make up the majority of EU-Russian trade (52 percent). These factors explain Germany's interest in maintaining pragmatic and cordial relations with Russia. German-Russian relations

were especially friendly under former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and, while they have cooled somewhat under Chancellor Angela Merkel, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev have a close, long-standing personal relationship.

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Geopolitical proximity; close energy and trade relations; and Germany's stance on strategic decisions such as the stationing of missile defense systems, the building of new pipelines, and NATO enlargement will influence German-Russian relations for some time to come. Foreign Minister Steinmeier echoed this in his statement in Yekaterinburg in May 2008: "I am convinced that there can be no security in Europe, in the entire Eurasian area, without—much less against—Russia."²

While the German government has criticized the backlash against democracy in Russia, it has also stressed that it views engagement as the primary tool to counter Russia's authoritarian tendencies. Germany's relationship with Russia is unique in Europe, causing friction with the new EU member states in eastern Europe, who are still influenced by their histories with Russia. Polish-German relations have been particularly hampered by the different positions of both countries toward Russia. The EU has failed so far to arrive at a common

European Russia policy, reflected most recently in the delay in agreeing on a common negotiation framework for the new partnership agreement between Russia and the EU. This lack of European unity is making it easier for Russia to attempt to divide Europe by focusing on bilateral relations. However, NATO enlargement, the crisis in Kosovo, and Iran are all global issues, which cannot be solved without Russia—and all are challenges also on the U.S. agenda.

United States

The United States and Russia have had a complicated relationship since the end of the Cold War. While the 1990s saw a tumultuous Russia backing off from the international arena, the twenty-first century has seen a resurgent Russia. Rising energy prices have fueled Russia's economic recovery, at least in the short-term, allowing then-President Vladimir Putin to use this economic leverage to reassert Russia on the international stage, attempting to erase what many Russians perceived as humiliation in the 1990s. In this, Russia and the United States have clashed repeatedly, most notably over NATO's eastern enlargement. Russia would like to prevent any further NATO enlargement into its immediate neighborhood and perceived sphere of influence while, at the same time, the United States is pressing for membership especially for Georgia and Ukraine.

American insistence on establishing a missile defense system in eastern Europe has further antagonized Russia. Repeated U.S. criticisms of Russia's fledgling democracy backsliding into an autocratic state, allegations that Russia has rejected as meddling into its internal affairs, have not improved perceptions of either party. As trade and energy relations are rather negligent between Russia and the United States, criticism of Russia, which often originates in Congress, has not been muted by economic interests, as is sometimes the case in Germany. The new president will inherit these problematic Russian-U.S. relations, which have deteriorated in recent years, despite shared challenges such as terrorism and Iran.

Transatlantic Relations with Russia in 2009

Senators Barack Obama and John McCain have both referred to Russia in their foreign policy agendas—an issue on which their stances are the most varied and which could become a real stumbling block between Germany and the United States. The presumed Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Obama, argues against Russia as a threat. Senator Obama emphasizes cooperating with Russia to secure nuclear weapons and adds that the United States "must also work with Russia to update and scale back our dangerously outdated Cold War nuclear postures and de-emphasize the

role of nuclear weapons.”³ He argues that the United States will have to reduce its nuclear weapons in accordance with Russia. Negotiations about this goal could lead to the envisioned engagement with Russia and will certainly please Germany, which would not want an antagonistic approach.

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Yet, Senator Obama also stresses that the United States will have to stay adamant about a democratic development of Russia and “must not shy away from pushing for more democracy and accountability in Russia.”⁴ Congress will probably also continue to advocate for more democracy in Russia, increasing the pressure on the next president to combine moral obligations in advocating democracy with negotiations about crucial international problems.

Nevertheless, Senator Obama’s willingness to engage internationally with Russia will certainly be viewed positively in Germany.

The presumed Republican candidate, Senator McCain, views Russia in a much more antagonistic manner. He is calling for

NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) plays a role not only in transatlantic relations. NATO’s enlargement is closely connected to relations with Russia; NATO’s military engagement in Afghanistan is often viewed as being at the heart of deciding the future of this transatlantic organization; and as the Iraq War takes center stage under any new U.S. president, consequent demands to allies to increase contributions to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan might become a challenge to close transatlantic relations. The United States and Europe have to come to an understanding of NATO’s mission, the aims of the organization, the means needed to achieve those aims, and an adequate burden-sharing arrangement between both partners.

Germany

Germany is one of the countries which benefited the most from NATO. With the end of the Cold War, Germany has expanded its role in NATO, becoming an active member of the Alliance. Yet, under the German constitution, the German parliament must approve German participation in each NATO mission outside of the territory of the NATO member states. With the constant cycle of parliamentary elections, this makes German participation in NATO missions dependent on public

“a new Western approach to this revanchist Russia. [The U.S.] should start by ensuring that the G-8, the group of eight highly industrialized states, becomes again a club of leading market democracies: it should include Brazil and India but exclude Russia.”⁵ Senator McCain’s proposal to exclude an undemocratic Russia from the G-8 stands in direct opposition to the German policy of engaging Russia. While Senator McCain argues that “America needs to revive the democratic solidarity that united the West during the Cold War,”⁶ such an alliance could be directed against Russia, making Europeans—and especially Germans—very uncomfortable with that idea. This could lead to more friction between Germany and the United States, making a needed Western consolidation of Russia policies even more distant. In fact, Senator McCain’s policy of confrontation will make it more difficult to get a consensus with Germany across selected issues. As Russia’s cooperation in a variety of international security issues is needed, this antagonistic approach could have far-reaching international consequences—and would certainly burden the transatlantic partnership. So the real debate between Senators McCain and Obama centers on what the U.S. answer to a resurgent Russia should be—a more antagonistic approach, as Senator McCain seems to prefer, or international engagement, which Senator Obama has advocated for. Germany would certainly prefer the latter.

approval, which might not always be forthcoming. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, the members agreed to the conditions for withdrawing NATO troops from Afghanistan. While not a timetable, Germany was instrumental in initiating this strategy paper, not least because of the low level of public support in Germany for the mission in Afghanistan. The Bucharest summit also revealed frictions between member states toward NATO enlargement. Germany is hesitant about NATO enlargement for two reasons: First, due to its energy needs it relies on cordial relations with Russia—which vehemently opposes any further NATO enlargement toward the east, especially any enlargement encompassing former Soviet republics. Second, Germany argues that countries embroiled in territorial disputes, such as Georgia, or where the population does not support NATO membership, such as in Ukraine, are not ready for NATO accession. This position was criticized at the NATO summit in Bucharest by the United States and was met with disappointment by other eastern European countries.

United States

The United States has been instrumental in the Alliance since its founding. After the Cold War, however, NATO is still searching for a new mission shared by all of its members. After

the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, NATO invoked Article Five, declaring the terrorist attacks on the United States as an attack on NATO itself. NATO members supported the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, yet even though help and troops were offered, the U.S. was hesitant to fully embrace this international alliance and military aid, which seemed cumbersome and more of a burden than a help. But the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan have stretched the U.S.' military means, and the current U.S. administration has repeatedly called for an increase of NATO troops in Afghanistan as well as lifting national restrictions on missions and troop deployments. U.S. calls for NATO enlargement, seen as essential to its national interest in securing the eastern European region and fostering democracy in countries previously under Soviet control, continue even as tensions arise among Alliance partners. For example, Europe and the U.S. clashed over the plan to install a missile defense system in eastern European countries. The system, which the U.S. claims would be aimed at rogue or anti-Western nations such as Iran, was viewed as a threat mainly by Russia. Western European states, especially Germany, have stated reservations against the system, but eastern European states have voiced support, not the least because it would protect them against a Russia whose shared history still gives them reason to pause.

Transatlantic Relations vis-à-vis NATO in 2009

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will feature prominently on the agenda of any new U.S. administration. Both U.S. presidential candidates made it clear that they view increased allied participation in the NATO framework as imperative to win the war in Afghanistan and to relieve stretched U.S. forces. While Senator Obama and Senator McCain perceive this as a tool to improve the transatlantic partnership by making Europeans more trusted and consulted stakeholders, asking European allies, and especially Germany, to contribute more troops or remove national caveats from the deployability of already existing troops might put these states in a conflicted position. Especially with Germany, where public opinion does not approve of the war in Afghanistan and where parliamentary elections in the fall of 2009 could preclude politicians to come out in favor of increased troops or an expanded mandate, such a request could cause frictions.⁷ However, German Defense Minister Franz-Josef Jung has announced that the German government will request an additional 1,000 troops for the German mission in Afghanistan from the German parliament in the fall and additionally ask for an extension of the mandate through December 2009,⁸ most likely to avoid a renewed debate about the mission in Afghanistan during the German federal election campaign in fall 2009.

NATO enlargement, pressed by President Bush, is another sensitive topic between the United States and Europe, as well

as among eastern and western European states. The presumed Democratic as well as the presumed Republican candidate both support NATO enlargement and have expressed their support for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Senator Obama sounded consolatory toward states seeking NATO membership as well as the concerns of European NATO members, stating that he would "welcome the desire and actions of these countries to seek closer ties with NATO and hope that NATO responds favorably to their request, consistent with its criteria for membership. Whether Ukraine and Georgia ultimately join NATO will be a decision for the members of the alliance and the citizens of those countries, after a period of open and democratic debate."⁹ In a meeting with the Congress of Romanian Americans (CORA) and the Central and East European Coalition (CEECE), Senator McCain "support[ed] continued NATO enlargement, and [was] concerned that a pause in progress could be detrimental to continued expansion."¹⁰ Such organizations representing eastern European immigrants have a strong voice in the U.S., claiming a certain domestic influence on U.S. foreign policy, and are therefore courted by the presidential candidates. Still, the U.S. will not be able to achieve membership for Georgia and Ukraine without the approval of the European members of NATO, including the hesitant western European nations. The U.S. would be advised to consider the well-founded objections from the western European states, of which Germany is at the forefront. An objective look at membership criteria should be undertaken by the new U.S. administration to avoid a new transatlantic rift over NATO enlargement.

Missile defense, another contentious issue among NATO members, is also likely to be influenced by the U.S. presidential campaign. While NATO formally endorsed the planned U.S. missile defense system that would be stationed in eastern Europe, construction is unlikely to begin until the next U.S. administration is inaugurated. Additionally, recent debates on whether parts of the missile defense system would be stationed in Poland or Lithuania show a lack of consensus even among states involved in the initiative. The two presidential candidates are split along party lines when it comes to missile defense systems in Europe. Senator McCain "strongly supports the development and deployment of theater and national missile defenses"¹¹ and any "efforts to provide effective missile defense that will aid in defending our European allies from external threats."¹² While welcoming a joint decision of all NATO member states, Senator Obama has criti-

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cized the Bush administration for rushing to deploy an unproven technology. Senator Obama's campaign spokesman, Bill Burton, stated that "[w]e must ensure we do not rush to deploy technology that is not proven."¹³ As the missile defense system will have to be funded by the U.S., Congress will contribute to the debate and decide whether funds will be made available for a system that has not been thoroughly tested, which adds further uncertainty.

Additionally, NATO is in dire need of a strategic debate. While allied cooperation and solidarity was institutionalized during the Cold War, different threat perceptions today have called the cooperation within NATO into question. A shared strategic discussion across the Atlantic on NATO's role and how adequate burden-sharing can be accomplished is urgently required; while it would be desirable that such a debate would echo internally in Germany, the national elections in 2009 will

European Union

Germany is an integral and important part of the European Union (EU). Bilateral relations between the United States and many European countries have been augmented by bilateral relations between the U.S. and the EU. Even so, the U.S. is often confounded by the EU's bureaucratic pace and European in-fighting that can sometimes hinder an otherwise coherent European approach to international problems. But with the EU representing 10 percent of the world's population and accounting for roughly 40 percent of world trade and over 60 percent of world GDP,¹⁴ the EU is a valuable economic partner for the U.S. The EU itself is undergoing a transitional period as its member states struggle to continue to ratify the Lisbon Treaty, which would change some of the power structures within the EU.

Germany

Germany, whose containment was a key factor in the creation of the treaties that led to the European Union, has made its international obligations to the EU one of the paradigms of its foreign policy. It remains one of the leading voices in Europe, yet with the most recent EU enlargement to twenty-seven member states, the three largest countries (France, Great Britain, and Germany) face more competition from the smaller states for influence. Furthermore, Germany's (and "old" Europe's) relations with the newer members of the EU are complicated by the fact that their interests do not always converge, for example, vis-à-vis Russia. Even as the EU is trying to institutionalize a common voice on foreign policy, Germany will remain one of the strongest voices in the Union, making Germany an essential partner for the U.S. in understanding Europe and the EU.

likely prevent that. Germany will in all probability continue to be cautious vis-à-vis American positions due to NATO's operational nature and Germany's desire to have good relations with Russia. New threats, however, will need new NATO responses. A new U.S. administration in 2009 and NATO's 60th anniversary could be additional occasions for a new dialogue about NATO's future.

But as NATO's 60th anniversary comes at the beginning of a new U.S. administration, it remains to be seen how effectively this occasion can be used for a strategic reorientation of NATO.

United States

The United States has viewed the EU both positively and negatively over the past decades. On the one hand, the EU is the organizational embodiment of a peaceful European continent and thus ultimately of the American successes of World War

II and the Cold War. With the continued EU enlargement encompassing eastern European states, the Union fulfills a crucial role in democratizing and stabilizing the former Warsaw Pact states. This is in the U.S.' best interest as its desire for democracy promotion and NATO enlargement is also furthered by the EU. The U.S., however, has also criticized the European Union member states for neglecting defense spending and relying too heavily on soft power while leaving the U.S. to provide the military resources in international crises.

The European Union is an organization which is still 'finding itself'—not surprising, considering that the last large war in Europe ended only sixty-three years ago. It is constantly undergoing reforms; the Lisbon Treaty is only the latest in a long line of efforts to reform the EU. The U.S. has yet to completely understand the function and intricate bureaucracies of the EU and, while it would like the EU to speak with one voice, it has not refrained from exploiting policy differences between EU member states, for example in the run-up to the Iraq War. Furthermore, different voices in the U.S. have expressed hesi-

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tancy about a more unified Europe, perceiving it as a threat to the U.S.—further evidence of an ambivalent relationship between the U.S. and the EU.

The Role of the EU in Transatlantic Affairs in 2009

Both U.S. presidential candidates have vowed to renew transatlantic ties, encompassing the EU as well as key individual member states. As the U.S. election progresses, the European Union, too, is undergoing its own transformation with discussion and debate on the latest reform treaty, the Lisbon Treaty. Apart from more internal matters, such as voting mechanisms, the Lisbon Treaty would create a “new foreign minister in all but name [...] by merging two existing posts. Working for both governments and the European Commission, he will have political clout, money and his own diplomatic service. He will speak for the EU in places like the United Nations, whenever governments have agreed on a foreign policy position.”¹⁵ Thus, the decades-old U.S. complaint of who to call at the EU would finally be answered.

But as the Irish referendum has halted the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty for the moment, the EU is forced to address internal issues, causing it to become more focused on inner-European affairs. The turmoil surrounding the Treaty and the Irish referendum might increase the skepticism regarding the EU in both Democratic and Republican camps and renew questions in Washington of what the EU can realistically deliver, regardless of who wins the election in November. However, even if the Lisbon Treaty is ultimately ratified, the EU will not be a global power player any time soon, mainly because its member states have no interest in doing so, but also because they lack the capabilities, especially in military terms. It is therefore important for the new administration in Washington to be patient with Brussels and understand that the individual governments in the European capitals will still have to be consulted on critical foreign policy issues, without trying to play them off against each other.

A second challenge that the U.S. and the EU will have to address is NATO-EU relations and the question of European defense cooperation. The Lisbon Treaty would allow that “the keenest member states may also push ahead with defence cooperation among themselves.”¹⁶ While the United States has long argued for Europeans to increase their military spending and increase military cooperation, other actors in the U.S. view any European defense cooperation agreement as competition to NATO. Especially in light of NATO’s woes in Afghanistan and questions of enlargement, missile defense shields, and an adequate burden-sharing going unanswered, U.S. and EU talks after the presidential elections should center on how to make cooperation between the EU and NATO more efficient. While EU member states are unlikely to increase defense spending

significantly, “the 27 EU member states could deliver more ‘bang for the buck’ by eliminating military duplication and creating defence synergies. Some steps have been taken, such as co-ordinating long-range air transport. But this is not enough. We should streamline arms procurement policies and examine savings from eliminating separate military training programmes and institutions in the EU countries.”¹⁷ Any military cooperation between EU member states should augment NATO and not become a vehicle for a slow European withdraw from NATO, as those missions get more complicated and costly. As the EU brings mainly economic and soft power to the table, it needs the U.S. military strength to successfully solve international crises. EU-NATO relations need to be evaluated and put on a strategic base adequate for the twenty-first century. A transatlantic debate about a new kind of burden-sharing, state-building mechanisms, and strategic goals is urgently needed, as this debate will impact not only future military transformations but also relations with other countries around the world.

The EU has an important place in many of the current foreign policy issues: negotiations with Iran, a voice in climate policy,

and energy policy, to name only a few. The U.S. and the EU will have to work together in order to find solutions. However, the EU will not always be able to find a common voice on many of these issues, making U.S.-EU cooperation difficult. One of the most

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contentious issues between the United States and Europe is the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership. The U.S. would like to see Turkey become a member of the EU and has pressed Brussels to begin negotiations. France and Germany, among others, are more hesitant about Turkish membership. With a new U.S. president focused on Iraq, Turkey will also increase in importance as Iraq’s northern neighbor. With tensions between Turkey and the Kurdish population in Iraq high, any U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq might open the door for Turkey to increase its military operations in northern Iraq, further limiting its opportunity to become a member of the EU. However, Turkey also has something to offer to the EU. As a country locked between the EU and the oil and gas reserves around and in the Caspian Sea, pipelines running through Turkey could become part of the EU’s answer to its dependence on Russia for energy sources. The EU has yet to come up with a coherent energy policy and the United States is increasingly worried about European energy dependence on Russia—more worried than Germany or the EU themselves. As the U.S.’ chief trade partner and Western ally in many foreign policy questions, the U.S. can ill-afford to have Russia curtail the EU’s decision-making ability. While the EU itself has only marginally factored into the debate among the U.S. presiden-

tial contenders, it is a key to many foreign policy challenges and Brussels should be among the first capitals the new U.S. president plans to visit.

Conclusion

The transatlantic alliance is crucial in solving issues ranging from relations with Russia to the future of NATO. However, while the United States and Europe usually agree on the overall goal they do not always agree on measures to be taken to accomplish the tasks at hand. The member states of the European Union are also far from achieving a unified voice, especially as the Lisbon Treaty—designed to improve the EU in this regard—has been stalled, at least for the time being. Yet, even with formal structures in place, differences in interests and policies are likely to remain. Germany, as the largest and economically most powerful country in the EU, will continue to play an important role. Russian-German-American relations will also be on the agenda for some time to come. Regardless of who wins the U.S. election in November, the critical role German-Russian relations will play in the future, especially in relations with the EU, will have to be taken into account and evaluated in Washington. As Germany has an interest in maintaining good relations with Russia, to which it is increasingly

linked through energy and trade relations, it would like to see the U.S. engaged with Russia on issues such as NATO enlargement and missile defense systems rather than the current trend of antagonizing each other. As Russia is an important player in many wider-reaching global issues, transatlantic relations would be better served if Germany and the United States could come to an agreement on its stance vis-à-vis Russia. The same holds true with NATO. A shared understanding of NATO's role, mission, and the burden-sharing necessary to achieve those goals will be instrumental to the success of the organization. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, the U.S. still needs NATO and the new U.S. administration should work together with Europe in ensuring its success.

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The next two years are critical for German-American relations. With the presidential election in the United States in 2008 and the German parliamentary election in 2009, the political landscapes, priorities in domestic and foreign policies, and political actors are about to change. Key issues of interest to both countries include the war on terrorism, the war in Iraq, how to deal with Iran and North Korea, the relationships with China and Russia, and environmental issues such as global warming. These issues will be examined and reevaluated by the new leaders, perhaps assigning them a different importance than they currently carry. Regardless of what the future agenda will be and on which key issues both sides will have to focus their attention and resources, it is imperative that the United States and Germany come to an understanding about these issues and their comparable or diverging interests related to them. The German-American relationship remains one of the most crucial partnerships to address the issues confronting the world—especially with Germany as one of the most important players in Europe. This AICGS project analyzes current and future issues on the German-American agenda and will make recommendations to the new American administration. This project aims not only at understanding the key issues before us, but also at examining how the German-American relationship can be used to solve these issues or where German and American interests and views might diverge and how a potential confrontation can be avoided.

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