

In a Dissolving World Order, Europe and Germany Need a More Strategic Outlook

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With the power shift from U.S. global leadership to a bipolar world including a rising China, it looks like the jungle is returning to international relations, as Robert Kagan suggests. In this context, the question for Europe is whether it will choose the United States, its long-time partner, and the transatlantic relationship, or China, its long-time competitor and second-largest trading partner. And this at a moment when the perception that the United States is withdrawing from Europe has seriously damaged how Europeans see the country.

For example, public support for the transatlantic partnership in Germany is declining despite the seventy years of security and prosperity the transatlantic relationship has provided. According to the Körber Foundation, only 32 percent of Germans say the relationship between Germany and the United States is somewhat good. Nearly 52 percent are in favor of striving for more independence in defense matters. What is more, 50 percent say that there is a need for closer ties with the United States, while 24 percent advocate for closer ties with China and 18 percent are uncertain or see equidistance as an alternative.

At the same time, the days of European countries free riding on NATO security while promoting economic prosperity have ended. They must make a choice: in a climate of growing economic, political, and security challenges, Europe needs to decide whether to continue its dependence on the United States. The United States' re-evaluation of its alliances and commitments challenges Europe to take the torch to defend democracy in the transatlantic partnership.

Europe cannot lay claim to global leadership while relying on the United States for security. Can European countries muster the political will to reshape the transatlantic relationship and take responsibility for their own security? They have started addressing their deficit in military capabilities by strengthening their commitment to a common defense policy and by establishing new instruments of multilateral cooperation – including Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defense Fund, and the European Intervention Initiative. France is calling for strategic autonomy for Europe, including through the creation of a European army.

Other suggestions are being made. For example, Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations proposes more “strategic sovereignty,” in which EU member states exercise national sovereignty within a common European security policy. In this framework, individual countries could decide to meet their obligations toward a stronger EU alongside, rather autonomously from, the transatlantic partnership.

Such initiatives could make it possible for Europe to successfully execute a common foreign, security, and defense policy – and become more independent from the United States. EU law does not prevent member states from pursuing different security policies. But even though the initiative has been taken, there is no real debate about strategy in most EU member state, including the largest one.

For a More Strategic German Debate

The European Union and especially Germany – its most influential member economically and politically – need to find the political will to face the challenges of a dissolving world order. Member states must acknowledge the necessity of a long-lasting strategic debate in order to save the transatlantic relationship and the liberal values and stability of the European Union in a world that is succumbing to valuing “survival of the fittest” over cooperation.

It is unlikely that any meaningful debate on European security issues can be undertaken without Germany’s support and political will. But it has to deal with several obstacles in this regard: a historical lack of strategic thinking, a troubled history, constitutional independence of the ministries within coalition governments, and public reluctance to support an international leadership role.

Germany’s ambivalent response when the United States withdrew its troops from northern Syria was indicative. With no coordination with the foreign ministry, the conservative Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer proposed a security zone with contributions by the Bundeswehr. The social democratic Foreign Minister Heiko Maas responded quickly with his own initiative that undercut the authority of

the defense ministry. His party stated that the defense minister’s proposal was out of line. This shows how in a coalition government party politics can easily hinder a strategic debate, and makes the need for strategic foresight particularly clear.

Forming a Council on Strategic Foresight as an instrument of the parliament could foster the basis for a strategic debate in Germany. By discussing future scenarios and their implications as well as alternative actions before events have occurred, the tendency toward crisis management could be avoided and new possibilities opened up. This would create an atmosphere of action rather than reaction. At the same time, these debates would inform public opinion, influencing politics without encroaching on the policy-making process. A new German strategic culture, one that would focus on trends and their impacts on international politics, will be better able to anticipate concrete risks and opportunities and evaluate alternative options for policymakers.

Through such a council’s reports on global trends, scenarios, and action plans, the parliament could contribute to an ongoing, informed public debate on strategy and foreign and security policy. Regular committee hearings on strategic foresight would also ensure a transparent and informed discussion of the challenges facing Germany and the policies best suited to meet them. Inviting representatives of allied countries to these hearings would further create crosscutting European ideas as well as build trust between Germany and European partners.

In the short term, the creation of a Council on Strategic Foresight would inform politics of critical issues and lead to a more informed policymaking process in Germany, assuring voters that important topics are being discussed in the parliament. In the long term, it could change the country’s strategic culture into one that supports elites and politicians in conducting the necessary strategy for the country and Europe – either strengthening their values-based systemic partnership with the United States or fully rebuilding it.

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