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Prioritizing the Partnership: German-American Relations and the 45th President

BY JACKSON JANES AND PARKE NICHOLSON

Should the U.S. and Europe double down on achieving their policy priorities?

What issues must take priority in the coming years?

Should we create new structures to facilitate more in-depth, sustained policy interaction across the Atlantic?

Foreign policy issues are usually not the driving force behind election campaigns. Compared with the high-pitched debate over domestic issues, only the most pressing foreign policy concerns become part of the public discussion. Yet the upcoming U.S. elections in November will have an impact around the globe. This will be reflected in the decisions made that affect not only the United States, but also its key allies, including Germany.

Many Germans are paying close attention to the choice Americans will make in determining not only the next president, but also the direction of American foreign policy. As it has been in the past, the German-American relationship comprises one of the most important bilateral partnerships for both countries. Coming to grips with shared challenges and hard choices will be of mutual importance to both Berlin and Washington. Yet the equations of interests and priorities will be driven by intense domestic political debates as well as by turbulent—often unexpected—global developments. Both factors will shape the dialogue across the Atlantic in ways yet to be determined, and the choice of leaders will be decisive in charting the course ahead.

Eight years ago, on a hot summer day in Berlin, Barack Obama spoke to a quarter million Germans who came to hear and see “their” candidate for the presidency. When Obama won the election, millions of people outside the U.S.—but especially Germans—believed that the new president was truly one of their own.

President Obama made his final visit to Germany in April, and while he still remains popular as an iconic figure, the wave of enthusiasm has unquestionably waned. The thousands that appeared to hear him in Berlin in 2008 are now accompanied by many others protesting against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), U.S. intelligence snooping, the use of military force in the Middle East, or any other assorted grievances against the United States.

The international image of Obama has thus been replaced by the gradual realization that Obama is an American president like many before him, both empowered and constrained by

the dynamics of domestic politics and the requirement to protect the interests and fulfill the expectations of the American public while simultaneously meeting demands of the U.S. as a global superpower.

And those demands are many: Whether it be turmoil in the Middle East, the clash between Asian politics and American economic interests, the reappearance of Russia as an aggressive actor, threats of terrorism, global warming, or global financial meltdowns, the U.S. is inextricably engaged in the global arena at multiple levels. Even as American foreign policy must be globally-minded, the significance of transatlantic relations has been a cornerstone of U.S. interests and priorities for decades. And while that recognition has not been fundamentally altered through multiple presidencies, there are now currents steering the American and European publics' perceptions of interdependence. As Americans get ready to elect the 45th president of the United States in November, how transatlantic partners can mutually benefit, where their engagement is needed, and why this is essential are questions that need to be addressed by leaders on both sides of the ocean. More than twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some of the answers will—and perhaps must—change.

After Obama

During his eight years in office, President Obama has not drastically altered the shape and structure of transatlantic relations. Certain goals have remained steadfast: continuing a set of shared opportunities to enhance the economic network across the Atlantic, supporting the global governance institutions in which there is a mutual interest, and the commitment to enhancing security in a dangerous world. We also share the challenge of sustaining a consensus within our societies about those goals.

Yet what has changed in the transatlantic community are the questions about defining and sharing both the burdens and the responsibilities in pursuing those goals. So, too, has the degree of trust across the Atlantic changed, trust both in the coherence and consistency of U.S. foreign policy as perceived in parts of Europe and, in the U.S., in the perception of coherence and consistency of the European Union, including the EU's ability to sustain its own security and stability. This has to do with policy choices made on both sides of the Atlantic, some of which were the basis of conflicts—intervention in Libya or revelations by Edward Snowden—and others dealing with how to meet other challenges—global recession, climate change, and terrorism and its roots.

Seventy years after a war that devastated Europe and left the U.S. as the sole source of support, the equations of power and leadership are in flux. Today, the U.S. sees a global array of issues in which it has many interests—and recognizes the need for engaged partners to help in dealing with them. That is precisely what President Obama stated in April in Hannover,

when he said “We need a strong Europe to bear its share of the burden, working with us on behalf of our collective security. The United States has an extraordinary military, the best the world has ever known, but the nature of today's threats means we can't deal with these challenges by ourselves.”¹

Yet the next U.S. president will encounter domestic political trends throughout Europe that reflect a mix of uncertainty and anxiety, along with ambitions to strengthen and expand national and European capabilities. They will be paralleled by trends in the U.S. that reflect a desire to reduce engagement in Europe in the face of newly-powerful competitors elsewhere and amid a continual stream of crises in other parts of the world. While there are serious dangers in the European Union that might weaken the continent—the upcoming referendum in the UK over membership in the EU, the continuing refugee crisis, and lagging economic trends—there are also centrifugal forces of polarization in the American political discourse hampering effective policymaking, both domestic and international.

Political Headwinds

The transatlantic community can be seen as a multi-level success story with no comparison in the world. It is the source of millions of jobs generated by billions in trade and investment. It is also defined by two historically unique international alliances—NATO and the European Union—under whose roofs live close to a billion people.

But taking advantage of that success remains a stark challenge for leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, where political headwinds are strong. Chancellor Merkel faces serious pressure in the wake of the refugee crisis, the continuing economic malaise in Greece, and the ongoing stand-off with Moscow over Ukraine. The European Union is surrounded by forces that threaten to unravel the threads of European integration across the continent.

In the U.S., the economic, political, and security strategy that the country has pursued, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, is no longer a sacrosanct assumption in the politically-charged environment in Washington. It appears that the past fifteen years have led to an exhaustion of support for the liberal international order that the United States has engaged in building over the past seven decades—and from which the United States has benefitted greatly. Overall, we are seeing that the evolution of the larger framework of the global network of institutions and policies that have served the transatlantic community particularly well is not as clearly accepted in today's turbulent domestic debates.

The Choices Ahead

Yet the choices ahead are not about the demolition of the transatlantic bargain of interests and goals. They are about a recalibration of burden-sharing and power-sharing. There is

still a shared stake in seeking a path to stability in the arc of violence raging in the Middle East and parts of Africa. There is a shared challenge in the global refugee crisis requiring the pooling of resources. The response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe requires principal responsibility among the Europeans, supported with American engagement.

The lesson of history is that the United States cannot ultimately stand aside from European conflicts. Europe is simply too important to the United States—politically, economically, and culturally. Just how that fact can be best operationalized is a challenge for both European and American political leadership to meet and for domestic political debates to engage.

The lessons of the past eight years may have sobered Europeans and Americans alike in their evaluations of what can be expected from each other. For Germans and indeed all Europeans, the legacy of the Obama era may lie in the realization that the transatlantic dialogue will increasingly be defined by changing equations of shared burdens and responsibilities. While there is a serious concern that American foreign policy priorities are becoming less focused on Europe, there remains a gap in drawing the consequences of such a trend.

Regardless, there remain a number of pressing challenges for both the United States and Europe:

— Reforming global governance will be an important task for the next president. Rising economic powers such as China need to feel a greater stake in existing international institutions, while Western powers must also work with new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to ensure that they reinforce, rather than undermine, liberal economic norms.

— The revolution in energy has made the United States one of the world's leading suppliers, but also leaves open questions about the vulnerability of allies in Europe and Asia to some suppliers intent on manipulating markets.

— The transatlantic community must continue to deter aggression and remind would-be adversaries that they have the most to gain by integrating with the international order, rather than by trying to undermine it.

— Finally, Europe and the United States both need to adjust to becoming more, not less, welcoming to immigrants, as their skills and energy will be vital to the dynamism and innovation that sustains our economies.

There are also many choices for the next president as s/he implements his or her vision for U.S.-European relations:

— As CNAS Senior Fellow and AICGS Trustee Julianne Smith has testified before the U.S. Congress, the challenges

ahead may seem overwhelming, but “we cannot afford to lose sight of what we must fight to preserve” including Europe's prosperity, unity, and values.² Should the U.S. and Europe double down on achieving their policy priorities?

— In a speech in the Bundestag, Dr. Andreas Nick of the CDU described a range of German-American initiatives concerning energy and climate change, foreign and security policy, economic partnership, and governance of the internet.³ Which of these issues must take priority in the coming years?

— As former World Bank President Robert Zoellick argued in 2014, perhaps it really is time now for the United States and Germany “to launch a serious strategic dialogue about the changing world.”⁴ Should we create new structures to facilitate more in-depth, sustained policy interaction across the Atlantic?

— GMF President Karen Donfried and former German Ambassador to the U.S. and AICGS Trustee Wolfgang Ischinger have also pointed out that the German-American relationship “needs to be nourished by regular and vigorous policy debates at all levels, including among our publics” and that “the pursuit of common goals is not a given—it has to be built and tended.”⁵

For Americans, and indeed for the 45th president, the question in the coming year will be: What are realistic expectations of our European partners in dealing with global challenges? Currently, the belief in the American backstop makes European incoherence seem survivable. And as of now there is an American backstop. But Europeans would be wise to take more proactive measures to visibly assert their capacity for leadership under the next president, no matter who she or he is.

¹ The White House, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of Europe,” Hannover Messe Fairgrounds, Hannover, Germany, 25 April 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/25/remarks-president-obama-address-people-europe>

² Julianne Smith, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Strains on the European Union: Implications for American Foreign Policy,” 3 February 2016, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/Julie_SFRC-Testimony_FINAL.pdf

³ Antrag der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU und SPD, “Die transatlantischen Beziehungen zukunftsfest weiterentwickeln,” Deutscher Bundestag, 18. Wahlperiode, 12 April 2016, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/080/1808072.pdf>

⁴ Robert Zoellick, “Germans must show their country can still be a force for freedom,” *Financial Times*, 26 October 2014, <http://www.ft.com/>

⁵ Karen Donfried and Wolfgang Ischinger, “Trans-Atlantic Ties: It's Time to Rebuild Trust,” *Spiegel Online*, 4 June 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/editorial-on-need-for-new-transatlantic-dialogue-a-1037191.html>

As the American voters evaluate their choice for the White House on November 8, the debates over economic and foreign policy issues in the U.S. all through the campaign toward Election Day will reverberate well beyond the United States. This Issue Brief is part of AICGS' Annual Symposium in Germany, examining key issues at stake for the U.S. and Germany, including U.S. expectations of Germany and Europe; German and European expectations of the next President; foreign policy priorities and anticipated changes in foreign policy with a new American President; and areas of cooperation and conflict across the Atlantic in dealing with regional and global crises.

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Dr. Jackson Janes is the President of AICGS. Mr. Parke Nicholson is the Senior Research Associate at AICGS.

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1755 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036 – USA
T: (+1-202) 332-9312
E: info@aicgs.org
www.aicgs.org

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
American Institute
for Contemporary
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