

Back to team play German hopes for renewed co-operation with the USA

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Germany hopes that Joe Biden's upcoming presidency will contribute to restoring transatlantic bonds. It is pinning its hopes on both sides sharing a similar perception of the key challenges, the appreciation of the importance of alliances, and on the US returning to the use of multilateral instruments. German-American relations will no longer be burdened by the confrontational rhetoric and strictly transactional approach which were typical of the outgoing president. However, the political change in the United States will not remove the differences of positions and interests that underlie the main disputes between Berlin and Washington. Moreover, given the fact that both Democrats and Republicans were running neck and neck during the presidential race, Germany may modify its expectations with regard to the new American administration to become more realistic. German politicians have signalled their readiness to engage more in maintaining the partnership with the US, but whether they will be able to put these declarations into practice remains an open question, considering that elections to the Bundestag are due to be held next year. The main difficulty for Germany will be making adjustments in the area of security, mainly due to the German public's reluctance to increase spending on defence. Coordination of policy towards China will be an equally important challenge.

Hopes and concerns

When the electoral balance finally tilted decisively in favour of the Democrat candidate, Germany responded with clear relief. Amidst the coordinated wave of congratulations from European politicians on 7 November, Germany did not hide its joy at Biden's victory. In her statement on 9 November, Chancellor Angela Merkel included heartfelt congratulations not only to Biden but also to the new vice-president-elect Kamala Harris. At the same time, the absence of any mention of Donald Trump confirmed the high degree of irritation at the style

of his politics, as well as the deterioration of bilateral relations during his presidency. Critical opinion about the outgoing president was sealed by his comments after the election questioning whether his successor had been elected legitimately; in Berlin, these remarks were widely seen as a threat to social and political stability. The former foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) claimed Trump was accountable for the fact that the US had ceased to serve as a role model as the Western democracies' leading nation¹. German politicians fear the

¹ 'Ex-Außenminister Gabriel über die USA: „Wer so tief



political, economic and social consequences of the deepening political polarisation in the United States, and more broadly, the weakening of liberal democracy in a systemic clash with authoritarian states. The ongoing change is seen as a serious test for the US. Close attention has been paid to the reactions of Republican Party's representatives to Trump's allegations that the election was held incorrectly, as well as the radicalisation of some of his supporters.

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After four years of the 'America First' policy, Biden's victory was clearly the preferred scenario in Germany. Hopes were pinned on his deep commitment to transatlanticism and his outstanding experience, especially in foreign policy. The president-elect is characterised by an especially strong understanding of the benefits of multilateralism and an appreciation of the importance of alliances in pursuing US interests. The Democrat candidate's views were taken as a sign of an improvement in mutual relations.

The fact that the race between Biden and Trump during the presidential race was so close came as a surprise, and prompted German commentators to adopt more realistic forecasts and expectations. Considering the profound changes in US policy, it was not expected even in the preferred scenario of a Biden victory that the transatlantic relationship would return to the *status quo ante*, but the broad support for Trump undermined hopes for normalisation in a form convenient to Germany. There is a growing conviction that – given both the deep social divides and the balance of power in the Congress – the president-elect will have a limited room for manoeuvre. This also applies in the sphere of foreign relations, which has likewise become a subject of rivalry between Democrats and Republicans. At the same time, however, the two

parties share very similar views on the issues that are in dispute with Germany and the EU (China, Iran, Nord Stream 2). Given these circumstances, the new presidential administration's expectations towards America's European partners will not differ significantly from Trump's demands; they will just be expressed in a more friendly form. Moreover, German politicians reckon with the fact that, despite his interest in international issues, Biden may be forced to focus most of his attention and effort on the US's internal affairs.

As a result, an improvement in the atmosphere in mutual relations is expected: "Everything suggests that with President Biden, rationality, predictability and a spirit of partnership will be brought back to transatlantic relations"². Regardless of the frequently mentioned European dimension, Germany is above all interested in rebuilding its significance in US policy: it wants to be viewed as an equal partner. Germany may be supported in its efforts by Merkel's long tenure as chancellor and the fact that she has known Biden since he served as vice-president alongside Barack Obama (2009–2017). Germany probably also expects some form of compensation from the new administration for the deterioration of relations during Trump's presidency, as well as gestures marking a new beginning, e.g. making an official visit as soon as possible (Trump only visited Germany during the G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2017).

Showing initiative

Trump's presidency, which adopted a confrontational stance towards Berlin, provided a new context for Germany to reflect on the meaning of its partnership with the US. The growing catalogue of differences in transatlantic relationships has highlighted the costs and risks of the increasing distance between the two countries. At the same time, the limitations of German policy as regards actions taken separately from the United States, usually within the framework of

gespalten ist, fällt als Gestalter aus", Spiegel, 6 November 2020, www.spiegel.de.

² N. Röttgen, 'Joe Bidens Wahlerfolg rückt die USA wieder näher an Europa', Handelsblatt, 8 November 2020, www.handelsblatt.com.

European co-operation, were made evident. The election of Biden is seen as an opportunity for mutually beneficial joint action. Chancellor Merkel has declared that a proven trans-Atlantic friendship is necessary to face the key challenges of the pandemic, climate protection and terrorism, and also in order to maintain an open economy and free trade as the basis of prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic³. According to Olaf Scholz, Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister, who is also the SPD's candidate for the post of chancellor in the upcoming election, the US remains Europe's closest partner and ally on the global scale⁴. Most vocal in emphasising the significance of transatlantic partnership has been the defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer⁵.

According to German politicians, the election of Biden opens up a chance for the West to resume the previous spirit of team play. However, they admit that the renewal of the alliance also requires a change on the German, and more broadly, the European side. Merkel has highlighted the need for Germany to assume greater responsibility: the most important ally, the United States, legitimately expects both a stronger effort to ensure security and an international commitment to supporting its own beliefs. In this way the Chancellor showed understanding for the US's long-held expectations in the field of security policy, which accumulated in Trump's criticism on Germany's failure to fulfil its obligation to allocate 2% of its GDP to defence. Kramp-Karrenbauer has been pressing for Germany to meet its obligations as an ally towards the US, including at the federal budget level⁶. In turn foreign minister Heiko Maas (SPD) has stated that the increase in expenditure in this area will be a gradual process, and has emphasised that it is necessary to assume greater responsibility

in foreign and security policy in Africa and the Middle East⁷. For his part, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has appealed for German investments to strengthen Europe, which is necessary in order to maintain the US's interest in it⁸.

Even before the vote in the US, Maas insisted that Germany was ready to invest in co-operation and become more engaged in the partnership, formulating an offer of a new transatlantic beginning, a 'New Deal'⁹. He also promised that specific proposals would be presented concerning the approach to China, climate protection and overcoming the pandemic.

Germany is hoping for a reorientation of the US climate policy, but Biden will have limited room for manoeuvre as his party will not have a majority in the Senate.

The offer of co-operation covering a wide range of areas and the declarations of commitment may have been presented not only to improve relations in the short term with the United States, which have been strained over the past four years, but also to place these relations on a new footing that will be resistant to political turmoil¹⁰. The multitude of topics in the renewed co-operation agenda Germany has proposed is intended to enable it to remain flexible about setting priorities (e.g. combating the pandemic, dealing with climate change), while at the same time pushing security policy or US preferences in formulating a shared stance on China onto the backburner. This proactive approach to shaping future co-operation is also an expression of the expectation that Germany will be treated on equal terms as a partner, based on the belief that Biden needs alliances to enhance the US's potential for action,

³ Pressestatement von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel nach den Wahlen in den USA, Die Bundeskanzlerin, 9 November 2020, www.bundeskanzlerin.de.

⁴ O. Scholz, 'Wir werden Joe Biden beim Wort nehmen', Spiegel, 7 November 2020, www.spiegel.de.

⁵ Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Medienpreises der Steuben-Schurz-Gesellschaft, Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 23 October 2020, www.bmvg.de; see also A. Kramp-Karrenbauer, 'Europe still needs America', Politico, 2 November 2020, www.politico.eu.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ 'Außenminister Maas zum US-Wahlausgang: „Irgendwann muss auch Trump eine Entscheidung akzeptieren“', Spiegel, 8 November 2020, www.spiegel.de.

⁸ F.-W. Steinmeier, 'Deutschlands Chance', Frankfurter Allgemeine, 8 November 2020, www.faz.net.

⁹ 'Außenminister Maas zur Wahl in den USA', Pressemitteilung, Auswärtiges Amt, 7 November 2020, www.auswaertigesamt.de.

¹⁰ T. Kleine-Brockhoff, 'Wie Berlin Biden helfen kann', Frankfurter Allgemeine, 9 November 2020, www.faz.net.

since the country is now weaker than it used to be in the past.

The program for rebuilding mutual relations

In his first telephone conversation with Merkel on 10 November, the president-elect reportedly expressed his interest in close co-operation to address the common challenges of combating the pandemic, climate protection and global economic revival, and also declared his intention to renew transatlantic relations through co-operation with the EU and within NATO¹¹.

From the German perspective, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the United States' resuming its involvement in the work of the World Health Organisation, may be a quick test to check whether transatlantic co-operation can be revived.

Similarly, high hopes are pinned on a possible shift in US climate policy, the US being the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases after China. Biden has announced that he will rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and strive for climate neutrality by 2050. Investments supporting this goal should be a key element of the strategy for economic recovery in the post-pandemic period. Germany is counting that these declarations will have a political effect, hoping that this will encourage other countries to increase their efforts to reduce emissions. Furthermore, a positive impact is expected on co-operation between companies from both countries. Germany also believes that it is possible to start negotiations on creating a transatlantic emissions trading system¹². When it comes to legislation, however, the new president's ability to reorient climate policy will remain limited as his party will not have a majority in the Senate.

Germany is moderately optimistic about the prospects for economic co-operation during Biden's

presidency. It is assumed that he will not follow in the footsteps of his belligerent predecessor regarding trade policy, and that will translate into a better atmosphere of the negotiations – at the same time, however, criticism of Germany's trade surplus will not cease. A key task for the new administration will be to deal with the recovery of the US economy after the pandemic crisis. The Democrats' interest in retaining US public support during this period must be taken into account, and so Germany assumes that protectionist measures will continue, along the lines of the 'Buy American' slogan used in Biden's election campaign. Instead, Berlin is hoping for the functionality of the World Trade Organisation to be restored, particularly with regard to ending the blockade of nominations to the appellate body. It also sees opportunities for a common approach to WTO reform, mainly to improve the options for influencing China. Germany is interested in bringing a rapid end to the dispute over subsidies for aircraft manufacturers, Boeing and Airbus, and unlike the European Commission, it has been willing to give the new administration time to work out a position, without resorting to punitive tariffs. In Germany, there is still an interest in returning to negotiations on a broad trade agreement, although with a greater emphasis on agreeing common labour and environmental standards. The dispute over the taxation of global enterprises is likely to continue, which will hinder co-operation on business taxation reform within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Conflicts of interest will also emerge in the debate on the appropriate regulatory approach to technological development.

” From Berlin's perspective, coordination of policy towards China will be a major challenge.

The coordination of policy towards China constitutes a key element of the offer Germany has presented to the US¹³. At the same time, this issue

¹¹ 'Biden bezeichnet Trumps Verhalten als „peinlich“, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 10 November 2020, www.faz.net.

¹² O. Scholz, 'Wir werden Joe Biden beim Wort nehmen', *op. cit.*

¹³ See H. Maas, 'Es ist Zeit für einen transatlantischen Neuanfang', *Welt*, 25 October 2020, www.welt.de. Cf. N. Röttgen, 'Joe Bidens Wahlerfolg rückt die USA...', *op. cit.*

is becoming one of the most serious challenges they are facing. Given the intensifying rivalry between China and the US, Germany has tried to avoid being forced to clearly side with the US. Berlin may be more ready to take a more decisive stance on this issue now, since it has become more critical about the Chinese government's actions and sees the risk of China's growing dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. However, economic interests will still determine its position towards China, whose potential for German business is believed to be more promising than the US market. The consequences of the pandemic crisis may further strengthen this view. As a result German politicians, especially Christian Democrats, may make efforts to maintain a relative balance of security and economic interests. However, Germany will find it more difficult to avoid responding to US expectations, since the multilateral mechanisms and consultations that had been in abeyance under Trump will have resumed functioning. Germany will support the attempts by the EU and the US to agree on a common trade policy towards China, and will also take action to reform the WTO to this end. However, it will be reluctant to bear both the political and economic consequences of Washington's pressure on Beijing, which will not be eased by the Democrats, although at least it will result from other methods of action.

” The upcoming election campaign will not contribute to a rational public debate on Germany's greater engagement in the areas of security and defence.

Despite the change in the White House, Nord Stream 2 and the US sanctions on this project, which Berlin has rejected as a manifestation of an “attack on European sovereignty”, will likely continue to put a strain on US-German relations. Germany made efforts to prevent any further tightening of the restrictions hoping that negotiation conditions would improve in the event of victory for the Democrats. However, it was not assumed that the problem would be automatically resolved, because Democrats and Republicans alike have a negative assessment of the gas

pipeline, and Congress strongly supports the continuation of economic pressure. Biden too adopted a critical stance on the German-Russian co-operation in this area (“a fundamentally bad deal for Europe”). However, Germany hopes that the future president, by focusing primarily on the normalisation of relations, will be reluctant to impose sanctions on his allies and that, unlike with Trump, the export of American LNG will not be a priority for him. Supporters of the pipeline are counting on the Democrats to be more open to their arguments. Germany may try to soften the American position, in particular as part of the coordination of Western states' approach towards Russia which Biden has announced. Possible decisions to this end will be viewed as an indicator of the new administration's attitude to co-operation with Germany. Moreover, if the planned reduction of the US military presence in Germany is revoked, this would be an analogous measure of the renewal of US-German relations from Berlin's perspective.

Outlook

Biden's presidency gives Germany time to adapt to changes in US policy and, more broadly, to the transformation of the international environment to more favourable conditions than those offered by the Trump administration. However, this process – particularly with regard to the implementation of Germany's declaration of greater engagement in reviving of the transatlantic partnership – will clash with German political reality.

As Angela Merkel's long chancellorship nears its end, the race for the post of government leader has begun. The configuration of the coalition after next year's Bundestag elections will have a decisive influence on future modifications of foreign and security policy. Considering the relatively short period left until the elections, it is unlikely that German politicians will want to make any major changes in external relations, especially given the all-consuming struggle with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. For Chancellor Merkel, an auspicious start to co-operation with the new American administration could

serve as a symbolic accomplishment crowning her achievements in the field of transatlantic relations, especially since one of her main goals when she took office was improving relations with the US. For Germany's main political forces, however, the upcoming election will have an increasingly strong impact on how individual parties set their priorities. It is also possible that they will exploit the contentious issues in foreign policy in their political competition.

From Washington's perspective, the actual increase in Germany's military contribution will prove how serious the German declarations are. At the same time, the upcoming election campaign will not contribute to a rational public debate on Germany's greater involvement in the areas of security and defence. On the contrary, objections to a further increase in the defence budget should be expected; these will be justified in particular by the needs of the country's healthcare and education systems. Likewise, attempts to expand German military commitments regarding conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood may be heavily criticised. There will be another stage of the debate on the deterrence policy within NATO and on

German participation in nuclear sharing. The SPD will focus on the issues of arms control and disarmament policy. It is very likely that throughout the campaign the political parties will capitalise on the anti-American sentiments predominant among the German public which intensified during Trump's presidency. One indicator of the tone of next year's disputes may be the statements made by Rolf Mützenich, the chairman of the SPD parliamentary club, who has appealed for a stronger decoupling of Europe from the US.

Disillusionment with the United States may make Germany more open to the proposals for European autonomy formulated by President Emmanuel Macron. On the other hand, if US-German relations improve markedly, the differences of interests between Berlin and Paris may become more apparent. In the debate on the need to strengthen co-operation between European states in the face of the changes in the international environment, tension will intensify between supporters of the synergistic concept of 'strengthening Europe' and the revival of transatlantic relations on the one hand, and supporters of European autonomy on the other.