

## US-German clash over international order and security The consequences for NATO's Eastern flank

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This year's Munich Security Conference has laid bare the differences in the US and German visions of international order and security in speeches given by Chancellor Angela Merkel and US Vice President Mike Pence. Germany fundamentally disagrees with the Trump administration both on the paradigm of inter-state strategic competition with China and Russia (and Iran) and on the redefinition of the political, economic and military terms of the alliance with Europe. Berlin, aware of the growing challenges to European and global order and security, rejects the American 'peace through strength' policy, but at the same time has failed to present any real alternative. Merkel's defence of the multilateral approach and of the liberal international order (understood as shaping the policy with partners and allies, above all the USA, but also in dialogue with China and Russia) is not a viable alternative any more. Nor is developing comprehensive European strategic autonomy in the French spirit, independent of the United States. Berlin is still aware that the alliance with the USA form the foundations of German and European security and prosperity even if Washington is becoming an increasingly difficult partner and ally. Given the long-term domestic limitations that shape German foreign and security policy, it is difficult to expect any major change in Germany's in-between course in the coming years. The continued disagreements between the two biggest allies over key security issues will present an increasing challenge to NATO's Eastern flank countries.

### International order and the alliance with Europe according to the US

The Trump administration has given up the assumption that security and economic development can be achieved through co-operation in international relations, and treats strategic competition with global revisionist powers (China and Russia) and with regional rivals (North Korea and Iran) as its primary security concern<sup>1</sup>. The USA views China as its main global

competitor and wants to contain its growing influence by political, economic and military means. In Europe the USA wants to counter Russia in the first place but it also strives to restrict Chinese influence. This analysis of the strategic environment results in the return to the 'peace through strength' policy, i.e. maintaining a military advantage over strategic adversaries. This concept, mentioned also in Mike Pence's Munich speech, refers to Ronald Reagan's policy in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>. By adopting this paradigm

<sup>1</sup> M. A. Piotrowski, B. Wiśniewski, *The U.S. National Security Strategy: The Trump Administration's Approach*, 'PISM Bulletin', 21 December 2017, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-128-1068#>; M. A. Piotrowski, *Changes in the Main Assumptions of the U.S. National Defense Strategy*, 'PISM Bulletin', 26 January 2018, <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-14-1085#>

<sup>2</sup> Mike Pence, *Remarks by Vice President Pence at the 2019 Munich Security Conference*, 16 February 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2019-munich-security-conference-munich-germany/>

in international relations, Washington recognises that it is necessary to reform the political, economic and military foundations of its global dominance and to adjust the existing international order to US needs and interests. This also involves a revision of trade agreements, treaties and a reform of existing alliances<sup>3</sup>.

**The USA expects the European allies to increase their military potential and thus to adjust to the changing global balance of power.**

The USA is thus redefining the terms of political, economic and military co-operation with Europe (amongst others). On the political level, the Trump administration is questioning the value of the multilateral approach in relations with its European allies. It no longer wants to play the role of a benign hegemon, and is increasingly insisting they adjust to the US policy, pursuant to the America First approach<sup>4</sup>. With regard to economic relations, Washington wants to improve terms of trade with the European Union and is even ready to resort to a trade war to achieve its goals. On the military level, the USA expects the European allies to increase their military potential and thus to adjust to the changing balance of power and to support the US-led deterrence policy in Europe (and partly in the Asia-Pacific region). It also counts on their increased engagement in combating terrorism in the European neighbourhood. Another issue is Washington's insistence on increasing European pressure on Iran, and on EU member states to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Tehran.

From the US point of view, Europe is the playground for strategic competition above all with Russia. Thus the Trump administration has strengthened the investments commenced by President Obama in improving the defence and deterrence in Europe. The US military presence in Europe is expanding thanks to the increased budget for the *European Deterrence Initiative* (from US\$3.4 billion in 2017 to US\$6.5 billion in 2019). It includes an intensified US rotational military presence, participation in exercises and investments in military infrastructure (air and naval bases and training grounds) – all this not only on the Eastern flank but also in Norway and Germany (amongst other countries). At the same time, the USA is pressing NATO allies to increase: defence spending, the readiness of European armed forces, and the military presence of Western European countries on the Eastern flank. If not for Washington's pressure, the decision to deploy NATO battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland would have been hardly possible. The NATO Readiness Initiative, as part of which member states have committed to increase the readiness of at least part of their forces, was also adopted by NATO as a result of US pressure<sup>5</sup>.

Strategic competition in Europe is also taking place in the economy. From Washington's point of view it is essential to oust both Russian and Chinese influence from areas of key significance for security, while at the same time strengthening the US economic position in Europe. This stance has been manifested in strong US pressure on Germany (on halting the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline) and on the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing countries, France and Germany and Central Eastern Europe (on excluding Chinese participation in investments

<sup>3</sup> Mike Pompeo, a speech during the GMF in Brussels: *Restoring the Role of the Nation-State in the Liberal International Order*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/12/287770.htm>

<sup>4</sup> "Multilateralism has too often become viewed as an end unto itself" – Mike Pompeo in his speech in Brussels; see footnote 3.

<sup>5</sup> As part of the NATO Readiness Initiative adopted during the NATO Summit in Brussels in July 2018, the allies undertook to increase the readiness of their armed forces. They are expected to be capable of deploying 30 mechanised battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels within 30 days. These troops would be tasked with – in case of conflict in the region – strengthening the NATO Response Force (NRF).

in the 5G networks). US Vice President Mike Pence in Munich repeated the message from the Trump administration that Washington cannot ensure the defence of the West if US allies grow dependent on the East (China and Russia).

## Germany and the new US paradigm

Germany fundamentally disagrees with the Trump administration both on the paradigm of strategic competition with China and Russia and on the redefinition of the political, economic and military terms of the US alliance with Europe. In her speech in Munich<sup>6</sup> Chancellor Merkel demonstrated this stance and defended the German vision of international relations and Berlin's security policy. Her speech needs to be read also in the context of growing US pressure (also linked with the departure of pro-Transatlantic officials from the Trump administration such as Gen. James Mattis).

First of all, Germany does not want to brand Russia and China as strategic rivals because it is not ready to embrace the political, economic and military consequences of this approach. It sees the need to counteract those Chinese and Russian policies and activities that are harmful to German and European interests but in general it believes that it is necessary to develop 'multilateral' compromise solutions that will create the basis for peaceful coexistence and economic development. In the case of Russia, Germany is ready to continue supporting the EU sanctions against Moscow for violating international law (the annexation of Crimea) and even to impose stricter sanctions in case the situation in Ukraine escalates. It is also ready to increase, to a certain extent, military spending and engagement in NATO's defence and deterrence policy, including the Bundeswehr's pres-

ence in Lithuania and participation in the NATO Response Force. At the same time, Germany continues to emphasise that the NATO-Russia Founding Act is still binding; this is aimed at restricting NATO's (and the US's) military presence on the Eastern flank to avoid 'antagonising' Russia. Berlin does not want the USA and NATO to make a firm, symmetrical response to the development and deployment of the Russian land-based missile systems violating the INF Treaty; it has emphasised the need for dialogue on arms control (although it seems also to be ready to reinforce NATO's deterrence posture to a limited extent). Germany also sees no reason for restricting its economic relations with Russia (where the EU sanctions do not apply).

## Germany is not ready to embrace the political, economic and military consequences of the American 'peace through strength' approach.

Chancellor Merkel in Munich defended Germany's engagement in the Nord Stream 2 project with the bizarre argument that NS2 can be used as an instrument to prevent Russia's growing dependence on China. She emphasised at the same time the need to diversify the sources of gas supply to Germany and Europe – also through LNG imports from the USA. In the case of China, Germany also disagrees with the US paradigm of strategic competition with Beijing. Even though it sees China's economic policy increasingly as a challenge and protects its own interests in a more assertive manner, it believes that the West's response to China's growing power should be found in dialogue and not in confrontation with China. The German government is currently discussing its 5G strategy, which will serve as a litmus test for German policy towards China (and the USA).

Berlin views the Trump administration's redefinition of the political, economic and military

<sup>6</sup> Angela Merkel, *Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zur 55. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz am 16. Februar 2019 in München*, 16 February 2019, <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-zur-55-muenchner-sicherheitskonferenz-am-16-februar-2019-in-muenchen-1580936>

terms of the alliance with Europe as an equally fundamental problem for US-German relations. Politically, the unilateralism practiced by the Trump administration – acting without consulting its allies – or even disregarding them – and expecting them to adjust to the US policies – is unacceptable for a Germany which had been the key European partner of the United States in international policy during the Obama administration. Economically and militarily, Germany is Trump's target due to its largest economy in the EU that maintains a trade surplus with the USA, and for its weakest military amongst the largest European allies. This approach from the Trump administration is a major threat to the position of Germany in international relations that is based on trade, diplomacy and dialogue. For all these reasons, dislike and even hostility towards the Trump administration is growing among the German political elite, as manifested in the very cool reception of US officials in Munich. Thus Berlin is investing in co-operation with the Democratic Party which seem to favour the German approach to international relations to a greater degree.

**Berlin is nevertheless aware of the fact that NATO and co-operation with the USA form the foundation of European security.**

While rejecting the political goals and means employed by the Trump administration, Germany is still aware of the fact that NATO and co-operation with the USA form the foundation of German and European security. For this reason Berlin is not ready to support a full-fledged strategic alternative to the alliance with the USA, i.e. developing a comprehensive EU strategic autonomy independently of the USA, which France is interested in. However, it does support the development of an EU security and defence policy, as was emphasised by Merkel in Munich. A full strategic autonomy of the EU

would entail political, industrial and military consequences. This would also intensify the pressure on Germany to enhance its military capabilities and would raise the issue of European nuclear deterrence. This, as with the adoption of a more assertive security and defence policy with regard to Russia and China, is still very unlikely in the case of Berlin.

**Germany's response:  
a strategy or no strategy?**

Germany's response to the Trump administration's paradigm, repeated by Chancellor Merkel in Munich, is an appeal to defend the 'liberal international order' based on multilateralism understood as shaping the policy jointly with partners and allies, above all the USA, but also in dialogue with China and Russia. Paradoxically, in the changing strategic environment such a non-confrontational approach does not imply the defence of the liberal *status quo* but it rather enables a regulated transition from the dominance of the West under US leadership to a multi-polar world with growing Chinese and Russian influence. Both China and Russia see the readiness for dialogue and the lack of a tough stance as a weakness of the West which should be exploited to challenge the global and European order underwritten by US political, economic and military power. This German approach – which is viewed by some experts as a desire to 'return to the past' or as a lack of strategic thinking and a refusal to see a new strategic reality – is conditioned by domestic limitations that shape German foreign and security policy. Since these are long-term, any major change in German policy is unlikely to happen even after Chancellor Merkel leaves office. The German security and defence policy was, is and to an increasing extent will be the subject of controversy and an inter-party deadlock that will continue to restrict Berlin's room for manoeuvre in NATO and in the EU. Significant developments in the German security

and defence policy have depended to a high degree on a cross-party consensus, which will be hard to reach with the governing coalition parties taking increasingly divergent positions.

**The German attitude towards the new US paradigm is partly conditioned by domestic limitations that shape German foreign and security policy.**

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose support level has fallen below 20%, is redefining its political agenda. There are many indications that it will be focused on social issues with intensified pacifist rhetoric. The inter-party stalemate is best illustrated by the recent discussions on defence spending and on the suspension of the INF Treaty. While generally recognising the need to allocate 2% of GDP to military spending the Christian Democrats support a more realistic increase of the German defence budget to 1.5% of GDP by 2024. German government presented these plans to NATO in January this year. They were then questioned in public by the Social Democratic Minister of Finance, who stated that, considering the expected slow economic growth in the coming years, these promises would most likely not be kept. The Green Party and the Left Party are also opposed to increasing defence spending. The stances on the suspension of the INF Treaty are similarly split. The Christian Democrats, and in particular the CSU, want Germany and NATO to act more decisively. However, the CDU does not want a symmetric response from NATO (i.e. a deployment of land-based intermediate-range missile systems); the SPD focuses on commencing talks on disarmament and arms control between the USA, Russia and China almost entirely excluding other options. Regardless of this, the FDP has accused the Social Democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs of making insufficient efforts to encourage the partners to start this dialogue.

Additionally, there is the Green Party, whose representatives insist that Germany should join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and that US nuclear weapons should be withdrawn from Germany.

The diverging stances adopted by the key political parties, the anti-Trump sentiments among the German elites, the presentation of the Trump administration in the German media as the greatest threat to Germany, and the lack of clear message from the government on the importance of the relations with the USA – all this results in the aggravation of the anti-American sentiments among the German public. Germans are hardly aware of the significance of the alliance with the USA for their country's security and economic development. This is illustrated by the results of public opinion polls that were published in the Munich Security Report 2019. Germans think that United States' power and influence is a major threat to their country (49% of respondents), and to a lesser extent China's (33%) and Russia's (30%). Likewise, more Germans have confidence in Vladimir Putin (35%) and Xi Jinping (30%) than in Donald Trump (10%)<sup>7</sup>. This has also been proven by a poll conducted in February this year for the ARD television broadcaster: only 24% of respondents recognise the USA as a trustworthy partner, while 28% of Germans recognise China as such, and 35% are ready to trust Russia<sup>8</sup>.

Germany's political options in foreign and security policy are also limited by problems in reforming and modernising the Bundeswehr. A report from the Parliamentary Armed Forces Commissioner presented in January this year<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Munich Security Report 2019, *The Great Puzzle: Who will Pick Up the Pieces?*, February 2019, <https://www.securityconference.de/en/publications/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2019/>

<sup>8</sup> ARD-DeutschlandTrend, *Mehrheit sieht Grundrente positiv*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Bundestag, *Wehrbeauftragter beklagt „Überorganisation“ in der Bundeswehr*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw05-wehrbericht/589712>

once again showed the extremely slow tempo of improving the situation in the German military. Insufficient funding is not the only reason. In the report, the Bundeswehr was called a 'bureaucratic monster' being consumed by excessive regulation and funds mismanagement leading to much higher spending on modernisation programmes than necessary. The availability of arms and military equipment has improved only to a small extent after years of austerity and so-called 'dynamic management' which in fact meant incomplete equipment and limiting spare parts supply. The German land forces will have (only) one fully modernised and equipped mechanised brigade operationally ready as late as in 2023. This is a good illustration of the state of affairs but at the same time it does not mean that the Bundeswehr is totally defunct. Regardless of all the problems, it is able to maintain around 3,000 soldiers on out-of-area crisis management missions and operations (around 1,000 in Mali and Afghanistan each) and around 500 soldiers in Lithuania as part of NATO deterrence efforts on the Eastern flank. In autumn 2018, 8,000 Bundeswehr soldiers took part in NATO's collective defence exercise (Trident Juncture 2018) in Norway. However, the German Armed Forces' capabilities of conducting conventional operations are and will remain limited. Coupled with the approach of German political elite and public sentiments, all this means that Russia will never see Germany as a country able to develop a reliable defence and deterrence policy without US political and military engagement in Europe.

### **Changing paradigms and NATO's Eastern flank**

The Trump administration's paradigm of strategic competition, coupled with the redefining of alliances, is opening up new opportunities to the Eastern flank countries (Poland, the Baltic states and Romania), but it also generates challenges. On one hand, the US perception of Russia as a geopolitical rival of the West is in

line with the analysis presented by these countries already before 2014. Thus the US pressure on Europe to curb Russian influence (e.g. with regard to NS2) supports the position of Poland, the Baltic states and Romania in the EU.

### **The increasingly strained relations between Washington and Berlin are not beneficial to NATO's Eastern flank countries.**

On the other hand, the Trump administration's scepticism about the multilateral approach offers new opportunities to enhance bilateral co-operation and to increase the US military presence on the Eastern flank. From a regional perspective more US engagement strengthens defence and deterrence in the region and does not undermine NATO, contrary to the opinion shared across Western Europe. Countries like Poland are thus ready to invest in bilateral relations with the USA in order to reinforce regional security. However, this bilateral approach also entails challenges, such as a growing dependence and susceptibility to pressure from an increasingly difficult ally, which Washington is becoming. Questions also arise regarding whether such a bilateral relationship will continue with the next US administration after Trump.

However, neither the German multilateral approach nor the European strategic autonomy concept promoted by France offer a real alternative to guaranteeing European and regional security. Without the US, Germany (and Europe) are unable to develop a reliable defence and deterrence policy vis-à-vis Russia. Furthermore, Germany is ready – while totally disregarding the stance and interests of the Eastern flank countries – to implement economic projects (NS2) that enhance Moscow's political and business influence in Germany and that undermine the region's energy security. In turn, France preaches the need to develop European strategic autonomy in security and defence

but focuses entirely on strengthening the EU's capabilities for crisis management and by no means views collective defence as being part of it. Neither Germany nor France is willing to accept any other perspectives in European foreign and security policy beside their own, and the arrangements made by the German-French tandem – regardless of all the differences between the two countries in this area – are meant to be binding for the entire EU. This approach limits the room for manoeuvre for the Eastern flank countries as regards real participation in debates on European security and in the decision-making process in the EU. It is also far from the multilateral paradigm that Berlin preaches in relations with the USA.

The increasingly strained relations between Washington and Berlin are not beneficial to

NATO's Eastern flank countries – in a situation when they are militarily dependent on co-operation with the USA but politically and economically belong to the European Union, where Berlin holds the dominant position. These countries, including Poland, do not want a further escalation of the divides inside NATO. Therefore they are currently emphasising the need to develop a joint response by the allies to the end of the INF Treaty and are interested in Berlin's increased military spending and readiness to enhance NATO's deterrence posture in order to reduce Transatlantic tensions. At the same time they see the need to develop an EU security and defence policy that would strengthen the European military potential but not in opposition to the USA, and also in line with their own security concerns.

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