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German-American Relations under the Joe Biden Presidency

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Chancellor Angela Merkel meets then-Vice-President Joseph R. Biden in Berlin, 2013

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Introduction

It is over. Donald Trump has lost. After four years of chaos, the self-declared saviour of America failed to convince the voters in key states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania to grant him another term. Their choice will have a significant impact on German-American relations.

President-elect Joe Biden campaigned on nothing less than restoring the soul of the American nation. The new administration faces a raging pandemic and a troubled economy, much like the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Biden's foreign policy will be substantially different from Trump's. After years of troubled relations with one of America's most important allies, Biden will have to try to re-engage with Germany. Berlin ought to be prepared.

A New Beginning

Germany obviously has to deal with anyone who occupies the White House but seen from Berlin, the Biden victory is a welcome chance for a new beginning in US-German relations. Over in Germany, President Trump was perceived as unreliable and often outright hostile. He was also extraordinarily unpopular among ordinary Germans. While 86% of Germans had confidence in then-President Barack Obama, just 10% thought Trump would do the right thing.¹ That lack of personal popularity also made Germans turn against the US as a whole. Between 2016 and 2020, the share of Germans who have a favourable view of America more than halved from 57% to 26%. Trump's approval numbers are even lower than those of George W. Bush in the years of the German-American rift over the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.²

Germans are unlikely to be as enthusiastic about the new President-elect as they were about Obama (due to his old age and the relative disenfranchisement that liberal Germans experienced when they learned that the Obama presidency could not fulfil the idealist objectives of their time properly). However, there is every reason to believe that Biden is going to be much more popular than Trump. A poll recently found that 80% of Germans believe that German-American relations will improve under President Biden. Just 1% think the opposite.³ This matters a great deal for transatlantic relations. It was difficult for German politicians to be seen as "pro-American" under Trump because there was always the fear that they would be seen as "pro-Trump." Given voters' intense dislike for him, that was something to be avoided at all costs. This risk is going to diminish somewhat under President Biden. Still, the damage his predecessor has done to the public perception of the US as a beacon of hope and democracy, a "city upon a hill" as it were in international relations, is a strong burden. Moreover, in the past four years, those who – by upbringing or politicization – were critical of America, anti-Americanists even, have had the upper hand in the public discourse.

Temperament and worldview aside, the new administration is going to be much more aligned with Berlin on a number of important policy issues. Biden takes climate change seriously. Unlike Trump, Biden is a strong supporter of NATO as an idea and as a policy enabler. Earlier this year, he called NATO "the most effective political-military alliance in modern history."⁴ This is a drastic change from the man who said NATO was obsolete. While Trump has repeatedly praised Russia's strongman Vladimir Putin, President-elect Biden has referred to Russia as the greatest threat facing

¹ Wike, R./Fetterolf, J./Mordecai, M. (2020) "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly," *Pew*, 15 September, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

² *ibid.*

³ Ehni, E. (2020) "Klare Mehrheit zu Impfung bereit," *Tagesschau*, 12 November, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend-2403.html>.

⁴ Biden, J.R. (2020) "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

America.⁵ Importantly, he sees the European Union as a project worthy of support, not an enemy who is out to get America.

Old Problems

Biden will undoubtedly seek to improve German-American relations. Unsurprisingly and most fundamentally, America will continue to look to the Indo-Pacific rather than Europe because it is forced to deal with an overtly aggressive China. Consequently, Germans will inevitably have to do more for their own security. Sad as it may be, this sentence has been used so often that any constructive ideas pale in comparison, and simply funnelling more money into defence budgets hardly does the trick at all. As China becomes more of a direct challenge, Americans will also expect German help. German policymakers have already modified their view of the Chinese Communist Party but the Biden administration will undoubtedly push Berlin to do more when it comes to issues like 5G or East Asian security. Germany, traditionally loathe to let politics get in the way of business, will be very reluctant to take sides in a conflict among two of its largest trade partners. In addition, Berlin has its hands full trying to navigate European political quagmires and those stemming from the European periphery. The South China Sea, in more than one way, is a long way from the German plains.

China aside, there are plenty of policy areas in which the US and Germany will continue to disagree long after Trump leaves office. Biden opposes Nord Stream 2, the gas pipeline linking Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea, just like almost every other American policymaker of note. The German government has threatened to change its stance on Russia and the nexus of politics and economic interests after Alexey Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent, but it is unlikely to follow through. Frustration over Germany's low defence spending and reluctance to take on

meaningful additional responsibilities is bipartisan and far from limited to Trump's inner-circle, or Republicans in general. The Biden White House will articulate those frustrations differently, but the fundamental disagreements will continue to exist.

The past years of Trumpian foreign policy have masked the extent to which Germany itself is a factor of uncertainty in transatlantic relations. A large part of the immediate future of bilateral relations will depend on German domestic politics. Lack of popular support for military interventions, for example, mean that the German government is heavily constrained when it comes to taking on more responsibility in Europe's neighbourhood. Anti-Americanism is another constant issue and one that has grown worse throughout Trump's term. Some analysts have also warned of the risk of Germany becoming too comfortable again once the US reverts to being a reliable partner. Others have made the opposite argument: That it is going to be easier for German politicians to do more once Trump is out of office because they do not risk being seen as following Trump's "orders." It is difficult to tell what will happen next, but there is little doubt that Trump's behaviour encouraged the German government to take its own security more seriously. The national security consensus in the aftermath of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, however, will have to be renegotiated.

Germany is set to hold six important regional elections and, most importantly, federal elections in 2021. Chancellor Angela Merkel, long an anchor of stability in transatlantic relations, will step down from power after 15 years. Foreign policy rarely plays a dominant role in German elections but it is certainly conceivable that some of the more controversial topics in German-American relations will be used by politicians for electoral gain. We might see German politicians rally against "American orders for higher defence spending", for example. It is unclear which government will replace

⁵ Reuters (2020) "Kremlin accuses Joe Biden of spreading hatred of Russia with threat talk," *Reuters*, 26 October, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-kremlin-idUSKBN27B13B>.

the current Grand Coalition between centre-left SPD and centre-right CDU/CSU. At this point, we do not even know who the next leader of the Christian Democrats will be. The most likely scenario is a coalition between CDU/CSU and the Greens. That coalition would almost certainly create significant challenges for German-American relations when it comes to areas like defence spending, use of force or nuclear sharing.

Making the Most of It

So, what should Germany do to make the most of the Biden presidency? Here are some recommendations:

1. Accept the Structural Shift

Germans need to understand that there is no going back. President Biden will not be like Obama and even Obama was not actually as Germans imagined him to be. While Biden might be invested personally in Germany and Europe, the shift of American attention to Asia is structural. Europe's weight will continue to decrease in Washington. This shift should be fundamental to Berlin's plans for the future.

2. Avoid Complacency

The biggest mistake Germany could make is complacency. The election was way too close for comfort and someone like Trump might well be elected again. The endless debate between Europeanists and staunch defenders of the transatlantic relationship is largely unproductive. Germans will have to do more for their security either way so they should put their time and energy into debating concrete ways to do just that. Germany will need to increase defence spending and do more of the things that Americans used to do for them. Berlin should communicate to the incoming administration that it understands as much and get on with it. With Trump in office, Germans could always say that they would like to take the initiative and compromise with their American allies but that he was simply too unreasonable for either. With Biden in office, that is over. There are no more excuses for Berlin.

3. Get Quick Wins

German leaders like Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) have already stressed that they are ready to approach Team Biden with concrete proposals on areas in which the US and Germany can deepen their cooperation. Climate change is a perfect example of an area in which Germany and America have strongly overlapping interests. Working together on specific projects in areas like this can highlight that both sides are serious about moving beyond speeches and declarations. If done correctly, such quick wins can regenerate trust and create momentum to overcome more controversial differences.

4. Offer Cooperation on China

The elephant in the room is China. Germany has vast business interests in China and Berlin does not want to hurt its economy. However, recent Chinese aggression has substantially changed how the regime is seen in Berlin. It is no longer simply a market for German cars and machinery, it is a geopolitical rival which seeks to undermine the liberal international order upon which Germany's position in the world depends. Biden's focus on including allies means that China represents an obvious opening for German-American cooperation.

5. Level with Citizens

Many high-ranking German politicians are unwilling to level with ordinary voters when it comes to foreign policy. As a result, plenty of Germans have an entirely unrealistic view of international politics and Germany's role in the world. That was possible over the last couple of decades because Berlin could rely on others to look after it and its core interests. Looking forward, this is not going to work because German leaders will have to make some very tough decisions on issues like defence spending or the use of force. It will be difficult and cost votes but now is the right time for honesty.