

Merkel and Trump: The Dangers Besetting a Weak Atlantic

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US and German domestic politics are lurching toward a head-on collision. In the wake of his first trip to Europe, Donald Trump was basically speaking for the benefit of his own electorate when he said that he had "won" all the important challenges at the NATO and G-7 tables. If that is his approach, then it is almost a foregone conclusion that Trump will soon be announcing the United States' withdrawal from the Paris climate accord. His decision is not actually going to have much of an impact on the reduction of emissions in the United States because that reduction will continue anyway for economic reasons (coal is priced out of the market) and technological reasons (the combination between shale gas and renewable energy sources).

There is, however, going to be a political impact, confirming that the US President has no intention of being bound by multilateral agreements that he considers to be useless or damaging to the US economy. The price of his stance is that Washington will forgo exercising global leadership, a move which may delight China and Russia but which is a source of concern for the Europeans. In the eyes of the man who puts "America first," this is a price he can live with, but for Angela Merkel, on the other hand, it marks the end of an era based on unquestioned trust in Atlantic relations. The German Chancellor, also speaking for the benefit of her own electorate, said that Europe is going to have to get by on its own, taking its destiny into its own hands.

The – at least temporary – rift between the West's two capitals is the real risk in this phase. The relationship between Europe and the United States has been based since the end of the Cold War on the solidity of the bond between the United States and Germany, bolstered by robust British support that we are now in danger of losing. It is true, if we look at recent history, that there has been no lack of deep disagreement, from the rift over the Kyoto Protocol (with the United States opposed to international constraints in the environmental sphere) to Germany's opposition to the war in Iraq. But things had never gone too far. Neither of the two sides had ever explicitly voiced a lack of confidence in the other. Yet that is what is happening today.

Donald Trump's reiterated criticism of Germany's trade policy – a surplus that he argues is damaging the US economy – finally sparked an irritated response from Angela Merkel, proving that mutual estrangement is now considered a winning card in the domestic political arena on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus the tie with the United States has now become a factor in the German election campaign in much the same way as post-Brexit euroskepticism was a factor in the US presidential campaign. Indeed it is no mere coincidence that Social Democratic Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has leveled even more direct criticism at Trump than the Chancellor, arguing that the US Administration's shortsighted policies are damaging Europe's interests and making the West "weaker."

Some people interpret the current clash between the United States and Germany as a modern variant of the old geopolitical clash between maritime powers and land-based powers. For a post-Brexit Europe in which Germany's leadership is an inevitable fact of life, that would be a risky scenario. It would translate into a latent conflict between the Atlantic world and Eurasia. Then there are those who, far less dramatically, downplay the present crisis to the status of a mere parenthesis in history caused by the absence of personal chemistry between Donald Trump and Angela Merkel amplified by their respective domestic fronts. So between an alarmist view and a more reassuring interpretation, it might be an idea to establish a few clear index markers.

First: following the end of the bipolar system, it was only natural that ties between Washington and Berlin should loosen. One might almost say that the post-Cold War era is starting a few decades late. There can be no question that Europe must finally shoulder its own international responsibilities. The point, however, is that it should have done so long ago, not as a result of a rift with Trump's United States. If German Europe were to built "against" the United States, it would overbalance too far to the east and it simply would not hold out. It would break up from the inside.

Second: a Europe capable of taking its fate into its own hands certainly means a more autonomous Europe, a Europe less dependent on Washington. This is a necessary development but it is not, in itself, an easy thing to achieve in view of role traditionally played by the United States as a political prop for the European Community.

Yet Europe is still going to need NATO for security reasons; the alternative would be a totally independent defense capability, but that is an inconceivable scenario in the short term and it raises the question of control over nuclear weapons (with France now being the only EU member state to own them).

Third: there certainly exist differences both of vision and of interests within a Western alliance that was forged after World War II. Those differences should be addressed rationally and without overdramatizing the situation. Yet the United States and Germany sit at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum within NATO, with Germany being a new trade-based and "multilateralist" power (for which international law and the international institutions are of central importance) while the United States is a superpower vacillating between global leadership and a unilateral or nationalistic inclination. Economic ties are more important than ever, but rather than uniting, they divide: we should not forget that the TTIP – the prospective transatlantic treaty on trade and investments – ran aground in Berlin well before it did so in Washington.

Against this backdrop, cooperation between Europe and the United States is bound to become sectoral and interest-based. The phase of ideological Atlanticism is now most emphatically behind us. Yet it is in Europe's interest to keep alive its preferential tie with the United States because the alternatives are in every instance a far worse prospect.

Words are important, and in this new era of international disorder it is worthwhile using them correctly. The exchanges between Donald Trump and Angela Merkel highlight the problems in the old Atlantic relationship, but they have gone beyond the common interest, which is to keep an efficient relationship alive. Trump openly rooted for Europe's disintegration in the course of his election campaign, and that is a scenario which only Vladimir Putin envisions with glee. Angela Merkel, for her part, questioned the Atlantic tie's credibility, and that is a hypothesis that Europe cannot afford. A more balanced approach was called for by Italy, with its mediation at the G-7 summit on the issue of international trade, and by Emmanuel Macron. In the view of the young French President (who recently held his first meeting with Putin), a politically stronger and more integrated EU will also be capable of establishing pragmatic ties with the United States and of containing Russia's interference.

The United States and Germany may no longer be the allies they were back in the days of the Cold War, but the United States and Europe must continue to be preferential partners. As the G-7 summit proved, the Western democracies are meeting part of the global challenges they face in different ways. Yet only if these national formulas do not end up totally in thrall to a "zero sum" rationale will the Atlantic tie hold out, also keeping in check the current tension between Washington and Berlin.