

USA: THE EUROPEAN PARTNER IN CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

The transatlantic partnership between the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) is considered fundamental to their foreign policy by all EU member states. Germany, for instance, regards the USA as its closest ally outside Europe.¹ While the USA maintains bilateral relations with numerous countries around the world, the transatlantic partnership remains a very important mainstay of U.S. foreign policy.² Consequently, the USA is looking upon Europe's current challenges with concern.



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There is a belief in the USA that Europe is caught in a deep crisis. There are increasing concerns that the multiple challenges could be weakening, or even destabilising, its strategic partner, Europe. After it took tough negotiations to save Greece from having to leave the euro, there are growing doubts in the USA about the EU's fundamental governmental structure. These doubts are currently being fuelled by Europe's response to the refugee crisis. Particularly in U.S. government circles, there is an opinion that the lack of strong institutions to implement political decisions is now taking its toll and making itself felt in the EU's increasing inability to take effective action.

However, the USA still has a great interest in a strong and stable partner on the other side of the Atlantic, in a Europe that has the traditional characteristics of being "whole, free, at peace" and, as

- 1 | Cf. Federal Foreign Office 2015: Die transatlantischen Beziehungen, 9 Oct 2015, in: http://auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/USA/TransatlantischeBez-allg_node.html (accessed 5 Nov 2015).
- 2 | Nuland, Victoria 2015: "Unity in Challenging Times: Building on Transatlantic Resolve" (speech), 27 Jan 2015, in: <http://state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2015/jan/236820.htm> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

is now frequently added, “prosperous”,³ as the concerns are also to a large extent related to economic development. U.S. politicians are aware that they need Europe to be able to realise many of their foreign policy interests. There is no other similarly strong and developed transnational partnership between the USA and another country or region worldwide. That said, the USA is finding itself in a situation where it has to review its own global role. Even now that the financial crisis has been overcome, the country is facing enormous domestic challenges, relating to the need to strengthen a hard-pressed middle class, infrastructure, education policy, the integration of some eleven million illegal immigrants, etc. It is also facing foreign policy challenges. This applies in particular in regard to its relations with the up-and-coming power China. Relations between the two countries are complex, and U.S. policy wavers between engagement and containment. A strong Europe, which at many levels pursues similar interests based on common values, is considered an important factor for the USA’s continued capability of projecting its influence globally. This has become particularly relevant since the Western democratic system is coming under ever stronger challenge, not least from countries engaging in state capitalism such as China (and Russia). The illusion of a post-ideological era has evaporated in Washington as well by now.

Transatlantic security experts consider Russia a serious threat to the partnership between the USA and Europe.⁴ Leaving aside the debate about the right societal model, the main question is who has a better understanding of the currently complex world and can use that to their own tactical advantage. According to one opinion that is frequently aired in Washington, Russia managed to steal a march on the West with Syria and the Ukraine because of a lack of decisiveness. Heather Conley, Vice President of the think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and director of its Europe Program, spoke of a new Russian “Iron Curtain” in early October and warned against Russia’s new geopolitical strategy.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the West has forgotten to “conduct effective deterrence” against Russia and underestimated its military threat.

3 | Cf. Kerry, John 2014: Remarks at the Atlantic Council’s “Toward a Europe Whole and Free” Conference (Speech), 29 Apr 2014, in: <http://state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/04/225380.htm> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

4 | Stavridis, James 2014: Vladimir Putin Hates the TTIP: Which is exactly why Europe and America need to get it done, Foreign Policy, 19 Nov 2014, in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/19/vladimir-putin-hates-the-ttip> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

The West had forgotten how to “conduct effective deterrence” against Russia and had underestimated Russia as a military threat for too long. Strategic cooperation between Russia and NATO had become a thing of the past and this required an adjustment of NATO’s long-term strategy. This in turn required a stronger constant military presence by the USA and the European NATO member states at the northern and eastern boundaries. Heather Conley believes that the NATO summit in Warsaw this coming year will have to mark a turning point in NATO strategy vis-à-vis Russia in order to re-establish an effective counterbalance to Russia.⁵ Although Heather Conley’s remarks were addressed to a national audience, they reflected the widespread concern that the USA and NATO may be losing their influence in the security arena and may no longer be capable of regaining it.

The following text contains a summary of the U.S. perspective on Europe’s current trouble spots, which is then placed into context. First, the authors provide a short overview of the current state of the negotiations on the “Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership” (TTIP) and the transatlantic component of the nuclear deal with Iran as well as the UK’s potential exit from the EU. This is followed by a comprehensive report on the current refugee crisis in Europe, the fears about Greece leaving the eurozone, the Ukraine conflict and the battle against Islamic State. There are a number of further relevant topics (such as Europe’s relationship with China), which exceed the scope of this report, but which also play a role within the transatlantic alliance.

THE “TRANSATLANTIC TRADE AND INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIP”

Negotiations over the “Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership” between the USA and the EU are ongoing. On 24 June 2015, the U.S. Congress granted a so-called Fast-Track Authority to the President by passing the Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). A few days later, on 8 July 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the continuation of the TTIP negotiations. Shortly afterwards, the tenth round of negotiations was held in Brussels from 13 to 17 July 2015. The negotiating parties have met four times in total in 2015, most recently from 19 to 23 October 2015 in Miami (Florida). While it is to be expected that the

5 | Conley, Heather 2015: “Russian Strategy and Military Operations” (statement in U.S. Senate), 8 Oct 2015, in: https://csis.org/files/attachments/ts151008_Conley.pdf (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

negotiations between the European and U.S. negotiating teams will continue, the likelihood of a decision in Congress will diminish as the presidential election campaign is heating up. It is the case that, by contrast with the “Trans-Pacific Partnership” (TPP), the negotiations for the TTIP are considered particularly complicated and the political decision about the agreement simpler. But most observers no longer believe that there will be a political vote in Congress under President Obama. The decision by the European Court of Justice to declare the Safe Harbor agreement invalid will probably hamper the TTIP negotiations. This decision has clarified the need for U.S. companies to modify the way they deal with European user data. The decision has further strengthened the doubts of some on the U.S. side about the Europeans’ commitment to engage in more intensive transatlantic cooperation.



John Kerry: Had it not been for the strong negotiation partners in Europe, the nuclear deal with Iran might not have been signed. | Source:

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THE NUCLEAR DEAL WITH IRAN

The nuclear deal with Iran, on the other hand, is cited in U.S. government circles as an example of a joint transatlantic achievement in an international conflict. The broad European support for the deal helped the U.S. government to present it as a positive negotiation outcome. That said, the cooperation between the E3 (Germany, France and the UK), the EU and the USA during the final phase of the negotiations on the Iran nuclear program were described as important in the media, but not as instrumental to

the breakthrough in the negotiations. The U.S. media portrayed the E3 as relevant actors, but focused their reporting on Secretary of State John Kerry and his negotiating team. The breakthrough was ultimately attributed to Secretary Kerry. At government level, however, the significance of the U.S.-E3 cooperation is definitely appreciated. The deal would not have been concluded without a strong negotiating partner in Europe, in this case actually three. The U.S. government is aware that the E3 had a crucial influence on the lengthy negotiations and that the diplomatic resolution of this conflict can also be attributed in large part to the E3. Shortly after the conclusion of the negotiations, there was some uncertainty in the USA as to whether Congress would accept the deal. The EU, on the other hand, declared the negotiations concluded and initiated the lifting of the sanctions. This briefly caused some concern among U.S. companies which feared that European businesses may gain an advantage in the resumption of trade relations with Iran. This fear quickly manifested in some critical reporting about the lack of cooperation on the part of Europe. Ultimately, there was no majority in the U.S. Congress for blocking the nuclear deal. The USA will once again play a special role in the coming implementation phase, but the two parties either side of the Atlantic are expected to engage in close cooperation to ensure that Iran actually adheres to the deal.

POTENTIAL BREXIT

For a long time, the USA considered the UK its most important partner in Europe. A strategic "special relationship" connected the two countries. British politicians, including not least Eurosceptics, have also had significant influence on the U.S. interpretation of European politics in the past. This influence was (and is) strengthened by the fact that British media, such as *The Economist*, also have an impact on decision-makers. But there has been a change in perception over recent years. Europe is seen less and less from the British perspective and perceived increasingly as an entity of its own, partly due to Germany playing a greater role in Europe. These days, eyes are turning to Berlin rather than London in connection with many issues.

The UK leaving the EU would have negative repercussions for U.S. relations with both the EU and the UK and therefore to transatlantic relations generally. Consequently, a potential Brexit would affect U.S. key interests. During David Cameron's latest visit in June 2015, Barack Obama stated publicly that the U.S. expected

the UK to remain part of the EU.⁶ This was an astonishing statement by the U.S. President, reflecting the U.S. interest in the EU retaining its cohesion.

The “special relationship” between the USA and the UK is likely to survive – whatever the outcome of the British vote. But the gulf between the two parties would probably widen. The debate about defence expenditure in London and the UK’s limited military engagement, for instance in the current fight against IS,⁷ is calling into question the UK’s role as a strong partner in security matters. The USA had exerted substantial pressure on the UK with respect to both issues.

Economic relations are also likely to suffer substantially. The USA would not seriously consider a separate trade agreement with the UK; the preference for multilateral free trade agreements over bilateral agreements is too strong. The TPP and TTIP clearly demonstrate that fact. Even if a bilateral agreement were to be considered, this would be unlikely to produce more favourable terms for the UK. Only very recently, U.S.

Trade aspects also contribute to the U.S.’ attitude of favoring a UK which is a member of the EU.

Trade Representative Mike Froman, who leads the U.S. negotiating team, made it clear that the U.S. has a definite interest in the UK remaining in the EU from a trade perspective as well.⁸ The burgeoning relations with the EU – particularly in the expectation that the TTIP will materialise – are already determining U.S. economic interests more strongly than the economic relations with the UK.

Most recently, the UK’s decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has been a great disappointment to the USA, as it left the country isolated. China’s recent efforts to woo the UK are being viewed with suspicion.

Leaving the EU will hardly make the UK more interesting as a strategic partner – particularly against the backdrop of British influence in the EU waning. Conversely, there are fears that the EU would change as well. The UK is viewed as an important guarantor

6 | Cf. Schliess, Gero 2015: On UK “Brexit,” Obama is thinking US – not EU, 25 Jul 2015, in: <http://dw.com/en/a-18607337> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

7 | “Daesh” is the Arabic acronym for ISIS. This term is increasingly being used by analysts with the aim to avoid conveying the impression that the terrorist organization is an Islamic state. In accordance with that, “Daesh” instead of IS or ISIS will be employed in the following.

8 | Cf. Financial Times 2015: Brexit and the delusions of new free-trade deals, 30 Oct 2015, in: <http://ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/aba86dce-7efa-11e5-98fb-5a6d4728f74e.html> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

of a strong transatlantic alliance within the EU, not least in the area of security and with respect to geostrategic issues. The UK is further considered the guardian of the open market in the EU, which is also in the USA's crucial interest. Even though the USA may be focusing increasingly on Germany in connection with issues concerning Europe, the UK remaining in the EU is still of central importance to the USA.



U.S.-Mexican border: Migration, immigration and integration are similarly controversially debated issues in the USA. | Source: © Frank Duenzl, picture alliance.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Unlike most European states, the USA has seen itself as a country of immigration since its very foundation, which has given many people refuge and the chance of a better future through the centuries. Nevertheless, migration, immigration and integration have become highly controversial topics in the USA as well, with respect to both domestic and foreign policy, although the circumstances are different, particularly on the domestic front. The main difference is that the U.S. debate about immigrants is almost exclusively about illegal immigrants already living in the country. The humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis that is particularly relevant in Europe is almost totally absent in the USA, with one exception being the some 84,000 children from Central America, who crossed the border from Mexico into the USA in 2014 and 2015.

However, there is one thing the situations in the USA and the EU have in common, namely that the issue of foreigners and immigration is a politically highly charged subject. The potential Republican U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump derives a great deal of his political energy from his hostile stance towards foreigners. Among other things, Trump announced his intention to expel the eleven million illegal immigrants and to reform the process for obtaining U.S. citizenship. Border control is a further significant issue, as large parts of the border to Mexico are not fortified. Trump announced that if he became President he would fortify the border with a huge security wall. Yet the USA has a long history of successful immigration and integration. Some one million foreigners (legally) immigrate to the USA each year.

The USA observes the current flow of refugees into Europe with concern. Since 2012, the EU member states have experienced a significant rise in the number of asylum applications.⁹ By September 2015, the entire previous year's volume of 700,000 applications had already been exceeded.¹⁰ The refugee drama is frequently viewed in the broader context of the multitude of challenges currently facing Europe. The way migration is being dealt with at the present time is viewed as a failure by many. This is due to the perception that there is no effective common European policy on migration. Many Americans see European migration policy as an example of the lack of cohesion within the EU and of the fact that action based on a common European vision in this area represents an enormous challenge. Migration experts from the USA question Europe's asylum application structure ("Dublin III Regulation") because of the vast numbers of refugees. During discussions in think tanks and the like, people point out that these developments can no longer be described as a refugee crisis and that there is a larger dimension involved: global migration flows. This view then reinforces the scepticism about whether Europe is up to managing these developments.

Many Americans see European migration policy as an example of the lack of cohesion within the EU.

9 | Cf. Eurostat 2015: Asylum in the EU: The number of asylum applicants in the EU jumped to more than 625,000 in 2014 (press release), 20 Mar 2015, in: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6751779/3-20032015-BP-EN.pdf> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

10 | OECD 2015: Is this humanitarian migration crisis different?, Migration Policy Debates 7, Sep 2015, in: <https://oecd.org/migration/Is-this-refugee-crisis-different.pdf> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

The USA is also particularly concerned about extremists potentially exploiting the current situation to enter Europe. The fear is that there are some terrorists among the migrants. The terror attacks in Paris on 13 November have pushed this concern back onto the political agenda. So far, it is unclear whether the attackers pretended to be Syrian refugees and in fact travel from Syria through Greece into Europe. Regardless, such suspicions are enough for radical right-wing groups, as for example the Front National in France, to question the entire European refugee crisis management. Similar opinions are expressed among conservative news reporters in the USA. The potential exploitation of the Syrian refugee crisis by Islamic extremists is one of main reasons the USA has only been accepting a very limited number of refugees from Syria to date.¹¹ But what worries observers in Washington even more is the thought that the integration of the migrants may fail. The fear is that a failed integration process would facilitate the dissemination of radical propaganda by Islamists and recruitment for terrorism.



Refugee child: American politicians mostly depict Germany's dealing with the refugee crisis as exemplary. | Source: © Srdjan Zivulovic, Reuters.

11 | Cf. Fidler, Stephen / Pop, Valentina 2015: Paris Attacks Shine Light on Europe's Failing Border Policies, Wall Street Journal, 19 Nov 2015, in: <http://on.wsj.com/1HbL6zD> (accessed 11 Dec 2015); Fox News 2015: Paris massacre ringleader used migrant crisis to get into France, PM says, 20 Nov 2015, in: <http://fxn.ws/1QxBbas> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

U.S. media are reporting extensively about the refugee crisis. In an op-ed piece in the LA Times, Dalibor Rohac commented that the refugee crisis revealed the weak points of the incomplete institutional underpinnings of the EU.¹² While the adoption of the Schengen Agreement facilitated the free movement of people throughout the EU for political reasons, the individual peripheral states carried the main burden of securing the borders. Rohac further commented that the current refugee crisis was buoying up nationalist tendencies in Europe. The columnist Roger Cohen wrote in the New York Times that Europe had no vision: "Europe is caught between those who want to get in, those who want to get out, and those who want to destroy it."¹³ There have also been corresponding reports in various media on the fact that the Eastern European countries in particular are opposed to ideas such as fixed distribution quotas imposed by Brussels. Slovakia, for instance, only wanted to accept Christians and was calling the Western European model of multi-culturalism into question. Hungary's current refugee policy is also viewed in a very negative light in the U.S. There is general incomprehension about the slow pace of the distribution of the burdens the refugee crisis entails. In addition, the USA is also concerned about a potential political polarisation of Europe, and there are fears that the willingness to help others within Europe will decline further if no decisions are made to realise effective reforms as soon as possible.¹⁴

U.S. politicians usually cite Germany's way of handling the refugee crisis as a positive example. By contrast with the national debt crisis, no advice is being offered on how Germany should conduct itself in this crisis. On the contrary: the Chancellor receives praise. In a telephone conversation with the Chancellor, President Obama expressed his appreciation of Germany's engagement and reiterated this opinion during President Gauck's visit to the USA in October 2015. Previously, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, Anne C. Richard, had already made a point of emphasising Germany's commitment. At the same time, there is an implied expectation that Germany must be capable not

12 | Rohac, Dalibor 2015: A borderless Europe under siege, Los Angeles Times, 6 Aug 2015, in: <http://fw.to/OPesOre> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

13 | Cohen, Roger 2015: The Migrant Crisis in Calais Exposes a Europe Without Ideas, New York Times, 3 Aug 2015, in: <http://nyti.ms/1KLSjfe> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

14 | Cf. Applebaum, Anne 2015: Europe's Deadly Denial: The refugee crisis is the consequence of Europe's refusal to confront the wars on its borders, Slate, 4 Sep 2015, in: http://slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2015/09/europe_refugee_crisis_the_eu_has_failed_to_confront_the_wars_in_syria_and_.html (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

only of solving its own problems but, in view of its leading role in the EU, also of making a major contribution to resolving other European problems.

In the media too, Germany is frequently cited as a positive example in the EU. Other countries are called upon to increase their engagement. The New York Times commented that particularly richer European countries such as the UK and France could accept more refugees and stated that poorer countries at the southern periphery had to carry comparatively higher burdens. The German government, and first and foremost the Chancellor, is singled out for particular praise because of its engagement, although there have also been reports

Angela Merkel's appearance in a German TV discussion and her exchange with a young Palestinian girl was positively reported on by U.S. media.

of xenophobic rioting in Germany. Angela Merkel's appearance in a German TV discussion and her exchange with a young Palestinian girl played a role in this context. This was generally seen in a positive light. It was thought that Chancellor Merkel had had the courage to spell out the truth, namely that not every person could come to Europe. Esther J. Cepeda argued in the Mercury News that one could not demand honesty from politicians and then complain when they spoke the truth. The Chancellor is therefore also thought highly of in connection with the migration issue.

Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State, recently put it succinctly at a public event: "Germany is living the values that bind us."¹⁵ But this does not mean that Washington is blind to the enormous challenges the refugee issue entails for Europe.

THE GREEK NATIONAL DEBT CRISIS

Politicians in Washington have been keeping a very close eye on the development of the Greek national debt crisis from the beginning. The USA is concerned mainly about the potential repercussions for its own economy and for Europe's development as a strategically important partner. It quickly became general knowledge in the USA that U.S. banks and private investors had only invested modestly in Greek government bonds. The direct impact on the USA would therefore be very minor in the event of a default. This is probably also the reason why the U.S. administration was largely restrained in its comments in the early days of the crisis.

15 | Victoria Nuland uttered this statement at the following event: "Europe 25 Years After German Unification: Crisis, Unity, and Opportunity", which was hosted by the German Marshall Fund in Washington, D.C. on 6 Oct 2015.

In early 2015, President Obama expressed sympathy towards the new Greek government and warned against hampering growth through excessive insistence on reforms and debt repayments. Growth was the best way to achieve deficit reduction and fiscal stability, according to the President speaking in a CNN interview in January 2015. Europe “cannot keep on squeezing countries that are in the midst of depression.”¹⁶ Particularly in Germany, this caused quite some irritation.

Later on, the problems with Greece were viewed generally as Europe’s problems and not much commented upon. Only when it became apparent that the European decision-makers may be losing their grip on the situation and that the survival of the euro-zone seemed to be in jeopardy did the U.S. administration feel compelled to criticise the austerity policy towards Greece and to demand compromises from both sides. A Grexit with unpredictable consequences was seen as detrimental to the USA’s (geostrategic) interest.

The USA also coordinated closely with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help stabilise the situation in Greece. It was probably due to U.S. pressure that an IMF report was published shortly before the Greek referendum, which made clear that any further assistance by the IMF was contingent upon a restructuring of the debts. U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew made a point of praising the report, stressing that he too believed Greece’s debt was not sustainable. Lew closed his comments by calling the agreement an important step in the right direction.

After the successful negotiations about a third bail-out program in July between the heads of state and government of the euro-zone and Greece, concerns about economic repercussions for the USA lessened significantly. However, the potential impact of the national debt crisis on the geostrategic partnership continues to play a role. In principle, the USA has a clear interest in a strong European partner that is increasingly capable of accepting international responsibility. Consequently, there is great interest in the integrity of the eurozone. Germany is seen as the leading nation in Europe in this context as well. As the Greek national debt crisis evolved, USA observers

The U.S. has a clear interest in a strong European partner which is increasingly capable of accepting international responsibility.

16 | Cf. Ackerman, Andrew 2015: Obama Expresses Sympathy for New Greek Government, Wall Street Journal, 1 Feb 2015, in: <http://on.wsj.com/16925k5> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

therefore mainly turned their attention to Germany and to Chancellor Merkel as the key figure for overcoming the crisis.

According to some observers, the positions taken by the USA over recent months were probably also influenced by concerns about the possibility that a Greek exit from the eurozone – or even worse from the EU – would provide Russia with new scope for exerting influence in Europe.

Even though conservative economists view the current agreement with Greece politically as a submission to the creditors' demands, they also consider it the only way to encourage new growth. The current crisis has reignited the dispute about the question of whether high debts hinder growth. Conservative economists such as Romina Boccia from the Heritage Foundation, who invoke economists like Ken Rogoff, believe the USA is also on a course towards a level of debt that will stifle growth. At the same time, they acknowledge that there are crucial institutional and structural differences. The USA, for instance, prints its own money and a large proportion of its debts is in the hands of domestic creditors. Nevertheless, they call for stronger budgetary discipline in view of the current experience with Greece. On the other side of the divide are economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman. Krugman, one of the few old-school Keynesians who place great trust in an expansive monetary policy, accused the EU negotiators of wanting to stage "a coup" in his column in the New York Times.¹⁷ He was particularly doubtful about Germany's good intentions. To him, the harsh demands of the current agreement are calling Greek sovereignty into question. And he believes any new growth is only possible in conjunction with some debt relief. Krugman caused considerable irritation in Germany by voicing his opinion, but was paid hardly any attention in the USA beyond the expert audience.

During the phase of negotiations in July, the major quality newspapers published editorials that were generally critical about the management of the crisis, particularly by Germany. The key question was mostly what this would mean for European cohesion.

17 | Cf. Krugman, Paul 2015: Killing the European Project, New York Times, 12 Jul 2015, in: <http://nyti.ms/1URLzdC> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

The USA and Europe are linked by a common political stance towards Russia's aggressive conduct in Ukraine. Consequently, the USA expects Europe to take a clear position and follow up with action. While the Normandy format brought about the Minsk peace deal, doubts remain in U.S. government circles about the leadership role of Germany and France and about the EU as a general coordinating body in the Ukraine conflict. The USA also considers the Ukraine crisis a serious challenge to the European construction project.¹⁸ Progress in the implementation of the peace agreement has been sluggish, and the USA fears Russia could exploit Europe's current softly-softly approach to establish government-type institutions in Eastern Ukraine, thereby cementing the current territorial division. Politicians in the USA further believe only a strong Europe will be capable of setting clear limits to Russia. Although the EU has joined the USA in imposing sanctions against Russia, it seems that the multitude of challenges within Europe make it unlikely that expectations of Europe demonstrating a strong security policy can currently be fulfilled.

While the U.S. economy is recovering from the global financial crisis,¹⁹ most of the European countries remain in a state of stagnation.²⁰ The USA fears that an economically weak Europe may be reluctant to impose stronger sanctions against Russia. It also makes it more difficult to justify increases in military spending to the public at home. Russia is aware of these problems and may well seek to use them to its advantage in the near future. Ultimately, the Ukraine crisis cannot be resolved without an economically strong and politically united Europe; at least that is the opinion in the USA.

The Ukraine conflict also illustrates the expectation in the USA for the European member states to show a greater financial commitment to NATO. As the USA sees it, the withdrawal of a large proportion of U.S. troops from Europe after the end of the Cold War created a vacuum, which now needs to be

According to the U.S., the European NATO member states need to fill the power vacuum that emerged after the end of the Cold War.

18 | Cf. Blinken, Antony J. et al 2015: Remarks on Transatlantic Cooperation and the Crisis in Ukraine, 5 Mar 2015, in: <http://state.gov/s/d/2015/238644.htm> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

19 | Cf. Chandra, Shobhana 2015: U.S. GDP Rises 2.3% in Second Quarter; First Quarter Revised Upward, Bloomberg, 30 Jul 2015, in: <http://bloom.bg/1LZoIdz> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

20 | Cf. The Economist 2015: The euro-zone recovery is losing momentum, 14 Aug 2015, in: <http://econ.st/1J4eUIz> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

filled in view of Russian aggression. The U.S. government believes it is predominantly up to the European NATO member states to take on this task. But some European NATO countries are continuing to cut their defence budgets, although the agreement made at the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 set down a defence budget of two per cent of GDP. The U.S. government is sticking to this goal, at least in public, although experts have drafted numerous alternative, more effective reform plans for NATO's role in Europe.²¹

Since October 2015, Ukraine is no longer the only trouble spot where Russia as well as the USA and the EU member states are involved. As a result of Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict, the transatlantic security alliance seems to have a new serious challenge to deal with.

THE FIGHT AGAINST DAESH

In the fight against Daesh, there is currently a lack of viable options in Washington D.C. The air strikes have so far only had limited success, and the costly training of moderate rebels has ended in fiasco.²² The hope of the USA for a strong coalition with numerous active members has so far not materialised. Even among NATO members, support has been rather limited. Currently, only the UK, France and the Netherlands are actively involved in the air strikes against Daesh. Other European states, such as Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Norway, Spain and Germany, are only providing logistical support to the alliance.²³ France's military response to the 13 November terrorist attacks initiated a discussion within Europe as to whether there should be a joint military engagement against Daesh.²⁴ Both the UK and Germany have already expressed their

21 | Cf. Techau, Jan 2015: The Politics of 2 Percent: NATO and the Security Vacuum in Europe, Carnegie Europe, 09/2015, in: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Techau_NATO_paper_final.pdf (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

22 | Cf. McLeary, Paul 2015: U.S. Acknowledges Reality and Scraps Failed Syria Training Program, Foreign Policy, 9 Oct 2015, in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/09/u-s-acknowledges-reality-scraps-failed-syria-training-program> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

23 | Cf. U.S. Central Command 2015: Counter-ISIL military coalition concludes operational planning conference, 1 May 2015, in: <http://centcom.mil/en/news/articles/counter-isil-military-coalition-concludes-operational-planning-conference> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

24 | Davidson, Helen / Jalabi, Raya 2015: Paris terror attacks: France launches fresh airstrikes on Isis in Syria – as it happened (Live-blog), The Guardian, 17 Nov 2015, in: <http://gu.com/p/4e99e/stw> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

solidarity as well as support to France's military engagement against Daesh.²⁵ Both countries have recently passed legislation to expand their military operations against Daesh. Some American security experts recommend a joint military engagement through NATO, although it remains to be seen whether this proposal will materialize.²⁶

In January 2015, Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland was still speaking of the transatlantic alliance as the foundation for the international coalition in the fight against Daesh.²⁷ This reflects the U.S. expectation of greater European engagement in this area. Due to the massive influx of Syrian refugees to Europe, the European engagement in Syria could well increase in order to curb the flow of refugees. At the same time, the large numbers of Syrian refugees have had no effect on the fundamental differences in the stance taken by different European states with respect to military intervention in Syria. Countries such as the UK and France, which are directly affected by the IS terror, have a stronger motivation fuelled by public opinion and are therefore engaged more strongly in the fight against Daesh.

Russia's military engagement in Syria is now forcing the USA to subject its strategy for Syria to a critical review. It appears that Russia has timed the start of its operation very well as the USA is only one year away from the next presidential elections, and Europe is currently mainly dealing with its own challenges. While it is not in the interest of the USA to be shown up by Russia in Syria, Russia's military operations appear to be in clear conflict with President Obama's demand that President Assad has to go. Russia has made it clear that it wishes the Assad regime to remain in place and is prepared to provide it with military support.

It is not in the interest of the U.S. to be shown up by Russia in Syria. It needs to critically review its strategy.

According to official U.S. policy, cooperation with Russia in Syria would be feasible as long as it entailed a plan for a change in political leadership in Syria and the removal of Assad from power. However, Russia is currently not prepared to discuss a post-Assad

25 | BBC News 2015: Syria air strikes: MPs authorise UK action against Islamic State, 3 Dec 2015, in: <http://bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34989302> (accessed 11 Dec 2015); Rising, David 2015: Germany Oks military mission against Islamic State group, The Washington Post, 3 Dec 2015, in: <http://wpo.st/ymyw0> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

26 | Stavridis, James 2015: NATO's Turn to Attack, Foreign Policy, 14 Nov 2015, in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/14/natos-turn-to-attack-paris-terrorist-isis> (accessed 11 Dec 2015).

27 | Nuland, n.2.

scenario. Consequently, the USA now needs to fundamentally review its anti-Daesh and Syria strategies. The USA may see itself forced to tolerate Assad, at least for a certain period, in order to engage in stronger cooperation with Russia in the fight against Daesh.



Al-Rakka: In the stronghold of Daesh, billboards convey confidence with regard to the Islamic State's ability to resist attacks by the international coalition. | Source: © Nour Fourat, Reuters.

Furthermore, Russia's military operations in Syria are hampering U.S. plans for a possible no-fly zone near the border to Turkey to establish a safe zone for civilians. Another question currently under discussion is to what extent Russia is actually fighting against Daesh or whether it may only be interested in keeping Assad in power. While Russia's intentions may be unclear, Russian activities provide some indication: the installation of highly sophisticated anti-aircraft systems is deemed to be of strategic significance as these are unsuitable for fighting Daesh in the current scenario.

Occasionally, one hears people in Washington voicing the opinion that Russia is also intent on exerting pressure on Europe through its military intervention in Syria. Most refugees are, in fact, trying to escape Assad rather than Daesh.²⁸ Putin, on the other hand,

28 | Cf. Reimann, Anna 2015: Syrische Flüchtlinge in Deutschland: Die meisten fliehen vor Assad – nicht vor dem IS, Spiegel Online, 7 Oct 2015, in: <http://spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/a-1056567.html> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

stated the opposite before the beginning of the Russian military action.²⁹ Some analysts consequently think it is in Russia's interest – not least in view of the sanctions – for the tensions the flows of refugees cause in Europe to increase. However, observers also draw attention to Russia's close links with Europe, particularly in the area of energy, which is why Russia should not be intent on a destabilisation of Europe.

CONCLUSION

Many observers in the USA believe Europe is facing fundamental problems. Besides the crisis affecting Greece, these include security challenges such as how to deal with the Ukraine crisis. Furthermore, many experts express concern regarding the question of how Europe will be able to manage the never-ending flow of refugees. Most observers are sceptical as to whether the EU is capable of overcoming the challenges. The prospect of a potential Brexit fuels the concern that the European Project could be jeopardised by increasing centrifugal forces. From a U.S. perspective, only a coherent and strong Europe would remain relevant to the USA as a partner for solving global challenges. At the same time, joint achievements, such as the nuclear deal with Iran, illustrate the potential of the transatlantic partnership when the same or at least a very similar view of an issue is held on both sides of the Atlantic. The Ukraine conflict is another case in point. U.S. and European sanctions against Russia are being upheld and are sending a clear message to Moscow. Many experts describe Russia's activities in Ukraine as a serious threat to Europe's stability and to the transatlantic partnership between the USA and Europe.

For the transatlantic partnership to be able to resume its previous success, Europe needs to achieve inner cohesion.

However, joint transatlantic responses to trouble spots have so far been lacking. This also applies to potential long-term impacts of these challenges. As the refugee crisis has unfolded, there has neither been a request for assistance by Europe nor an offer of support or advice by the USA. Not enough energy is invested in maintaining the transatlantic partnership, unlike the situation involving Asia, where the USA is making efforts to establish closer links – especially economic links as with the current conclusion of the transpacific trade agreement. The Transatlantic Trade and

29 | Cf. RT 2015: Putin: People flee from Syria because of ISIS, not Assad regime, 4 Sep 2015, in: <http://rt.com/news/314435-putin-isis-syria-refugees> (accessed 5 Nov 2015).

Investment Partnership has always come second to the Pacific agreement, both chronologically and politically, and will very probably not be concluded and voted on in Congress before the end of Obama's term in office. The recent decision by the European Court of Justice that the Safe Harbor agreement must be revised represents another clear illustration of this trend of increasing tension and drifting apart of the transatlantic partners.

It is still the case that the USA maintains keen interest in a strong Europe. While hopes for a strong and united Europe are high, many Americans worry about how long Europe will be able to manage its various challenges. It has become obvious to Washington that the EU has been forced to expend large parts of its political resources on dealing with internal challenges over the last few years. Considering this situation, people in the USA are wondering to what extent they need to adjust their expectations in the transatlantic partnership. It may very well be that the USA has not invested sufficiently in the transatlantic relationship over recent years. But it is still interested in a strong transatlantic partnership and hopes that Europe will overcome the current crises. Germany is seen in a leadership role in Europe; U.S. hopes rest predominantly on Chancellor Angela Merkel and on her ability to provide a lead in re-establishing stability in Europe.