

USA

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Merkel visiting Trump: “much better to talk to one another”



AFTER THE GERMAN FEDERAL CHANCELLOR'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, THE NEED FOR AN INTENSIVE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE EU AND THE USA APPEARS GREATER THAN EVER.

“Today we have a smart, level-headed and decisive leader in Washington, D.C.. Too bad she has to go back to Germany.” This is a tweet with which a young American woman commented on the German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel's encounter with Donald Trump in Washington last week. It expressed a typical stance as Angela Merkel appears to be more popular right now than ever before in many political circles in Washington, with the think tanks, and among international political experts. While that may be gratifying and the first personal meeting was important for Germany and for Europe, the summit also illustrated very publicly the controversial issues straining the transatlantic relationship, on which both sides will have to work particularly hard over the coming months.

Merkel included Trump's family and business representatives

The Chancellor invested significant efforts into the visit to prepare the ground for a personal relationship despite all the critical discussions about Donald Trump. After all, she had not found it so easy to connect with George W. Bush and Barack Obama in the beginning either. The German proposal to involve Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner as well as the BMW and Siemens CEOs in talks about vocational training was a concession to Trump's idiosyncratic government style, where family members and businesspeople appear to play key roles.

Merkel's initiative was definitely successful where the content was concerned. It is remarkable to now see Donald Trump himself as well as many US media and the highly respected Brookings Institution think tank discussing vocational training.

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This is all the more relevant as the focus on further vocational training was clearly meant to promote the idea that the digital transformation that has just gone underway should be seen as a joint transatlantic challenge.

For the time being, however, Trump rebuffed the Chancellor's offer to develop a personal relationship linked to the visit's topic and format. That was not only illustrated by his body language and his obvious wish to keep his distance, particularly by comparison with the preceding visits by Theresa May, Shinzo Abe, and Justin Trudeau. It was above all a tweet he posted just twelve hours after the joint press conference that confirmed that unfortunately they were nowhere near "talking to one another" in a trusting manner, as Merkel had publicly called for.

Trump accepts Europe's leading role in Ukraine and stands by NATO

This does not, however, take away from the concrete achievements of this first visit. Besides the decision to embark on a joint vocational training project, Trump assured Merkel of his agreement with Europe taking the leading role in the Ukraine conflict. During the joint press conference, Trump also declared his commitment to NATO in even clearer terms than in his speech to Congress two weeks earlier.

So there were definitely some entries on the plus side. However, on the minus side there are still three major issues that will now need a high level of attention and intensive engagement on the part of the EU politicians in the dialogue with the USA.

The EU must get through to Trump through action

Firstly, it is unfortunate that with just one week to go before the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome Donald Trump has not been heard uttering the term "the European Union" once. Until recently, the general opinion in Washington was that a united and strong Europe was in the interest of the United States. That no longer appears to be taken for granted under Trump. Against this backdrop, one may be justly annoyed about the openly anti-EU rhetoric of Trump advisor Stephen Bannon. However, the way Europe is perceived in Washington depends not first and foremost on Trump's or Bannon's ideas, but on how the EU and its member states conduct themselves. During her visit to Washington, the Chancellor consistently mentioned Germany and the European Union in the same breath. The Irish head of state Enda Kenny also did so emphatically that same morning.

It will now be up to the representatives of the EU states to consistently "bring the EU into the conversation" in their talks with the Trump administration. The European Union must get through to people in Washington through action and conduct itself as a true "union" in the transatlantic dialogue. Trump and Bannon are by no means the only ones in Washington who have doubts in the EU and put forward ideas about the supposed advantages of exclusively engaging in bilateral relationships and about the battle against multilateralism. But merely complaining that the Americans are ignorant about the EU will not do any good. It will take engagement and dialogue to make progress. It is a good thing that government representatives and parliamentarians from EU member states, civil society representatives, and MEPs are currently travelling to Washington every week. A constant stream of visitors seeking to establish a dialogue with the new administration and its entourage of advisors and intent on promoting the EU at the same time can help to shape the positions of the US administration, which are still unclear in many areas. It would also make sense for some representatives from EU states to make a point of appearing in Washington together.

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The discussion about higher defense payments by the European NATO partners goes on

Secondly, Trump took advantage of Merkel's visit to once again highlight the disagreement about the Europeans' defense spending for NATO. Trump's follow-up tweet was stylistically unacceptable and the alleged debt does not exist. But fundamentally, all those involved know that the call for European countries to make higher contributions towards the cost of their own continent's defense represents a justified demand. Of course, this issue predates Donald Trump's taking office. There has been a broad consensus on this matter in Washington for a long time – and not just there.

It is unlikely that the US partners will be appeased by references to the fact that the Europeans have already agreed to increase defense spending to two per cent of GDP by 2024. This agreement was made back in 2002, when the security situation in Europe was totally different. Since then, Russia has annexed Crimea and intervened in Eastern Ukraine, and hybrid warfare, maneuvers close to EU borders, and cyberwar have become reality. These arguments will have to be taken into account for the timing. These developments have also made it necessary to widen the discussions with the Trump administration from purely talking about expenditure to including capabilities, technologies, and the development of the defense industry, entirely in line with Merkel's call for "talking to one another, not about one another". Donald Trump is scheduled to come to Europe in the not too distant future, to the NATO summit in June, when he will no doubt revisit this topic.

The two sides are far apart where their ideas on trade and global competition are concerned

Thirdly, Merkel and Trump were obviously worlds apart in terms of their ideas on trade and economic cooperation. Merkel argued from the perspective of the philosophy underlying the EU Common Market: open markets with common rules, competitive products, trade as a win-win situation for all those involved. Trump remained in his world of "good" and "bad" deals, the zero numbers game, winners and losers. While the chancellor attempted to point out that every deal also requires democratic acceptance by the respective other party and that thinking in terms of winners and losers can ultimately not be helpful, Trump appeared to purposefully fail to take her point. There is an urgent need for engagement here as well.

While it is true that Donald Trump is not doing himself any favors, the Europeans should not allow themselves to be drawn into a vicious circle of talking about one another and shaking one's head about one another or even give in to anti-American reflexes.

The transatlantic partnership remains important for freedom and prosperity in Europe

Even 60 years on from the founding of the EU and after Donald Trump's taking office, it remains the case that the transatlantic partnership is essential to security in Europe, a prerequisite for our European life in freedom and prosperity.

The challenge to the EU arising from the positions taken by Trump is clear: stand firmly together in a community established for the long term rather than short-term deals, take on greater joint European responsibility for security and defense.

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At the same time, there is a need for greater engagement by the transatlantic partners on both sides, making efforts not to let opposing positions simply confront one another or even toughening them to win domestic approval. Smart, level-headed and decisive leaders will shape the common topics in a continuous dialogue across the Atlantic.

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