



The Future of US-German Relations (III): Security Policy

Working Group of Young Foreign Policy Experts

Key Points

- US foreign and security policy is characterised by two camps: the traditionalists and the nationalists. To date, it has not been possible to place the president clearly in either camp.
- Not least because of the existence of these two camps, US foreign and security policy has been lacking a clear strategic line to date.
- However, one can assume that Trump will be more inclined to rely on military might than diplomacy.
- Under Trump, the US will insist more strongly on greater transatlantic burden-sharing.
- Berlin should make efforts to meet this demand as it is in Germany's strategic interest to invest more in its defence.

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Background

Donald J. Trump's election as president of the United States of America has prompted an uproar in international politics due to his opposition to the status quo. With his slogan "America First", he intends to review America's role in the world and embark on new paths, particularly in the fields of immigration, climate and security policy. It is still unclear whether or not the Trump administration is in fact seeking to reverse US foreign policy traditions – and if so, what precisely this may entail.

In a series of three papers, the KAS Working Group of Young Foreign Policy Experts came up with a number of suggestions on how German politics should act in view of the ambiguous signals from Washington. Germany and the US are still linked by many different ties, and Germany has benefited greatly from the US's international leadership over the last few decades. But how can this partnership be strengthened so as to withstand the new challenges?

The first two papers dealt with trade policy and multilateral cooperation. In this third and final paper, the authors put forward theses on the US's future foreign and security policy and provide recommendations for German decision-makers.

Five theses on the future of US foreign and security policy

1. No recognizable strategic outlook

Even after almost a year has passed, there are no signs of either clear continuity or a definite change in US foreign and security policy. On closer inspection, one can identify three key factors influencing the context in which the US's future security policy could develop. On the one hand, the nationalist motto of "America First" that was promoted during the election campaign; on the other hand, the more traditional Republican foreign policy camp of influential members of the Trump administration; and finally, Donald Trump's personality.

The principle of "America First" serves domestic politicking and is based on two perceptions. Firstly, the United States has overextended itself over recent years by acting as the "world's policeman" in wars far from home and neglected domestic politics as a result. Therefore, the nationalists want the US to downscale its global engagement and turn its attention to domestic matters. Secondly, according to Trump, allies and partners have exploited the US in the area of foreign policy. While Obama had still promoted the image of a benevolent hegemon who makes available global public goods above all because it is in the country's own interest, Trump's world view is based on a zero-sum game, in which all countries must focus on their own relative advantage.

Apart from the "America First" camp, foreign and security policy traditionalists have been appointed to important positions in the administration, including former generals Mattis, McMaster and Kelly. They have demonstrated a concentration on established strategies and alliances thus far. For this camp, it is precisely the close-knit network of alliances and partnerships underpinning the US's role as a world power beside the country's own strength. While its representatives were initially viewed as a mere fig leaf, this group has been steadily increasing its influence in the administration since January – this is set to continue. Because of the slow pace in filling political appointments, Trump's tendency to allow decision-makers and particularly the military greater scope of action inevitably means that he will rely more heavily on the rather traditionalist figures in the administration.

US foreign and security policy lacks a strategic outlook

America First camp wants the US to disengage from global politics

Traditionalists favour established alliance strategies

Slow pace in filling political appointments is strengthening the traditionalists

Trump vacillates between the two camps

In addition to these two influencing factors, President Trump's personality should not be underestimated. He openly embraces the principles of flexibility and unpredictability. His security policy agenda takes the public effect into account as illustrated by the rocket attack in Syria this past April – a decision that is more in line with the outlook of the traditionalist camp. US security policy should not be understood as a mere tug of war between nationalists and traditionalists; it is also subject to the frequently impulsive behaviour of the president, who has been vacillating between the two camps to date.

The security policy pursued by the Trump administration will be determined by the interplay of these three factors. One can assume that the president will prioritise courses of action that can attract support from both camps.

2. Demonstration of military strength

Unanimity in questions of military strength

The first point on which nationalists and traditionalists agree is the question of military strength and decisiveness. The Republicans always thought Obama's foreign politics to be weak and hesitant. The Trump government displays a focus on military strength and determination instead. "America Firsters" and traditionalists are united in the conviction that this will require urgent investments in the country's armed forces. After 15 years of constant operations and automatic budget cuts that have now lasted for six years, the image of "hollow forces" is widespread. At the same time, the US has lost some of its lead in the area of military technology due to a decade of fighting insurgents, enabling some of its competitors to catch up. Consequently, the US's capability of projecting its power globally is increasingly being questioned in many regions around the world. To counter this development, the Trump administration has announced that it intends to invest in the country's armed forces. This expenditure is partly to be financed by heavy cuts to the State Department and development aid budget. One can assume that the US will rely more on its military might than on diplomatic efforts in the future. This shift in priorities will not necessarily result in more military interventions, however. Instead, it is likely that Trump intends to use the increased focus on the military to act as a deterrent against US enemies. The way he has been dealing with North Korea is a good illustration in support of this thesis. So far, US actions towards Pyongyang have been limited to threats of military force. Trump has threatened the North Korean dictator with "fire and fury" should he dare to attack the American mainland. To underpin this grandiose rhetoric, the US military sent B1B bombers for exercises to South Korea in September; the US thus underlined its military deterrent capability, signalling at the same time that it is ready to assist its close ally in the event of nuclear conflict with the northern neighbour. It was only a few weeks ago that the US military conducted training flights over the Sea of Japan near the Korean peninsula, with Japan and South Korea providing fighter cover. Both the demonstration of political will via (martial) pronouncements and the display of military capabilities were intended to discourage North Korea from expanding and, above all, deploying its arsenal of rockets and nuclear warheads without the US actually having to use military force.

Investment in armed forces

Strengthening the military to the detriment of the State Department

3. "Gloves off" approach in US foreign policy

A more pragmatic, less value-focused foreign policy to be expected

The greater focus on military strength has resulted not only in higher defence spending but also in a reduced willingness on the part of the US to show restraint in the use of its instruments of power. In his public statements, Secretary of State Tillerson has announced a more pragmatic and less value-based foreign policy. In its human rights policy as well as with respect to international law, the administration is showing signs of expansive tendencies that run counter to Western values. The supply of fighter

“Rules of engagement”
already relaxed

jets to Bahrain, for example, was made subject to toned-down human rights requirements, and the US announced that the dialogue about human rights developments in Egypt would be conducted behind closed doors in the future. The rules of engagement for the military activities in Syria, Iraq and Somalia have been relaxed considerably, which could result in the protection of civilians required under humanitarian international law being undermined. In this area, too, a fundamental consensus between nationalists and traditionalists exists inasmuch as they are not concerned with their own conduct serving as an example as is the case with Germany and Europe, but are convinced that the US cannot be the only superpower abiding by the rules under all circumstances. A less value-focused US foreign policy may cause problems for US-German cooperation. For one, cooperation will naturally become more difficult as long as Germany continues to see itself as a normative power. But more importantly, Germany and Europe are set to lose one of the strongest advocates of a value-based international order.

4. Focus on NATO: Pay up, Europe

America First camp
feels exploited by
allies

One of the “America First” camp’s fundamental beliefs is that the US has been exploited by its allies. During the election campaign, Trump had already repeatedly criticised European NATO allies because of the inadequate burden-sharing within the Alliance. In view of the low defence budgets of the Alliance partners, he even spoke publicly about attaching conditions to the US’s commitment to fulfil its mutual defence pledge. While the US has confirmed its commitment to Article 5 of the NATO treaty since, the US government has greatly increased the pressure on its European allies – including Germany – and pushed for the implementation of the latest target of spending 2% of GDP on defence which had been agreed on by all NATO partners in 2014. One reason why the administration will not refrain from pushing for the realisation of this target is that the traditionalists and nationalists are fundamentally of one mind on this matter. Particularly for domestic reasons, President Trump will make a point of insisting on financial equity in the Alliance which means that greater political engagement alone will not ease relations within the Alliance.

Trump insists on allies
to implement the 2%
target

5. Ambiguity in the fight against terrorism

Priority will be given
to the fight against
terrorism

Within the broad spectrum of security challenges, President Trump has pushed the fight against terrorism up the agenda, not least because he is under pressure domestically to deliver results after the statements he had made on his intention to fight the Islamic State. At the same time, however, the policy of “America First” in particular means that a return to the military interventionism of the 2000s is unlikely. After all, Trump promised not to repeat his predecessors’ mistakes and become embroiled in costly and lengthy wars in the Middle East. Most recently, Secretary of State Tillerson has emphasised that the US would not widen its engagement in Syria. As was already started under Obama, the US will make greater use of special operations and air strikes for anti-terror operations around the world and focus on small-scale, “surgical” interventions.

Recommendations

1. Follow up words with deeds

Berlin will have to learn to live with US wavering

Germany must be prepared for a situation in which few clear strategic guidelines will emanate from the White House in addition to US politics veering between lethargy and impetuous actions. However, the fundamental interests of the US have not changed under Trump. Consequently, traditional alliances such as NATO will probably continue to play an important role in the US's strategic deliberations.

Europe must take on a greater burden in its own interest

As the US is no longer setting out strategic lines, Europe and particularly Germany will have to move forward proactively with initiatives of their own and map out their own security interests. But this can only work if there is a willingness to follow words with deeds and make the necessary resources available. On this basis, it will be possible to seek cooperation with Washington and exert direct influence on the policies pursued there. Strong commitments to contribute more to transatlantic burden-sharing, accompanied by implementation measures, will help to strengthen the stance of the traditionalists in the White House. Trump will not miss any opportunity to take credit for defence budget increases implemented by his partners. With a president who thinks mainly in economic terms, the Europeans can remind Trump that a departure from the traditional US foreign policy would be very costly by turning his attention to what has been achieved so far. Not least where reassurance and deterrence measures are concerned, the Europeans, and Germany in particular, are of crucial financial and political importance in NATO. In addition, all NATO states are in some way or other involved in the fight against the Islamic State – and that too forms part of the transatlantic burden-sharing that America benefits from financially.

Seek to prevent a departure from traditional security policy

2. NATO: Increased investments in defence

Increase of defence spending in Germany's interest

As emphasised once again at the NATO summit in late May, the Trump administration expects a clear commitment from its European partners to reach the 2% target (including 20% of investment expenditure) and to concrete plans for implementation by 2024. The US demand for speedy implementation of the 2% target has created a great deal of dismay in Germany and played a role in the recent election campaign.

The German government should take advantage of the current favourable budgetary situation to make clear headway towards reaching the 2% target. It should do this not because the US demands it, but because it is in the country's interest to improve its military capabilities.

Sub-targets achievable in the short run

The implementation of this target by 2024 does represent a challenge, and it will require a credible plan detached from short-term domestic developments that sets out the necessary milestones to achieve the target. As a first step, Germany should raise its investment in defence equipment from six to seven billion euros and thereby from the current 16% to 20% of the defence budget. This would allow the first sub-target, 20% investment spending, to be achieved.

Unlike the investments made in recent years, which justifiably went mainly towards making the Bundeswehr a more attractive employer, the focus should now be on strengthening critical capabilities, particularly in areas currently provided exclusively or predominantly by the US such as reconnaissance, in-flight refuelling, air and sea transport, helicopters and medevac. The recent announcement of providing several new artillery battalions goes in the right direction.

Close the gap to the
US's technical lead

At the same time, Germany should use the additional funds not only to purchase existing systems but also for the purpose of modernisation and, above all, for keeping up with the technological advances of the US. Under the so-called "Third Offset" strategy, the US has been making massive efforts to advance to the next generation of military hardware for two years already. The initiative describes the Americans' attempt to secure a lead in military technology over their enemies, particularly in the area of so-called "anti-access and area-denial" systems designed to prevent access mainly to strategically important areas.

Should the US succeed in this endeavour, there is a risk that the Alliance will experience a new technology gap after a period of hard-won interoperability which will make effective collaboration impossible unless the rest of NATO keeps up with the US in this area. Germany should therefore approach the United States and seek to become involved in the Third Offset initiative.

More European leadership
on the Eastern
flank

Berlin must also convince other European NATO member states that increasing their defence spending is not only in line with the remit of the Alliance but also in their own interest. The repeated budget increases in Germany and its presence in the Baltics mean that Germany is in a strong position in this regard. It would send a clear signal to the US if Europe were to become engaged more strongly in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. After Brexit, only one of its four multinational battlegroups will be led by an EU country, namely Germany. Germany should therefore, for instance, work urgently towards having a European battalion take over the lead role in Latvia currently held by Canada.

3. NATO: Greater engagement in the fight against terrorism

Initiate new Strategic
Concept

NATO's engagement in the fight against terrorism must be increased. This would not only invalidate Trump's assertion that NATO is not taking on the challenges of the 21st century but also raise the relevance of the Alliance in the eyes of those member states who do not directly or hardly feel under threat from Russia. A first step in this direction would be to initiate a process to draw up a new Strategic Concept in which the fight against terrorism would have to play a more prominent role. In this context, it will also be relevant to stress the importance of resilience which is not least of enormous significance in mitigating the impact of terror attacks. By setting up a regular meeting of the ministers of the interior, allies could achieve better coordination of information exchange and of best practices regarding the absorption of terror attacks (for instance by measures to protect critical infrastructure).

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*Further information at
<http://www.kas.de/wf/en/71.6391/>*

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