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Interjection

Global Power Shifts

It's Time to Reshape the West!

Peter Beyer

“America is back!”: With US President Joe Biden, there is now potential for an ambitious transatlantic policy. We should devote all our energy to reforging the alliance between Europe and the US. Anything else would be fatal, as disunity in the West only plays into the hands of our systemic rivals China and Russia. What do we need to do right now?

“Democracy will win!”

Thomas Mann

Without wanting to sound too euphoric, Joe Biden’s election as the 46th US President presents the West with a new opportunity. In his speech at the virtual Munich Security Conference in February 2021, Biden said: “The transatlantic alliance is back.” He spoke of a “new moment in history”. There is something to this: We now have a window of opportunity to place our transatlantic partnership on a new, more stable foundation for the coming decades.

This is certainly necessary, as the West and democracy are under pressure both from the inside and outside. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the German reunification, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the epochal years 1989 to 1991 did not lead to “The End of History”, as famously put forward at the time by Francis Fukuyama with a question mark. On the other hand, the world may have become less rigid, but this makes it a little more unpredictable and complex.

It feels as though we have been stumbling from crisis to crisis since the turn of the century, with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global financial crisis, the euro crisis, and the upheavals and wars in the wake of the “Arab Spring”. This is not to mention the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the refugee crisis in Europe, the IS terror in major European cities, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as US President. And finally, the coronavirus pandemic, which is not just a health emergency but also an

economic crisis that will continue to challenge us in the long-term. And these are just the more major crises we have faced.

Many of these crises are still smouldering and could erupt again, with other massive challenges being visible on the horizon. It is quite possible that historians in 40- or 50-years’ time will see our era as the beginning of a new Cold War between China and the West. Then there are the uncertainties surrounding the tech revolution: Digitalisation and bioengineering are still in the embryonic stages, but what will be their impact on mankind and the international state system?

Despite these crises and challenges, we Germans and most Europeans are still doing well – living in freedom, security, and relative prosperity. This is also due to the prudent actions of the German government and EU Commission. However, things might well get tougher in world politics and crises could arise that we cannot even imagine yet. Therefore, we must ask ourselves how we can bring permanent stability to our system and structure. How do we achieve a degree of resilience in the face of internal and external upheavals and crises? And how do we position ourselves for the future?

For me, one thing is irrefutable: Europe needs a strong, ambitious alliance with the United States of America if it is to meet the challenges of the 21st century. If we succeed in working closely together on an equal footing and in a spirit of trust, we can build a *New West*.

Below are five points outlining what a new phalanx between Europe and the US might look like.

1. The US and the EU – Unbeatable as Joint Forces

Biden and his administration understand the complexity and contradictions underlying Europe, while also understanding what partnership means: the ability to compromise. For the most part, Donald Trump only wanted to push through maximum demands, which meant that we in Germany and Europe were happy if we could simply prevent the worst from happening. After taking office, Biden virtually swore an oath to uphold the transatlantic partnership, which has helped to restore lost trust. Now, however, is the time to turn rhetoric into tangible policies.

We do not need Europe going it alone or fantasising about decoupling from the US.

This opportunity, therefore, presents us with both a test and an obligation alike. Europe needs to grow up – even if this is uncomfortable. After the First World War, the US refused to defend and shape an order it had helped to create. Following the Second World War, it was initially reluctant to accept this role. It is now up to Europe to take a step towards greater responsibility. France’s President Emmanuel Macron erroneously calls NATO “brain-dead”. But his analysis cannot be dismissed: If Europe “can’t think of itself as a global power”, it “will disappear”.

However, we do not need Europe going it alone or fantasising about decoupling from the US. If it is to ensure a close alliance with America, Germany as a nation must act as a partner and leader in Europe. We owe this to ourselves and our allies. This includes, for instance, our defence budget continuing to grow towards the two per cent target, as agreed with our NATO partners. It includes a commitment to nuclear sharing – and to its technical modernisation. It

includes the procurement of armed drones to protect the men and women we send into combat. It includes more engagement in NATO and European defence policy. It also includes making German foreign and security policy far more effective.

Therefore, I advocate for the establishment of a National Security Council, where these threads of foreign, defence, and economic policy can all come together. The German government’s rules of procedure are outdated and have scarcely changed since the times of Konrad Adenauer – and must, at long last, be adapted to our times. We need to be able to translate the many ideas and concepts we are developing into policies. We need more flexibility, and we need to overcome old and rigid patterns of thinking. In a recent interview with the magazine *Internationale Politik*, the Christian Democratic party leader Armin Laschet rightly pointed out that German and European foreign policy is “always about both things – our values and our interests”.

America will remain a superpower – its economy, innovative strength, and military capabilities speak for themselves. However, the country will not be able to increase its global commitment again. There are various reasons for this, among them the American people’s scepticism following the wars in Afghanistan, and above all in Iraq. A president who miscalculates foreign policy, will lose the next election.

In order to support global political commitment from the US, Europe must do its homework in terms of security policy. In concrete terms, this means burden-sharing – for instance in the South China Sea – by which we show the Americans, but also the Chinese, that we mean business. But the EU must also adopt a stronger role on the periphery of our continent – including Libya and the Middle East. Russia is presenting a *fait accompli* in these regions. That the new US administration wants to take a clear, tough stance towards the Kremlin is good news. Biden has said that, unlike Trump, he will not be “kow-towing” to Moscow. This is a good approach for a transatlantic policy towards Russia.

2. Common Sense on Trade

In November 2020, China, Australia, and 13 other Asia-Pacific countries came together to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement. The result is the largest free trade area in the world. The RCEP may not impose high standards or regulatory depth, but it still presents us with a wake-up call. China and Australia are bitter systemic rivals who have absolutely no trust in each other – and yet they successfully negotiated this agreement. There is still no free trade agreement between the close allies Europe and America, and there have not even been any negotiations since the end of TTIP. This is irresponsible – also because the reasons to dismantle trade barriers and set standards have grown even more numerous since the failure of TTIP.

The West's disunity only helps our systemic rivals China and Russia.

I believe the West needs to finally come back to its senses on trade policy. Firstly, the time of unilaterally imposed punitive tariffs on aluminium and steel as well as extraterritorially effective US sanctions should come to an end. We are friends bound together by Western values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law – not adversaries who should impose punitive tariffs on one another. Car tariffs threatened under the Trump administration must also be taken off the table for good. This disunity in the West only helps our systemic rivals China and Russia.

Secondly, we need to reattempt to negotiate a comprehensive and unbureaucratic free trade agreement between the EU and the US. Proposals for a deal that solely focus on industrial tariffs are too cautious and lack ambition. A free trade agreement with Biden, who campaigned on the slogan “Buy American”, should not be considered a foregone conclusion, with his administration currently analysing their country's competitiveness.

Nevertheless, Europe should be quick to approach America with proposals and promote a comprehensive and ambitious free trade agreement benefiting all parties. The failure of TTIP has taught us that it is too complicated to negotiate and adopt a large treaty in one go. Instead, we should now act more flexibly, meaning we ought to negotiate individual sections – and immediately bring them into force. This will also increase public acceptance. A free trade agreement secures jobs and prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic – while also making us less dependent on China in terms of trade and, in future, less dependent on Russia in terms of energy.

3. Transatlantic China Strategies

One of the weaknesses of the German people and Europeans is that they are, at the very least, sceptical about strategic thinking. However, we are dealing with systemic rivals who adopt a strategic, rather than moral, approach to politics. President Xi Jinping leads China with the long-term goal of shaping the country into an economic, military, and technological superpower – thus, from China's perspective, restoring the “normal state of affairs”.

We must learn to play to our strengths vis-à-vis Beijing, which means linking value-driven policies more strongly with interest-driven ones. And that means, as a first step: Europe and America need a joint China strategy.

The West's hope that the Middle Kingdom would become more democratic as its prosperity increased, turned out to be a fallacy. China's economic success has gone hand in hand with a regime that has become even more authoritarian. We are dealing with a regime that digitally monitors its citizens on a massive scale, fights democracy in Hong Kong and suppresses the Uyghur ethnic group. The rule of law, freedom of the press, and individual rights simply do not exist. At the same time, Beijing is rearming, exerting pressure on its neighbours, causing unrest in the South China Sea, and playing in the same league as Silicon Valley when it comes to the digital revolution.



China as a systemic rival: President Xi Jinping leads the People's Republic with the long-term goal of shaping the country into an economic, military, and technological superpower – thus, from China's perspective, restoring the "normal state of affairs". Source: © Tingshu Wang, Reuters.

First and foremost, a transatlantic China strategy must start with trade – and the World Trade Organisation needs to be the lever for this. We need a long-awaited WTO reform that forces China to comply with international standards and rules. The Communist Party's state capitalism is currently abusing the WTO system. In future, this needs to imply tough sanctions. Decoupling from China, however, is unrealistic, as our economic relations are too close.

We must take advantage of the fact that China – unlike the US and the EU – has no natural allies. A China strategy must, therefore, also ask the question: How do we work with India or Vietnam? We should also think about overcoming the coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of systemic rivalry: China, as an authoritarian state, seems to be able to fight the virus better than Western democracies. We need to counter this narrative with good and far-sighted policies – and prove it in potential future pandemics. Biden

sees “extreme competition” between Washington and Beijing. His approach is: We only cooperate with China when it benefits us. This is a pragmatic approach to a transatlantic strategy.

4. Push for Digitalisation

In 50 or 100 years, life may look quite different to what we know today. Against the backdrop of the tech revolution that is starting to unfold, many questions arise: Will we be ruled by algorithms in the future? Or will our lives be mainly characterised by more prosperity and less work? The fact is it will be what we make it.

Cyberattacks originating from Russia are currently the order of the day, and China is also active in this field. But this is just the advent compared with what lies ahead. Whoever takes the lead in artificial intelligence, bioengineering, quantum computing and other innovations, will become the dominant power on this planet.



Beijing and Moscow are aware of this. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, referring to the issue, said frankly: "Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world." A world in which the Chinese and Russians take the lead in tech is guaranteed to be a world much less worth living in, than one shaped according to our values.

Germany and Europe are currently sleepwalking through this trend – which poses a threat to our security, prosperity, and democracy. This is where we need massive investment – as well as close ties to the US and Silicon Valley. First and foremost, the initial stumbling blocks need to be cleared out of the way. We need a swift agreement on a successor to the Privacy Shield on transatlantic data security. Then it is a matter of protecting our critical infrastructure. The Chinese company Huawei, ultimately controlled by the Communist Party like everything else in the country, must not be allowed to install hardware in our 5G network under any circumstances. We must protect our sensitive data in order to avoid becoming easy prey for China. The same applies to digitalisation and research: We should set international standards and rules with North America – before the Chinese do. Intensive transatlantic tech cooperation must also go hand in hand with cooperation on climate protection, science, and pandemic control.

5. Promoting the Transatlantic Partnership

Recently, the new US Secretary of State Tony Blinken told a story from the spring of 1945. His stepfather, a Polish Jew, 16 years old at the time and a concentration camp survivor, encountered a US Army tank while fleeing. When the tank stopped, the hatch opened, and an Afro-American GI emerged. The boy said the only English phrase he knew: "God bless America!"

This story tells us something about the attraction of Western democracy, which the US in particular stood for at that time. For close transatlantic cooperation, we need a meaningful narrative that convinces the German people. Fortunately, this is crystal clear. First, in historical terms: the

"raisin bombers", the Marshall Plan, the economic miracle, the integration with the West, German unity, supported by George H. W. Bush.

But our age also offers an attractive transatlantic narrative. Germany reaps enormous economic benefits from its good relations with the US. Washington's security guarantee ensures stability at the heart of Europe, resulting in strong economies and our relative prosperity. The US has many weaknesses and is currently more divided than it has been for a long time. Yet, like no other country in the world, it stands for freedom and individual opportunity. The four years of Trump and the turbulent months following the presidential election bore witness to the strength and effectiveness of American democracy.

We also need to raise public awareness of these facts. We must explain to people why an alliance with the US is far more attractive for Germany and Europe than neutrality or even rapprochement with Russia or China. We must vigorously and persistently campaign for the transatlantic partnership – and ensure that German and European foreign policy does not take on a skewed, anti-transatlantic tone.

In the end, it boils down to a sentence by Henry Kissinger from his book "World Order": "The United States, if separated from Europe in politics, economics, and defense, would become geopolitically an island off the shores of Eurasia, and Europe itself could turn into an appendage to the reaches of Asia and the Middle East." This means that Europe needs the US, but also that the US needs Europe. If a close alliance on an equal footing between Europe and the US succeeds, we will withstand every internal and external challenge facing us in the 21st century. In that case, Thomas Mann's inspiring sentence would retain its validity: "Democracy will win!"

–translated from German–

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