

Dear Readers,

For decades, presidential elections in the United States have been followed with particular attention by audiences in Germany and Europe, with affinities and aversions often depending on which candidate lay closer to one's own socio-political and ideological preferences. However, the election in November 2024 was different: It was the first since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had once again brought home to us Europeans the existential importance of NATO's security guarantees and – with them – of US engagement in Europe. The sobering realisation was that voters on the other side of the Atlantic decide on our security.

A little over one year has passed since the election, and there has been no shortage here in Germany of analyses and assessments of the foreign policy pursued by President Donald Trump since he returned to office in January. “Isolationist”, “personalistic”, “transactional”, “unilateral”, “erratic” – these are just some of the labels that have been repeatedly attached to his administration. Understandably, the main interest has been on transatlantic relations and on the question as to whether we can still rely on the US as a partner with shared values and as a guarantor of our security, especially vis-à-vis Moscow.

In this issue of *International Reports*, we aim to broaden the perspective to other regions, deliberately highlighting actors that – much like Germany and Europe – view themselves as allies of the US or at least have a particular interest in good relations with Washington based on economic, financial, or security dependencies. We look at Canada and Mexico – the two immediate geographical neighbours of the US – as well as at Israel and the Gulf, at Taiwan and Vietnam, and also at African states and the possible consequences of a new US trade policy. In addition, we turn our sights to the World Health Organization, which now has to do without US funding. How have these actors been affected by the policies of the new Trump administration? How have they adapted? Can we discern certain patterns and draw conclusions for Germany and Europe?

Taken both individually and as a whole, the articles paint a largely nuanced and in parts contradictory picture that does not sit easily with the often sweeping judgements that dominate debate in this country. To begin with, the background circumstances in the cases examined here differed significantly. Based on its experience of Trump's first term in office, Mexico regarded his return to the White House with some trepidation. Canada felt similar, having been alarmed by Trump's campaign rhetoric, which portrayed its northern neighbour as the “51st US state”, as Bernd Althusmann shows in his article. By contrast, Israel and the Gulf states had placed great hopes in Trump long before his re-election. Both sets of expectations have only been partially fulfilled. In Ottawa and Mexico City, despite some friction, the prevailing view after nearly one year of Trump is that things could have turned out much worse. In Israel and the Gulf states, on the other hand, decision-makers have had to recognise that Donald Trump is certainly not the unreserved ally some of them had wished to see in him before the election. From the perspective of international health institutions, as Andrea Ostheimer explains in her article, things appear to have turned out even worse than feared.

In light of the case studies presented here, the terms often used to describe Trump's foreign policy have not always proved accurate. Current US foreign policy is by no means consistently "isolationist", as developments in the Middle East in particular have indicated. There, the Trump administration has invested considerable diplomatic resources in seeking a peace settlement for the Gaza Strip involving the key regional players, and the administration can at least point to some interim successes. In the same region, unlike his predecessors, President Trump has even been willing to order military strikes against the Iranian nuclear programme.

The Middle East further illustrates that although personal relationships may carry more weight than usual in Trump's foreign policy, they are not the sole determining factor. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu courted the US President just as much as the Gulf monarchs did, with some of the latter offering generous gifts and business deals that skirted the boundaries of corruption. Initially, this produced images of ostentatiously displayed harmony. However, in the end, unconditional support was not secured by any of these actors. Indeed, the US was unable to prevent Israeli air strikes in Qatar, which severely undermined the sense of security among the Gulf states, as Philipp Dienstbier points out in his article. At the same time, as Michael Rimmel mentions in his analysis, the "greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House" compelled Benjamin Netanyahu – live on camera – to make an apologetic phone call to the Qatari head of government.

One common experience shared by the actors examined in this issue is that the new US foreign policy is in fact shaped above all by transactional and unilateral thinking. Under Trump, the US orients its foreign policy far less around values, institutions, or alliances and views bilateral relations instead – in a distinctly sober way – as interest-driven give-and-take, often across very different policy fields. Some countries have adapted to this posture: By focusing on what they can offer Trump, they have in some cases fared reasonably well. Maximilian Strobel analyses how Mexico has demonstratively deployed its own military against illegal migration into the US in order to avert the most severe tariff threats from Washington. Ultimately, however, neither good personal relations nor the best deals seem to have offered protection against nasty surprises. In the final analysis, whether this has been the expression of an "erratic" policy or part of a strategy remains a matter of speculation. In any case, Trump's foreign policy has been difficult to predict for opponents and allies of the US alike. This applies not least to us Europeans in light of the highly contradictory signals emanating from Washington on further support for Ukraine and the deterrence of Russia.

For Germany and Europe, three broad foreign policy conclusions follow from this. Firstly, every effort should be made to develop or maintain good relations with the US and its current president, including on a personal level. Banal though it may sound, it remains better to enjoy good personal relations with Trump than bad ones, even if this strategy alone offers no guarantees.

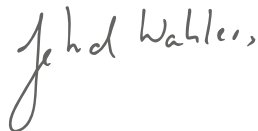
Secondly, we must engage with the transactional style of the current US administration. If transatlantic relations under Trump also chiefly amount to give-and-take from the American perspective, Europe needs to have as much as possible to put on the scales. We can achieve this by strengthening our economic competitiveness and military defence capability as rapidly and as substantially as possible. It goes without saying that we are neither able nor willing to operate in the same manner as the Gulf states or Vietnam, which have in some cases offered business deals crafted specifically for Trump and his family. However, we must act, not least because the US administration's transactional approach also applies where security and economic integration are at stake, as developments in Asia clearly illustrate. As Marcin Jerzewski notes in his article, Taiwan has taken note of how security assurances from Washington are increasingly tied to the island republic's own contributions and efforts, while Vietnam – as Lewe Paul shows – is using pragmatic diplomacy to navigate between American expectations and Chinese influence.

Thirdly, we are well advised to continue our efforts at economic and political diversification with determination so as to at least reduce our dependencies on the US. As Anja Berretta, Chantelle Moyo, and Jule Steinmann highlight in their article, many African states are turning their gaze towards Beijing in light of the uncertainties in their relations with Washington. This is not an option for Europe. However, there are plenty of countries – from Latin America and Africa to the Middle East and Asia – that share our interest in a stable, rules-based international order and with which we should strengthen our cooperation. Where these are democracies such as Brazil, India, and Japan, so much the better. However, we must also be able to pursue a balance of interests with states that do not conform to our democratic standards.

We shall once again be watching events across the Atlantic with close attention in 2028 when the next US President is elected: After all, we will not be able to dispense with the United States as a security partner for the foreseeable future. However, ensuring that we are better prepared for every conceivable outcome than we were last time should be high on our list of priorities in the years to come.

I wish you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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