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# Germany and the World: Global Trends and Future Challenges for German Politics

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In a globally networked world of ever closer connections between people, goods, capital and services, Germany's future depends on how early it identifies new trends and challenges. This is essential in order to lay the groundwork for political decisions that will positively shape Germany's and Europe's framework conditions for freedom and democracy, innovation, economic competitiveness and both internal and external security. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has, thus, surveyed its international network of staff posted in more than 100 countries around the globe. A number of trends were identified Germany needs to be prepared to respond to.

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### Between System Competition and Geopolitics

The **growing bipolarity between the US and China** is being felt all over the world. Under President Trump, the US is withdrawing from regional and global organisations and treaties, and seeking direct, bilateral confrontation with China and other powers. China, on the other hand, is expanding its economic, military and political influence in a soft power sense all over the globe to such an extent that it is at the very least perceived as a carefully planned strategy. The impression of a global competition between the democratic free-market economy and the system of state capitalism as run by the communist party (CPC) is largely undisputed, although it is not totally dominant, leaving room for multipolar constellations. Countries that identify with the values of democracy, freedom and human rights look expectantly to Germany and the EU as players in this global game. However, the EU and Germany are increasingly perceived as players who do not truly understand the challenges of the future.

These challenges lie in the increasing dysfunctionality of **multilateral systems**, as major powers regularly block each other and encourage others to follow suit. However, the multilateral, rules-based structures of governance have so far provided protection against the law of the jungle, particularly for mid-sized and smaller states.

The **international shipping routes** that are so vital to global trade, particularly in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, are coming under pressure due to the undermining of existing laws and threatening military backdrops. Appeals from Europe are not enough to counter this pressure.

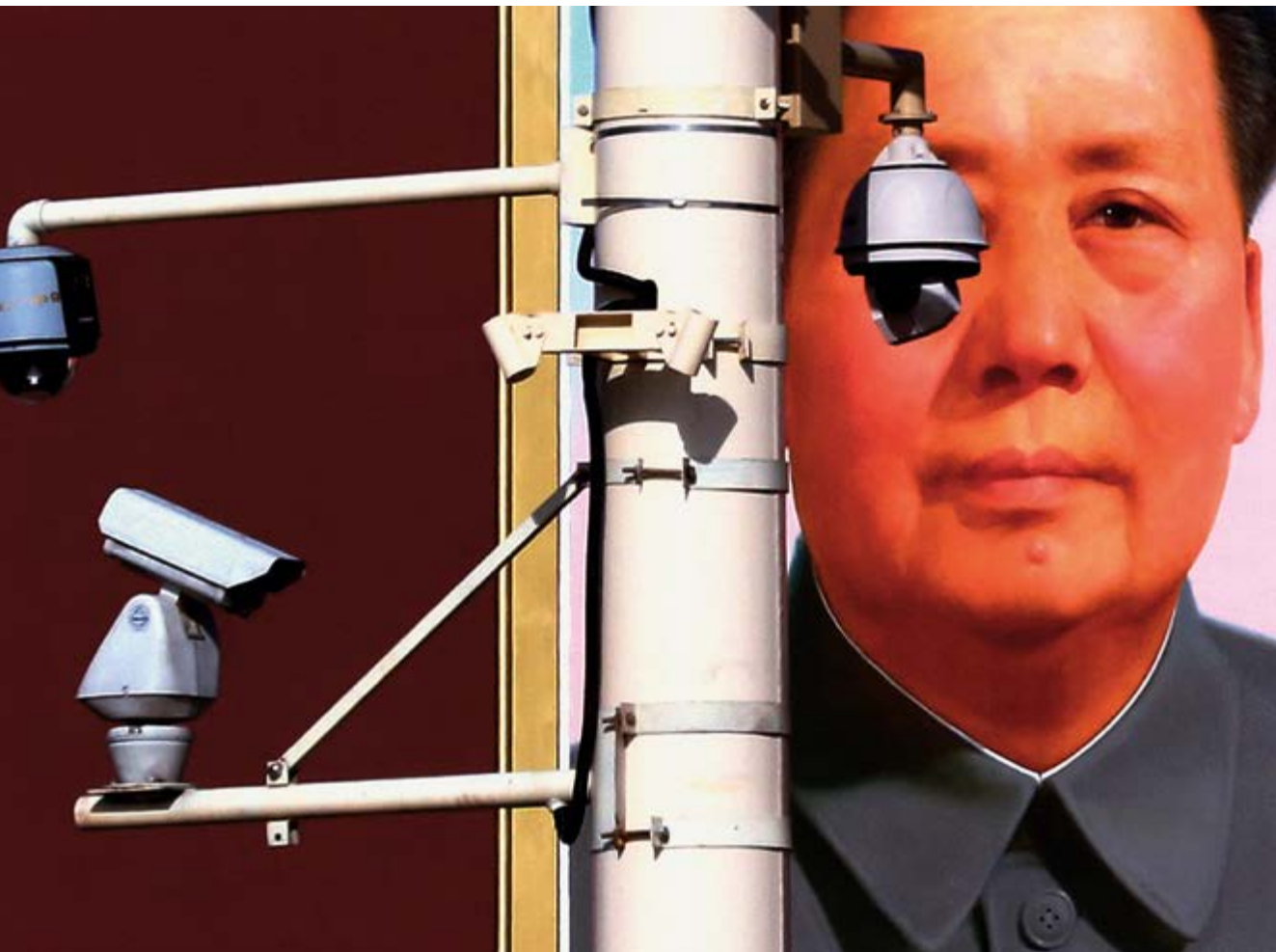
Competing powers such as China and Russia are increasingly using cyber strategies to exert influence on the political, economic and security spheres in Germany and Europe. This has been evident in their **interference campaigns** on social media, along with their espionage activities and attacks on the institutions and leaders of liberal democracies. There is, moreover, no sign of a decline in these persistent attacks.

Global conflicts over the **safeguarding of natural resources** are leading to new alliances being formed involving contracts, financing, technology and infrastructure. In many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America this is perceived as a form of neo-colonialism. This regards resources such as fossil fuels, raw materials required for state-of-the-art technology (including 'rare earths'), lithium, foodstuffs, drinking water (70 per cent of which is in the Antarctic), and also data – the 'oil of the future'. This is why traditional regions, such as Central Asia and North Africa, as well as new ones, such as the global data space, the Arctic, Antarctic and outer space are now equally being embroiled in the geopolitical rivalry. In all

these areas, there is evidence of increased friction between the major world powers. In some cases, this has become a race and involves circumvention or even blatant violation of international law. With its General Data Protection Regulation, the EU has taken an initial step towards adopting a policy of “data geopolitics”, albeit a predominantly defensive one. Offensive steps are needed to ensure Europe’s survival as a global economic power based on the principles of democracy and freedom. German companies must also face up to the competition in other countries by offering higher social and human rights standards than, for instance, their Chinese or Russian competitors.

Along with outer space and the polar regions of the globe, it is likely that further steps will be considered for exploiting and controlling the Earth’s resources through interventions in the geochemical cycles of the Earth, i.e. geo-engineering. The anticipated growth of the world’s population to nearly ten billion by 2050, and the consequences of climate change, are making resources scarcer and fuel the return of geopolitics to the question of borders, power and access to territories.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to address the **tensions in the Persian Gulf**, an area rich in fossil fuels, but surrounded by



Big Brother is watching you: In China, new technology is often used and developed in a way that is at odds with liberal attitudes. Source: © David Gray, Reuters.

countries with severe water shortages. The polarisation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is fuelled by religious ideology and affects the entire region, is set to intensify. In this global conflict, Saudi Arabia is supported by the US, while Iran tends to be backed by competing powers. The consequences are felt directly in Germany and Europe in the form of violence in Europe's neighbourhood, refugees, migration, terrorism, the scarcity of resources that are vital for its economies, and the disruption of trade routes to Asia.

### **Social Changes Caused by Digital Transformation and New Technology**

By providing cheap, fast and direct access to information and communication, social media and other forms of electronic media have had a major impact on **political communication within democratic societies**. This has provided more participatory opportunities for citizens, and more information options, but also less reliable quality of the information now offered. Rational, factual debate has given way to emotional arguments in which facts and political processes are relativised – a trend that is clearly visible in the democratic nations of Europe, North and South America as well as in the freer countries of Africa and Asia. This increasing polarisation and loss of confidence in traditional political institutions – such as parties, parliaments, governments, courts and also traditional media – are challenging our basic structures of freedom and democracy. Strong pillars of a pluralistic society such as associations, clubs and churches are in retreat in many Western countries. Transparency of decisions in terms of both arguments and procedures seems to be the order of the day. Fundamental questions once taken for granted, such as the relationship between majority decisions and the procedures of the democratic constitutional state, arise. For instance, is a majority in a vote or even an opinion poll more important than judicial channels and decisions? Familiar areas of conflict such as human rights vs. security are being imbued with new meaning and call for democratic and broadly accepted decisions.



All over the world, people are feeling disconcerted by the unimagined possibilities opened up by technology. **Genetic engineering** makes headlines that are reminiscent of horror films or science fiction, and people are worried or even fearful in the face of different value systems combined with a sense of disappearing borders. Hopes and potential for progress require a legal framework based on socially accepted values. In the world order, these values need global rules in order to flourish. The debate about 'designer babies' in terms of gender, skin colour, height or other features has already highlighted the ethical problems and emotional potential. If brain doping and AI implants mean that even the human brain can be turned into an app for controlling the human body and its environment, this raises even further questions about



Flight and migration: Prospects at home can only improve through economic development, freedom, social security, education, health and political participation. Source: © Darrin Zammit Lupi, Reuters.

potentials and limits. It is no coincidence that many countries are seeing an **increase in spirituality** and radical forms of religion or natural religions, particularly in Latin America and Africa. This can and will be instrumentalised for political ends.

In many open societies, political leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to reach out to **young people**. This is partly due to changing means of communication, and partly to the fact that today's youth are less connected to their milieu, which also affects more established ties to political parties. At every election, young people have to be won over afresh, something that is already quite a challenge in the ageing societies of Western Europe and Japan. This is even more the case in Africa and Latin America, where

young people often make up a large proportion or even the majority of the population.

Germany has to tackle the specific question of the importance of using the **latest technology for the surveillance and monitoring** of security hotspots, schools, and workplaces. In China, new technology is often used and developed in a way that is at odds with liberal attitudes. Germany and the EU have to decide what limitations should be placed on the use of such technology in their own countries.

### **Demographic Change and Migration**

The demographic change that is likely to affect the whole world presents a challenge for Germany on two fronts with significant interfaces:

the ageing population in Germany and many other European countries, plus Japan and China, and the simultaneous and rapid **population growth** in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In particular, the expected doubling of the African population by 2050, i.e. in a single generation, has already had and will increasingly have a direct impact on Germany and Europe. The younger generation expects more opportunities, partly fuelled by the images and stories that they see on the internet that seem to promise better life in Europe and North America, sometimes thought of as being some imaginary land of luxury and idleness. Young people want this for themselves, so first they move to the ever more crowded megacities in their own countries, then to neighbouring countries, and often finally to Europe. Their prospects at home can only improve through economic development, freedom, social security, education, health and political participation. But this is precisely what is lacking in these countries, some of which are ruled by dictators, others riddled with corruption and others under the influence of foreign governments. They have become a playing field in the global competition for resources, which leads to violent conflict, habitat loss due to climate change and land use, as well as religious fundamentalism. Some states may collapse, with dire consequences for the security of their neighbouring countries and beyond.

All this gives young people the impression that a bright future can only be found elsewhere. **Migrants** are often young, educated people whose skills are required in Germany and the rest of Europe. This reinforces the negative effects in their home countries, where, for example, the quality of health care is declining due to a lack of skilled personnel.

Forest fires and other natural disasters:  
Increasing climate change poses an enormous  
challenge in terms of how to provide for  
the world's rapidly expanding population.  
[Source: © Dicarado Moraes, Reuters.](#)





## Climate Change and Resources

The increasingly noticeable consequences of climate change present an enormous challenge in terms of how to provide for the world's rapidly expanding population. Its largely negative impact on **habitats** and hence also on agriculture for food production, combined with more frequent extreme weather events (natural disasters) exacerbates the existing risk of civil and interstate wars, with all the **migratory movement** that this entails. This applies especially, although not only, to Africa. On this continent, as well as in Asia and Latin America, cities are becoming megacities of ten or twenty million inhabitants or more, which leads to even more problems. City life is not synonymous with improved standards of living in terms of income, education, housing and services but is often a daily battle for survival in extremely polluted neighbourhoods where public utilities and services such as water, energy, security, education and health care are inadequately supplied. In such situations, it is difficult to enforce policies aimed at preventing or at least adapting to climate change.

**Expectations for Germany are that it should reach its own goals regarding climate change, and ideally also financially support other countries.**

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For Germany and Europe, it will become increasingly important to meet the demands of developing and emerging economies for **financial assistance** in order to help them prevent or adapt to climate change. The moral pressure on wealthy countries to shoulder more of the cost is growing, and at the same time their failure to meet their own climate targets is increasing the challenge of at least contributing to a global reduction in greenhouse gases.

In the competition for the planet's dwindling resources, which are located in some of the

world's least developed countries, a conflict is emerging in the sense of the need for '**resource justice**'. If the exploitation of resources in poorer countries by the industrialised nations and China does not lead to any noteworthy boost to their development, this will have an impact on both the quest for global partners and on the development prospects of the people who live in these countries.

## Individual Topics of the Future

In light of these trends, Germany and Europe need to consider the following issues:

The **relationship between the political process and its outcomes** (polity and politics – policy outcomes, or input legitimacy vs. output legitimacy) is of major significance for the global competition between democratic, constitutional states and those that have authoritarian structures but still demonstrate positive socio-economic outcomes. But it is also of enormous importance for the internal legitimation of democratic politics, which has suffered in the West in recent years despite the objective existence of positive development results (in terms of prosperity and freedom). Securing democracy – as a form of government and a way of life – both at home and abroad requires more effort to achieve legitimacy.

Europe needs to develop **its own position on the growing bipolarity between the US and China**, which should form the basis for possible scenarios such as 'decoupling' the two economic systems, similar to the former bipolarity between the US and the Soviet Union. The disputes over *Huawei* have provided a foretaste of the economic and practical consequences for citizens, and have also shown that the US could demand an alliance decision from Europe.

The question also arises as to whether alliances should be restructured in order to **create closer ties between Germany/the EU and countries with similar value systems and overlapping geopolitical interests**. If the G7 or NATO wish to include Asian nations (such as



India and South Korea) or Latin America ('West NATO'), then concepts such as 'the West' and approaches for opening up new constellations would have to be developed further.

Germany and the EU need to invest massively in **digital innovation, artificial intelligence** and the substantive **ideas and technology that are urgently needed to reduce greenhouse gases**. Along with state-directed industrial policies, as exemplified in China but also in some Western countries, **mobilising venture capital** is an important option. Especially in Germany, with its little-used capital and safety culture, this seems to be not only a legislative but also a psychological task. Current global trends are drawing attention to these enormous political challenges.

In this context, more attention should be paid to the diagnosed '**tribalisation**' of the **political debate**. The lines of conflict in societies no longer run along factual issues or ideologies, but rather on existing or perceived affiliations, such as globalists vs. nationalists, tech elites vs. digital illiterates, populists vs. multiculturalists, and identity politics in general. Parties and political elites need to gain a better understanding of these powerful forces if they are to overcome them, and garner sufficient support in the public debate and elections so as to make the policy decisions required.

*-translated from German-*

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