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# Out of order? The US alliance in Germany's foreign and security policy

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## ABSTRACT

The Trump Presidency has caused a debate in Germany on the future of the transatlantic alliance and reinvigorated efforts to increase defence cooperation with European partners. Yet, tangible results that would suggest a decoupling from the US alliance remain scarce. This article explores the motives and debates behind Germany's alignment with the US. How does Germany's alliance with the US fit with Berlin's overall foreign policy strategy? The article argues that the stability of the regional order is an important driver for Germany's alignment. Throughout the post-WWII history, Germany's primary interest has been to stabilise the European continent through regional integration in the European Union (EU) and NATO. A failure of the transatlantic alliance risks to threaten this goal, as new divisions might emerge between Central and Western European member states. The German case suggests that, in addition to threat balancing, the provision of regional order is an important incentive to align with the US.

## KEYWORDS

Alliances; international order; German foreign and security policy

## Introduction

In 2018 German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel offered a negative assessment of Germany's aptitude for an era of international competition: 'In a world full of carnivores, vegetarians have a very tough time of it' (Gabriel, 2018, p. 1). The 'world full of carnivores' refers to the growing assertiveness of states, such as China and Russia and the transactional approach in international politics that the election of Donald Trump as US President brought to the White House. In this world, 'vegetarians' such as Germany with a focus on a normative foreign policy, non-military means and multilateral cooperation risk standing on the sidelines while other non-Western powers gain influence. While the US can hardly be defined as a 'vegetarian' given its global power projection, Germany's partnership with the US has been based on a common support for the multilateral order. Now that the US support for some of the main institutions of this order (such as the UN, WTO or NATO) appears shaky, the need arises to reevaluate the basis for the transatlantic alliance with the US. In particular, this research paper aims to answer the question how Germany's alliance with the US fits with Berlin's overall foreign policy strategy.

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The US alliance remains of paramount importance for Germany's foreign policy. The article examines the recent history, key foreign policy documents, the current relationship with the US administration and the policy debate in Germany. It argues that the relevance of the US in Germany's foreign policy strategy is not primarily based on a realist objective to balance against a common threat. Instead, the article shows that an important driver for Germany's alignment with the US has been and still is to ensure on the European continent the order that is based on regional integration through the European Union (EU) and NATO. This regional dimension explains the significant challenge that Germany faces amidst the current frictions in the transatlantic alliance. Germany ponders how to ensure the stability of the regional order without the US support, while at the same time avoiding new divisions among EU member states in a post-Atlantic Europe.

The German case offers an alternative explanation why states enter and maintain alliances. While realist literature often defines a common threat perception as the main driver for the formation of alliances (Walt, 1987, 2009), the German case suggests that the provision of regional order is an important incentive to align with a more powerful partner such as the US.

Given the importance that Germany assigns to the balancing role of the US in Europe, the shifts in the transatlantic alliance under President Trump's administration were more consequential than during previous tensions. This paper argues that the changes in the German perception of US commitment to international security and order pushed Germany to rethink its foreign policy orientation. Traditionally, Germany could count on transatlantic security guarantees, which allowed Berlin to ignore calls for a stronger German and European role in regional security. Now, Germany is compelled to strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy. The rebalance from a transatlantic to a European vocation in the area of security and defence constitutes a major challenge for Germany not only from a military perspective. It requires Germany to step up its political leadership on the continent, possibly in a close partnership with France. However, the creation of a core Europe centred around Germany and France risks to upset the carefully calibrated balance of power on the continent and EU unity.

The section following the introduction provides a brief overview of the historical developments of the German-US alliance until the early 2000s. It highlights that Germany's motivation to form a close alliance with the US was based consistently on its goal to promote the regional order on the continent. The third section looks at some of the latest German strategy and policy documents. Next to the US security guarantees, they highlight the extent to which Germany based its foreign policy model on the international order as sustained by the US. The paper then turns to a discussion of the alliance management under the Obama and Trump administrations. During both administrations, the EU was the most important point of reference for Germany. Either in order to cooperate with the US (during Obama), or to guard European interests from negative effects of US policies (during Trump). As the subsequent section discusses, the first years of the Trump administration has led to a change in the perception of US power in the German discourse and promoted views that Germany needs to prepare for a post-Atlantic Europe. The final section before the conclusions examines Germany's vision of the international order and the limits it is facing to achieve it. The conclusions summarise the main findings.

## The foundations of today's German-US relationship

It is almost impossible to disentangle the German-US partnership from the regional context of transatlantic relations, the ties between the EU and the US, as well as cooperation within NATO. One of the most consequential policy choices of the young West German federal state shortly after WWII was the decision of the Konrad Adenauer government to pursue a policy of *Westbindung* (integration into the West). On the one hand that meant to firmly side with the US in the foreseeable conflict with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Germany strongly advocated the creation of Western European institutions, which followed the liberal and free market model of the US and constituted a counterpoint to the model of the Soviet Union.

The formation of the alliance with the US went hand in hand with the creation of the European Communities (later European Union) and NATO as regional integration projects. Firmly based in the West and committed to regional integration, Germany – which had been at the centre of the two world wars and previous violent conflicts in Europe – was seen as less threatening by its continental neighbours (Szabo, 1992). With this strategy Germany achieved its key foreign policy objectives until 1989, to rehabilitate as a respected state in the international community and to reunite with East Germany.

The end of the Soviet Union suddenly put Germany in a new position in Europe. Without the East-West conflict as the primary rationale of the NATO alliance and as a sovereign reunited country, would Germany fall back into a dominant role in Europe? Would the US lose interest in Europe and retreat? Would European nations once more start quarrelling in a potential vacuum that the US leaves behind? These were some of the worries of the time (see, for example, Mearsheimer, 1990).

Instead of a disintegration of the West, the wars in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and in Afghanistan from the early 2000s onwards absorbed the attention of the transatlantic alliance and constituted a new rationale for NATO and kept the US involved on the continent. European nations saw the need for further economic and partly political integration which led to the creation of the EU as well as subsequent reforms and enlargements. Instead of provoking disintegration, the post-cold war period laid the foundation for the newly founded EU, which soon aspired to become an actor on the international stage and to create capabilities that would match the increasing expectations by the US and other partners (Hill, 1993).

For Germany and its relations with the US the starting point of this new era was the 1990 Two Plus Four Treaty. After the end of the Cold War the four formal occupying powers – the US, the Soviet Union, the UK and France – gave up their rights and allowed East and West Germany to reunite and to gain full sovereignty. While France and the UK were initially worried about a hegemonic position of a strengthened Germany in Europe, the US strongly supported the step as long as the reunited country would be part of NATO and the European Community (later European Union). 'We will be partners in leadership' summarised George Bush (1990) in his short and often-cited address on the eve of unification. He voiced the US expectation that Germany would become a capable eye-level partner embedded in the institutions of the transatlantic community.

Initial French and British worries of a dominant Berlin Republic did not materialise and the 'tamed Germany' (Katzenstein, 1990) became one of the driving forces behind

European integration in the 1990s. Germany's policy makers also understood the strategic necessity to ensure NATO's enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries in order to stabilise its eastern neighbours and prevent the creation of alternative security arrangements that could have split the continent once again (Eyal, 2000). Multilateralism within NATO, the EU and the UN remained one of the fixed tenets of German foreign and security policy. However, the development of a more active Germany in line with US expectations, especially as a contributor to multilateral peace operations, was a slow process. The German lesson of WWII was a deep-seated notion of 'never again war'. The military self-restraint, which is also reflected in the parliamentary control of the Bundeswehr, caused a debate about the circumstances under which German troops can be deployed in out-of-area missions (Iso-Markku, 2016). The tensions between the alliance-expectations to be part of multilateral military interventions and the preference for military restraint culminated during the 1999 Kosovo war, when Germany took the historic step to deploy its first combat troops as part of a NATO-led air campaign.

The wars in the Western Balkans had their effects on the transatlantic partnership. On the one hand, Germany began its development as a military contributor in line with the US expectations of 'partners in leadership'. On the other hand, the experience showed Europeans that they had to develop their own military capabilities in order to handle instabilities in their neighbourhood. 80% of NATO strikes in Serbia were carried out by the US (Bierling, 2014, p. 91). As a result, in 2001 the EU launched what is now the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Due to its military restraint and its strong commitment to the US partnership and NATO, Germany was initially wary of supporting the new defence pact that allowed European states to launch civilian and military missions under an EU flag. While the US was generally supportive of the European defence ambitions, the State Department under President Bill Clinton formulated conditions (Madeleine Albright's '3 Ds'). The CSDP should not decouple Europe from the US, discriminate non-EU NATO allies or duplicate NATO capabilities (Varwick, 2017).

Yet, Germany eventually became a strong supporter of CSDP. Less because of operational concerns and rather because German elites saw it as the 'next grand integration project' in Europe (Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet et al., 2010, p. 223). The EU crisis management structures heavily tilted towards civilian crisis management elements in line with Germany's militarily restrained foreign policy approach. US concerns were mitigated, as the CSDP soon turned out to be much less ambitious than NATO in terms of operational capabilities. Duplication concerns of the US seemed unfounded also because the 2003 Berlin Plus agreement allowed the EU to use NATO's command structures for its military operations.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the century, the relationship between the US, Germany and the rest of Europe enjoyed a moment of balance. The relationship was not without policy differences, for example on how to engage in the Western Balkans or on burden sharing. However, similar objectives on both sides of the Atlantic, a stable commitment of the US to Europe and to regional integration all but erased old concerns that the new century in Europe could look as unstable as the previous ones. The regional order was an important goal for Germany and an incentive to align with the US. Under the US security umbrella and in a more closely integrated EU, questions of a revival of German dominance lost their urgency.

Until the early 2000s, Germany's relationship with the US mostly fitted its overall foreign policy approach of a civilian power with a focus on multilateralism and military self-restraint. When the US decided to invade Iraq in 2003, the German government was torn between its commitment to the transatlantic ally on the one hand, and the criticism of US policies in the Middle East on the other, which it perceived as overly militaristic and unilateral in nature. The result was the first major disagreement with the US administration.

It first seemed as if the 2001 terror attacks in New York would bring the allies closer together. The day after 9/11, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder pledged 'unconditional solidarity', and German forces later joined the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (Brummer & Oppermann, 2016). However, the US intention to launch a pre-emptive military operation against Iraq was widely opposed in Germany. While a UN Security Council resolution backed up the war in Afghanistan, Germans saw the Iraq war as a unilateral and militarily aggressive move by the US. For example, half a million Germans formed a protest march in Berlin in late 2002 (Bierling, 2014).

Ahead of the federal election in the autumn 2002, Schröder used the scepticism about the use of force and the widespread anti-American sentiment to campaign on the opposition to the US intervention plans. While he secured re-election, the fierce criticism of US intent led to an all-time low in the transatlantic government relations. France shared the scepticism towards US intentions, which provoked the US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to label the dissenters as 'old Europe'. Indeed, a 'new Europe', the UK and other Southern and Central European states, sided with the US. Not only did the Iraq war cause rising tensions between Germany and the US, but it drove temporarily a wedge into the EU. Arguably, the latter consequence of the Iraq intervention was seen as the more damaging one in the German debate.

In hindsight, experts disagree on the significance of the transatlantic fallout over the Iraq war. Some scholars saw the Iraq war as the end of the 'special relationship' of Germany with the US (Szabo, 2004). Because the end of the Cold War had reduced the German incentive to bandwagon with the US, the fear that Germany takes a 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) had materialised. It seemed as if Germany stopped hiding its national interest at the cost of the transatlantic link.<sup>2</sup> Others read less into the German opposition. The apparent clash of US interests with Germany's restraint and multilateral foreign policy doctrine, as well as a strong public opposition during an election season, left the Schröder government with few other options than to oppose the US policy (Rudolf, 2005). Nevertheless, the Iraq war controversy created the notion that the German-US relations had changed. Germany appeared less constrained by the structural dependencies of the Cold War era and willing to express its opposition when needed (Risse, 2004).

While Iraq foreshadowed a growing emancipation of Europe from the US, it remained an outlier in an overall strong alliance. The period between the Cold War and the year 2008 – when Barack Obama won the US elections and, perhaps more consequential, the financial crisis hit the world economies – were formative years for the German-US partnership. In this period the regional integration in Europe made leaps forward, Central European and Baltic countries were integrated into the EU and NATO, and the Euro was

created. The transatlantic alliance placed Germany in a regional order in which any risk of conflicts seemed to vanish.

## The US alliance in Germany's foreign and security policy strategy

Despite tensions over the Iraq war, the US alliance remained an integral part of Germany's foreign and security policy strategy. On the one hand, this is due to Germany's reliance on the collective security arrangement of NATO and the US nuclear umbrella. On the other hand, recent foreign policy documents reflect the fact that Germany built its approach to international relations around the US-led post-war order constituted by the European Union, the WTO as well as the UN.

Both aspects, collective security guarantees and multilateral embeddedness in the US-led order, feature in the German government's 2016 White Paper on Security Policy, which is Germany's key strategic document. The strategy identifies the need to ensure the 'indispensable commitment of the United States to the security of Europe' (p. 64) and declares that 'only together with the United States can Europe effectively defend itself against the threats of the twenty-first century and guarantee a credible form of deterrence' (p. 49). The document also underlines the US alliance's relevance to the regional order: 'Since the end of the Cold War, European countries – together with the United States of America – have established a unique peace order on the European continent' (p. 31). In short, in 2016 the US was seen as the indispensable partner for security and order in Europe.

The US relevance for German security remained also backed up by hard facts on the ground and the continuous US involvement in Europe's territorial defence. 75,000 American troops were stationed on German soil in the year 2000 and still around 40,000 were present in early 2020 (Bierling, 2014, p. 69; Beardley, 2017). At the same time, the nuclear sharing arrangement in NATO allows the US to continue stationing nuclear weapons in Germany and contributes to Europe's nuclear deterrence.

The German government's 2018 coalition agreement – though not a strategic foreign policy document – signifies a change of rhetoric in reaction to the growing tensions in the US alliance. 'Europe needs to become more internationally self-reliant and capable. At the same time, we want to strengthen the bond with the US. We want to stay transatlantic and become more European' (translation by the author; p. 144). While the formulation intends to make a point for a stronger German commitment to European capabilities, it also displays an uncertainty of the future direction of German foreign policy.

The formulation clearly shows that both the European and the transatlantic orientation are very important to Germany. Yet, it omits the reality that the reason why Germany was even thinking of becoming 'more European' was that the transatlantic bond had already weakened in the perception of German policy-makers in 2018. From their perspective, the US increasingly behaved in a hostile way towards European interests, and Germany had to step up its leadership role on the continent. However, the formulation also shows that the new government shied away from clearly committing to a robust European approach that could signify a pivot away from the US dependence. The reluctance might have been based on the assessment of the realities on the ground, because in terms of dependence on US security guarantees, nothing had changed since the 2016 White paper.

## Alliance management: navigating Obama's multilateralism and Trump's transactionalism

During both the Obama and Trump administrations, the regional dimension of alliance management in the context of the EU was of importance to Germany. During the Obama presidency, the US administration and the German government worked closely together in creating a strong EU position on critical issues, such as the 2014 sanctions against Russia following the war in Ukraine. The close partnership with the US helped Germany to be an accepted leader in Europe on security matters. During the first years of the Trump presidency, this dynamic was turned on its head. Instead of Germany and the US working together on a strong EU position in the interests of both alliance partners, Germany felt that it had to support the EU stance in order to protect European interests against what they perceived as harmful US policies. Not only did Germany have to show leadership qualities in Europe, for the first time it had to manage the leadership role without the support of the US.

During the Obama administration, several transatlantic projects, such as the joined work on what became the Paris Climate Agreement, restored the trust into the US partnership after the Iraq crisis. From a German point of view, the Iran nuclear talks were a textbook case of successful multilateral diplomacy. Initiated by the three biggest EU states – France, Germany and the UK – in 2003 and later enlarged with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, Russia and the US – the P5 + 1 talks catapulted Germany into the centre of international politics. While progress was slow under President Bush, the election of President Obama and a 'moderate' government in Iran accelerated the progress at the turn of the decade. The management of the nuclear talks also reflected Germany's multilateral orientation, as the EU High Representative was in charge of the diplomacy.

However, Obama's focus on multilateralism and support for the European role in international affairs came with strings attached. After costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama's rationale was to reduce the costs of US international engagement. Towards that end, Europe's greater say in international affairs came with heightened anticipation that European countries also shoulder more responsibility in regional security (Böller & Hagemann, 2017). The question of burden sharing between the US and its European allies became even more relevant, as Obama sought a strategic reorientation of the US towards the Asia-Pacific region.

European allies failed to meet the expectations. The 2011 NATO Libya intervention, during which Obama initially thought to delegate the main responsibility of stabilising the country to European allies and to 'lead from behind', became a wake-up call for EU states (Menon, 2013). Just as during the Western Balkan wars, 90% of the military actions against the Libyan regime would not have been possible without the support of the US (Koenig, 2012). In June 2011, the outgoing US Secretary of Defence Robert M. Gates bemoaned the 'two-tier alliance'. With the power of foresight he warned that 'future US political leaders, those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me, may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost' (Birnbaum, 2011). Especially Germany, where military self-restraint continues to run deep in the strategic culture, failed to live up to US expectations, as it abstained from the UN Security Council vote authorising the Libya air campaign and withdrew its AWACS crews from surveillance flights.

Since 2014, the Ukraine crisis and the worsening of Western relations with Russia caused a rebalance of US commitment to Europe and brought the allies closer together. While NATO had been focused on crisis management and out-of-area operations since the end of the Cold War, reassurance measures in the Baltics and Central Europe were on the top of the agenda at the alliance's summit in Wales in 2014. The US reconfirmed its European engagement, committed to send troops to Poland and set up a \$3.4bn worth European Reassurance Initiative (Peel & Acton, 2018). This time Germany also tried to meet international and US expectations and sent troops to Lithuania as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. Berlin also committed to 'move towards' the NATO goal to spend 2% of its GDP on defence in 2024 – a benchmark it continuously failed to meet as it allocated about 1.2% of GDP to the military in 2017 (NATO, 2017).

However, Russia's new assertiveness was not perceived in Germany as a major threat in a way that it could serve as a foundation for the renewal of the transatlantic military alliance. In contrast to some of the Baltic countries or Poland (see Lanoszka, 2020), Germany did not see Russian actions as an imminent threat to political systems or even the territorial integrity of NATO allies, but rather as a threat to the general principles of the rules-based regional order in Europe. From Germany's perspective, the act of annexing Crimea and starting a war in Eastern Ukraine were wrong and called for consequences, yet, further aggression towards NATO allies were seen as unlikely (Gotkowska, 2016). Consequently, Germany's involvement in NATO's Baltic reassurance was often framed as an act of solidarity towards NATO allies and less as a measure of deterrence towards Russia. It was more about ensuring the regional order and less about balancing a threat. In line with its cooperative foreign policy approach, Germany strongly argued against bolder deterrence measures, such as a permanent, non-rotational deployment of forces in the Baltics and Poland, as it feared a breach of the 1997 NATO-Russia founding act and thus a breakdown of any dialogue with Russia.

In general, the discourse in Germany developed along concepts of 'responsibility' rather than highlighting deterrence or military engagements. In a significant speech in early 2014, President Joachim Gauck (2018) broke the ground: 'It is precisely at times when the United States cannot keep on providing more and more that Germany and its European partners must themselves assume greater responsibility for their security'. The 2016 German White Paper on security policy determined that 'the transatlantic security partnership will grow closer and become more productive the more we Europeans are prepared to shoulder a larger share of the common burden'. In the document, Germany communicated its readiness 'to actively participate in shaping the global order' and 'to assume leadership' (German government, 2016, p. 23). By the end of 2016, Germany and Europe were far from able to defend themselves or to uphold regional stability in crisis theatres in the Middle East and North Africa. Nevertheless, Germany reversed the trend of declining defence budgets and pursued a closer defence cooperation with European partners within the EU and NATO.

The alliance management during the Obama administration can best be summarised as a multilateral partnership. Looking at the list of international challenges, from climate change and the Iran nuclear deal to the Arab Spring and the Ukraine crisis, all responses by the US and Germany involved a high level of engagement of the EU as the regional decision-making forum and actor in the making. What seemed natural at the time from

the German multilateral-biased perspective, may have been only a temporary phenomenon.

The election of Donald Trump as US President represented a major turning point in Germany-US relations. His remarks and policies, such as a partial retreat from international agreements, escalating rhetoric with regard to North Korea, distancing from the free trade agenda and shrugging off post-WWII institutions such as NATO and the EU, run against Germany's foreign policy model based on multilateralism and heavy focus on diplomacy in conflict management. The approach by the new US administration was probably best described in an article by Trump's former advisors HR McMaster and Cohn (2017), who rejected the idea that the world is a 'global community' but described it as an 'arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage'. Since then the December 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS; White House, 2017) confirmed the administration's realist view on international relations by emphasising the return of 'great power competition' (p. 27) and the need for 'an America that successfully competes' (p. 3) in order to prevent conflicts. While the NSS also paid lip service to a 'strong and free Europe' that shares 'the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law', the document conveyed the subtext that the US President seeks 'value for money' (Dempsey, 2017) in the transatlantic relationship.

The transactional turn in US foreign policy was surely noticed in Berlin. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's comments that 'the era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent' (as quoted in Paravicini, 2017) at a campaign-style event in summer 2017 were hardly an announcement of a major German foreign policy shift. However, they indicated that Germany had to reassess how to engage with the US and uphold security and stability in Europe when US commitment is further fading. President Trump's speech in Warsaw in July 2017 did little to reassure Germany that President Trump would share the liberal worldview of the government in Berlin. While he underlined US commitment to the NATO mutual defence clause, he portrayed the picture of a 'Western civilization' under attack by 'radical Islamic terrorism' and 'the steady creeping government bureaucracy' (Robinson, 2017, p. 17). For observers in Germany he was rather seeking to build a new illiberal and religious-conservative alliance instead of strengthening the previous transatlantic bond.

The President Trump's May 2018 decision to reimpose sanctions on Iran and stop honouring the Iran nuclear agreement risked to damage further the transatlantic alliance. In the months leading up to the decision, German, French and British diplomats tried to find a solution together with the US Department of State to address some of the concerns regarding possible shortcomings of the deal, without upsetting Iran or the other permanent UN security council members (Peel & Manson, 2018). In the end they had no success. From a German perspective, the diverging US decision weighs heavier than the earlier fallout over the Iraq war, because it seemed as the US administration is proactively undermining multilateral agreements. In addition, in the aftermath of the decision US and German interests were directly opposed. The US wanted to reinstate maximum pressure on Iran, including blocking trade with EU partners. That ran against German and European intentions to continue to economically engage Iran in order to keep it in the agreement (Scazzieri, 2019). The toxic consequences of this fundamental strategic collision course could not be fully estimated at the time of writing.

Germany's position on the US' increasingly antagonistic approach towards China, especially concerning the 'trade war' that started to unfold in 2018/19, was less clear-cut. Germany's economic success was to a large part built on exports of specialised and high-quality machinery to China and hence did not suffer the same export deficit problem that drove President Trump to impose import tariffs on Chinese steel and a number of other goods. However, German officials increasingly became worried about an excessive reliance on the Chinese market, Chinese investments in European companies and infrastructure as well as the potential toxic leverage that Beijing could obtain on European unity (Brattberg & Soula, 2018). While Germany saw the need to address Chinese assertiveness, it did not choose to use the unilateral and punitive measures of the US administration.

Instead of China being a potential threat, which could provide a new glue to the transatlantic alliance, the question how to deal with the rising power seemed to become an issue of growing distrust between Germany and the US. A vivid example was the question whether the Chinese technology giant Huawei should be allowed to provide technology for the setup of next generation 5G mobile networks in Europe and America. Germany's reluctance to follow the US advice to prohibit Chinese technology over fear of spying displeased US officials. The other way around, German policy makers were defiant in face of the US warning to cut off intelligence sharing should they continue to allow Chinese network technology (Shalal, 2019).

The German alliance management in the time of the Trump administration had to change from a multilateral partnership to a strategy of damage control and hedging against risks of US abdication of multilateral leadership. The regional dimension thereby became an integral part in the hedging strategy and Germany started to focus more closely on working together with European partners with a similar global outlook, in particular with France. Examples included shielding European businesses from the negative effects of American Iran sanctions, or the defence of EU's trade interest against US tariffs on steel and aluminium.

### **Perception of US power: preparing for a post-Atlantic era**

The first years of the Trump administration changed how German experts and policy makers perceived US power and its effect on regional order. Given the importance that Germany traditionally assigned to the positive effect of US power on the regional order, this shift in itself could be consequential for the alliance going ahead.

The immediate concerns of the German public, however, were related to the breach of what was seen as the common value base of the alliance. Based on their own lesson of twentieth century history and the positive experience of the German and European reunification in the 1990s, Germany strongly emphasises values as a basis for stable and peaceful international relations. Germany's foreign policy elite, pushed by critical media and public opinion, has a strong determination to avoid compromising principles of human rights, democracy and the rule-of-law in their relations to other governments around the world.

Despite the general popularity of President Obama, his US administration was not able to escape criticism for compromising these values during his tenure. Especially the revelations of the spying activities of the National Security Agency (NSA) caused an emotional

outrage in Germany. Based on the government oversight abuses during the Nazi and Stasi era, Germans are highly concerned about privacy rights. It mattered little that it was later revealed that a German agency closely cooperated with the US partners (Spiegel, 2013). President Obama's growing use of drone warfare and the related human rights concerns also sparked criticism against the US global role. Nevertheless, a prominent view in Germany was that Obama was as close as it gets to an ideal US President.

The manner in which Donald Trump conducted his presidential campaign, including verbal attacks against migrants, vilifying of the press and questioning of the scientific findings behind climate change policies, influenced how Germans perceived the US commitment to shared values. As a consequence, Chancellor Merkel saw the need to remind the President-elect Trump that 'Germany and America are bound by common values – democracy, freedom, as well as respect for the rule of law and the dignity of each and every person [...]' (as quoted in Faiola, 2016). She even seemed to make 'close cooperation' of her government with the US administration contingent on the integrity of these values. The reaction shows that from a German perspective the alliance with the US is as much based on a joint perception of values, as it is about security.

In addition to values, the individual in the White House also has a strong effect on the German perception of the US. Polling by the PEW Research Center (2018, p. 16) shows that German favorability ratings of the US more than doubled from 31% to 64% after Obama was elected, in correlation with an even sharper upturn in confidence ratings of the US President. The decline of US favourability ratings was equally swift when the unpopular successor Donald Trump was inaugurated in 2017 (from 57% to 35%). In 2018, US favourability in Germany hit a ten years' low of 30%, the lowest rating among all European allies. The first image of the individual and what kind of policy he/she brings to the oval office matters to a large extent in the German popular perception of US power.

While the disregard for shared values and the style of the individual holding the presidency had an immediate effect on the perception of the US, the German debate on the consequences of the structural shifts of US power could cause a more lasting impact on the alliance. Already during the Obama years, the relative shift of power away from the US and towards Asia was reflected in US policies that started to divert its attention towards the pacific region. The German and European discussions on how to fill the void that the US might leave behind started with the 2011 Libya crisis and continued with the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The 2016 German White Paper on security policy and the EU global strategy from the same year pay testament to a new discussion of European global 'actorness'. However, despite the crisis in the neighbourhood a sense of urgency was missing, as the US partnership and security guarantees in the alliance were not doubted.

The election of President Trump amplified the German perception of the structural shifts and the decline of US power. Chancellor Merkel's remarks that 'we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands' (as quoted in Paravicini, 2017) set the starting point for a wider debate in Germany, whether 'Trumpism' is simply an indicator of a larger trend of American fatigue in global leadership. In October 2017, a transatlantic manifesto by twelve German foreign policy experts declared that Germany should not make the mistake of distancing itself from the US (Berger et al., 2017). The experts saw the Trump presidency as an isolated 'sui generis' phenomenon that does not represent the structurally stable partnership between the US and Europe. Without the US,

Germany cannot guarantee its security nor is it able to be an effective actor that keeps the EU together: 'a departure from this trans-Atlantic orientation will renew the threat of a special path (Sonderweg) of Germany, it will strengthen nationalists on the left and the right, and it will endanger the peaceful European order'.

The manifesto soon provoked responses that pointed out that Trump represents a structural trend of US decline and that America is on the trajectory of becoming incapable of underwriting the multilateral global order. Two journalists from the German weekly '*Die ZEIT*' argued for a 'post-Atlantic Western policy' (Lau & Bernd, 2017). According to them, President Trump would be a symptom of a larger phenomenon of American retreat in international relations: 'the transatlantic crisis didn't begin with Trump and will not end with Trump'. The so-called 'adults in the room' did not have a moderating effect on Trump. Because the US is overwhelmed by its global leadership and has lost moral authority, Germany does not have another choice to pursue an 'alternative foreign policy'.

Most prominently German former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel reiterated the post-Atlanticists case in a keynote address in late 2017. He believed that for the US administration, Europe became 'one region among many others' with the consequence that 'the US' relations with Europe will not be the same as before, even after Donald Trump is no longer president' (Gabriel, 2017). Gabriel's address was met with criticism and some saw it as an 'obsessive dissociation from the US' (Füchs, 2017). For others, the speech that also included pro-alliance positions was much more contradictory and rather 'an articulation of the conflicting forces pulling at Germany (and other Europeans)' (Stelzenmüller, 2018, p. 9). It is fair to argue, that by late 2017, the German foreign policy elite was increasingly feeling insecure about whether the continuous reliance on US power could be sustainable in the long run.

The German perception of US power took another more serious turn to the worse in 2018. During the first year of the Donald Trump presidency, the German elite had still debated to what extent the 'blustering' of the US administration will have an actual effect on the day-to-day business of the alliance. The US announcement to abandon the Iran nuclear agreement rattled even prominent Atlanticist voices in the German debate, which started to argue that Europe will have to seriously re-evaluate the transatlantic partnership if president Trump is re-elected in 2020 (Witte & Birnbaum, 2018). It had been clear before, that President Trump would not be a supporter of the Iran nuclear agreement and would potentially abandon it. However, by threatening European businesses into compliance of US sanctions against Iran, the US aimed at actively undermining the multilateral agreement and with it the transatlantic partnership. For Germany, the US administration was not only waning in its support to the multilateral order or simply ignoring it. The US – in a process of relative structural decline and return to narrow self-interests – seemed to become hostile to the multilateral system.

The three dimensions, the perception of values, the individual and structural power of the US in the international system, were all pointing to a worsening of the transatlantic alliance at the time of writing. Especially the perception of the structural changes in the US relations with Europe drove Germany to concentrate more strongly on Europe. For Germany, protecting the European Union as the strongest element of regional order in Europe, and potentially developing it towards a credible international actor, became a vital mission.

## German perception of world order: a rebalance to Europe

As this section will discuss, Germany strongly believes in the post-Cold War international and regional order marked by rules and cooperation. However, the perception in the stability of this order was so deeply ingrained that Germany neither expected that this order might be challenged by emerging players such as Russia, nor that the US would waver in its support for it. Consequently, Germany never developed the ability to uphold the order by itself and is now struggling to provide the political and military means to do so.

Germany's perception of the international order is largely influenced by its experiences of the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall and the promise of the success of the liberal 'Western' model that this event carried (Bagger, 2019). Reunification and the end of the Soviet Union strengthened the belief that instead of war, competition and rivalry between states or different ideologies, a system of global rules and norms would ensure peaceful cooperation between democratically organised societies. The decades after reunification seemed to fulfil this promise, as the EU deepened its institutional organisation and widened its membership base. Even as late as 2011, the 'Arab Spring' was often compared in Germany to the fall of the iron curtain and the transformation of Central European states, even though the Arab economies and societies shared little resemblance with Germany's eastern neighbours (Asseburg, 2011, p. 6).

Germany's cooperative and norm-based foreign policy approach was especially prominent in its relations to Russia. While the Baltic countries and Poland (see Lanoszka, 2020) remained sceptical of their eastern neighbour, Germany forged closer political and economic ties with Russia in the decades after the Cold War. Hope that the Russian state might transform into a democratic and liberal system was promoted through the German policy of 'modernisation partnership'. Consequently, the illegal annexation of the Ukrainian peninsular Crimea in 2014 rocked Germany's belief in the international order at its core. Not only did the Russian aggression disappoint those who believed that a Russian transformation is possible. It also highlighted that the international order based on the rule of law and the validity of borders was more fragile than previously assumed.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine was not the only event that severely tested the German world view of increasingly closer cooperation in recent years. The 'Brexit' decision of the UK to leave the European Union and the strengthening of illiberal ideologies and autocratic tendencies in and around Europe left Germans to a large extent perplexed and unprepared. Instead of liberalism and multilateral cooperation, illiberalism and competition seem to be the new trajectory of international relations.

The policies of the US administration under President Trump seemed to reinforce this trend. From a German perspective, the 2018 decision to abandon the Iran nuclear agreement was just the latest example of a foreign policy approach that is built on nationalism and disruption, rather than diplomacy and order.

A widely held explanation in Germany for the renewed rise of competition and nationalism is to see this trend as a reaction to forces of globalisation. Faced with fast-paced technological change that speed up the process of globalisation, international and national government systems are increasingly incapable of managing the distribution of public goods, such as security, prosperity, healthcare or education (Maull, 2015). In order to restore citizens trust in the political system, a rhetoric of strong leadership, national

interest and supposedly simple solutions can be an effective device for politicians. Inevitably, this strategy increases the competitive and uncompromising stance to the outside world.

These developments are worrisome for Germany because from its perspective liberalism and multilateralism is not only an ideological and idealistic mindset that developed after the horrors of WWII. Instead, a liberal and multilateral regional and world order is in Germany's essential security interest. The so-called 'German question' still influences how Berlin views the stability of the regional order. Its size and geographical location in the middle of Europe means that Germany is constantly confronted with looming war on the continent. Germany is too small and incapable to play the role of a stabilising hegemon in Europe, while it is too strong and influential to just follow its interests without consulting neighbours (Kundnani, 2015). The previous centuries of European history have shown that self-interest and competition is a recipe for war around the centre of the European continent. Creating multilateral institutions, such as the European Union, as systems to balance power and mediate conflict through norms and decision-making rules is seen as beneficial for Germany and its partners.

The perception that competition and nationalism are enjoying a revival pushes Germany to contemplate whether to step up its engagement for the international order. For example, Germany has increased its efforts to develop the EU as a capable international actor. According to this view, the EU can serve as a power multiplier in a world where no single European state will be able compete against rising powers or reign the forces of globalisation.

The uncertainty in the relation with the US also intensified German cooperation on defence matters in the EU, bilaterally and in NATO. After the US elections and after the United Kingdom – a critique of closer defence cooperation outside of NATO – voted to leave the EU in summer 2016, European defence cooperation accelerated in speed. In late 2017, 25 EU member states agreed to join the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework that is part of EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. PESCO allows groups of member states to cooperate on defence projects, jointly develop defence capabilities and deploy them in military operations. It is important to note that Germany does not necessarily see the EU as the main European security provider (especially not on territorial defence), nor that it wants to undermine NATO. Germany stresses frequently that NATO remains the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence, and developed the alliance's Framework Nation Concept as another format to manage defence cooperation in Europe.

France is the most important partner for Germany in the effort to strengthen European agency. Lately, this has been underlined through bilateral military projects, such as the joint development of a next generation fighter jet, as well as the announcement of a new Elyse Treaty between the two countries. In the EU, the Franco-German motor is seen as necessary and decisive in pushing reforms. 'The renewal of the EU will only succeed if Germany and France work together with all their strength. That is why we want to further strengthen and renew German-French cooperation', (translation by the author, German Government, 2018, p. 9) the 2018 coalition agreement states.

However, Germany has difficulties implementing the shared leadership with France. This has been especially apparent in the area of Eurozone and EU institutional reforms, where Chancellor Merkel very hesitantly reacted to President Macron's call for bold

reforms (Riegert, 2018). While this is partly due to Merkel's lack of political clout at home at the end of her Chancellery, it remained an open question whether her successor will be more forthcoming to French reform ideas, or whether there are more fundamental differences on how Germany and France want to proceed. In particular on defence matters differences between the strategic cultures of Germany and France are still significant. While France follows concrete operational objectives in the Sahel and MENA region when pushing for European defence cooperation, Germany sees deepened defence cooperation as a political end in itself and shies away from the political risks at home to articulate an active role for the German military in the European context (Iso-Markku & Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, 2019).

So far, a possible German rebalance to Europe remains mostly confined to a change of perceptions and rhetoric. In practice, it faces significant military and political constraints. Militarily, it can be questioned whether Germany and its European partners are able to develop the necessary capabilities to take over more responsibility for regional security. After decades of disinvestment, assessments of the German armed forces repeatedly reveal a dire state of the equipment and a lack of readiness (Bundestag, 2019). Even though Germany increased its defence budget and plans to spend 1.5% of its GDP by 2025, little suggests that Germany and its European partners will cease to rely on the US alliance for their security.

The political constraint of a German rebalance to Europe relates to Berlin's worry about the regional order that is highlighted in this article. Germany is concerned that the strife for a more capable and independent EU might harm the internal cohesion of the EU. France has traditionally been more willing to take ambitious steps on defence or Eurozone integration, even if it meant creating a two-tier Europe. Germany, however, approaches European integration from the geographical position in the middle of Europe (Münkler, 2015), from where it is equally important to honour the interests of eastern neighbours and to avoid the creation of new dividing lines. In particular, the Baltic states and Poland fear a Russian threat and are reluctant to trade the transatlantic alliance over a more uncertain Franco-German security guarantee. These divisions surfaced again in the latest discussions on European Strategic Autonomy (Lippert et al., 2019). While France and Germany see a push for more European Strategic Autonomy as compatible with NATO, Central European member states listen to US concerns and perceive a risk of decoupling (Franke & Varma, 2019).

Rebalancing Germany's transatlantic orientation to a more European approach comes with severe consequences for the regional order in Europe. For Germany, it risks partially upending the carefully calibrated balance of power that has been ensured by the integration of European states into the EU. Instead it would create a new centre of gravity around a Franco-German core and thereby risk a division between Central and Western European member states.

### **Wanted: an alliance in support of the regional order**

The German perception of the US alliance is currently undergoing a fundamental transition. It is difficult to overemphasise how important the US alliance is for Germany's foreign and security policy goals. The view from Berlin is that the US remains indispensable as a guarantor of the multilateral global order and collective security guarantees in Europe.

However, the decisions made in Washington, DC to withdraw support for some of the multilateral arrangements have a strong effect on German policy makers.

From a German perspective, the regional dimension of the transatlantic alliance is especially relevant and one of the main incentives to align with the US. In the past, the US alliance was decisive in helping the EU integration process to function. Directly, through diplomatic coordination, and indirectly, through security guarantees, the US helped to reunify the European continent and to formulate joint European policies. The US support of regional integration is an essential German security and foreign policy interest.

The US administration under President Trump changed the dynamic. Faced with increasingly incompatible policy positions in Washington, DC, Germany is compelled to rebalance the two pillars of his foreign policy strategy, the transatlantic partnership and European integration, and emphasise the latter. Berlin is becoming increasingly determined to work more closely together with France in strengthening the EU as an international actor capable of pursuing international objectives independent of the US. The debate between the Atlantic and post-Atlantic fractions in Germany is slowly shifting towards a more Europe-centred Germany.

This paper suggests that strengthening Europe as an international actor will be far from an easy process for Germany, as it previously could rely on US support to keep Europe united. With the decreasing importance of the US as an outside guarantor for European security and order, different interests between Central and Western European countries might be more difficult to moderate. This is especially true for Germany, which is traditionally eyed with suspicion because of its size, economic power and central location in Europe. This political challenge comes in addition to the dim outlook of the current transformation of the German armed forces, which will not be able to fill a potential void after a US disengagement from the continent.

This analysis of the German perception on the US alliance provides two observations that speak to the larger literature on alliances. First, perceptions of the allies matter. President Trump did not need to withdraw troops from Europe or exit NATO in order to set in motion a shift in the thinking of German policy makers to step up the European commitment. At time of writing, the results of this rhetorical shift are still meagre and little suggests that Germany has become less dependent on the US for its security. However, there are signs that the perception of the US under President Trump has set the German alliance policy on a new trajectory and strengthens Germany's security and defence engagement with European partners.

Second, the findings give weight to the argument that alliances are about more than just threat balancing. The US alliance with European states allowed an element of order on the continent in form of rules-based integration in the EU, a taming of old rivalries and a temporary answer to the question of Germany's place in Europe. While the EU is not at risk of immediate collapse if the US alliance weakens further, Germany fears new divisions between a Franco-German core Europe with a European vocation and a Central European periphery with a transatlantic focus. To avoid these cracks, Germany has an incentive to nurture the transatlantic alliance.

The coming years will provide plenty of opportunities to analyse to what extent and how Germany manages the transition from a primary transatlantic to a pan-European power and what implications this will have for the regional order on the continent.

## Notes

1. Only two missions, Operation Concordia in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been carried out under the Berlin Plus agreements before the tension between Turkey (non-EU NATO member) and Cyprus (non-NATO EU member) paralysed the agreement.
2. Schröder contributed to this narrative in an op-ed in Germany's largest daily newspaper 'Bild' where he argued that 'Germany does not have to hide its national interest', see Bierling, 2014, p. 99.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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