

Realism, not sentimentality

We can't act jointly with Trump, yet we can't act alone without the US

BY SIGMAR GABRIEL

When people in Germany talk about trans-Atlantic relations, the conversation soon turns to Donald Trump. He's regarded as the source of all conflict between the United States and Europe, especially with Germany.

Yet Trump is not to blame for everything. And he's not always wrong, for instance when he criticizes China. We won't solve any problems with the US – whether trade issues, dealing with Iran or Nord Stream 2 – through Trump-bashing and finger-pointing. We must broaden our view and consider the wider geopolitical context.

What we're currently observing has far less to do with Trump than we would like to believe and far more with a dramatic transformation in global politics. We're witnessing a shift in the axes of global power, and with it a change in the world's political and strategic orientation. The Atlantic is no longer the center of gravity for global economic, political and military power. Supply chains have very quickly shifted to the Pacific.

The US has for years been in a state of imperial overstretch. It's stuck in a strategic dilemma. While it wants to (and should) be the guarantor of a liberal world order, it also wants to be the world's leading economy. Being both overstrains the US, notably in light of China's dynamism, size and power.

This is why Trump's predecessor, President Barack Obama, sought to concentrate his country's strength on competing with China and to withdraw from certain other roles in the world. In this sense, Trump's foreign



Critical of Trump, but committed to trans-Atlantic cooperation: In June, Sigmar Gabriel assumed the chairmanship of Atlantik-Brücke, a non-profit association founded in 1952 to promote German-American understanding.

policy in many ways represents the continuation of a US foreign policy that started well before his time.

That said, in contrast to all previous presidents, Trump is unable to discern what it is that has made the US so successful over the past 70 years and what distinguishes the country from revisionist, autocratic regimes such as those in Russia or China. Unlike all previous superpowers, the US has always had partners, friends and allies. Its ability to maintain a tight network of partners has always been one of the most important factors in reinforcing its influence.

Trump has dispensed with this alliance-based policy. Europe, the most important ally of the US over the past 70 years, often seems to him to be a “conspirator” against US interests. This view of the world is a far greater

cause for concern than any differences on specific issues such as trade disputes, the Iran deal or the planned Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. History has shown that the trans-Atlantic partner-

ship can overcome these kinds of differences of opinion, as well as far more serious ones. One need only to think back to the early 1980s and the debate on the stationing of medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

Where do we Germans and Europeans stand in this situation? It must be clearly stated that if we fail to quickly get a grip on this new reality, the future world order will reflect There would be a lot at stake for the US, Germany and Europe if the trans-Atlantic partnership were to further erode. The US risks losing those with whom it has united to fortify its authority, who have strengthened its unrivalled power base – its close network of allies, friends and partners. Europe risks not only losing its most important ally; in a fundamentally transformed geopolitical context, it also risks drifting into insignificance as a partner. We can't act jointly with Trump, yet we can't act alone without the US.

What direction Europe will take depends heavily on the attitude that Germany adopts. Germany's role as the central power in Europe must always be one that has the unification and strengthening of Europe as its goal, yet it must never relinquish its ties with the US and should strengthen them wherever possible. Germany

We Europeans are like the last geopolitical vegetarians in a world full of carnivores

has always navigated its allegiance between Europe and the Atlantic. And it must continue to do so; we can't afford to divide Europe.

The old trans-Atlantic partnership, in which Europe could concentrate on itself and largely keep out of international issues, leaving difficult problems to the US, is decidedly over. It will not return.

From a European perspective, we must recognize that the US is undergoing a permanent and fundamental transformation. In just a few years, the majority of Americans will no longer have European roots, but will rather have Asian, Hispanic or African origins. This new America will see trans-Atlantic relations in a very different light, and not necessarily in a friendly one.

However, the new America will, hopefully in good time, realize that in the world of tomorrow, alliances and allies will continue to be essential in protecting its values and pursuing its national interests. “Bowling alone” is not an attractive way to live, neither in private life nor in international relations.

We Europeans should thus invest in the America of tomorrow and the new trans-Atlantic partnership, in the coming generation and in the descendants of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America. And we should travel not just to New York, Washington and California, but develop a wider view of the cultural, political and economic diversity of this truly great country.

Sigmar Gabriel is an SPD member of the Bundestag. From 2013 to 2017, he was Germany's federal minister of economic affairs. He then served as foreign minister until March 2018. This text is an excerpt of a speech on the future of trans-Atlantic relations at an Atlantik-Brücke event.

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Wunderbar together | Germany and the US.

BY ROBERT NORMEN

There is one undisputed winner of the EU elections – and it's Die PARTEI (The PARTY). They quadrupled their share of the vote, from 0.6 to 2.4 percent, giving them a gain of two seats in the European Parliament. Die PARTEI is a satirical party, albeit of the higher order – picture Stephen Colbert getting elected to the House of Representatives and then fully embracing his new role.

The EU elections have been considerably less fun for the Social Democrats (SPD), the earnest mainstays of the German party system and currently still together with Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats as part of the Federal Republic's governing coalition. The SPD suffered heavy losses, ending up with a meager 15.8 percent – a loss of 11.5 percent – its worst results in nationwide elections since 1949.

Party chairperson and floor leader Andrea Nahles had for months been under a barrage of nagging criticism by party rivals. After the elections results became known, her critics wasted no time declaring her the culprit for the SPD's demise that had in fact been underway for years. Nahles is both a serious policy wonk and a politician deeply anchored in her party's peculiar sentiments; she has stayed true to the ever-elusive ideal of social justice.

After several former big players in the SPD tried to get back in the game and began jostling for Nahles' job, she pulled one final House of Cards-like move. Nahles tried to make her rivals, chief among them Martin Schulz, a failed candidate for chancellor in 2017, to come out

of the woodwork and declare their candidacies. She preponed the leadership election in her caucus by six months, for the next week.

Yet no one dared publicly challenge her. Instead, the party sent emissaries suggesting she should resign. A day later, Nahles relented, announcing she would leave politics altogether.

The Social Democrats are now reeling in an existential crisis. An emergency crew of regional and mid-tier officeholders assumed interim leadership roles while the party is yet again left searching for its soul and for new party heads. For the first time in its history, there will be two people at the helm, to be decided by a party-wide vote in the fall.

All the while, the Greens are enjoying their moment in the sun. The eco-friendly party won 20 percent of the vote, its best result in its history. They're currently capturing the *Zeitgeist* with their clear message of being decidedly liberal on social matters like gender equality and LGBTQ rights, moderately left-leaning in their economic policies and very much in favor of protecting the environment while

having shed some of their former more radical positions.

They are led by Robert Habeck, the favorite son-in-law type, a charismatic orator who can speak without the stilted platitudes of so

many of his colleagues. The second party chairwoman – the Greens have always had both a man and a woman in the top posts – is Annalena Baerbock, herself an affable character, but also a smooth operator running the party machine. The Greens profited from the hoopla around the Fridays for Future demonstrations, in which students skip school to advocate for stricter climate policies.

Habeck acknowledged the pressure the party is now under. The Greens feel humbled given the unprecedented support, he said, “yet everybody knows that we have to deliver now.”

It does not seem far-fetched for the Greens to make a run at the chancellery after the next Bundestag elections.

The poor results for the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, formerly considered the country's big-tent parties, together won only 44.7 percent of the vote. In the national elections of 2017, they had combined to win 53.4 percent, which was sufficient to form a “grand coalition,” a moniker that is seeming increasingly quaint.

The CDU is beginning to resemble the SPD. After Merkel's withdrawal from the party's leadership, her successor Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer has been zigzagging between appealing to the party's more conservative flank, which has been unhappy about Merkel's course during the refugee crisis, and following Merkel's more liberal course.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 10 percent of the vote, which is less than they had hoped for. However, in the upcoming regional elections in the eastern states of Brandenburg and Saxony, the party expects to win big, with the chance of even becoming the

Shake it up

The EU elections have put a spin on all the German parties



Great Green hopes: Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck

strongest party. In defiance of a formal resolution by the national party, the Christian Democrats at the state level are pondering if they have no alternative but to form a coalition with the AfD in order to hold on to power.

Meanwhile, on the day after the election, experts from the CDU published the findings of their study, revealing that in fact more former CDU voters had switched to the Greens than to the AfD. In a rather stunning admission, Kramp-Karrenbauer herself confessed to having made the mistake of overeagerly trying to appease the part of the electorate embracing “traditional conservative” positions. A member of the party's leadership said to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “The unity of the party does come with a price, and on election day we had to pay it.”

Since her ascent to the top of the party in January, Kramp-Karrenbauer was widely seen to be Merkel's heir apparent as chancellor. She is now being questioned again by a party that is increasingly doubtful that it will be able to hold on to power once Merkel leaves office.

Their best shot would likely be through a partnership with the Greens. Due to the Greens' newfound strength, the Christian Democrats would have to accommodate their calls for stricter environmental policies. Although far from being climate-change deniers, the CDU has been slow to catch up to the new realities, both at the ballot box and in the atmosphere.

Robert Normen is a political correspondent based in Berlin.