



A Fragile Friendship: German–American Relations in the Twenty-First Century

Klaus Larres & Ruth Wittlinger

To cite this article: Klaus Larres & Ruth Wittlinger (2018) A Fragile Friendship: German–American Relations in the Twenty-First Century, *German Politics*, 27:2, 152-157, DOI: [10.1080/09644008.2018.1429412](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1429412)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1429412>



Published online: 11 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 118



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A Fragile Friendship: German–American Relations in the Twenty-First Century

KLAUS LARRES and RUTH WITTLINGER

INTRODUCTION

German–American relations are back in vogue. They have returned as an important relationship in international politics and have once again assumed their rightful place as a significant field of scholarship. And yet it was only a few years ago that German–American relations seemed to take second place to transatlantic relations in general and EU–US relations in particular. The advent of Donald Trump as US president in January 2017 has made all the difference. Trump’s difficult personal relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and his denigration of everything the western world, including the US itself, have stood for since 1949 have given a new significance to German–American relations in practice and theory. This special issue offers a much-needed analysis of empirical and conceptual aspects of German–American relations in the twenty-first century.

Throughout the cold war era, transatlantic relations were among the crucial pillars of global affairs. They provided long-term stability and reliability in a tumultuous and dangerous international environment. German–American relations, in turn, were an essential – if not the most essential – part of that complex relationship among the allies on both sides of the Atlantic. With hindsight it is obvious that the relative stability of global affairs in the years since World War II was caused by a number of factors such as the existence of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons and the bilateral nature of power politics, both of which contained any over-ambitious risk-taking in international politics. But there were also other less obvious factors that contributed to the maintenance of stability and calm. Mutually beneficial transatlantic and German–American relations were part and parcel of this.

Of course, there were still plenty of transatlantic crises. In fact one could argue that the history of transatlantic relations since the 1948 Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO a year later has been a succession of smaller and larger crises. But these manifold crises, we now know, were hardly ever of a fundamental or systemic nature. The departure of France from the military side of NATO in 1966 and the country’s long-running battle with America for the soul of (western) Europe during President De Gaulle’s long reign was the closest the alliance came to a possible break-up.

By contrast, German–American relations never looked into this kind of abyss. As no other European country, (West) Germany was fully aware of its utter dependence on the US. Initially this concerned both economic and security affairs, including the nuclear umbrella and political support offered by the US against the communist Soviet

Union. Throughout the cold war and beyond, with only the 1990s being an exception, Moscow was perceived as an aggressive, revanchist and anti-western power by almost all western countries. The era of *détente* in the 1970s, however, somewhat lessened the anxiety many in West Germany had about the Soviet Union. In particular since the *Ostpolitik* treaties of the early 1970s, the 1972 Berlin Four Power Agreement and the 1975 Helsinki conference, Europeans and in particular the Germans began to see the Soviet Union as a constructive and cooperative though still difficult economic and political partner. No longer was Moscow seen as posing a real risk to the European security set-up. This view was never shared on the other side of the Atlantic. Differing perceptions about the Soviet Union/Russia have consequently remained among the major bones of contention in German–American relations, well beyond the end of the cold war in 1989/90.

Naturally, the decreasing likelihood of a Soviet invasion of western Europe, at least as seen from Bonn, meant that West Germany's perceived dependence on the US receded from the early-to-mid 1970s. At the same time the US encountered its first significant economic problems. It was in 1971 that the now famously large US trade deficit commenced. In that year the US registered a small trade deficit for the first time in 100 years. It dramatically escalated in the following years and decades and undermined the standing of the US dollar as the provider of international monetary stability. Subsequently the US trade deficit with Europe's export champion Germany became particularly high and was only surpassed by the US deficits with China and Mexico.

Simultaneous European economic success as well as growing economic competition from countries such as Germany put transatlantic relations under stress during the final decades of the twentieth century. West Germany, the underling of the 1940s and 1950s, had become a serious economic competitor. On occasion the Bonn Republic even dared to challenge America's global wisdom in the security and political-economic sphere, as when sanctions imposed by the Reagan administration on the Soviet Union in the 1980s were much criticised. The famous shouting matches between US President Jimmy Carter and West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt about both economic and military matters are also well known.

Still Germany and the US entered the new millennium in the glow of success regarding the intensified alliance between the two countries that had resulted from strong US support for German unification. President George H.W. Bush referred to Helmut Kohl's Germany as a 'partner in leadership' when addressing the German public in Mainz in May 1989. He thus called for a special German–American alliance even before the momentous events a few months later. Most analysts are agreed that Bush had not attempted to be merely polite. He was dead serious and saw Germany as Europe's only power with a possible future as an international player.

France, after all, had declined in international importance and its economic performance had begun to seriously lag behind Germany's. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's nationalistic and less than visionary leadership in 1989/90 foreshadowed the increasing nationalisation and provincial small-mindedness of British foreign policy that ultimately culminated in the Brexit referendum of June 2016. This seemed to leave Germany as the only economically important European country with perhaps also a potential for global political if not military reach. While in this respect George H.W. Bush's expectation proved to be premature, his basic insight turned out

to be right: without a strong and globally oriented Germany Europe would be unable to be an international player of significance.

Despite much encouragement from both the George W. Bush and the Obama administrations to become more involved in the world, by and large unified Germany has remained reluctant to act like a global power. Still, in particular in three areas, Berlin recently has begun to display a much greater international engagement than hitherto, often in cooperation with the US: (1) with regard to relations with China, a crucially important country for Germany's export industry, Berlin has assumed something approximating international leadership by, for instance, focusing on advancing German and EU investment relations and rule of law provisions with Beijing; (2) Germany has not shied away from contributing to western efforts to battle international terrorism: Berlin actively contributes to many global peace-keeping activities (Afghanistan, Sudan, Mali, for instance); (3) Germany has also grasped the mettle of international responsibility in terms of supporting and at times organising coordinated global environmental initiatives.

There is one more area in which Germany recently has begun to play a prominent role – but this time in opposition to the US. Since Donald Trump's inauguration and the implementation of some of his domestic and foreign policies that amount to undermining established western values, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has become the spokesperson for defending and upholding the value system of the enlightenment. Berlin's political stance toward other countries that are also busily undermining democratic values, such as Turkey, Poland and Hungary, demonstrates that under Merkel's chancellorship, Germany does not shy away from defending core liberal values.

This has certainly given German–American relations a new and crucial importance and significance. Of course it has also led to a rather tense relationship with the Trump administration. The contributions to this special issue discuss a number of aspects of the current, much more fragile state of German–American relations from different perspectives.

The Preface to this special issue is provided by Dr Karsten Voigt, former Coordinator of German–North American Cooperation at the Foreign Office of Germany from 1999 to 2010. Voigt was a long-time senior SPD politician and member of the Bundestag from 1976 to 1998. Acknowledging that transatlantic relations are bound to change as the world around them changes, he points out that even though the two countries inspire each other, there is also a long history of the US criticising Europe and vice versa. Voigt also explains that the political cultures of Germany and the US have changed in recent years. Whereas the debates in the US have become more polarised, in Germany a high degree of consensus on many domestic and foreign policy issues has emerged, according to Voigt. The long-standing foreign policy expert concludes that whereas Germany has become more liberal over recent decades, in the US, after 9/11, the balance between security and freedom has shifted towards the former. Voigt, however, does not anticipate any lasting damage to German–American relations under Donald Trump's presidency. Whatever President Trump is saying and doing, argues Voigt, the societies on both sides of the Atlantic will remain connected through shared interests and values.

The schism that emerged between Germany and the US over the Iraq war is the subject of Dieter Dettke's contribution to this special issue. His article explores and

explains Germany's pre-emptive 'No' to the war in Iraq and argues that this did not constitute a structural break of the relationship with the US, although for many its dramatic consequences appeared as a 'parting of ways' of two close allies. After the war in Kosovo and the German military contribution to the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan, there was no chance that the SPD/Green coalition would have been able to put together its own majority for an additional war effort in Iraq, according to Dettke. Opposing what was perceived as American unilateralism was popular and provided an opportunity to stand up to the Bush administration. It also offered Germany an opportunity to reclaim the right to national sovereignty in spite of its commitment to multilateralism. Dettke argues that this self-assertion was a new development in German foreign policy and that it is likely to characterise Germany's future actions. In Dettke's view, the arrival of the Trump administration in Washington and its challenge to the liberal world order America created after World War II could set the US and Germany on an even more profound collision course.

The article by Eric Langenbacher and Ruth Wittlinger examines recent dynamics of collective memory in German–American relations. After outlining the importance of history and memory for bilateral relations, they trace the evolution of collective memories of the two countries and identify the key filters through which they evaluate each other. The article then identifies the key characteristics of German–American relations since the advent of Donald Trump to the American presidency. This is followed by an analysis that examines Trump's use and abuse of history and memory and what that means for his foreign policy in general and German–American relations in particular. In view of the way Donald Trump has taken the subjective nature of collective memories to an extreme by largely disconnecting these memories from their historical context at the same time as extensively referencing his own history and experience, the authors conclude that we might be witnessing the end of memory, in particular the end of memory's direct impact on discourse and policy.

The contribution of Klaus Larres analyses the evolving relationship between Angela Merkel and Donald Trump since the latter moved into the Oval Office in January 2017. The article highlights both the more fundamental structural problems and the day-to-day political hurdles in German–American relations. It examines the way German Chancellor Merkel and US President Donald Trump did not get off to a good start, arguing that their relationship so far has been lukewarm at best. Trump's lack of support for democracy and the liberal world order as it was established by his predecessors in the mid-1940s deeply worries European politicians, according to Larres. In view of their own history and the expectation that Germany may have to step in and become the western world's leading defender of western values, most German policymakers, including the long-serving chancellor, are particularly annoyed and distraught about developments in the US.

Christian Schweiger's contribution to this special issue offers a comparative analysis of how the 2008–09 global financial crisis was perceived and how it has been addressed in Germany and the US. He argues that the financial crisis has significantly changed the parameters of the bilateral relations between Germany and the US in the context of wider EU–US transatlantic relations. In his view, the financial crisis has revealed systemic weaknesses in the governance of the euro zone and fundamental divisions between national governments in the EU on how these should be addressed.

In the context of German domestic politics the financial crisis has resulted in increasing scepticism towards US-style liberal market capitalism, according to Schweiger. He points out that Germany managed to maintain its strong economic standing under the adverse circumstances of the financial crisis. In his view, domestically the post-crisis political consensus has emphasised the strengths of Germany's coordinated market economy in contrast to the liberal model of the US.

Stephen Szabo's contribution examines the different approaches of Germany and the US towards Russia. According to him, Russia has been the focal point of the relationship since the end of World War II and has been both a wedge and a consolidator in German–American relations. The way the Soviet threat held Washington and Bonn together despite some important divergences in interests and policies during the cold war is remarkable, according to Szabo. He considers the close cooperation on Russia policy between President Obama and Chancellor Merkel over the Ukraine crisis a major achievement that was crucial in Germany's shaping of a unified EU sanctions regime. Despite this, however, the strategic glue which held the transatlantic relationship together weakened during the Obama years. Donald Trump's openly sympathetic attitude towards Putin and Russia poses an entirely new factor in the German–American approach towards Russia, according to Szabo. He expects the policy of sanctions and dialogue to continue to be at the centre of Germany's approach but questions whether this will be sustainable without American support. Most importantly, however, Szabo wonders whether Germany risks once again becoming the land between, this time not of its own volition but due to the policies of its closest allies.

Looking at immigration in particular, Joyce Mushaben examines to what degree the US and Germany have diverged in this policy area in recent years. Although both countries embraced restrictive practices during the 1980s, US law now concentrates on security first, relying heavily on exclusionary border control and 'national security' framing. Whereas the old FRG used complex, exclusionary laws to limit all forms of migration prior to 1998, united Germany has redefined itself as a 'welcoming culture', upholding human rights, open borders and pro-active resettlement policies. Focusing on the 'migration–security' nexus, the article compares fundamental changes in the admission and resettlement policies each now applies to persons seeking international protection. It reviews securitisation dynamics in the USA, followed by a treatment of developments at the European level that have conditioned reforms in Germany since 2005. The refusal of some EU member states to accept their fair share of the humanitarian burden arising from the 2015–16 refugee crisis has ironically contributed to Chancellor Angela Merkel's new image as Lady Liberty, according to Mushaben.

Dorle Hellmuth's contribution examines German and American responses to international terrorism from the end of the cold war to today. While terrorism was not a priority for much of the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks generated a long list of domestic counterterrorism measures in both countries. In the international realm, Germany and the United States did not agree on much, according to Hellmuth. The German government ended up participating in many US initiatives designed to hunt down al-Qaeda operatives and prevent them from launching another attack inside the United States, but German support was often secret and cooperation in the context of the 'war on terrorism' was considered controversial at home. When comparing German and US

counterterrorism approaches, the article takes a unique approach by analysing how parliamentary and presidential government structures affected responses in terms of content and scope. Hellmuth's comparative analysis illustrates various similarities between German and US decision-making processes and argues that checks and balances continue to balance executive power gains in both countries.

Taken together, all the articles, as well as the introduction and Karsten Voigt's Preface, analyse the current state of German–American relations and highlight the serious and perhaps unprecedented challenges the two countries face at present.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Klaus Larres is the Richard M Krasno Distinguished Professor of History and International Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a Senior Fellow at the Center of Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University/SAIS in Washington, DC, and a Visiting Professor at Schwarzman College/Tsinghua University in Beijing. He also serves as a Counselor and Senior Foreign Policy Adviser at the German Embassy in Beijing, China. Larres is the former holder of the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and a Member/Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton, NJ. His research focuses on: 1. relations among the U.S.-Europe-China; 2. U.S. foreign policy and transatlantic relations; 3. the Cold War and the politics of Winston Churchill. He has published widely in all these areas.

Ruth Wittlinger is Associate Professor in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. She has published extensively on memory and identity in post-unification Germany and Europe. She is author of the monograph *German National Identity in the Twenty-First Century: A Different Republic After All?*, and her research has been published in a number of journals including *West European Politics, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, German Politics, German Politics and Society, and Cooperation and Conflict*. In 2017, she was awarded a Lady Davis Visiting Professorship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.