

The Response to Trump: Emancipation!

By Tobias Fella



*Tobias Fella, Policy Advisor
on German and European
Foreign and Security Policy,
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*

Just like a deer caught in the headlights waiting for the worst to happen, the world watches the unpredictable U.S. President. However, by taking on the discussion on the decline of U.S. leadership, Europe misses a chance.

NATO-Summit in Brussels, trade wars with China and the European Union, withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) or meeting Putin in Helsinki: Trump dominates the international agenda. He sets topics and defines terms – in front of the camera, via twitter or with the help of his friends on Fox News. Just like the U.S. President, also his team knows of the power of words. Words never only describe reality, they also shape it. Thus, using their power means shaping the policy discourse.

We Europeans have difficulties coping with all the irritations, opinions and ‘alternative facts’ Trump is offering us on a daily basis. Yet, we continue trying to fathom his personality or state of mind – his “true” intentions behind what is being said. We keep asking: What will he do next? Will it be even worse? Is the world as we know it coming to an end? – quoting the title of “Der Spiegel” just after Trump’s election – and

if so: What then? In order to being able to foresee the future we also develop sophisticated models of foresight, identify trends, build and discuss scenarios that are based on scientific theory and methodologies. However, the man in the white house keeps catching us by surprise and shows us that our predictions were utterly wrong, almost like ‘Kremlin Astrology’ during the Cold War. But there are ways to ease the situation, which ideally lead to a common European America Policy, in short: Emancipation!

Three steps need to be taken:

First, we need to recognize the unparalleled power potential of the United States. As historian Paul Kennedy said: The United States is “the greatest superpower, the world has ever seen”. With only 5 percent of the world population, it makes up 25 percent of the world’s economy, over a third of the world’s military spending and it invests by far the most in research and development – almost 500 billion US-Dollars annually. It is home of 600 out of the 2000 most profitable companies as well of 50 of the 100 top universities in the world. In addition, the United

States is able to take military action all over the world in less than an hour, benefits from favorable demographics, and is surrounded by two massive oceans. Hence, Trump is doing what he does, simply because he can.

Second, we need to take into account that the U.S. President does not disagree with the American belief shared by the U.S. elite of being an exceptional nation with a special mission that decides over its own destiny. In this understanding, it is only the American people who determine the United States' place in the world. It is neither China nor Russia. Thus, being number two is not an option – neither for New York Times or Washington Post columnists criticizing Trump nor for renowned U.S. think tanks like The Brookings Institution or the Council on Foreign Relations. Meanwhile, these only represent parts of the American public, making a visit to Trump-friendly platforms such as “American Greatness”, “Breitbart”, and the opinion section of the “Walt Street Journal” and “The American Conservative” worthwhile.

Third, we must be wary of taking on the American discourse one-to-one, because it could lead to accepting a worldview we do not actually approve of. This includes legitimizing U.S. leadership simply by its absence. Connecting crises such as the Ukraine crisis, NATO burden sharing and the Syria Crisis to the with-

drawal of the United States from the world stage or to its demise as a former superpower assumes that the world is in need of U.S. leadership. Surely, we live in turbulent times and face major challenges. Nevertheless, there is room for self-reliance and emancipation. In fact, while Trump criticizes Europe and Germany, in particular, using both as a projection screen for all bad things and negative developments, he implicitly recognizes Europe and Germany's significance. A significance, which has a lot of potential. Hence, we should find the courage to emancipate – first of all our thinking!

One point should be made perfectly clear, however: Demanding emancipation does not mean separation. Emancipation, rather, is a precondition for being able to better understand the United States as well as revitalizing the transatlantic partnership. In a globalized world with its transnational challenges, everything else would be grossly negligent. Anyone who is calling for “Strategic Autonomy” or a “European Army” should be aware of this while also keeping in mind that it feeds into the logic of multipolarity and power rivalries, including ideas of closed and confrontational spheres of influence. But this cannot be in anyone's interest. Rather, “strategic interrelation” should be our leitmotif – forming an enlightened and self-critical Euro-American alliance in the 21st Century.