

Milestones with Mixed Messages: German-American Relations at 70

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2019 will mark a number of meaningful milestones in German-American relations: 70 years since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany and NATO and 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. These achievements will be celebrated, but they will also be accompanied by many harbingers of more challenges and uncertainty ahead. Because the past is informative, if not determinative, reviewing how we got to today may reveal where we are going.

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Founded in 1949, in the wake of a devastating world war, the Federal Republic of Germany has since been described by former federal president Joachim Gauck as “the best Germany we have ever had.” The country has built a respectable record of learning, reforming, and renewing.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also came into being in 1949 and is now known as the most successful alliance in history. Germany, a member since 1955, was the frontline of the alliance during the Cold War and remains one of the most important and active members today.

Thirty years ago, the Berlin Wall fell – symbolically ending the Cold War and beginning the process of German unification and Europe becoming “whole and free.” Of the many German-American joint efforts during these past 70 years, German unification certainly stands out as the capstone of cooperation.

Those three milestones are evidence of cooperation – a cooperation without which none of them would have been possible. American support of the birth of the Federal Republic was critical to the evolution of a stable democracy. Six years after its founding, West Germany joined the NATO alliance to secure its partnership with both the U.S. and other alliance members. American diplomatic support in 1990 was of equal importance in laying the framework for the fulfillment of German unification.

During the past seven decades, there were multiple occasions that tested and strained the German-American partnership, but the bonds of common interests and goals have mostly held – until now.

Warning Signs

Despite the successes of the past 70 years, other milestones will mark serious warning signs in 2019. In the 20th century, the incapacity of Europe and the unwillingness of an isolationist U.S. to engage in preventing the Second World War reminds us of the dangers of a world left to the rule of the jungle. That deficit has clear messages as we look at contemporary threats to our democracies today.

Other red flags could include the 20th anniversary of the euro. While it has survived multiple crises in the last 20 years, there is a serious question about its ability to survive another set. With the current president of the European Central Bank due to retire this year, the status of Europe and the role of the euro in a fragmented environment does not bode well for his successor.

NATO's 70th anniversary will be celebrated in April in Washington. Whether President Trump will use the opportunity to complain again about NATO members' financial obligations remains to be seen. The anniversary celebration will be accompanied by tensions within the alliance: uncertainties about its future and a tenuous consensus on solidarity, shared purposes, and burden sharing.

These reminders as to how far Germany and the U.S. have come – through both crises and accomplishments – as well as the challenges in the new year are both encouraging and sobering for 2019 and the foreseeable future.

Challenges in 2019

In both countries, there are doubts about the current political leadership. Will Merkel remain chancellor if her party takes another hit in upcoming elections? Who will be her successor and in what combination of coalition government?

Will Donald Trump be confronted with a serious set of allegations either from the Mueller investigations or from the House of Representatives, now under Democratic Party control? And who – Democrat or Republican – might succeed Trump in 2020 should he leave office?

These uncertainties occur while more tectonic shifts on the global stage are creating new, more serious challenges to both countries and their longtime partnership.



The future of the European Union and its capacity to sustain momentum in the face of spreading populist movements is at stake. The results of the European Parliament elections in May will shape the governing structure of the EU, which will have to deal with contention over trade policy, defense, energy security, and the refugee crises. Germany's role in the EU will be even more decisive in holding Europe together in the wake of Brexit. It will be no easy task.

Russia's use of military force in Crimea to alter the map of Europe and other aggressions demand a more vigorous response from Europe. Despite the multiple initiatives to generate a stronger European security capability being taken, it remains unclear if the EU can reach the level of cohesion and credibility needed to seriously confront Russia. Meanwhile, things continue to deteriorate in Ukraine, and Putin continues to destabilize Europe.

At the same time, challenges are also emerging from the Trump administration. In questioning the parameters and cornerstones of the European-U.S. relationship – a commitment to mutual security, human rights, and a liberal trade system – Trump appears to be ambivalent about the value of an integrated Europe. He seemingly rejects the notion that Europe and the U.S. are partners, rather seeing the EU as a rival and questioning whether Europe is really taking advantage of the U.S. But there is a larger American debate unfolding about the role and responsibility of the U.S. on the world stage – one that will not be settled even after Trump leaves the White House.

There is also the growing shadow of China on transatlantic relations. Over the past few years Beijing has engaged in more investment and other forms of involvement in Europe in line with its Belt and Road Initiative. It has been particularly interested in Germany's high-tech sector, but it has also made enormous investments in other countries, leading to concerns about increasing Chinese leverage without seeing agreement on policies and practices in trade agreements. Meanwhile, trade policy clashes between China and the U.S. have escalated significantly and, despite an opportunity for transatlantic cooperation, a lack of a consensus in Europe and the U.S. on how to address trade concerns has hampered cooperation.

There are many assumptions that have long been taken for granted in the transatlantic dialogue and that now need to be reset.

Germany's role is shaped by the fact that Berlin is the clear European leader in partnership with the other European countries. Germans don't like to express it that way, but it is undeniable. This is due to a combination of the strength of the largest economy in the EU, the German leverage within the institutions that make up the EU, and until now, the relative political strength and continuity of leadership in Germany over the past decades. There has been a good deal of German consensus about dealing with Europe in the name of achieving a peaceful and successful continent. Germany has also sought to deal with its past, present, and future through Europe. That is also the case regarding Germany's commitment to the common defense of Europe under NATO.

Germany does not want significant change in those institutional cornerstones. Europe's close alliance with the U.S. has allowed Germany to profit immensely from the post-Cold War international system. That is why German leaders, including Merkel, have been cautious about alienating Washington.

Yet Europe now faces a situation in which the transatlantic cornerstones are less stable on both sides of the pond.

The clash over defense spending, for instance, is a wakeup call that Europe must shed its reticence over the use of military force in order to strengthen European defense. As Angela Merkel advised, Europeans must "fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans." Yet that will require more resources. For Germany, it could mean that it will wind up being the largest EU contributor to defense. The resurgence of nationalist fervor in many European countries, in addition to the reticence of governments to surrender defense policy sovereignty, stands in the way of significant progress.



Rather than letting disputes and disillusion dilute it, the Euro-Atlantic partners should seize the opportunity to craft a stronger alliance. That effort will need to be accompanied by shifts in both thinking and policy, as well as a reset of burden and power-sharing in the 21st century.

Issues that challenge the U.S. and Europe at home and abroad, such as immigration, terrorism, economic inequality, digital revolutions, and regional security can be shared in both their diagnoses as well as potential responses. The domestic political eruptions visible on both sides of the Atlantic stem from backlashes against ever more rapid globalization, anxiety about the future, and the need to rethink and reform the institutions needed to confront them. Europe and the U.S. share both the challenges and the consequences for either success or failure, and this makes the transatlantic relationship more important now than it has been since the end of the Cold War.

Traditional political elites in Europe and Washington are struggling to convince their constituents that globalization is still beneficial. Germany needs to rethink its role and responsibilities as the anchor of a European order. Americans need to grasp the fact that a secure and stable Europe – and Germany at its center – is one of its major accomplishments in the twentieth century. That both sides of the Atlantic have arrived to an environment of stability, security, and prosperity is a result of strong leaders in partnership.

There is no doubt that we are witnessing deteriorating trends in that partnership today. To deal with that threat, four questions need to be addressed: how, when, where, and why do the members of the transatlantic community need each other. The answers may be uncomfortable, unsettling, and uncertain. But the two countries which profited so much from the last seven decades need to lead that effort again now.

A version of this essay was originally published by the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies on January 18, 2019.