

LETTER FROM BERLIN



Europe's Post-Trump Sigh of Relief

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

When the major news networks and the Associated Press declared Joe Biden the winner of the 2020 presidential elections on November 7, there was a big sigh of relief all over Europe, especially in Germany.

But when U.S. President Donald Trump claimed victory in the days following the election and declared that he would ask the U.S. Supreme Court to stop the counting of postal ballots which made up a large portion of the votes, shivers went down the spines of political leaders in Europe. Fundamental principles of democracy were being challenged. It's no wonder that most European leaders dread the prospect of another four years of Trump in the White House.

There were exceptions. Janez Janša, the prime minister of Slovenia, a member state of the European Union, came forward and congratulated Trump the day after the election, before complete results were available. "It's pretty clear that American people have elected

@realDonaldTrump @Mike_Pence for #4moreyears," Janša tweeted.

Judy Dempsey from Carnegie Europe makes the valid point that "several leaders inside the EU will be delighted by a Trump victory. It would give a real fillip to nationalist, popular leaders, whether in Hungary, in Poland, or in Slovenia. ... Trump's illiberal views of democracy, accountability, and the judiciary and his penchant for authoritarian leaders is more to their liking than Europe's values based on the rule of law."

In addition, Dempsey warns: "A Biden presidency will be so preoccupied with domestic issues that the foreign policy agenda—and that includes tackling climate change—will be put on the backburner. The European Union, unless it fundamentally changes the way it functions, will be in big trouble."

Because Hungary and Poland are currently blocking the European Union's own-resources expansion—the €750 billion reconstruction fund to fight the economic and social damage

of the Covid-19 crisis—the German EU Council presidency is now struggling with an escalating crisis. The two countries' negotiating goal is to neutralize any impact of a rule-of-law mechanism on their governments. The European Union is facing the bitter reality that it can settle for a smaller recovery fund, or else give up much of the new rule-of-law mechanism to control the billions of euros flowing from Brussels into the questionable projects of political cronies close to the ruling governments.

TRUMP'S "TRANSATLANTIC DESTRUCTION"

James Goldgeier and Agneska Bloch of Brookings summed up how Germany suffered under the Trump administration. "Trump has dubbed Chancellor Angela Merkel 'stupid,' called Germany 'very bad' for its U.S. trade surplus, and threatened to punish Berlin for not meeting NATO defense

Klaus Engelen is a contributing editor for both Handelsblatt and TIE.

spending targets, all the while cozing up to authoritarian leaders in Europe and its neighborhood. Joe Biden, by contrast, is a committed internationalist and trans-Atlanticist. Despite the political gridlock he will likely face at home, his victory is, at least in principle, good news for European officials.”

Trump’s contempt for international treaties and multilateralism as he championed his “America First” policy shocked the Germans.

At the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, Trump began the first day with a hate-filled tirade against Germany being a “captive of Russia” because it allowed the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to be built, and on the second day even threatened to withdraw the United States from the alliance. This past summer, Trump announced that he would withdraw about 12,000 U.S. troops stationed in Germany because of the country’s delinquent status in NATO defense spending, thereby also relocating some troops to Poland. This is seen as an example of the outgoing U.S. administration’s punishment and reward policy.

BERLIN SEES BIDEN AS A HISTORIC CHANCE

Not in recent decades has the governing political leadership in Germany welcomed a newly elected U.S. president so emotionally and so full of good intentions as it has the incoming forty-

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sixth president of the United States, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris, the first woman to serve as U.S. vice president. This is understandable after four years of never-ending horrors coming from Trump tweets and the White House.



*A long working relationship: German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** and then-Vice President **Joe Biden** on the balcony outside the Chancellor’s office overlooking Berlin in 2013.*

On November 9, rather early, Chancellor Merkel stepped before the Berlin press to congratulate Biden and Harris. She spoke of an incoming U.S. president with whom she had worked for many years. Eager to move on from Trump’s critical view of Germany, Merkel started by urging that her country, as part of the European Union, and the United States must stand “side by side” to tackle Covid-19, global warming, and terrorism, and work to champion free trade.

Melinda Crane, the chief political correspondent for *Deutsche Welle*, commented. Merkel’s congratulation was “a resounding affirmation of what she hopes will be possible with this new administration. The chancellor tends to be very measured and restrained, but that was a downright emotional speech [particularly] in the part where she talked about the treasure of trans-Atlantic relations.”

Even earlier, on November 8, Germany’s President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who previously served as foreign minister, came out with an editorial in the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

Zeitung putting the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections in a historic perspective. He appealed to the German and European political elite to “not squander the great opportunity afforded to Germany by this U.S. election.”

He reminded readers that “the Americans were the first to believe Germany would have democracy after 1945,” and “Germans should be the last to teach them democracy lessons. If nothing else connected us, we, Germans and Americans, would still be Democrats. That connects us, certainly more than with any other region in the world, certainly more closely than with China or Russia.”

The German president made a second point: “an America that, as the most powerful country in the world, has recently devoted itself to the ruthless pursuit of short-term interests is being replaced by an America that knows the importance of alliances and allies. ... An America that, out of well-understood self-interest, places the strength of the law over the law of the stronger.” As the most concrete example, Steinmeier

points to more cooperation in overcoming the Covid-19 crisis. “The return to these shared ideals by the United States is an opportunity to end the erosion of the international order,” writes Steinmeier.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, in an interview with the Associated Press, sees the election

Kramp-Karrenbauer: We have a vested interest in ensuring that America continues its commitment to defending Europe while shifting its strategic focus to Asia. The best way to achieve this is to do more for our own security.

of Joe Biden as “an opportunity for a ‘new deal’ in trans-Atlantic relations that would revive the close cooperation between America and Europe, but also see Europeans shoulder greater responsibility on the world stage.” But Maas cautions that the issues—“low defense spending and the construction of an undersea pipeline for Russian gas that the U.S. considers a threat to European security”—likely won’t go away. Germany remains committed, says Maas, “to gradually increasing its defense spending toward NATO’s target of 2 percent of gross domestic product in the coming years. ... Europe will also have to develop its strategic independence or risk becoming a ‘plaything’ in the competition between the great powers—the United States, Russia, and China.”

Maas, of course, welcomes that Biden plans to rejoin the World Health Organization, which is seen as key to tackling the pandemic, and the Paris Climate Accord, which currently unites 189 countries in the fight against global warming. “Having Washington’s formidable diplomatic machine working with others to solve problems will be key.”

Still, Europe’s political world is slowly acknowledging the reality that more than 70 million Americans (47 percent) voted for Trump. This means Trump will have a large political base of voters with which he can dominate the Republican Party—and perhaps return to the White House.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FOR EUROPE?

As part of a “New Deal” with the new Biden administration, the paradox for the Europeans is that while they are continuing to rely on the United States in terms of security policy, more of what America has done so far will have to be done by Europeans themselves.

For those in the security and defense establishment who are worried about the recent debate (instigated by French President Emmanuel Macron, whose characterization of NATO being “brain dead” is not forgotten) on the idea of “strategic autonomy of Europe,” a recent speech by German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer could be considered required reading. Merkel’s trusted CDU party colleague delivered the speech at Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg on November 17, 2020.

When Kramp-Karrenbauer argues “The idea of strategic autonomy for Europe goes too far if it is taken to mean

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that we could guarantee security, stability, and prosperity in Europe without NATO and without the United States,” Merkel is speaking.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) is on the same wavelength in a speech he delivered on the occasion of the sixty-fifth birthday

of the Bundeswehr when he states: “Relying exclusively on the EU would create a divide in Europe. We will continue to depend on the strongest and biggest partner in the Alliance. But only a Europe that has the will and the ability to credibly protect itself will have the best chance of keeping the United States in the Alliance.”

Kramp-Karrenbauer’s “plain facts” on how the United States has been, and will foreseeably continue to be, Europe’s most important ally in security and defense policy are impressive. Without America’s nuclear and conventional capabilities, Germany and Europe cannot protect themselves.

The German defense minister cited estimates by the renowned London-based Royal United Services Institute,

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noting that “the United States currently provides 75 percent of all NATO capabilities. It provides 70 percent of what we call ‘strategic enablers’, which include reconnaissance, helicopters, air refueling, and satellite communications capabilities.” She also noted that the United States “contributes almost 100 percent of defense capabilities against ballistic missiles to NATO. And, of course, the United States provides the vast majority of nuclear deterrence capabilities.”

She concludes: “We thus have a vested interest in ensuring that America continues its commitment to defending Europe while shifting its strategic focus to Asia. The best way to achieve this is to do more for our own security. Only if we take our own security seriously will America do the same.” ◆