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## Merkel and the Trump Two-Step: Navigating the German Chancellor's White House Visit

by Jeffrey Brown

As German Chancellor Angela Merkel prepares for her first in-person encounter with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House this week, she faces a strategic reality that contrasts sharply with her previous visits hosted by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Buffeted by challenges at home ranging from Brexit to the Euro crisis and the implementation of Minsk II, Merkel faces perhaps her toughest – and most unexpected – challenge in liaising with a once stalwart ally now under Trump's management. But Trump's statements condemning Germany for its trade and refugee policies and its role in core European institutions such as NATO and the EU have already rejiggered the negotiating framework that has traditionally steered U.S. – German relations.

As they prepare to meet on Friday, both leaders' public statements since election night have further narrowed room to maneuver and leave little space for unforced negotiating errors. Faced with seismic change from top to bottom in Washington and staring down an often unpredictable and boastful personality, Merkel and her team will be pushed to bolster their traditional tactics with a fresh playbook that takes into account Trump's chaotic, personality-driven White House and transactional worldview. As Merkel prepares to meet Trump, it is time to consider the key factors at play in Friday's meeting.

### Merkel's mission of moderation vs. Trump's absolutism

In a stark departure from tradition, Trump never fully articulated his foreign policy platform during the 2016 election cycle, instead relying on Twitter and prime-time cable television appearances to enunciate his worldview in fits and starts. In the absence of a record of public service or a published foreign policy blueprint, Merkel and her team will be playing a guessing game when it comes to anticipating red flags and points of agreement that have been key to steadying one-on-one meetings in the past. In contrast with the efforts of previous administrations to set a list of commonly defined policy priorities ahead of face-to-face meetings, Trump has shown a proclivity for a foreign policy driven more by personal rapport than broad appeals to shared values and respect for tradition that Merkel prefers.

Despite early missteps during [contentious phone calls](#) with the leaders of Australia, Mexico and France, Trump has paradoxically laid on warm White House welcomes for Prime Ministers Theresa May of the United Kingdom, Shinzo Abe of Japan, Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and Justin Trudeau of Canada. For Trump, good relations with foreign states are predicated not on the history of relations or grand strategy, but instead on whether he feels that he can cement a relationship with fellow negotiators-in-chief.

Trump's early interactions with foreign heads of state therefore provide a number of clues and tactics that can inform Merkel's approach on Friday. But Trump's quest for truth through personal interaction is likely to rub against Merkel's pragmatism and search for middle ground. This leaves Merkel and her team with two possible approaches that supersede a reliance on well-defined and scoped set of issues that have governed relations during the Bush and Obama administrations.

In one scenario, Merkel doubles down on her post-election critique and [tense phone call](#) with Trump to hammer home stark divergences in worldview and policy, thereby cementing herself as the undisputed –

yet reluctant – counterweight to Trump at the vanguard of a refashioned Western liberal order. However, a public – or private – dressing down would likely prompt Trump to try and save face at all costs by renewing his critique of Germany’s trade and refugee policies, using the rebuke as an opening to demonstrate to the world how radically transformative he and his administration can be.

In a second scenario, Merkel institutes a charm offensive à la Justin Trudeau to ensure that she clicks at all costs with personality-driven Trump. Merkel and her team use Trump’s demonstrated lust for showmanship to their advantage, thereby sidestepping awkward moments during what is normally a carefully choreographed press conference. Merkel garners a post-meeting barrage of tweets from Trump noting the need for stronger German-American cooperation and an invitation to spend the weekend at Mar-a-Lago. However, if the choreography goes south or otherwise fails to indulge Trump’s need for validation or mitigates the ever-important optics of having negotiated a favorable deal, Merkel could quickly find herself in uncharted territory.

Of chief concern to Merkel and her team will be to ensure that she is capable of connecting with Trump on a meaningful level while maintaining the ability to parry any brash statements or demands. But Merkel’s options are constrained not only by the unfamiliar personalities now sitting in the White House, but also by the need to send a strong and reassuring message to increasingly worried voters at home.

### **The (other) elephant in the room**

After more than a decade in power, Merkel’s visit to Washington clashes not only with a radically transformed U.S. administration, but also a newly invigorated left under the aegis of Martin Schulz. With the [latest opinion polls](#) showing the Social Democrats pulling 31 percent of the vote to Merkel’s CDU/CSU coalition’s 33 percent, Merkel has been forced to take on the added challenge of proving to German voters that she can manage a rapidly fraying trans-Atlantic relationship under Trump. At the White House, Merkel will not only have to prove that she can toe a tough line on Trump, but also that she can effectively position herself as the arbiter of a trans-Atlantic relationship that could very well become increasingly strained in the years ahead.

Having conducted previous visits without the threat of a credible political challenge at home, Merkel will inevitably see whatever approach she takes criticized by shadow chancellor Martin Schulz, who is positioning himself as the [quintessential anti-Trump](#), capable of uniting Europe to act as a counterbalance to someone who wants to “divide Europe and destroy the common market.”<sup>1</sup> Schulz, who has stated that Trump is seeking to “start a clash of cultures” while “gambling with the safety of the Western world,” has cited Gerhard Schroeder’s opposition to the 2003 Iraq War as a model to counterbalance rash decisions by the administration in Washington. In his public statements, Schulz has drawn a clear contrast between the measured approach adopted by Merkel and U.S.-German relations under his Social Democrats.

### **Personality-driven politics or bust**

With elections in Germany approaching and the trans-Atlantic alliance facing a pivotal test, much is riding on Merkel’s White House visit. With the meeting coming [just two days before](#) implementation of Trump’s second travel ban, Merkel steps into a White House that is governed by a credo that departs markedly from previous administrations. Trump’s public pronouncements and penchant for personality-driven foreign policy pose major challenges to the pragmatic approach that has thus far governed U.S. - German relations. With the world increasingly worried that Trump will fail to moderate his positions, the international community will be watching closely.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-german-chancellor-candidate-martin-schulz-a-1133475.html>