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## **THE ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIP**

by Anthony Silberfeld, Josh Stanton and Kara Sutton

The trans-Atlantic bond was for generations defined by the strength of the “special relationship” between the United States and the United Kingdom. But the world changes, and so too must constellations among nations if they are to confront the vast problems of the modern era. In the early 21st century, it is the relationship between the US and Germany that forms the bedrock of the trans-Atlantic partnership.

That link, however, is hamstrung by a legacy of misunderstandings that now undermines Western efforts on a range of issues. The period bookended by disagreement over the Iraq War and outrage in the aftermath of the NSA scandal has left Washington and Berlin struggling to exert the full force of trans-Atlantic leadership that current global crises demand. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel meets US President Barack Obama at the White House on February 9, the two leaders will inevitably discuss the multiple challenges facing the West. Finding a joint approach to those challenges will be the measure of their meeting’s success.

Merkel may be traveling to Washington as part of the traditional duties of the host of an upcoming G7 summit, but her White House talks will undoubtedly include three topics of acute concern to the bilateral relationship. These issues—Islamic extremism, the escalating conflict in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, and the pressing need for an economic spark in Europe in part via a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—require the US and Germany to create an “essential relationship” based on a shared past and a shared vision of the future. German-American links are solid, but they need strengthening for this essential relationship to emerge. For this to happen, the US would benefit by viewing these issues through a German prism and recognizing that Berlin has distinct interests and constituencies that must be considered.

### **Safe from Terrorism... and Prying Eyes**

The Paris attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and on the kosher supermarket highlight the vulnerability of Europe’s open societies to radical Islam. More than four million Muslims call

Germany home and although only a tiny fraction of them pose a threat, security and political challenges exist. The presence in the country of an estimated 500-600 fighters returning from Syria and Iraq represents a danger made more grave by recent acts of terrorism in France and Belgium. Merkel, who recently declared that “Islam is part of Germany”, has forged a delicate balancing act that embraces Islam while repudiating those who commit violence in its name. As part of that balance, her government recently approved a draft law restricting travel for suspected terrorists while confronting rising Islamophobia among the public. This is most prominently reflected in the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) movement, which has drawn tens of thousands to recent rallies.

Germany, perpetually mindful of its history, goes to great lengths to condemn such movements that foster intolerance. In a recent speech marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Merkel said, “We’ve got to be on guard constantly to protect our freedom, democracy and rule of law. We’ve got to expose those who promote prejudices and conjure up bogeymen, the old ones as well as the new.”

The situation poses for the chancellor a dilemma familiar to Obama: balancing liberty and security. The US and Germany may ultimately differ on the definition of radical Islam and the tactics to combat it, but the objectives are identical. The need for comprehensive intelligence-sharing, therefore, remains paramount despite German anger at widespread American surveillance activities. Heightened German security concerns should lend additional impetus to the upcoming White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. Merkel and Obama should seize this opportunity to shape that meeting’s agenda and address the threats while confirming respect for privacy rights of citizens on both sides of the Atlantic.

### **Taming the Russian Bear**

Berlin’s carrot-and-stick approach to Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine contrasts sharply with repeated calls in Washington for a tough response. The chancellor remains the driving force behind EU sanctions against the Kremlin, recently warning that they would be lifted only when Moscow takes significant steps towards ending the conflict. At the same time, she consistently pushes for a diplomatic solution by calling upon the Ukrainian and Russian governments to implement the Minsk Agreement. Merkel has also dangled the possibility of creating a free-trade area between the EU and the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) “if the part of problems over Ukraine [are] solved”. Moscow’s response to that was cool; Washington remained silent.

As the conflict festers, Merkel’s maintaining a unified EU front will become increasingly difficult. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has said that further economic sanctions are possible if conditions in eastern Ukraine worsen but admitted that “nobody is ambitious to... impose sanctions”. Indeed, calls for easing the sanctions are growing louder, particularly from Austria, Slovakia and Greece. At home, Merkel faces similar pressure behind closed doors from a corporate sector that has invested heavily in Russia. The German economy is clearly paying a price, too. Exports to Russia dropped 15.5 percent in the first half of 2014, and GDP growth forecasts for 2015 hover around an anemic one percent.

Neither the EU nor the US ever articulated a clear political strategy beyond sanctions. Yet the resumption of fighting near Mariupol and other parts of eastern Ukraine has hollowed the Minsk Agreement and demonstrated that sanctions have not significantly altered the status quo. These developments have created two additional fault lines within the EU that relate to renewing sanctions (which are due to expire later this year) and providing arms to Ukraine. The US and Germany now need to develop a joint strategy that takes all this into account and

aims to bring an end to the conflict. This may ultimately include providing defensive weapons to Kyiv, although Berlin is among those steadfastly opposed to that approach. The Merkel-Obama meeting is unlikely to bridge this gap, but the talks should still allow a political strategy to emerge.

## **Unity on TTIP**

Trade is a topic of easy agreement between the president and the chancellor. Both advocate ambitious trade agendas that could result in large economic benefits. While the White House has backing from a Republican majority in Congress in this policy area, the chancellor confronts boisterous disapproval from opposition parties and even some members of her coalition partner.

German fears of an abandonment of perceived higher EU product standards and a corresponding flood of American “Frankenfoods” permeate mainstream and social media. There is also mistrust of the entire TTIP negotiation process, which is seen as open only to business interests. Skepticism of American intentions for an agreement also abound. Provisions for an investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS), for example, which the US views as crucial to any deal, are under fire in Germany.

Merkel has nevertheless repeatedly renewed her commitment to TTIP, most recently at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos. For his part, Obama called on Congress to act on his trade priorities in his State of the Union address. 2015 will be a vital year for TTIP. To advance their common agenda for a deal, both leaders should use their meeting to set a timeline for progress. This timeline should incorporate steps to make negotiations more transparent, thereby alleviating public concerns of collusion between government and business. At the same time, however, a degree of confidentiality is warranted if a comprehensive agreement is to be reached.

## **A New Paradigm**

The past 70 years have seen the US-German relationship transformed from a patron-dependent dynamic to an indispensable partnership. The trajectory of the trans-Atlantic alliance is now set by Washington and Berlin, and it is imperative that both recognize a relationship that has gone beyond special to become essential. Then they have to foster it.

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