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## **STEINMEIER'S MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?**

by Annette Heuser

As German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier arrives in Washington, DC today, his mission is to repair a badly frayed partnership and reconfirm its importance. There may be many items on the bilateral to-do list — Ukraine, Syria, Iran, just to name three — but it is the NSA scandal that continues to overshadow the entire German-American relationship. The success of the foreign minister's visit hinges on getting his hosts to understand that.

Those who thought the war in Iraq brought the once-rock-solid partnership to an unparalleled low now stand corrected. US surveillance activities on German territory that targeted and still target German officials have undermined the most fundamental bond between the two countries — trust. Hardly a day goes by without the German media's exposing new details of allegedly nefarious NSA activities.

The current US image in Germany is in stark contrast to that of previous decades. Then, the Marshall Plan and support for re-unification characterized American beneficence. Now, the US is perceived as a reckless and declining superpower oblivious to and apathetic about its ally's views, laws, concerns and interests. The NSA scandal hangs over the relationship like a dark, ominous and ever-growing cloud.

This toxic atmosphere has unsurprisingly affected efforts to establish a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), one of the most ambitious projects that Europeans and Americans have undertaken. TTIP is now the object of nearly incessant German scorn and criticism. Consumer-protection groups and even parts of the business community question German gains from such a mega-free-trade zone. The doubts do not arise out of a bias against global trade — Germany is, after all, the world's export leader. Rather, the deterioration in bilateral ties has increased already heightened concerns of adopting US data-protection and food-safety standards, which are perceived to be subpar. The debate about chlorinated chicken and hormone-treated beef in German supermarkets alone has become shrill.

Berlin now views its ties to Washington through the prism of the NSA scandal and the Obama administration's unwillingness to discuss it. The latter is perceived as pure arrogance. No improvement in bilateral ties will come and no breakthrough in TTIP negotiations will be

possible unless Steinmeier starts to untangle this Gordian Knot during his visit. He cannot, however, accomplish this alone.

Berlin knows a no-spy agreement is not in the cards, and it can live with that. But the foreign minister will be unable to repair and reconfirm Germany's ties to its key global partner as long as that partner refuses to discuss issues that have stoked widespread anger and disappointment, and shaken Germans to the core. If Washington desires close and strong ties to Berlin, American policymakers cannot sit the NSA scandal out. The issue will not disappear. Quite to the contrary, it will fester and continue to infect a once-strong partnership.

The foreign minister's efforts require the Obama administration to respond. The US must show him a serious commitment on all government levels, right up to the Oval Office, to address the scope of its surveillance activities in Europe, particularly in Germany. A continuing refusal to deal with the NSA scandal and its fallout will be a sign of Germany's degradation in the US's geostrategic outlook. The next two days are crucial. Steinmeier's repair-and-reconfirm mission faces a significant challenge.

*Annette Heuser is executive director of the Washington, DC-based Bertelsmann Foundation.*  
[annette.heuser@bfna.org](mailto:annette.heuser@bfna.org)

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1101 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 901 • Washington, DC 20005 USA • Tel: +1.202.384.1980  
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