



Germany's Coalition Agreement

Transatlantic Ties in Times of 'Profound Change'

By Emily Hruban

After months of tumultuous negotiations in Berlin, the CDU, CSU and SPD emerged on February 7 with a draft coalition agreement. Much of the document spells out a continuation of past priorities, but five short paragraphs on page 147 show a serious, and perhaps irreversible, shift in thinking about the transatlantic relationship: "The United States is undergoing a profound change, which poses a great challenge to us. We will adjust our policies accordingly."¹

The policy "adjustments" discussed in the agreement include ambiguous offers of cooperation. Furthermore, the partners promise to engage in an "open, intense dialogue with the U.S. administration, the Congress and representatives of the U.S. states," and that "a strong, frequent presence of German and European decisionmakers in Washington" can be expected.² However, the details of these connections are noticeably vague. It appears as if the transatlantic partnership is wanted for the connection's sake, with only a few short mentions of defense and trade, both issues that have featured widely in recent discussion about Euro-Atlantic cooperation. In fact, a commitment to economic ties may be the one and only issue that will bring the two powers together in the coming years.

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The 2013 Agreement

This is not the first coalition agreement to take a frosty tone toward the United States. The last coalition agreement between the same parties was negotiated at the height of the Snowden revelations in 2013. At the time, the coalition called for an acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the White House, and expressed a need to "clarify the rules of engagement between partners," noting that "we strive for credible and verifiable agreements in order to protect the private sphere of our citizens."³

However, what sets the 2018 agreement apart from those in the past is the outlook on the future of the relationship. In 2013, despite the turmoil caused by Snowden's bombshells and frustration over TTIP negotiations, the agreement acknowledged that "the transatlantic partnership is based on a foundation of shared values and interests

and is thus still today the key to freedom, security and prosperity for all.”⁴

The 2018 agreement and recent remarks by German leaders make clear that Germany increasingly views Europe, not the United States, as the primary protector of the global order. The new agreement states, “For Germany, a strong and united Europe is the best guarantee for a good future in peace, freedom, and prosperity.”⁵

America First

Although not mentioned by name in the document, both CDU and SPD politicians have cited President Donald Trump and his U.S.-centric policies and rhetoric as the reason for this change. German officials are especially frustrated by Washington’s failure to send a new ambassador to Berlin, a position that has been vacant since Trump took office over a year ago.

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel remarked in December that the “withdrawal of the U.S. under Trump from the role of the reliable guarantor of Western multilateralism has sped up the change in the global order and has immediate consequences for German and European interests.”⁶

Likewise, Angela Merkel referenced Trump’s America First brand of foreign policy in her January 2018 speech at Davos. The Chancellor stated that Europe “often relied on the United States of America, which has now started to concentrate more on itself...[Europe] must now take on more responsibility. We must take our fate into our own hands.”⁷

Public Opinion

Although the relationship between Berlin and Washington is strained, the agreement states that it remains critical that Germany continue to “strengthen the mutual understanding and trust of future generations” by engaging with American citizens directly, particularly outside of what they call “economic hubs.”⁸ Most notably, the agreement mentions the importance of the Deutschlandjahr program 2018-2019, a public diplomacy effort that aims to engage Americans across the country. Although Germany may be doubling down on its efforts to improve Americans’ views of the Federal Republic, rural Americans are not the group at risk of losing what faith they had in the transatlantic partnership.

Public opinion of the United States in Germany, on the other hand, was already strained under President Barack Obama, with concerns ranging from the Snowden revelations to the TTIP negotiations.

Negative headlines about the Trump White House and the

U.S. Congress now dominate the German media. The entire 2016 election was covered in the German press like a car crash. Readers could not take their eyes off the coverage. According to a spring, 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, 62 percent of Germans had a negative view of the United States, making it the European nation with the least favorable view of the country.⁹

Public opinion of the United States continues to deteriorate as Germans become incensed by news out of Washington, from the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, to the president’s Twitter spats with the North Korean dictator. Winning back support from German citizens will be the greatest challenge facing the transatlantic relationship in the decades to come. Neither government seems eager to take on this challenge. Trump’s toxicity in Europe makes it difficult for major political players in Berlin to advocate for the transatlantic relationship at home. Likewise, without an ambassador in place in Berlin, and without a real interest in improving popularity abroad, it is clear the U.S. government will not make German public opinion a priority. Without real concerted efforts, the future of the relationship remains in jeopardy.

Endnotes:

- 1 <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-spd-cdu-csu>
- 2 <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-spd-cdu-csu>
- 3 https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2013/2013-12-17-koalitionsvertrag.html
- 4 https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2013/2013-12-17-koalitionsvertrag.html
- 5 <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-spd-cdu-csu>
- 6 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2017/12/117-3-bmaa-forum.html>
- 7 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Rede/2018/01/2018-01-24-rede-merkel-davos.html>
- 8 <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-spd-cdu-csu>
- 9 <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/tarnished-american-brand/>