

Germany in a Pinch

Why the Trump administration is right to pressure Berlin



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KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Mr Mead, the Trump administration has been far more critical towards Europe and Germany in particular than any administration in post-War memory. Is this criticism justified or rather a pretence for domestic consumption?

MEAD: I think the Trump administration has been sincere in its criticism; it reflects its perspective. There is a real sense that Europe generally and Germany specifically is not doing enough about its own defence, that Berlin expects the United States to pay for much of Europe's defence bill, and that it reserves for itself the right to criticize the way in which the US tries to provide for Europe's defence.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: German policy-makers would argue that, since the 2014 Munich Consensus, Berlin has assumed greater responsibility, especially within NATO, but that it will not be able to shift gears overnight – for both technical and political reasons.

MEAD: As long as this remains the case, it is probably good for the US to keep pressuring Germany. What Germany is teaching the United States is that, when pressured, the Germans move in the right direction. Without pressure, Berlin will simply sit there and enjoy the benefits of what others are doing.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Differences over defence spending aside, considering the fact that Germany and the US remain extremely close allies, there seems to be an enormous amount of frustration with Germany in Washington.

MEAD: Both Republicans and Democrats feel that the Euro has been a terrible disaster for Europe, inflicting sustained and massive damage on some of the southern European countries, including Italy. There is a feeling that Germany has looked after its own interests at the expense of undermining the Western alliance and weakening Europe. Americans may not all think that this is the result of calculated policy, but Germany seems extremely comfortable with the status quo, which is dividing and weakening Europe.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Do you worry that these differences prevent us from seeing the bigger picture, such as coordinating a transatlantic approach to China?

MEAD: One can certainly criticize the Trump administration for opening every question at once, rather than developing a strategy and then carefully sequencing its moves. But however angry and disappointed Europeans may be with the Trump administration, we all see that what China is doing is a threat to us all. This is the real strength of the West: We share a cultural, ethical, and in many cases religious outlook. More often than not, we will look at events in similar ways.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Nonetheless, many people today are worried that the institutions underpinning transatlantic relations are crumbling.

MEAD: The instinct that international partnerships can only be strong if they are grounded in bureaucratic institutions may have been true in the 1940s and 1950s, when the international situation was more stable. Today, is Erdogan’s Turkey a NATO ally? Is Hungary really part of the European project? In the more fluid international environment of today, I think we may see a lot more stress on bureaucratic structures. We may find cooperation easier without bureaucratic structures. The EU may remain the most successful international venture of its kind in history, but it also seems to have more problems than it did five or ten years ago.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Where do you see the EU’s main problems?

MEAD: If Europeans perceive a problem, they think the answer lies in creating a bureaucratic process to tackle it. In order to coordinate among different countries, there are certainly cases where there is no other way. However, you then end up with a multiplicity of bureaucratic entities struggling to coordinate. Add to that a population that does not follow bureaucratic intricacies, and inevitably you end up with a massive democratic deficit. The more perfect the bureaucratic machine becomes, the greater the potential gap between the machine and public opinion.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Many Europeans argue that it is precisely the bureaucracy, its laws and regulations, that enable the EU to function.

MEAD: I would argue that the EU might become stronger if it found creative ways to loosen things. The Europeans may be able to all live in one house, but they cannot all sleep in one bed.

The Italians are going their own way already. The Turks, who were once headed toward Europe, are now heading away. These are not healthy changes. Europe’s problems are growing, and the capacity to address them seems to be decreasing. It is not a case of “Oh, there is a simple, obvious answer, and you just have to do it.” But somehow it feels like there is a gap between the gravity of the historical situation and the content of the political discussion. ✖

