

You Say Multilateralism, I Say...?

Why US liberals are sceptical of German rhetoric

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Mr Wright, is the Trump administration still interested in the idea of a transatlantic alliance?

WRIGHT: Unfortunately it is not a priority for President Trump or his administration. There is almost no one left in the administration who understands Europe. They focus on areas of disagreement – Iran, energy, and trade – but do not seem interested in building a common position on China, on technology and big data, on political interference or other major challenges.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Earlier this year the German Foreign Ministry initiated the hashtag “#MultilateralismMatters”, which stands almost diametrically opposed to the President’s slogan of “America first”. Is there such a thing as a Trumpian concept of multilateralism?

WRIGHT: The Trump administration appears more interested in bilateral relationships. John Bolton, the former national security advisor, was a staunch critic of multilateralism. He would argue that coalitions of the like-minded, such as the 2003 Proliferation Security Initiative he helped to develop in the early 2000s, represent an effective form of multilateralism. The administration prefers such coalitions to be temporary and mission-oriented. It is deeply sceptical of institutions, which are important because they provide a long-term structure for cooperation.



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KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Is this the right time then for Germany to launch its “Alliance for Multilateralism”?

WRIGHT: I think there are questions about what Germany means by multilateralism. It is striking that the “Alliance for Multilateralism” focuses on institutions like the Paris Agreement or the JCPOA, but not necessarily on mid-sized countries standing together against coercion. For example, China has put enormous pressure on Canada, including through the detention of former Canadian diplomat

Michael Kovrig. One would expect Germany to publicly stand with Canada to uphold the principle of multilateralism, but that has not happened. Liberal circles in America are somewhat sceptical therefore of what precisely Germany means: a values-based approach of the like-minded to uphold a certain idea of international order, or rather a convening project to bring everyone – including countries such as China and Russia – together. The latter approach does not actually address the underlying challenge to multilateralism.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Speaking of Beijing: How does the Trump administration see the role of Germany and Europe vis-à-vis China?

WRIGHT: There has been a major shift in Europe, particularly Western Europe, toward China. Germany, France and others have gone to the administration and asked to work together on China, particularly through the EU. However, in the words of the President, “the EU is worse than China”. Most senior officials realize they need to work with Europe, and are working to that end at lower levels. Even President Trump, though he does not want to work with the EU, is trying to engage NATO on China. The US and Europe really need to have a deep conversation about China.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: The debate on “decoupling” has added to signs that countries at some point may have to decide between having a deep economic partnership with China, or a deep security partnership with the US. How should Germany and others navigate this tension?

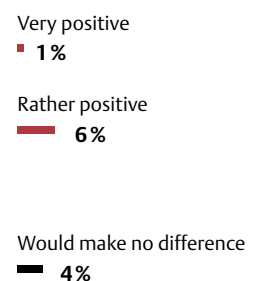
WRIGHT: China is a vital part of the global economy. Both Germany and the US will continue to engage

China economically, but Germany needs to be smart about how it engages. Berlin needs to recognize that unconditional engagement, lacking any consideration of security and strategic issues, is unrealistic. The decision to entrust one provider or the other with Germany’s 5G network will reverberate for decades to come, and will be very difficult to revise. It is the US position therefore – and not just of the Trump administration – that this decision needs to be thought through very carefully. What if China’s intentions evolve in such a way that Huawei’s involvement would compromise their security systems, their security operations, and thus the integrity of the transatlantic alliance? There may be certain areas where security and strategic concerns require limits to engagement.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Are you worried about the future of the transatlantic alliance?

WRIGHT: I worry that we are overly focusing on the values of NATO and the EU. No doubt these are important, but what really matters is whether or not the alliance deals with the problems we are facing. What we really need is a positive agenda that deals with Chinese mercantilism, with technology and automation, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and questions about big data, and with issues such as corporate taxes. You have a whole variety of issues that directly pertain to people’s lives. ✂

What would be the impact on German-US relations if President Trump were re-elected in 2020?



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