

German Foreign Policy Beyond COVID-19

Exploring its partnership potential will be essential for
Germany's responses to international challenges

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that international cooperation is indispensable for solving common challenges – or, as Gro Harlem Brundtland puts it, ‘a virus knows no borders’. Migration – ranked by the German public with 37 percent as the number one foreign policy challenge for their country – is another challenge where joint efforts are paramount.

While 46 percent of Germans expect states to cooperate more once the COVID-19 crisis is over, 24 percent say that they will focus more on their national interests instead. German officials do not get tired of articulating Berlin's commitment to multilateralism and solidarity in the EU and beyond. Yet, Germany has to match actions to words and prove that national go-it-alone measures are not an option, and that its export ban on medical equipment at the very beginning of the pandemic was a unique faux pas.

Yet, those who want to cooperate need partners. To avoid being left alone, Germany not only has to be more proactive regarding its allies but also to be open to new partnerships.

Forty-three percent of Germans see France as their country's most important partner. In September – before the US presidential election – its importance was even higher for the German public (54 percent). The joint proposal for the European recovery fund was clearly Germany's attempt to

prevent the EU's economic collapse during an unprecedented crisis. However, this can also be seen as a move to reach out to southern EU member states. It is also one recent example illustrating that the Franco-German engine is working again. A European strategy for the Indo-Pacific region could become another one.

So there is France. However, when Germans name their most important partner, other European countries such as Italy or Poland are not considered relevant options. Yet, for a middle power with a foreign policy strategy based on a cooperative and multilateral approach, one partner is hardly sufficient. Who else is there to cooperate with Germany?

The long-lasting Brexit negotiations might have brought the EU members closer together but they certainly did not improve the United Kingdom's standing as a trustworthy partner. The perception of the German public reflects this: only 1 percent say the country is Germany's most important partner. In contrast, 15 percent of Brits assign this role to Germany.

Looking across the Atlantic, the partnership with the United States – the guarantor of European security for the past 75 years – has changed. Under President Donald Trump it has lost its foundation: a shared belief in the rules-based order. Whether it is about the protection of the environment, democracy and human rights, dealing with China or

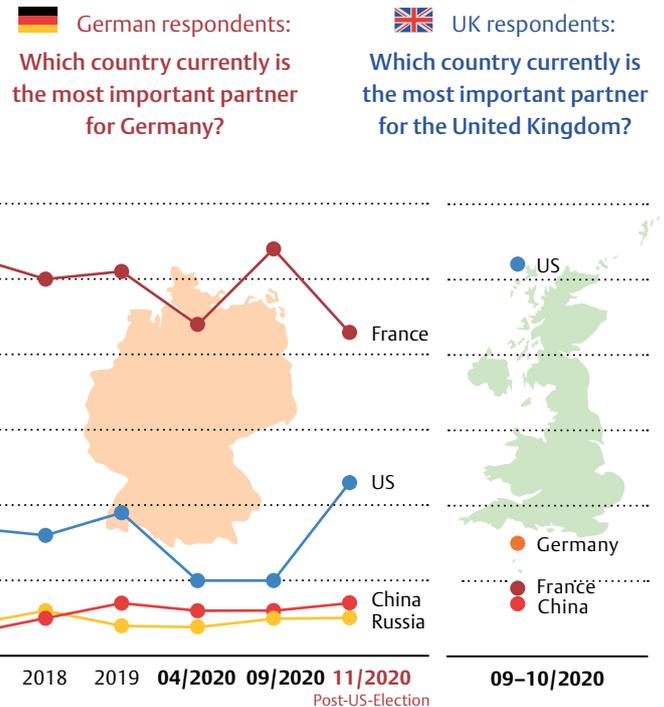
promoting free trade, ahead of the presidential election a majority of Germans did not consider the United States as a partner. What is more, 25 percent perceived the United States and Trump as a foreign policy challenge. From a German point of view, the transatlantic relations had reached a new low.

With the election of Joe Biden, the future appears more positive: 78 percent of Germans expect the strained transatlantic partnership to normalize again and almost a quarter name the United States as Germany's most important partner (compared to 10 percent in September). In addition, the German government will have responsive counterparts in Washington again. However, the US retreat from global leadership is likely to continue as the Biden administration will have to focus on a plethora of domestic challenges, leaving it with little bandwidth to restore the relationship with Germany and other European allies. This might be the reason why – even with a change in the White House – 51 percent of Germans say that greater independence from the United States is needed.

When it comes to Russia, the recent developments in Belarus and the poisoning of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny have further strained an already complicated relationship. Many more Germans now perceive Russia under President Vladimir Putin rather as a challenge (27 percent in 2020 compared to 6 percent in 2019) than as a partner (5 percent).

While experts debate whether a fundamental change in Germany's China policy has taken place, the government sticks to the idea of 'change through trade'. But what was a success for *Ostpolitik* might not work with China in the current geopolitical setting. In case of a US-Chinese Cold War, 82 percent of Germans would prefer their country to remain neutral instead of positioning itself next to one of the two superpowers.

The past years have shown that Germany's traditional partnerships are not a given and that different challenges might require different partners. So what are Germany's options? The German public has a clear opinion on this: democracies! Eighty-five percent say that democratic states are better suited



to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. This preference could become directive in the search for partners and evaluating common interests. Yet, dialogue should also continue with difficult actors not matching these criteria.

With regards to diversification, Germany's new strategy for the Indo-Pacific points in the right direction. Taking a closer look at African and Latin American countries might also bring to light more partnership potential.

In tackling foreign policy challenges during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, Berlin needs to do its homework vis-à-vis its allies, but it must also diversify its international relations and cooperate with other countries in a more flexible manner, based on shared interests and not only on legacies. ✖



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