

Overcoming Nostalgia

A stronger transatlantic relationship would empower the United States

Few would deny it: the transatlantic relationship has seen better days. On trade, hope of a grand deal has given way to a string of petty disputes, from steel to lobster. In the digital domain, American intelligence priorities have clashed with European privacy, a conflict that threatens to break the global internet into smaller pieces than it already has. In the Middle East, the US ‘maximum pressure’ campaign has collided and collided again with Europe’s efforts to salvage the Iran deal, a tension steadily escalating all the way to the United Nations Security Council.

The lion’s share of fault for this strain lies in Washington – and policy-makers in the United States should be ready to acknowledge as much. Too many of our officials have forgotten that American power is at its lowest ebb when we act alone. In that light, rebooting the alliance must be a priority for the next president of the United States, Joe Biden. But Europe must also understand that not every shift in American priorities can be chalked up to the current occupant of the Oval Office. In some respects, our foreign policy has changed because the world has changed around us. Nostalgia is not a strategy: US-EU ties must adapt to the world as it actually exists today.

To be sure, that effort starts with the United States getting its own house in order. For years now, we have systematically underfunded and

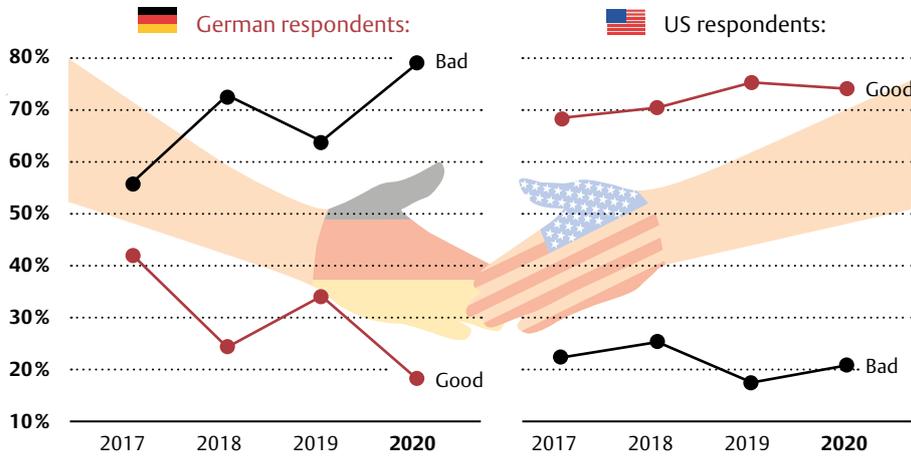


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understaffed our diplomatic efforts. Offices as critical as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs – or Ambassador to Ukraine – should not be going without Senate-confirmed appointees for months at a time. Partners as critical as Germany should be able to trust that the ambassadors we do send are consummate professionals, not representatives of a particular political party or the personal interests of the president. We have undervalued, too, our treaty commitments, recklessly withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, the

How would you rate the current relationship between Germany and the United States?



September 2020: don't know 2%, no answer 1%

September 2020: don't know 5%

Pew Research Center 

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Iran nuclear deal. Each move was an error. Reversing course is the kind of repair Joe Biden can start on inauguration day.

In other areas, though, the work of building a modern alliance will take many hands, and it will call for soul-searching in Berlin and Brussels as much as it does in Washington. If the Trump administration has been too reckless in its approach to China, for instance, Europe has sometimes been too slow to reckon with Beijing's growing aggression. As China grows more brazen, whether in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, the United States and Europe must rally around a coordinated response. Rather than fall prey to narrow temptations, we must exercise our shared economic power to defend shared principles.

Similarly, if the United States has spied too aggressively, Europe has sometimes seemed more interested in punishing American tech companies for it than in building an internet that harmonizes our values. There are positive-sum ways to improve security and privacy. Expanding the use of strong encryption is one; imposing the kind of 'data

sovereignty' pioneered by China and Russia is not. Make no mistake: Washington has woken up to the urgency of surveillance reform — and of reining in the worst excesses of Silicon Valley. Europe is, understandably, impatient to see change, not to mention still scarred by the Snowden disclosures. But whatever our disagreements on the best way to create an open, secure, accountable internet, they are not so deep that it would be worth ripping the network into pieces. The importance of digital collaboration, whether on shared cybersecurity or the next leap in artificial intelligence, is only growing. There has never been a worse time to throw up new walls.

Across the foreign policy portfolio, whatever our current difficulties, the transatlantic alliance remains the world's indispensable relationship. We are too connected — by values, interests, markets, and networks — to give up on the work. President-elect Joe Biden will, I hope, make that a priority. I hope the same of the next chancellor. Because if the last several years have taught the West anything, it should be that the go-it-alone theory of diplomacy is a lose-lose. 