

Adapting to a New Normal

German foreign policy and public opinion in times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated many of the trends and dynamics underlying the geopolitical shifts we have seen over the past decade. From a German point of view, the virus has underlined major cracks in each of the three pillars that have underpinned Berlin's foreign policy almost since World War II: European integration, transatlantic cooperation, and its export-driven economic model. Common to each of these pillars is a dependence on an open and rules-based order that is increasingly under threat. Recognizing these challenges, Germany has gone to great lengths to promote a renewed commitment to international cooperation: From new initiatives in the UN Security Council, where the country took up its seat as a non-permanent member in January 2019, to the launch of the Alliance for Multilateralism, Berlin has placed multilateralism front and centre of its agenda.

But how are these challenges, and the purported solutions, viewed by the public, particularly in the context of the pandemic?

First things first: However geopolitical realities may be changing, Germans continue to feel rather comfortable in a deeply interconnected world. A majority of them believe that globalization has benefited their country (59 percent) and them personally (52 percent, compared to 47 and 49

percent, respectively, in the United States, as data gathered by the Pew Research Center shows). In a similar vein, Germans remain staunch supporters of international cooperation: 89 percent favour cooperating with other countries to solve global challenges (notwithstanding a minor decrease from 96 percent in 2019). There are limits to the support for global interconnectedness: A strong majority of 85 percent would like to see the production of essential goods and critical infrastructure – 5G, anyone? – returned to German soil, even at the risk of higher costs. Notwithstanding, when it comes to international challenges, clearly Germans do not like to go it alone. So how do these preferences relate to their views on European integration, the transatlantic partnership, and relations with China?

On Europe, Germans appear rather conflicted: A plurality of 38 percent say that their view of the EU has deteriorated amid the COVID-19 crisis, compared to 33 percent whose view of Europe has improved. While nearly three quarters agree that, given its status as a relatively wealthy country, Germany should contribute more than other countries towards solving global problems, it is not clear how this would pan out in Europe: A majority of 59 percent comes down against so-called corona bonds, among the most controversial topics over recent weeks. Support for European integration

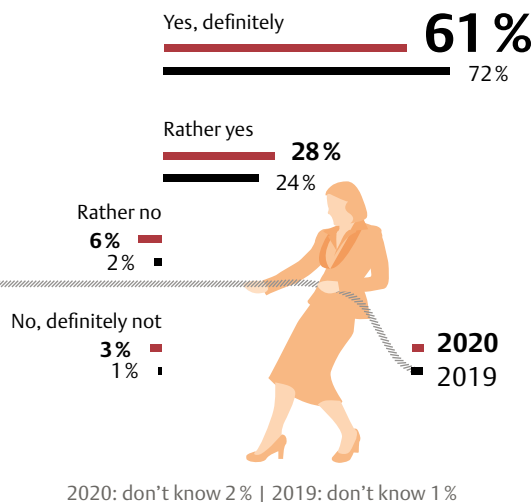
becomes less ambiguous where tangible benefits are at stake: For instance, an emphatic majority of 85 percent favours a return to the Schengen Agreement, which stipulates an absence of border checks among participating states, once the virus has been defeated.

Compared to the European project, German attitudes towards transatlantic cooperation have taken a significant dive. While scepticism towards Washington predates the pandemic, America’s response to the virus has clearly accelerated a feeling of estrangement on the German side: 73 percent of Germans say that their opinion of the US has deteriorated – more than double the number of respondents who feel the same way towards China. And despite the close security cooperation between Washington and Berlin, merely 10 percent of Germans consider the US their closest partner in foreign policy, compared to 19 percent in September 2019. The trend toward transatlantic estrangement is further underlined by the fact that the number of Germans who prioritize close relations with Washington over close relations with Beijing has decreased significantly, from 50 percent in September 2019 to the current number of 37 percent, almost equal to the number of those who see it the other way around (36 percent).

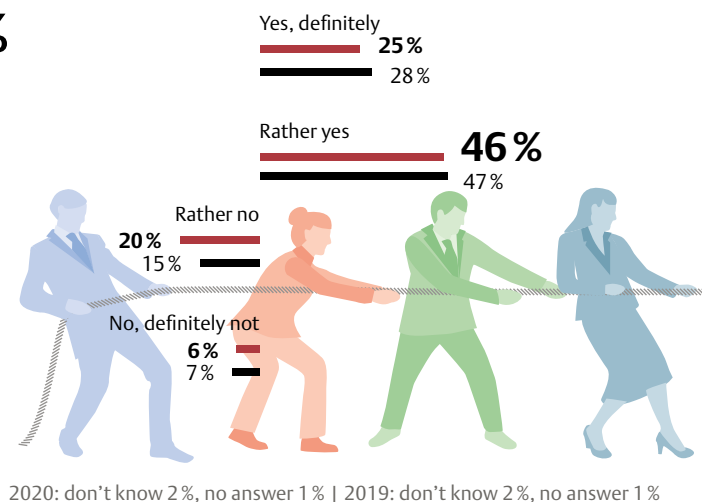
So out with the US, in with China? Not quite: Yes, the fact that the public is leaning towards a position of equidistance between Washington and Beijing should worry policy-makers. However, this is not to say that Germans are uncritical towards the People’s Republic. Over 70 percent believe that the Chinese government could have mitigated the pandemic by being more transparent in its handling of the situation. Neither do Chinese propaganda efforts appear to resonate with many Germans. In contrast to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who in March declared that, given a lack of European solidarity, he was directing all his hopes toward Beijing, 87 percent of Germans believe that the EU is contributing more to the fight against the pandemic than China.

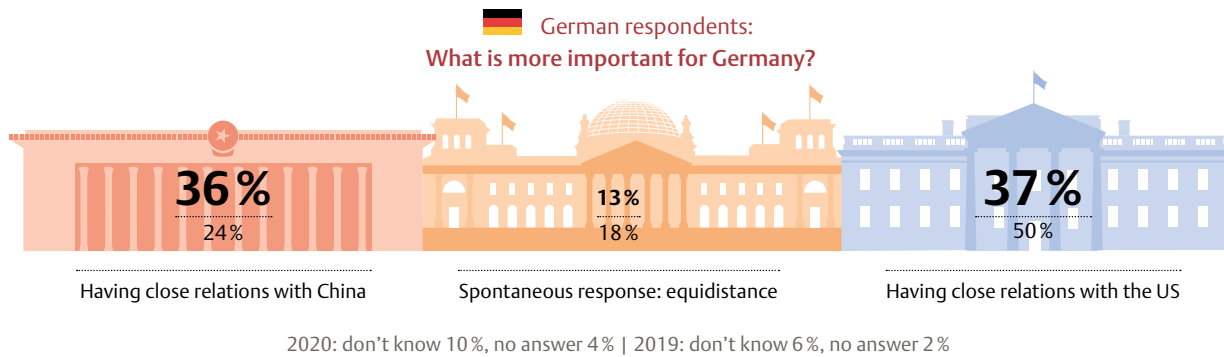
So what does all of this mean for the future of German foreign policy? The benefits of EU membership remain popular. However, our results suggest that the pandemic’s net effect on the image of the EU among Germans has been negative. Looking west, the Atlantic seems wider than ever. Data from previous surveys suggest that Germans’ perceptions of the US closely correlate with their perceptions of the incumbent president. Notwithstanding, the growing gap between public opinion and a foreign

Should Germany cooperate with other nations to solve global challenges?

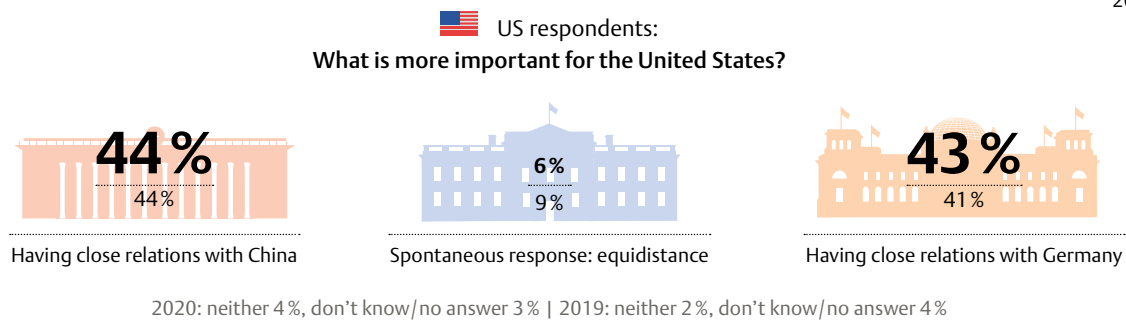


Should Germany cooperate with other nations to solve global challenges even if this implies initially putting national interests in second place?






2020
2019



Pew Research Center 

policy that heavily relies on close relations with Washington may well provide parties on both ends of the political spectrum with a welcome target. To this end, Social Democrats' recent demand to remove US nuclear weapons stored on German soil in the context of NATO's nuclear sharing scheme – a policy that is essential to Germany's role within the alliance – may be but a taste of the debates to come. And China? German policy-makers such as former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel have repeatedly warned that, wherever democratic states retreat from the international stage, authoritarian states will be quick to fill the resulting gaps. In terms of public opinion, the People's Republic appears to be on the cusp of filling the vacuum resulting from waning US popularity. As experts and politicians alike predict that Germany eventually will be forced to choose sides should the Sino-American rivalry continue on its current trajectory – and there is little to suggest it won't – Beijing's growing popularity will undoubtedly complicate such a decision.

As the corona pandemic underlines the urgent need for international cooperation, multilateralism appears to be faltering in both spirit and practice. Germans for one remain staunch optimists about the future of international collaboration, with 42 percent believing that the pandemic will lead to an increase in international cooperation. Let us hope that they aren't in for a rude awakening. 



JOSHUA WEBB
Editor, The Berlin Pulse,
Körber-Stiftung, Berlin



RONJA SCHELER
Programme Director
International Affairs,
Körber-Stiftung, Berlin

© Körber-Stiftung / Claudia Höhne