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Germany, Trump And The World

by Joschka Fischer on 31 January 2017



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Donald Trump is now the 45th President of the United States, and in his inaugural address he made it clear to the assembled US establishment that his administration does not intend to pursue business as usual. His motto, “America first,” signals the renunciation, and possible destruction, of the US-led world order that Democratic and Republican presidents, starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt, have built up and maintained – albeit with varying degrees of success – for more than seven decades.

If America abandons its role as the leading economic and military power and moves toward nationalism and isolationism, it will precipitate an international reordering, while also changing the country itself. Rather than being a hegemon, the US will become one great power among many.

Since the end of World War II, the US has been the engine of global free trade, so a move toward protectionism, or an attempt to either reverse globalization or harness it for narrow national interests, would have immense economic and political consequences worldwide. The full implications of such a shift are largely unpredictable; but we all know – or should know – what happened the last time the world’s leading powers turned inward, in the 1930s.

The alliances, multilateral institutions, security guarantees, international agreements, and shared values underlying the current global order might soon be called into question, or rejected altogether. If that happens, the old *Pax Americana* will have been needlessly destroyed by

America itself. And with no obvious alternative framework to replace it, all indicators point to turbulence and chaos in the near future.

America's two former enemies, Germany and Japan, will be among the biggest losers if the US abdicates its global role under Trump. Both countries experienced total defeat in 1945, and ever since they have rejected all forms of the *Machtstaat*, or "power state." With their security guaranteed by the US, they transformed themselves into trading countries, and have remained active participants in the US-led international system.

If Trump takes away the US security umbrella, these two major economic powers will have a serious security problem on their hands. While Japan's peripheral geopolitical position might, theoretically, allow it to re-nationalize its defense capacities, pursuing that option could significantly increase the likelihood of a military confrontation in East Asia. This is an alarming prospect, given that multiple countries in the region have nuclear weapons.

Germany, meanwhile, lies in the heart of Europe, and is surrounded by its previous wartime enemies. It is the continent's largest country in economic and demographic terms, but it owes much of its strength to the American security guarantee and multilateral, transatlantic, and European institutional frameworks based on shared values and free trade. The existing international order has rendered the *Machtstaat* and its accompanying sphere of influence unnecessary.

Unlike Japan, Germany cannot re-nationalize its security policy even in theory, because such a step would undermine the principle of collective defense in Europe and tear apart the continent. Lest we forget, the post-war global and regional order's purpose was to integrate the former enemy powers so that they posed no danger to one another.

Owing to its geopolitical weight, Germany's perspective is now synonymous with that of the European Union. And the EU's outlook is not that of a hegemon; rather, it is concerned with the rule of law, integration, and peaceful reconciliation of member states' interests. Germany's location alone makes nationalism a bad idea; and besides, its most fundamental political and economic interests depend on a strong, successful EU – especially in the age of Trump.

Germany is in the same boat as all other Europeans with respect to security. Just as there can be no French security without Germany, there can be no German security without Poland. That is why Germany and all other European countries must now do all they can to boost their

contributions to collective security within the EU and NATO.

Germany's strength is based on its financial and economic might, and it will now have to leverage that strength on the EU's and NATO's behalf. Unfortunately, it can no longer count on the so-called "peace dividend" that it enjoyed in the past (and even during the euro crisis). Thrift is undoubtedly a virtue; but other considerations should take priority when one's house is on fire and about to collapse.

Apart from security, Germany's second fundamental interest is global free trade. Intra-European trade will remain supremely important, because that is how Germany makes a living; but trade with the US will be vital, too. It will not bode well for Germany if China and the US – its two most important non-EU export markets – enter into a trade war. Protectionism anywhere can have global repercussions.

And yet, along with all the dangers Trump's presidency poses for Europeans, it offers opportunities as well. Trump's protectionist rhetoric alone has already led to a rapprochement between China and Europe. More important, the new US administration has furnished Europeans with a chance finally to close ranks, grow up, and reinforce their geopolitical power and position.

But if Europeans finally do come together, they should avoid anti-Americanism. Trump is America's president, but he is not America. North Atlantic countries will still have a common history and shared values – even under Trump, and even though much else will change in the coming years.

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