

„Ready to lead once more“American-German relations under President Obama.

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April 29th 2009 marked the 100th day of Barack Obama holding office as the President of the United States of America. As a German political scientist living in Chicago and teaching at Northwestern University, I was fortunate to follow the electoral campaign up close from the day the Democratic National Convention officially nominated Barack Obama as a candidate in late August all the way through election night and beyond. In this essay, I will spell out some of the issues that have emerged in German-American relations under the new administration. In doing so, I will distinguish between structural conditions and political conditions. I will point out areas of shared interest between American and Germany, but I will also highlight issues that already are or could become contentious.

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2. The hope for change

Throughout the electoral campaign and the transition period, hopes were running high throughout Europe and especially in Germany that a US President Obama would somehow *change* transatlantic relations. Of course, Barack Obama's presidential bid had revolved around a message of hope and change.

It is probably fair to say that the Bush administration was not popular in Germany. Initial solidarity with the United States on both an emotional and a practical level after the September 11th terrorist attacks turned into contempt for a US foreign policy that was perceived as increasingly unilateralist. Concerns grew over US practices at Guantanamo and elsewhere. The question was raised whether the United States had transgressed the principles governing international legal norms – a question that the new president has meanwhile answered in the affirmative. In short, relations were at times strained, joyous pictures of Chancellor Angela Merkel welcoming President George W. Bush into her hometown notwithstanding.

It is, however, important to note that for the overwhelming majority of the German public and even more so for its political elites, it had always been clear that whatever was wrong with American-German relations was wrong because of disputes with the US government, not with the American people. Although it may at times have been difficult to perceive over the last couple of years: America is thoroughly and truly loved in Germany. If anti-American sentiments grew loud and sometimes ugly, it was for no small measure due to a feeling of love betrayed. With Barack Obama as the new President, Germany has the feeling that it can finally love America again. This became evident when Barack Obama visited Berlin in July 2008. It was corroborated by Barack Obama's first visit to Europe as a president. Despite some disagreement on policy issues, the American president was ascribed what some commentators¹ called "rock star status". At least on an emotional level, German-American relations have already seen an improvement after the election and the first 100 days.

The second important point to note is that despite disagreement over some policy issues – among them, admittedly, rather important ones – the fundamen-

¹ BBC News, March 31st 2009.

tals of American-German relations have always been strong and sound. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her interview with the New York Times Magazine of November 16th 2008 has made the point that US relations with all European states are “excellent”, calling the notion of poor trans-Atlantic relations “a myth”. As befits a politician who was trying to make her legacy look good, this may be a slight exaggeration. Nonetheless, there are few countries in the world that are on better terms than America and Germany are. By considering this bigger picture we retain – and in some instances: regain – a sense for the comparably minor proportions of the differences.

Nevertheless, Germany has been looking forward to Barack Obama taking office as President of the United States. And it has done so with high expectations. Chief among these is the hope that US foreign policy under President Obama will be more multilateral than the approach the old administration took towards world affairs. An Obama administration, Germany hopes, will lead America back into international agreements on, for instance, climate change. Germany expects that America under the Obama presidency will return to respecting international law. Together with other European nations, Germany hopes for a change in American *attitude* towards its allies, an attitude that was at times perceived as ‘arrogant’ under the Bush administration.

What, then, are the chances that these hopes will actually be fulfilled? What are the prospects that the United States led by Barack Obama will listen more closely to its allies, that it will consult with them more frequently, and that it will consider their concerns over disputed points more seriously? To answer these questions, it is helpful to distinguish between structural conditions and political conditions.

3. Structural conditions

Structural conditions paint the big picture, they are determined on the systemic level of international relations. We can analyze structural conditions in relative terms, as the position of each nation state is determined by other states' positions. From that perspective, European importance to the United States is in relative decline. India and especially China will both draw more attention from the

United States. Accordingly, American-German relations will become relatively less important. This is not to say that a deterioration of relations is to be expected. But because of Europe's relative decline, the United States, in a multilateral setting, will have a lot more positions and interests to consider than the ones of its European allies. It has been noted² that Barack Obama did not mention the European Union in his inaugural address and that it took him three full days to call a European state leader (British Prime Minister Gordon Brown – so much for “change”). This is a piece of evidence confirming the expectation of a relative decline in European importance to the United States.

A second major concern of the United States will be the Middle East. Since “energy independence” – an important campaign promise that seems to have high priority on Obama’s policy agenda – is impossible to achieve in the short term, Middle Eastern oil will become ever more vital to United States interests over the next five to ten years. For the same reasons – energy – Germany will place more emphasis on sound relations to resource-rich Russia. There is potential for conflict of interest here, since the United States will continue to see the region, including Georgia and the Ukraine, through a geo-strategic prism, while for Germany, economic considerations are prime.

But the Middle East could also play an important role in fulfilling the hopes for closer cooperation. Iran and its nuclear program could prove a litmus test for the new approach many hope the new administration will adopt. The Obama campaign has repeatedly pointed out that now is not the time for going tough on Iran. Rather, it would offer incentives to the Iranian government inducing them to stop their nuclear program. Such incentives – for instance a possible Iranian membership in the World Trade Organization – can only be offered in a multi-lateral setting. The United States will need its allies to talk Iran into giving up its nuclear program. It will need its allies even more if these efforts fail and the US attempt to increase Iran's isolation. There is no conflict of interest over the goal of such cooperation: the United States and Germany agree that Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons. But whether the United States will actually involve its allies into the decision making process and the negotiations, or whether, at some point, the

² The Economist, Jan 29th 2009: “Waiting for the Messiah”.

United States may see fit to use unilateral action, will be of the utmost importance for transatlantic relations.

The Obama administration has frequently stressed the importance of winning the war in Afghanistan. To do so, the government is taking a regional approach, recognizing the importance of Pakistan as a crucial yet unstable partner in the fight against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This new found regional strategy is stressed by the choice of Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal as top commander of the American troops in Afghanistan. McChrystal has long been known to favor more decisive action on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. As the situation there deteriorates and fears about Muslim extremists gaining hold of part of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal grow more substantiated, German's Minister of Defense, Franz Josef Jung, still proclaims "there is no war in Afghanistan".³ This view will in all likelihood not go down well with America. On this side of the Atlantic, the notion that the country's security is "defended at the Hindu Kush" is taken very seriously. Germany would be ill advised to ignore American concerns about sluggish allied support for the war effort in Afghanistan. Even though German politicians could hope to garner some domestic political support by taking an "anti-war" stance, the damage to transatlantic relations could be severe. From a long term political and geo-strategic perspective, Germany would do good to recognize and admit that it is already partaking in a war and that it has to do more if Germany and its allies are to prevail eventually. Nobody in Europe or the United States can have an interest in an Afghani-Pakistan theocracy equipped with nuclear weapons. To prevent such a scenario, more has to be done. This notion is clearly recognized in the United States; Germany, in its own interest, should come to same conclusion and act accordingly.

The world financial and economic crisis has emerged as an important structural condition in the last couple of months, raising questions about the future of capitalism and its regulation. The crisis and its aftermaths are also important determinants of American-German and American-European relations. Despite some disagreement at the London summit, I think that we can be quite optimistic in that respect. If America proposes a new regulatory framework for world finan-

³ Frankfurter Rundschau, May 13, 2009: "In Afghanistan ist kein Krieg." http://www.fr-online.de/in_und_ausland/politik/aktuell/1752222_Interview-mit-Franz-Josef-Jung-In-Afghanistan-ist-kein-Krieg.html

cial markets, Germany would in all likelihood be willing to side with the United States – not the least because Germany and the Euro zone as a whole will want their positions to matter. With the economic outlook rather bleak, nervous markets around the globe, and a now popular general distrust in free market approaches, regulatory harmonization between the US and the Euro Zone will be preferred over regulatory competition. This would be good news for American-German relations, since working together successfully in this vital issue area could produce the momentum necessary for successful multilateral cooperation in other areas. In that sense, the current crisis and the insight produced by it – that a new (inter- or even supranational) regulatory framework is needed – is in fact an opportunity for America re-entering an age of multilateralism.

The perceived need for regulatory reform is only one aspect of a final structural condition I wish to point out, globalization. While “globalization” has many aspects, the increase in cross-border activities on an economic, societal and political level have produced massive changes in the way things can be accomplished in today's world. This becomes most evident if we focus on transnational problems, ranging from environmental issues to terrorism to the outbreak of the H1N1 flu. Increasingly, nation states are faced with problems they cannot deal with alone. From this functional perspective, the United States will seek closer ties to its allies, and it will place more emphasis on multilateral cooperation.

4. Political conditions

Let's not forget that Barack Obama is a politician. That is *not* a bad thing, on the contrary. In a democracy, it means that the person in charge has to make sure his policies enjoy sufficient support among voters and stakeholders. Otherwise the politician loses office in the next elections. While this is admittedly a simplistic model of democratic politics, it points to the fact that Barack Obama cannot and will not be the “World President” some hope he will be. First and foremost he will answer to the American people – after all, that is his job.

In an interview that was published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of November 17th 2008, the German Foreign Minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier, has pointed out, that “every American president will put American interests first”.⁴ Let me add to that: He would be a bad president if he didn't. So, while Barack Obama will seek closer consultation with allies in Europe and elsewhere, he will do so only as long as it is in the American interest. While it may well be that a multilateralist approach is well suited for most foreign policy problems confronting the United States, situations might present themselves in which a unilateralist stance is demanded in order to protect US interests. It is hard to imagine, for instance, that the United States could accept Iran possessing a significant amount of nuclear weapons. While the name “Bush doctrine” may well be gone with president George W. Bush's term in office, the policy it stands for may prove surprisingly resistant. If we accept that the security environment for the United States is different from what it was during the Cold War, then no American president can ultimately rule out preemptive unilateral action to avert grave threats to American interests. Doing so could prove a strategic error, and would certainly be political suicide.

To be sure, political considerations are by no means the exclusive domain of American decision making. Consider the question of what to do with inmates of the detention camp at Guantanamo bay who are deemed to pose no threat but who – for humanitarian reasons – cannot be returned to their home countries. By ordering that the military prison be closed as early as 2010, President Obama has not only delivered on one of his campaign promises. The president has also fulfilled a demand that was voiced time and again by governments from countries all over the world. The Obama administration has now made a formal request to Germany to take in up to 10 prisoners. Will Germany respond favorably to this request? The German debate about this question is following a partisan logic that pits the Christian Democrats as the party of law, order and national security against the Social Democrats who seek to position themselves as the bearer of international humanitarian law and transatlantic solidarity. Here in America, it is well understood that Germany is preparing for the September federal elections and will not decide lightly on such a sensitive matter. On the other hand, the

⁴ In the interview Minister Steinmeier said: “Jeder amerikanische Präsident, auch Obama, wird zuallererst amerikanische Interessen vertreten.”

American right has already attacked President Obama for not extracting enough concessions from its allies overseas. Thus, the situation is one where domestic politics in both the US and Germany influence a foreign policy decision with significant symbolic value for transatlantic relations. How can this situation be resolved? In all likelihood by a strategic move known as “blame avoidance”: The German government has already announced that it is seeking “a solution embedded in Europe”. If the Germans manage to forge a common European position on the detainee question, they will have enhanced their bargaining power vis a vis the United States. More importantly during election season, such a move will deflect domestic criticism and turn it to the European level where it will find no clear target. This would be the smart thing to do, both from the point of view of domestic politics and from a strategic perspective.

Let me add to these political conditions something German public discourse oftentimes gets wrong: America is more than the big-city liberalism of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. It is no coincidence that people in Germany were struggling with the fact that the presidential race was so close for so long. Barack Obama represents an America Germany thinks it understands, while Senator McCain and especially Governor Palin stand for an America most Germans don't understand and even fewer know. As the president, however, Barack Obama is the president of *all* Americans. He cannot afford alienating that part of America Germany doesn't understand. Already, the new president took some heat from conservative pundits over his “apologetic” stance when visiting Europe (in the eyes of commentators from the right, president Obama's handshake with president Hugo Chavez from Venezuela at the Latin America summit in April 2009 was even more disgraceful to Americas pride. These comments are shedding some light on the ideological and partisan climate the president finds himself in). The Obama administration will try to avoid being seen as too ‘internationalist’ or too much involved in multilateral operations that could question the role of American leadership.

Not that the President-elect would want to have it otherwise. In its July/August issue of 2007, *Foreign Affairs* ran a piece by Barack Obama, then the junior Senator from Illinois. Senator Obama wrote the following about American foreign policy under a new president:

“But if the next president can restore the American people's trust – if they know that he or she is acting with their best interests at heart, with prudence and wisdom and some measure of humility – then I believe the American people will be eager to see America lead again.”

After he had become this new president, Barack Obama took up the issue of American leadership and pronounced in his inaugural address to the cheers of the two million people attending the event that “we are ready to lead once more”. From a European perspective, it is this confidence in the world leadership role of the United States that is hard to reconcile with the hope for a truly multilateral foreign policy approach. Thus, considering political constraints, there is ample room for German disappointment over the foreign policies of an Obama administration.

5. Summary and conclusion

The United States and Germany agree on a long list of issues. Their relations are excellent, and they mutually recognize each other as partners of the utmost importance in world affairs. The election of Barack Obama has led some in Germany to express their hopes that a new chapter in American-German relations would now be written. What in fact they are hoping for is not so much a new chapter but rather a new cover for that book or a nicer font in which its text is typeset. On closer inspection, the new president faces a number of structural and political constraints that will prevent him from entering an era of perpetual peace and transatlantic harmony. Chief among these is the concern over energy and the relative decline of European and, therefore, German, importance. While an Obama administration will seek closer consultation and cooperation with its allies, it will do so only as long as it is in the interest of the United States. The hope for the future of American-German relations, therefore, lies in keeping their interests in sync.