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On Ends and Means. Multilateralism, Nord Stream 2 and the German-American Relationship in Transition

The current debate over the Nord Stream 2 deal is an illustration of a serious geostrategic conflict in German American relations. It is also a clash of views in a larger framework in which the perceptions of both countries and their respective challenges are at odds. This clash is about views of multilateralism as an end and as a means of foreign policy. But it is also about the narratives Germans and Americans have created about themselves and each other and how those narratives have been changing over the past three decades.

At the recent summits in London and Brussels, there was a good deal of harmonizing rhetoric about the transatlantic alliances. Yet, when it comes to implementation of specific policies, national interests enter the arena and compromises are required. Whether it is about defense policies or trade agreements, reaching agreements is always a messy process.

The Nord Stream 2 case is a mix of domestic politics, and foreign policy. The construction of a gas pipeline delivering energy resources from Russia directly to Germany represents the classic case of “where you stand depends on where you sit”. The German position sees a need for gas supplies for its national needs (having decided to exit nuclear power), and believes it can forge a reliable commercial deal based on prior supply arrangements with Moscow while stressing that it needs to be seen as a complimentary part of a European approach to energy policies. Other European partners have been highly critical of the Nord Stream 2 deal, fearful of enhanced Russian influence and leverage in Europe. Criticism from the United States is largely shaped around the confrontation with Putin in a larger framework over Russian aggression in Ukraine, illegal occupation of Crimea, meddling in American elections, and cyber-warfare attacks on infrastructure. But Nord Stream 2 is also seen as a threat to European security and therefore a threat to the security of the US. The fissure between Berlin and Washington DC is illustrative of more than a debate over a pipeline.

In the American view, Russia is a direct threat to Europe but also a nuclear power with which it must deal, as Biden demonstrated at the recent summit with Putin in Geneva. German policies also see the need to deal with Putin when it comes to concerns about confrontations with Russia. But German-Russian relations are shaped by a different political geography and comprised of a more complicated mix of interests as well as historical ties with an additional overlay of a long term commitment to multilateralism as a German foreign policy cornerstone.

Over the past several decades, the German American dialogue has been able to bridge differences and merge goals despite differences in perceptions of alliances as well as self-perceptions on both sides of the Atlantic. But are we now in need of seriously revising dimensions of this arrangement? Or has that not been the modus operandi for some time already?

Over the past three decades, since unification, the German debate over its role on the European and the global stage has been steadily evolving in the direction of confronting more expectations, demands and responsibilities as much coming from outside the country as within. The "[Review 2014](#)" process pointedly collected these "expectations". In the diplomacy of earlier stages there were external expectations of the newly unified Germany, now the largest and most powerful country on the continent, which suggested that it should tread carefully in its role with an eye on the past as well as the future. Given the preoccupation with forging a unified nation, Germans were focused on soothing the nervousness of its neighbors as well as stressing its commitment to a stronger Europe. There was a good deal of uncertainty about any role in dealing with challenges beyond that agenda. One thinks of the response then Chancellor Helmut Kohl gave to the war in Iraq in 1990 in the form of "[checkbook diplomacy](#)" as answer to the call for [partnership in leadership](#) presented by George H. W. Bush in the spring of 1989.

That reticence did not prevent Germany from being drawn into the unraveling of Yugoslavia and the war and refugee crisis that emerged from it. But the domestic debates over that challenge reflected the continuing hesitation of Germans to do anything that would awaken the ghosts of the Second World War legacy. Throughout the Nineties, Germany remained in a parameter of what was known as the Bonn Republic, still a legacy of its limited role during the four decades of the Cold War. It was at the end of that decade with its entry into the war with Serbia that

constituted a major step which began to transform the Bonn Republic into the Berlin Republic.

Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, German Chancellor Schröder was to take Germany into what became a twenty year commitment in Afghanistan alongside US forces under the slogan of expressing “unlimited solidarity” with the Americans in the fight against terrorism. As Germans were quick to empathize with the US as well as fearful of a similar attack on German soil, that commitment was made without knowing fully what it might require. It also almost cost Gerhard Schröder his job as Chancellor in a vote of no confidence in the Bundestag. And yet less than two years later, a major German American conflict emerged over the decision in Washington to attack Iraq. Schröder proclaimed that Germany was not going to engage in “adventures”. That moment was the most severe strain on relations between Germany and the United States in the post-Cold War era. There was also a popular backlash on both sides of the Atlantic, which represented to Americans a lack of gratitude in Germany for American support of unification and keeping the country safe during the Cold War. But to Germans the invasion of Iraq was a breach of international law and an unnecessary act of war, apart from the doubt concerning the alleged weapons of mass destruction hidden by Saddam Hussein. The history of both countries informing their self-perceptions emerged in conflict with each other with equal amounts of antipathy. The ripples from that clash remain visible today.

Even though that chapter stands out as a moment of deep trial in the German-American dialogue, it was another harbinger of a relationship in transition. After unification, Germany had been moving in the direction of becoming more of a subject in, rather than an object of, American foreign policy. That change of roles meant that it was now making choices that were not as feasible in earlier years. One of those choices was to refuse to support the invasion of Iraq and a more recent one was the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Yet there was also a degree of continuity in the German domestic debate about the self-imposed parameters of its foreign policy which continue to influence the German debate today. The basis of that continuity is the firm place of multilateralism in German foreign policy.

Gunther Hellmann has described the evolution of that debate as a gradual shift in

focus on German power and influence as seen from within the German public as well as within Europe. In both cases he argues that there has been a gradual increase in confidence and trust in Germany's role as a leader in Europe, defined as a function of its deepest commitment to multilateralism within the European theater as well as its influence on the global stage. The previous concerns about the reemergence of potential German military power, as he argues, were now being replaced by rising expectations of Germany's political, economic as well as military capacities needed within the deepening and widening of the European Union. In this framework, Germany's role on the global stage was seen as representing itself and the European Union while shaped in its outlook and self-understanding by the bonds it shares with its partners under an EU umbrella.

That said, the same increasing weight Germany could leverage was also to become a source of conflict which arose such as during the Euro crisis or the refugee challenges. Allegations of German emphasis of its own national interests were to emerge as they have also appeared in the Nord Stream 2 debate, even as Berlin would continue to argue that it was conducting its policies in the interests of the multilateral commitments to the EU.

The German interpretation of its mission and policies was anchored in the concept of multilateralism. As Hellmann quotes German [President Steinmeier](#) from his 2020 speech at the Munich Security Conference: "Europe is the indispensable framework for us to assert ourselves in the world". In this interpretation, the embodiment of German multilateralism is found in the reality of the European Union. However, in the pursuit of asserting its national interests or priorities, German presentation of a multilateral justification often fell short of convincing all of its European partners as well as those in Washington D.C.. Nord Stream 2 is only the most recent and prominent illustration.

Transatlantic conflicts such as this one reflect different perceptions of multilateralism. In the American narrative multilateralism is, at best, a means, not an end in itself and certainly not a part of America's identity as it is in Germany's case. Partnership may be welcomed and indeed sought after through alliances and treaties, but they are understood to be tools of choice in primarily securing protection for the United States. They are referred to as a "[Shield of the Republic](#)" ([Walter Lippmann](#)) constructed less out of benevolence and more for strategic ends.

The evolution of the network of alliances and treaties following the end of WW2 were based on a global system of deterrence and interdependence of countries connected in the Cold War between the American and Soviet Union camps.

That interdependence among alliance networks did not prevent frictions, but through the four decades of the Cold War it did offer a basis of security and stability in dealing with the existential threat of nuclear war. It was on that basis that consecutive American presidents sustained those alliances after 1945, breaking with over 150 years of independence of the “entangling alliances” about which [George Washington](#) had warned us. And a chief beneficiary of that decision was to be the Federal Republic of Germany, symbolically captured in the accomplishment of German unification.

The nature of these networks and their purposes was to be transformed following the end of the Cold War. In the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union, debates over containment, self-defense and deterrence arose in the US about replacing those alliance policies with those supporting the expansions of democracies and securing American global dominance including Asia, where China was perceived not quite yet a strong and even threatening rivals.

Nevertheless, the ghosts of “entangling alliances” remerged as critics argued against these ideas as reckless moves without considering the consequences. That debate was overtaken by the attacks on 9/11 when George Bush declared the US was to conduct a [global war on terror](#). Yet the disastrous experiences emerging from military engagements in both Iraq and Afghanistan produced a backlash in the US which included the very idea of multilateral commitments and alliances which were increasingly seen as more of a burden than a benefit. That backlash also produced support for the presidency of Donald Trump who personally embodied those rejections of multilateral commitments and alliances.

President Biden assumed office with a message to Americans that foreign policy should primarily serve the interests of the middle class but with the added [message](#) – contrary to the Trump administration – that alliances are of crucial benefit toward that end. Yet the challenges and threats today are different than those during the Cold War. They are broader and deeper, aside from classic military conflicts but equally dangerous requiring a new set of tools and different strategies for working together in dealing with different weapons and defenses against them. One of the

many challenges Biden faces is convincing a large segment of the American public that it is in their interests to sustain partnerships in forging these strategies.

In making these adjustments, the challenge facing Americans and Germans is thus squaring conceptual circles. For Germans, the circles are those which surround multilateralism which means enveloping Germany and the EU in the first circle but that same multilateralism should also underwrite relations on the global stage. That stream of thought has informed German foreign policy in the entire history of the Federal Republic. It is also unlikely to change with the next post-Merkel government as it is largely supported within the German public.

The American circles are those which surround the notion of foreign policy as a “shield of the Republic” behind which, or next to which, allies may stand in defense of shared goals. The US has a different tool box in crafting those shields and it has put them to good use not only defending the US but also American partners. They have also been often adapted to changing circumstances. Both the purposes and members of alliances have evolved as have the challenges of the global arena and the resources and priorities which the United States can employ.

In light of the more utilitarian approach of multilateralism, and the dominant position the US has on the global stage, the American approach does not share the same reverence for the benefits of multilateralism as an end in itself. The US debate about its role on the global stage and its relationship with allies is moving in a direction that stresses less forward defense engagement in Europe precisely at a moment when Europe is struggling with its capacity to fill that gap. Relations between the US and its chief rivals, China in the first instance followed by Russia, generate consequences for US national interests. The need to forge alliances designed to secure those interests will produce both strategic approaches and policies to be shared with an array of partners.

The Biden administration is designing that strategy with a focus on the defense of democracies and meeting the challenges from autocracies. That will come with choices and expectations which can conflict within the strategic framework of transatlantic partners, and in particular with Germany. Nord Stream 2, relations with China as well as Russia, cybersecurity policies, trade negotiations are already impacted by divergent approaches. The dangers inherent in these conflicts lies in misreading both the mood and the motivation on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the case of the United States, the approach to multilateralism was always shadowed by concerns and a long-term debate about potential infringement of sovereignty in addition to the self-perception of an exceptional nation which has a dominant role on world stage which meant sometimes infringing on the interest of partners. American references to moralistic ideals were never far away from its national interests.

In the case of Germany, multilateralism appears as a sine qua non of diplomacy and Germany's long path in rejoining the community of nations after the catastrophe of World War 2. As Steinmeier emphasized it was to be encased in the indispensable framework of the European Union. That refrain did not deter Germany from asserting its interests any more than the United States was deterred from proclaiming its own prerogatives within its narratives. Indeed, that fact was evident within the EU itself as the Nord Stream 2 clash exemplifies.

The consequences for transatlantic relations in general and for German-American relations in particular can be seen in a lag of national self-perceptions behind the redistribution of power in the global arena. Similar to the process after 1945 which created the dominance of the United States in conflict with the Soviet Union, there is a current recalibration of power in process with China now changing and challenging that framework. The American narrative around the concept of the exceptional and indispensable nation is being tested against a Chinese version as well as a Russian derivative. Given the asymmetric dependence of Europe on the United States for its security, that conflict has strategic implications for how it evolves. A central response of the US to this challenge is to emphasize the need for transatlantic solidarity. The responses in Europe have been a mix of emphasis on increased capacity to defend its own security while dealing with divergent national interests within its own ranks. It is in many ways an effort at squaring many circles. But the challenge may also have to include a reset of the narratives which have been the basis of policies for many decades.

Alliances are made of alignment of interests as well as ends, goals and values. They are also made up of arguments over means involving the use of persuasion and power among leaders, partners and rivals. In [Hellmann's and Steinmeier's analysis](#), the German understanding of itself as the "Chief Facilitating Officer" in an "alliance for multilateralism" emerges conclusively from its post-1945 foreign policy identity

and sustains its narrative. While the American understanding of multilateralism has been shaped around different reference points, the merger of goals was and indeed is both possible and attainable within the configuration of global challenges and choices. As that configuration changes, so must the assumptions and expectations of a multilateral relationship adapt.

The shift in dimensions of conflict requires that questions about alliance must broaden the range in which they apply as do burdens as well as benefits. A cornerstone in multilateral ties and commitments remains the capacity for defense and deterrence. The goal of multilateralism is to extend the reach of both but also to deepen the interdependence among partners and, where possible, with rivals. Yet the emphasis must also be not only on process but on product, on performance. Facilitating multilateralism must achieve burden sharing as well as power sharing. This challenge is clearly one that faces the European Union as well as the transatlantic alliance.