



## **Jadwiga Kiwerska**

ORCID 0000-0002-4022-0775

Instytut Zachodni im. Zygmunta Wojciechowskiego, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

# Germany and the Crisis in Transatlantic Relations

## Introduction

The focus of attention in this article is a clear breakdown in transatlantic relations, largely due to the nature of the policy of the Donald Trump administration. The importance of this problem stems from the fact that the transatlantic system is a pillar of the international order, and certainly for European security. The beneficiary of the existence of the transatlantic community was Germany, for all the post-war decades, for whom the value of the alliance with the USA is difficult to overestimate. Meanwhile, the crisis in the transatlantic system is accompanied by a breakdown between Berlin and Washington. Therefore, the main question concerns Germany's tactics in this new situation, which is dangerous both for its own and for European security.

## Germany in the transatlantic system

Over the last decades, the transatlantic system which connects Europe and the United States with political, military and economic bonds has been an important element of the world order. On the one hand, it was the foundation of European security and on the other hand, an unquestionable pillar of the position and role of the USA in the world. The guarantor of these attributes was NATO, the most powerful political and military alliance in history. The foundation, on which the transatlantic system was built, created, along with emotional bonds and historical experience, a common system of values, principles and standards related to political, economic

and social life. Initially, at the time of the Cold War, the transatlantic system was bound by a sense of threat of a potential escalation of communism and after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Dissolution of the Soviet Union, concern for the security of Europe and the will to stabilize the international situation. Although American-European relations did not lack difficult moments that weakened the effective operation of the transatlantic system, the awareness of the significance of this unprecedented in the recent history of the alliance of sovereign states firmly rooted on both sides of the Atlantic, allowing it to survive worse moments and resolve internal disputes.

One of the main beneficiaries of the existence of a European alliance with America was Germany, which owed a lot to the support and guarantee of the United States, starting with assistance in the process of democratization and economic reconstruction after the war, through the guarantee of security offered to West Germany throughout the period of the Cold War, to support in the process of restoring one German statehood. The benefits were also mutual, because during the Cold War Germany served the American strategy, creating a barrier against the imperial attempts of the Soviet Union. Also after the reunification they remained an important reference point for Washington's European policy by continuing to share their territory with the US military forces in Europe and also by a relatively loyal attitude towards the US. Therefore, German-American relations formed a very important element of the transatlantic system, an important factor of its importance and effectiveness.

Admittedly, turbulence was not avoided, especially from 2002 to 2003, when, as a result of a dispute over US military intervention in Iraq, the relations between Berlin and Washington were "poisoned"<sup>1</sup>. Without underestimating the responsibility of the administration of George W. Bush for the tensions created, it was also Chancellor Gerhard Schröder who was not without blame, especially by making Berlin appear, next to Paris and Moscow [sic], among the so-called architects of the refusal, strongly opposed to a military operation in Iraq. In February 2003, Germany also contributed to the largest decision crisis in the history of NATO by blocking Bush's plans to strengthen anti-missile defense of Turkey. All of this undermined the condition of the transatlantic system, because the important link of this alliance, i.e. US relations with Germany, were turbulent and weakened and American leadership in the community was questioned and strained.

This assertive attitude of Berlin towards America proved the change that took place in the minds of united Germany about their role on the international stage. The fact that Germany is already a fully sovereign and "normal" country, and the strongest in Europe, was taken advantage of. The feeling of strength resulting from it allowed Germans to behave more assertively and even confrontationally towards the United States. Especially that it suited public moods, where the trend of anti-Americanism had appeared much earlier. One could have a false impression that this progressive process of integration and strengthening of the European Union is becoming a substitute for transatlantic cooperation for Germany.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'poisoned relations' in reference to American-German relations was used in September, 2002 by Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor and was repeated by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; A. Falke, *The End of German-American Relations... "as we know them"*, Heidelberg 2005, pp. 142–143.

But the Germans knew the value of an alliance with America and were aware of the importance of the transatlantic system for German interests, especially in the area of security. So if they decided to adopt such a critical attitude towards Washington and expose Euro-Atlantic cooperation to shocks, this was mainly due to the opposition to the principle of unilateral, forceful resolution of international conflicts, which the Bush administration seemed to seek. In Germany, after a heinous war experience, a culture of restraint and the *Zivilmacht* formula were developed, which were far from the concept of the role of power in overcoming challenges, and tied to the principle of multilateralism. Therefore, it was not about questioning the transatlantic cooperation itself, for which, given the insufficient Europe's military capability of guaranteeing security (defense budgets of European allies decreased by 22% in the 1990s), there was no alternative. It was rather a dispute about the tactics on the international stage, as well as resistance to the domination shown by the Bush administration and attempts to impose its will.

Undoubtedly, Angela Merkel was aware of the significance of the transatlantic system when in 2005 she became the head of the federal government<sup>2</sup>. The new chancellor, especially valuing relations with the US, not only brought harmony to German-American relations, but also gave them a new character, which was closer and balanced. She took advantage of the fact that the Bush administration, weakened by the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, wanted to regain those European allies whose support they had lost in connection with the Iraqi dispute. This put Germany in a favorable situation as they were a desirable partner, so they could boldly present their point of view, even criticize American policies and influence their shape. This made the transatlantic relations less asymmetrical, because its important element, i.e. German-American relations, was heading towards a partnership.

Nonetheless the beginning of Barack Obama's term did not indicate that during his presidency an unusually strong German-American partnership would be created and the transatlantic system would be strengthened. It could even be believed that Merkel and Obama had an emotional distance. After the initial enthusiasm of the Europeans towards the new host in the White House, transatlantic relations have been put to a difficult test. Obama, offering the European allies more consultation and less arrogance, expected a real partnership, meaning a greater participation in solving key global problems. Germany was perceived as a state that due to its potential and role in Europe should become the driving force behind the growing EU activity on the international stage.

Because the actions of the European community were, however, disappointing for the Obama administration as from its perspective the EU remained rather a nebulous and overly assertive creation, and not a strategic actor in the world, *a pivot to the Pacific Rim*<sup>3</sup> occurred in American politics. This was to some extent a result of disappointment with Europe and the recognition that it is already safe, and not just

---

<sup>2</sup> See: A. Merkel, 'Schroeder Doesn't Speak for All Germans', *The Washington Post*, 20.02.2003, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32835-2003Feb19.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32835-2003Feb19.html) [accessed: 10.04.2019].

<sup>3</sup> It was declared by President Obama in November 2011 when giving a speech at the Australian Parliament; White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, 17.11.2011, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-of-fice/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-of-fice/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament) [accessed: 10.04.2019].

a reaction to the growing power of China. The Germans also failed, which did not play the role of impulse that would activate Europeans. Moreover, when NATO intervened in Libya in the spring of 2011, Germany not only did not participate in the operation, but did not even support it, abstaining from voting in the UN Security Council session (together with Russia and China). That was why the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates spoke about the lack of allied solidarity in June 2011 referring to Germany. His accusations of limited contribution to the military resources of the Alliance, not matching their potential, were also mainly targeted at Germany. According to the head of the Pentagon, the European pillar of NATO was weakening in terms of military resources and does not take up security challenges to the best of its ability. "The prospect of a grim and even dismal future of the transatlantic system is quite real" Gates predicted, not finding any greater understanding of his opinions among European allies, especially Germany<sup>4</sup>.

However, the Obama administration invariably perceived Germany as a leader on the European stage, and thus, a valuable component of the transatlantic system. And it was Berlin that was the most important partner for Washington in Europe. This was confirmed at the moment of the imperial policy of Vladimir Putin, leading in 2014 to the annexation of Crimea and attempts to control the eastern part of Ukraine. As a result, Europe became the main American challenge in the field of security, and the transatlantic system was the main guarantor of defense against the potential threat from Russia. Chancellor Merkel herself turned out to be the most important ally for President Obama, supporting his actions aimed at Putin's politics. She was even an architect of a difficult consensus within the EU, enabling the introduction of sanctions against Russia.

Also in the military dimension, Germany presented exceptional solidarity and allied credibility, joining the initiatives taken in 2014 at the NATO summit in Newport (Wales), regarding the security of the Alliance's eastern flank. They also engaged in patrol operations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Accepting the decision of the Welsh summit to create the NATO Response Force (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF), Germany along with the Netherlands agreed to accept the role of framework nations responsible for the formation of these forces. Although these actions were in line with the expectations of the Americans to bear greater responsibility for common security by Europe, in the case of Germany, the US counted on much more, and not only in terms of engaging their military strength. The problem was still connected with burden-sharing within NATO. While in Newport, member states formally committed to gradually increase defense spending to 2% of GDP in 2024, there was not much progress, and Germany, Europe's strongest economy, in 2016 reached only 1.19% of GDP<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the topic of burden-sharing constituted a potential problem in transatlantic relations and Germany's restraint in making the financial commitment was particularly striking.

---

<sup>4</sup> Th. Shanker, 'Defense Secretary Warns NATO of "Dim" Future', *The New York Times*, 10.06.2011.

<sup>5</sup> *Germany – Military Personnel*, Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/de-personnel.htm> [accessed: 10.04.2019]; J. Palowski, *Bundeswehra na dnie. Resort obrony przedstawia plan naprawy*, 31.01.2016, <https://www.defence24.pl/bundeswehra-na-dnie-resort-obrony-przedstawia-plan-naprawczy> [accessed: 10.04.2019].

Despite this, the German-American relations at the end of Obama's presidency were exceptional. Chancellor Merkel was treated by the USA as the main partner in discussions on global challenges, as well as a credible ally in making decisions on security or even economic issues. Between Washington and Berlin, there was almost a partnership agreement or, as another American president once hoped, "partnership in leadership"<sup>6</sup>. Germany's strong position in Washington's political calculations also shaped their important role in the transatlantic system. This one, in the face of a real threat from Russia, was expanding its potential. Although the increase in defense expenditures was only declared and the progress in meeting this obligation in relation to the majority of member states was still low in 2016, the allies "closed their ranks" creating new military formations and undertaking further defense obligations, e.g. on the eastern flank of NATO and strengthened its military capabilities.

For its part, the Obama administration did not only confirm the American defense guarantees for Europe, referring to art. 5 of the Washington Treaty ("one for all, all for one"), but increased the amount of the US military budget four times in 2017 to increase the military potential in Europe (\$3.4 billion). It was also decided that the military presence of Americans in Central and Eastern Europe, which is at the highest risk of a possible exposure to Russian forces, would be stronger. There was no doubt that America made a "return to Europe" and returned to the role of the leader on the European stage, causing consolidation and strengthening of the transatlantic system, which, as the only force capable of opposing Russia, confirmed the sense of existence. It is worth remembering all this, assessing the state of transatlantic relations to which the next American administration led.

## Donald Trump and "America First"

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016 meant a great challenge for both German politics and the entire transatlantic community. The problem was not only the unpredictability of the new president, the domination of chaos and emotions in his actions, but above all, the change of American strategy towards Europe, resulting from the New York businessman's approach to international relations. In relations with the countries, it was not the unity of values and similar goals, historical experience and traditional ties, mutual interests understood broadly that began to matter, but according to Trump's electoral slogan, America First, a narrowly understood American interest and economic balance.

With this approach, named transactional, the US strategy was subordinated to economic calculations and specific benefits for the USA. In this category, all relationships with European allies and partners were assessed. Such factors determined the attitude towards NATO and the European Union. Therefore, Trump was averse to multilateral alliances and international organizations, which are limiting America in

---

<sup>6</sup> The term 'partners in leadership' was used by George H.W. Bush as far back as May 1989 during his stay in West Germany when calling for their greater involvement on the international stage; later the term became popular: G.H.W. Bush, *Speaking of Freedom. The Collected Speeches*, New York 2009, p. 52.

his opinion and even dealing with it dishonestly by using its resources. In turn, the disrespectful attitude to international agreements resulted from the tendency for unilateral actions, regardless of previous obligations, but only subject to the will of Washington and the benefits for the USA.

Above all, the transatlantic system, which was to some extent grown on American generosity ("mission") and the sense that common values are also important, not just short-term benefits, became the victim of such an approach to international relations. Now, however, American security policy, which is a guarantee for Europe, had to pay off. The basic determinant of US involvement in defending European allies is their financial contribution, and not common principles and objectives or commitments made earlier. Although the Obama administration already had similar expectations, demanding more defense spending, treating the burden-sharing issue as an indispensable condition for maintaining American involvement in Europe was an unprecedented situation and very dangerous to the rank of the transatlantic system and its pillar NATO. The strength of NATO comes from unconditional solidarity in accordance with art. 5 of the Washington Treaty. Meanwhile, President Trump initially questioned the obligatory nature of this provision, and later clearly lingered over the declaration of support for it<sup>7</sup>.

Besides, concern for the economic balance and aversion to multilateral alliances translated into Trump's attitude to NATO. Although it is no longer said, as in his election campaign, that it is an "obsolete" structure, NATO is treated as a costly burden on the American budget. Unlike his predecessors in the White House, President Trump does not regard the alliance as a determinant of the position of the United States in the world or a commitment that has grown up in historical experience and a unity of values, established by years of political and military cooperation. His disrespectful attitude to NATO and the treatment of the alliance in terms of economic calculus means that the American guarantees of security to Europe are no longer an axiom for Trump. This is tantamount to undermining the foundation on which NATO was built, and on which the transatlantic system is based.

The lack of respect for the current world order and its obligations led to challenging contracts and agreements to which America was a signatory. It also included those cases in which European countries were heavily involved, such as the Paris Climate Agreements, from which American administration withdrew in June 2017, or the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) rejected by Trump in May 2018. Such actions not only eroded confidence in the US, undermined their credibility, but they also jeopardized relations with European allies whose strenuous efforts to convince Trump of the importance of these agreements were completely disregarded.

In the case of the JCPOA, the problem was that one of its signatories included the EU and that is why Brussels considered the agreement with Iran as its great diplomatic success, proving the role it is beginning to play on the international stage. Contracting out of the JCPOA, America acted unilaterally, flouting the opinion of European allies. As the agreement with Iran was regarded in Europe as an important step in strengthening security in the Middle East region, the withdrawal of the US

---

<sup>7</sup> Trump declared alliance commitment resulting from art. 5 on 6 July 2017 during his speech in Warsaw, but it was not a convincing and categorical assurance.

could make Iran return to the nuclear program and cause further destabilization of the situation in the Middle East. There were also economic reasons such as European countries' fears of blocking their commercial relations with Iran, which were reconstructed with difficulty after Tehran's isolation on the international stage.

Also in the field of Euro-Atlantic economic cooperation, serious problems have arisen, as the European Union is being considered in terms of benefits and losses for the USA. Regarding Europe as a serious economic competitor and a threat to American interests, Trump is interested in weakening and breaking up the EU. Even the tendency of the current administration to play some of the Member States off and bring relations with them to the one-on-one model occurred. Until now, American presidents, to a greater or lesser extent, have tried to support the integration efforts of Europe. They perceived it as both the success of European allies who, when integrating, overcame the difficult past and accomplishment of American policy goals. After all, it was America after the war that imposed such a direction on Europe. Support for the EU was expressed by President Obama at the end of his office when during his visit to Germany he said: "...the whole world needs a strong, developing, democratic and united Europe"<sup>8</sup>. For Trump, these presumptions did not play any role, as according to him the EU was an example of harmful liberalism. Supporting Brexit, he hoped for more exits, which would weaken the condition of the economic rival.

This competition with the EU primarily concerned the area of trade. Trump protectionism, implemented as part of the 'America First' strategy, justified by a high trade deficit in relations mainly with China, but also with the EU, led almost to a trade war in transatlantic relations. The increase of customs duty on the European steel (25%) and aluminum (10%) by the Trump administration in May 2018 was considered one of Washington's most controversial decisions towards Europe. In reaction, Brussels imposed higher tariffs on some US products, which in turn met with Trump announcing the introduction of 25-percent tariffs on the import of European cars. This trade dispute with the EU translated into the state of transatlantic relations, also in the area of security. Trump used to combine the issue of the EU's positive trade balance in relations with the USA with the low expenditures of European allies on defense and use it as a reason for the criticism of Europe.

## Breakdown on the Washington-Berlin line

By rejecting international agreements, disregarding their own political and military commitments, pushing for protectionist and unilateral actions, the Trump administration has struck an important multilateral and liberal order for Germany, in principles and values particularly important for Germany, because of being beneficial. Besides, it was Germany and their position in the transatlantic system that seemed to be threatened the most with President Trump's transactional approach to

---

<sup>8</sup> Citation from: P. Wintour, 'Barack Obama says world needs a united Europe', *The Guardian*, 25.04.2016.

international relations. In many segments of the new American strategy, Germany had opposing views and was the main addressee of the allegations made by Trump.

By treating NATO as an organization under which the US will guarantee defense for a proper fee, pressure was put on Germany as it was believed they should pay high for their security. Bringing the burden-sharing issue strictly and decisively, Trump's administration targeted Germany, which with its 1.24% of GDP on defense in 2018, did not meet the expectations of the Americans. What is more, Germany was responsible, according to Trump, for insufficient financial commitment of allies to common defense, giving them a bad example<sup>9</sup>. In such an uncompromising approach to burden-sharing, the fact that Germany's defense budget in 2018 increased in comparison to 2017 by 8.5%, reaching a value of EUR 38.5 billion<sup>10</sup>, did not count. Germany's other efforts such as their involvement in NATO's collective defense or development aids, stabilizing the situation in volatile regions, were not recognized.

It cannot be denied that America was right when demanding greater defense expenditures from the economic leader; however, Trump's heavy criticism of Germany and his constant pressure on Berlin, without taking into account the conditions related to German culture of restraint and *Zivilmacht* shaped throughout the post-war period, also had other reasons. In the transactional approach of President Trump, Germany has become not only a financial burden in terms of security, but above all a dangerous economic rival and a dishonest trade partner. If Trump was opposed to the EU in his statements and actions, it was also targeted at the strongest EU country and an attempt to undermine its position in the community. Trump's statement that the EU is "a vehicle for Germany" created to compete in the area of trade with the US effectively was aimed at fueling anti-German sentiments in Europe and thus undermining EU unity<sup>11</sup>.

If Trump advocated protectionism in trade policy, it was dangerous for Germany which bases its economy on free trade and for whom the US was a very important export destination. The trade surplus of Germany in relations with the USA in 2017 amounted to over USD 60 billion (however, it was 10% less than in 2016), which placed them third in terms of a positive balance after China and Japan<sup>12</sup>. That is why Germany appeared on Trump's blacklist of dishonest, in his opinion, partners who sell more in America than they buy. Germany was affected by higher steel and aluminum tariffs the most as it is the seventh steelmaker in the world. Trump's announcement of imposing import tariffs (25%) on German cars was even more dangerous as their sales in the USA accounted for 32% of German export to the US

<sup>9</sup> See: *Trump Sends Disturbing Letters to Nine NATO Leaders Before Key Summit*, 2.07.2018, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/trump-sends-disturbing-letter-to-trudeau-and-eight-european-leaders-ahead-of-nato-summit#.Wzq-fUcGY0k.twitter](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/trump-sends-disturbing-letter-to-trudeau-and-eight-european-leaders-ahead-of-nato-summit#.Wzq-fUcGY0k.twitter) [accessed: 10.04.2019].; also see: J. Hirschfeld Davis, 'Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else', *The New York Times*, 2.07.2018.

<sup>10</sup> N. McCarthy, *Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/14636/defense-expenditures-of-nato-countries> [accessed: 10.04.2019].

<sup>11</sup> M. Gove, 'Donald Trump interview: Brexit will be great thing', *The Times*, 15.01.2017, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/donald-trump-interview-brexit-britain-trade-deal-europe-queen-5m0bc2tns](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/donald-trump-interview-brexit-britain-trade-deal-europe-queen-5m0bc2tns) [accessed: 10.04.2019].

<sup>12</sup> Data published by the Federal Statistical Office (9.04.2018) indicated a general decline in exports of German goods and services; in comparison with January 2018 it decreased by 3.2% in February and it was the largest drop in over 2 years.



market. In this situation, the US trade war with Europe took place especially at the expense of Germany.

A problem of a much lesser importance, but affecting the state of mutual relations, was Trump's attitude towards Chancellor Merkel. The frequent attacks against Merkel regarding her migration policy or economic or security issues suggested that his intention is to undermine the political position of the head of the German government, who embodies the principles of international cooperation that Trump rejects or disregards. Merkel lost the status of a close partner that she had previously enjoyed in her relations with the US. Instead of the "partners in leadership" achieved during Obama's term, there was a reluctance towards Berlin and Trump's incessant tendency to antagonize mutual relations. At one point, it seemed that Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, moving away from the French tradition of keeping distance to Washington and undertaking a diplomatic offensive against Trump, took Merkel's place as America's most important partner in the transatlantic community.

## New German tactics

For her part, Merkel made a lot of effort to reverse this unfavorable trend for Germany in American politics. Her involvement was based on both care for German interests, which were at stake due to Trump's actions, as well as concern for the condition of the transatlantic system, weakened by American politics. Merkel did not change her mind about the importance of transatlantic bonds. During her first meeting with Trump in March 2017 in Washington, she tried on behalf of Europe to convince the new host of the White House of the importance of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, important not only for the security of Europe/Germany, but also for the position of the USA in the world. Subsequent meetings of Merkel and Trump only confirmed how different approach the two leaders had towards the most important political and economic challenges. It was also difficult to persuade the president of the USA of the significance of transatlantic system.

Besides, the situation of the German Chancellor as an important European leader, who is able to promote European ideas in relations with the Trump administration, was complicated by domestic problems in Germany. Relatively low result of the Christian Democrats in the Bundestag elections in autumn 2017, followed by difficulties in forming a coalition and disputes in the new/old CDU/CSU-SPD government, all contributed to the weakening of Merkel's political position on the international stage. It also forced Berlin to change the tactics, and Germany closed its ranks with the European community in various cases, believing that it would be more effective when facing America.

It was hoped that the EU would show solidarity in trade. "Germany's priority is the common European front against Trump's commercial offensive", declared Chancellor Merkel in June 2018. If the US introduces higher car tariffs, "then the European Union will operate in a common, determined front [...]. We will not allow anybody to treat us this way" – the head of German government announced, definitely changing the tone of speech, which had been quite conciliatory so far in the hope of

reaching an agreement<sup>13</sup>. Now recognizing the seriousness of the situation and becoming disillusioned with the inability to use substantive arguments in the discussion with Trump, the German Chancellor clearly tightened the rhetoric. In response to Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran and return to the sanctions policy, the Chancellor stated that Trump's action undermined confidence in the world order and argued that "multilateralism is experiencing a real crisis. If everyone does what they want, it's bad news for the world"<sup>14</sup>.

Also in response to Trump's decision regarding the JCPOA, Germany explicitly put importance on the solidarity of EU partners. The joint efforts of the EU and Germany were seen to save the agreement by convincing Iran of the firm stand of the European signatories. Especially that Trump's announcement of the restoration of sanctions against Iran was of great importance from the German perspective, because it posed a direct threat to German entrepreneurs, reactivating economic relations with Tehran. Therefore, Germany adopted the principle that only common actions with the EU guarantee greater effectiveness in resisting the negative effects of Trump's policy.

At the same time, however, Berlin tried to consistently fulfill its allied commitments within the transatlantic community, which was supposed to confirm their credibility. Firstly, there was a further increase in defense spending in the German budget as in 2019 EUR 42.9 billion was planned. Secondly, it confirmed the implementation of its tasks within NATO, primarily related to the engagement on its eastern flank, also as a framework nation of the VJTF forces and participating in operations to combat the "Islamic State". Thirdly, Germany accepted one of the most important decisions of the Brussels NATO summit in July 2018, that is, the establishment of the NATO Readiness Initiative (4x30) with the participation of about 3 German mechanized battalions<sup>15</sup>. Demonstrating above-average alliance solidarity, Germany hoped that this would rebut charges brought by Trump against them.

Meanwhile, the course of the NATO summit in Brussels proved that Trump consistently sticks to the hard line of conduct towards Germany and is not able to appreciate the scale of German commitment to NATO's joint defense. For the current host of the White House, this was still not enough, which he confirmed when demanding an increase in defense spending to 4% of GDP, as well as making other allegations against Berlin. In connection with the implementation of the German-Russian gas project *Nord Stream 2*, the American president accused Germany of being totally controlled by Russia<sup>16</sup>. There were even threats to limit US involvement in Europe (including the withdrawal of American soldiers from Germany), and even

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ardmediathek.de/tv/Anne-Will/Nach-dem-G7-Gipfel-Bundeschkanzlerin-Ang/Das-Erste/Video?documentId=53067204> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>14</sup> *Merkel on Trump's decision: undermines trust in world order*, 11.05.2018, <https://www.dw.com/pl/merkel-o-decyzji-trumpa-podwaza-zaufanie-w-miedzynarodowy-lad/a-43739942> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>15</sup> K. Szubart, 'NATO summit from the perspective of Germany', *Ekspertyzy Instytutu Zachodniego*, 2018, no. 11, passim.

<sup>16</sup> D.M. Herszenhorn, *Trump rips into Germany at NATO Chief breakfast*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-nato-summit-rips-into-germany> [accessed: 10.04.2019].

the withdrawal of America from the alliance. This confirmed Trump's reluctant attitude not only to Germany but also to the entire transatlantic community and the devastating impact of the American president's actions on its condition.

## “Europe United”

The ongoing dispute over political issues between Washington and Berlin, security and the economy, caused mostly by Trump's reluctance towards the transatlantic system and related obligations, forced Germany to raise important questions. They concerned both the future of German-American relations and the prospects for US-Europe relations and the role of Germany in the transatlantic community. Possible actions, which could be taken by Europe in the face of Trump's presidency, were discussed.

The idea for such a debate was already given in May 2017 by Chancellor Merkel herself, whose personal impressions from the first meetings with Trump prompted the following reflection: “the times when we could completely depend on others have come to an end [...]. We Europeans must take our matters into our own hands”<sup>17</sup>. Merkel would often come back to this idea, developing it and making it more precise. “We can no longer hope, as it has been for the past decades that America will take care of us” and that is why the chancellor appealed “Europe must become a strong, loyal player on the global stage, otherwise it will fall apart”<sup>18</sup>. Even President Obama was calling for such an active Europe. This time the implementation of this objective would have a clearly anti-Trump character and would be an attempt to oppose the current American policy.

As a result, Berlin's collision with the confrontational policy of Trump, especially degrading Germany in bilateral relations, triggered announcing ambitious plans with regard to the EU. The will to shape the role of the EU as a strong and effective player, fulfilling the emptiness on the international stage, which according to Berlin may arise as a result of Trump's actions implementing unilateral policy, has been articulated more strongly than before. This also concerned the strengthening of European defense capabilities. Germany was one of the signatories of the PESCO project launched in December 2017, which improves interoperability of European forces. In June 2018, Germany signed a letter of intent initiated by France regarding the European Intervention Initiative. The initiative aimed at building a mechanism for regular political and military consultations, joint planning in the event of crises and cooperation in operations. Berlin seemed more and more interested in the development of the European Defense Fund, regarding it not only as an opportunity for German armaments, but also a factor strengthening European military capabilities.

---

<sup>17</sup> ‘Merkel nach Gipfel mit Trump “Die Zeiten, in denen wir uns auf andere völlig verlassen konnten, sind ein Stück vorbei”’, *SpiegelOnline*, 28.05.2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-zeigt-sich-nach-g7-gipfel-enttauscht-von-donald-trump-a-1149588.html> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ardmediathek.de/tv/Anne-Will/Nach-dem-G7-Gipfel-Bundeskanzlerin-Ang/Das-Erste/Video?documentId=53067204> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

This trend, assuming the strategic strengthening of the EU, but above all critical of American policy, seemed to dominate the German public debate. As far back as 2017, the experts, seeing the main threat to the transatlantic system in Trump's activities, wrote about the "post-Atlantic strategy of the West" faithful to liberal principles and independent of the US, in which Germany should play a creative role<sup>19</sup>. In the same spirit, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel from the SPD spoke out in December 2017. Proving that the position of the USA is weakening in the world, he recognized the need for Germany to articulate its own priorities and pursue a policy that is independent of the US. In his view, Germany should conduct its ambitious foreign policy to a greater extent outside the transatlantic system. And Europe, as the outgoing head of German diplomacy stated, must be a more active player on the international stage<sup>20</sup>.

In 2018 such mood in the German political discourse only intensified. Social Democrat Heiko Maas, who took over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after Gabriel, even regarded Trump's policy as one of the greatest threats to the world order and a serious challenge for transatlantic relations. He appealed for "Europe United" and argued that in view of the activities of the current administration, it is the EU's duty to protect the endangered elements of the current order, such as: free trade, ecology, multilateralism. It is Europe that must take up the challenges of globalization, including migration issues and social problems. While being clearly in favor of a more ambitious and more integrated European community, Maas outlined an important task for Germany as a guarantor of EU power and unity. He claimed that Germany is responsible for building a strong EU role on the international stage<sup>21</sup>.

In the face of new Euro-Atlantic relations, the factor for strengthening the EU must be its greater responsibility for its own security, argued Maas on another occasion. Although the US remains a key partner in the field of security, it is impossible to fully rely on them. Therefore, it is a responsibility of Germany and other European countries to strengthen their military capabilities. Moreover, he suggested redefining the nature of relations with the USA and described them as a "balanced partnership" (balancierte Partnerschaft). It meant strengthening the autonomy of the EU, creating a counterbalance for the US to protect European interests, increasing the EU's involvement in those areas from which Americans are withdrawing or their role decreases. Germany and the EU must counterbalance where the US will cross the red line, said the head of German diplomacy, referring to Trump's devastation of international agreements and the protectionist trade policy of his administration<sup>22</sup>.

Although Maas's vision was mostly in line with the views of the majority of the German political class, and Chancellor Merkel herself admitted that she agreed with many suggestions of the minister, she still spoke highly of the cooperation with the US in the field of security. She was fully aware that European defense capabilities

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Lau, B. Ulrich, 'Im Westen was Neues', *Die Zeit*, 31.10.2017.

<sup>20</sup> *Gabriel fordert neues Verhältnis zu den USA*, 5.12.2017, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/deutschland-und-die-usa-gabriel-fordert-neues-verhaeltnis-ze-den-usa/20670444.html> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>21</sup> *Speech by Foreign Minister Maas: "Courage to Stand Up for Europe – #Europe United"*, 13.06.2018, <https://bruessel-eu.diplo.de/eu-en/-/1354592> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>22</sup> H. Maas, 'Balancierte Partnerschaft', *Handelsblatt*, 22.08.2018.

would be insufficient for a long time and ineffective without American support. Especially because of the resistance, among others, of *SPD* coalition, there was not any significant progress in the German *burden-sharing* plans and the intention was to increase the defense budget in 2024, not to 2%, but only to 1.5% of GDP. In chancellor's opinion, Germany remained, in fact, not only a beneficiary, but also a spokesman for the permanence of the transatlantic system, no matter how their role in the community was consistently undermined by Trump.

It was also necessary to admit that German experts were right. While commenting on Maas's thesis and other statements postulating the construction of a "post-American" Europe, they argued that it was necessary to strengthen the European defense potential not in opposition to NATO, but to make the treaty stronger. Only the alliance with American resources guarantees effective defense. Neither in the current situation nor even in the more distant future will European allies be able to defend themselves and for a long time the US will remain the guarantor of the security of Europe/Germany<sup>23</sup>. Besides the Trump's rhetoric, his administration carried out its earlier commitments to Europe, including NATO's eastern flank, on which in 2019 it increased its expenditure to \$6.5 billion (in 2018 – 4.8 billion dollars)<sup>24</sup>. At least for this reason, maintaining transatlantic relations at a good level was so important and needed. An ambitious vision of building a "post-American" Europe could therefore be countered by the statement that it remains only a challenge for the moment.

However, we should not ignore the fact that Trump is the first American president who "regards democratic Germany as only an onlooker and competitor, and not an example of success, which is also down to American policy"<sup>25</sup>. Even if Trump's criticism is right to some extent, his attacks, aimed at the German ally, constitute a crucial breakthrough in a negative sense. They may affect not only mutual, but also transatlantic relations, and the consequences may be far-reaching.

It cannot be ruled out that a fundamental turnaround will take place in the near future. Anti-American or anti-Trump moods, intensified by Trump's transactional treatment of relations with allies under the slogan "America First", will lead Germany to drift beyond the transatlantic system, towards European defense initiatives that are supposed to strengthen the European pillar of NATO, and in fact, act to promote building US defense capabilities autonomous to the US. Not all EU Member States will be interested in such a course of affairs, but certainly Germany and France can begin to create a new formula of European security, even around the European Intervention Initiative pushed by Paris. Then Berlin will look at Washington from a different perspective, perceiving them, just like the current administration, mainly as a contractor or competitor "in business", as well as a destructor of the world order. It should be asked whether such a direction of change, threatening to challenge the transatlantic system and, consequently, its disintegration, will be beneficial for

---

<sup>23</sup> Statement by E. Brok, a former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament for *Rzeczpospolita*, 28.08.2018; see also: M. Koch, 'Aussitzen ist keine Option', *Handelsblatt*, 22.08.2018.

<sup>24</sup> *European Deterrence Initiative*, February 2018, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/fy2019\\_EDI\\_Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/fy2019_EDI_Book.pdf) [accessed: 11.04.2019].

<sup>25</sup> K.-D. Frankenberger, 'Welches Gegengewicht?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24.08.2018.

anyone in the Western world. It seems doubtful. But this can be the consequence of the actions of President Trump destroying the transatlantic axis, which Germany cannot stop.

## References

- Bush G.H.W., *Speaking of Freedom. The Collected Speeches*, New York 2009.
- European Deterrence Initiative, February 2018, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/fy2019\\_EDI\\_JBook.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/fy2019_EDI_JBook.pdf) [accessed: 11.04.2019].
- Falke A., *The End of German-American Relations... "as we know them"*, Heidelberg 2005.
- Frankenberger K.-D., ‚Welches Gegengewicht?‘, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24.08.2018.
- Gabriel fordert neues Verhältnis zu den USA, 5.12.2017, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/deutschland-und-die-usa-gabriel-fordert-neues-verhaltnis-ze-den-usa/20670444.html> [accessed: 11.04.2019].
- Germany – Military Personnel, Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/de-personnel.htm> [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- Gove M., ‚Donald Trump interview: Brexit will be great thing‘, *The Times*, 15.01.2017, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/donald-trump-interview-brexit-britain-trade-deal-europe-qeen-5m0bc2tns](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/donald-trump-interview-brexit-britain-trade-deal-europe-qeen-5m0bc2tns) [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- Herszenhorn D.M., *Trump rips into Germany at NATO Chief breakfast*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-nato-summit-rips-into-germany> [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- Hirschfeld Davis J., ‚Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else‘, *The New York Times*, 2.07.2018.
- <https://www.ardmediathek.de/tv/Anne-Will/Nach-dem-G7-Gipfel-Bundeskanzlerin-Ang-Das-Erste/Video?documentId=53067204> [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- Koch M., ‚Aussitzen ist keine Option‘, *Handelsblatt*, 22.08.2018.
- Lau J., Ulrich B., ‚Im Westen was Neues‘, *Die Zeit*, 31.10.2017.
- Maas H., ‚Balancierte Partnerschaft‘, *Handelsblatt*, 22.08.2018.
- McCarthy N., *Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/14636/defense-expenditures-of-nato-countries> [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- Merkel A., ‚Schroeder Doesn’t Speak for All Germans‘, *The Washington Post*, 20.02.2003, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32835-2003Feb19.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32835-2003Feb19.html) [accessed: 10.04.2019].
- ‚Merkel nach Gipfel mit Trump “Die Zeiten, in denen wir uns auf andere völlig verlassen konnten, sind ein Stück vorbei”‘, *SpiegelOnline*, 28.05.2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-zeigt-sich-nach-g7-gipfel-enttaeuscht-von-donald-trump-a-1149588.html> [accessed: 11.04.2019].
- Merkel on Trump’s decision: undermines trust in world order*, 11.05.2018, <https://www.dw.com/pl/merkel-o-decyzji-trump-a-podważa-zaufanie-w-międzynarodowy-ład/a-43739942> [accessed: 11.04.2019].
- Palowski J., *Bundeswehra na dnje. Resort obrony przedstawia plan naprawy*, 31.01.2016, <https://www.defence24.pl/bundeswehra-na-dnje-resort-obrony-przedstawia-plan-naprawczy>.
- Shanker Th., ‚Defense Secretary Warns NATO of “Dim” Future‘, *The New York Times*, 10.06.2011.
- Speech by Foreign Minister Maas: “Courage to Stand Up for Europe – #Europe United”*, 13.06.2018, <https://bruessel-eu.diplo.de/eu-en/-/1354592> [accessed: 11.04.2019].

Szubart K., 'NATO summit from the perspective of Germany', *Ekspertyzy Instytutu Zachodniego*, 2018, no. 11.

*Trump Sends Disturbing Letters to Nine NATO Leaders Before Key Summit*, 2.07.2018, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/trump-sends-disturbing-letter-to-trudeau-and-eight-european-leaders-ahead-of-nato-summit#.Wzq-fUCGY0k.twitter](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/trump-sends-disturbing-letter-to-trudeau-and-eight-european-leaders-ahead-of-nato-summit#.Wzq-fUCGY0k.twitter) [accessed: 10.04.2019].

White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, 17.11.2011, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament) [accessed: 10.04.2019].

Wintour P., 'Barack Obama says world needs a united Europe', *The Guardian*, 25.04.2016.

## *Niemcy i kryzys w relacjach transatlantyckich* *Streszczenie*

Prezydentura Donalda Trumpa okazała się wielkim wyzwaniem dla wspólnoty transatlantyckiej. Jednym z czynników załamania w relacjach amerykańsko-europejskich była zmiana strategii USA wobec Europy, wynikająca z podejścia Trumpa do stosunków na arenie międzynarodowej, w którym liczy się przede wszystkim wąsko pojmowany interes amerykański. W tej nowej sytuacji Niemcy straciły pozycję bliskiego i cennego partnera USA, a stały się groźnym konkurentem gospodarczym i handlowym, finansowym obciążeniem w zakresie bezpieczeństwa. Taktyka Niemiec wobec narastającego napięcia we wzajemnych stosunkach oraz kryzysu w relacjach transatlantyckich polegała na albo na próbie łagodzenia sporu, albo przrzucaniu ciężaru negocjacji z USA na forum Unii Europejskiej, wreszcie asertywności wobec niektórych żądań administracji Trumpa. Powrócono też w Niemczech do koncepcji budowy autonomii strategicznej Europy i przejęcia przez UE roli globalnego gracza, co nie zmienia faktu, że długo jeszcze europejskie możliwości w zakresie bezpieczeństwa – bez amerykańskiego wsparcia – będą niewystarczające i nieskuteczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** RFN, USA, stosunki transatlantyckie, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump

## *Germany and the Crisis in Transatlantic Relations* *Abstract*

Donald Trump's presidency proved to be a great challenge for the transatlantic community. One of the factors of the breakdown in American-European relations was the change of US strategy towards Europe, resulting from Trump's approach to international relations, in which the narrowly understood American interest counts the most. In this new situation, Germany has lost the position of a close and valuable partner of the USA, and has become a dangerous economic and commercial competitor, or a financial burden in terms of security. Germany's tactics in the face of increasing tension in mutual relations and the crisis in transatlantic relations consisted of either attempting to settle the dispute or shifting the burden of negotiations with the US on the European Union forum, and finally assertiveness towards some of Trump's demands. Germany also returned to the concept of building Europe's strategic autonomy and taking over the role of a global player by the EU, which does not change the fact that European security capabilities will be insufficient and ineffective for a long time without American support.

**Key words:** Germany, USA, transatlantic relations, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump

## *Deutschland und die Krise in den transatlantischen Beziehungen*

### *Kurzfassung*

Die Präsidentschaft von Donald Trump wurde zur großen Herausforderung für die transatlantische Gemeinschaft. Einer der Faktoren des Zusammenbruchs in den amerikanisch–europäischen Beziehungen war die Änderung der Strategie der USA zu Europa, die aus Trumps Einstellung zur Gestaltung der Beziehungen auf der internationalen Szene resultierte, in der vor allem nur amerikanisches Interesse von Bedeutung ist. In dieser Situation hat Deutschland die Position des vertrauten und geschätzten Partners der USA verloren und wurde zum gefährlichen wirtschaftlichen und geschäftlichen Konkurrenten sowie zur finanziellen Belastung im Bereich der Sicherheitspolitik. Deutschlands Taktik angesichts zunehmender Spannungen und der Krise in den gegenseitigen und transatlantischen Beziehungen bestand darin, dass es die Streitfragen entweder zu lindern versuchte oder die Verhandlungen zur Lösung der bilateralen deutsch-amerikanischen Probleme auf die Ebene der EU verlegte; eine andere Maßnahme war assertive Haltung gegenüber einigen Forderungen seitens Trumps Administration. In Deutschland kehrte man auch zum Konzept des Aufbaus einer strategischen Autonomie von Europa und der Übernahme durch die EU der Rolle eines Globalspielers zurück, was aber an der Tatsache nichts ändert, dass es noch lange die europäischen Möglichkeiten im Bereich der Sicherheit – ohne amerikanische Unterstützung – unzureichend und erfolglos bleiben.

**Schlüsselwörter:** BRD, USA, transatlantische Beziehungen, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump

## *Германия и кризис в трансатлантических отношениях*

### *Резюме*

Президентство Дональда Трампа оказалось большим вызовом для трансатлантического сообщества. Одним из факторов возникновения проблем в европейско-американских связях было изменение стратегии США в отношении Европы, вытекающее из подхода Трампа к международному сотрудничеству. Этот подход, прежде всего, учитывает узко понимаемые интересы США. В создавшейся ситуации Германия потеряла позицию близкого и важного партнера США и стала грозным экономическим и торговым конкурентом, финансовой нагрузкой в области безопасности. Тактика Германии по отношению к растущему напряжению во взаимоотношениях и кризису трансатлантических связей, состояла в попытках смягчить возникшие разногласия, перенести бремя переговоров с США на форум Европейского Союза, или же давать отпор некоторым требованиям администрации Трампа. Германия вернулась также к концепции строительства стратегической автономии Европы и выступления ЕС в роли глобального игрока. Однако, следует отметить факт, что еще долгое время, европейские возможности в области безопасности – без американской поддержки – будут недостаточными и неэффективными.

**Ключевые слова:** ФРГ, США, трансатлантические отношения, Ангела Меркель, Дональд Трамп