

Berlin Needs to Offer Itself as a Useful Partner – to Trump or to Harris

By Rachel Tausendfreund

As president, Donald Trump openly and consistently questioned the value of the transatlantic alliance. For Europe, the possibility that he might return to the White House at a time of immense security and economic challenges is daunting. Vice President Kamala Harris, in contrast, has underscored the value of US alliances and leadership in her convention speech. Berlin and Europe will need plans and initiative, and none of the options include returning to the 2021 status quo.

SITUATION

The election of a US president, the commander and chief of the world's most powerful military and the person who appoints those who direct the world's largest humanitarian aid efforts, has obvious global consequences. Sometimes the consequences are unanticipated. If Joe Biden had lost to Donald Trump in 2020, Ukraine would now be an occupied country, and Europe would be scrambling to cope with millions more refugees and an emboldened Putin.

If the United States stopped its military aid to Ukraine today, Russia would still be likely to win the war – a fact that underscores the consequences of the US election for Europe. Despite increasing defense spending, Europe continues to rely on the United States for its security. Beyond that, few of the global challenges the EU wants to address (from climate change to the

reform of multilateral institutions) can be tackled without US support. In terms of policies as well as personalities, the contrast between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are clear and consequential for Ukraine, Europe, and Germany.

SCENARIOS TRUMP 2.0

It should be relatively easy to assess what a returning president's foreign policy and team would look like. But Donald Trump is different. Although he has demonstrated some consistent priorities and lines of thinking, including a mercantilist view of global economics and a power-centered, transactional view of diplomacy, decisions in his first term often seemed mercurial. Furthermore, high staff turnover in high-level positions (chief of staff and secretaries of state and defense) and the fact that several of

his former cabinet members turned against him, mean that it is hard to know who will have Trump's ear in 2025. And while the Heritage Foundation think tank has presented an extensive domestic agenda for a Trump 2.0 administration (Project 2025), its proposals on foreign policy remain sketchy.

Nonetheless, there are policy questions on which Trump's instincts are generally aligned with the new GOP mainstream or on which Trump and key advisors have been consistent. In these cases, it is possible to offer reasonably secure estimations of what a second Trump administration would mean for US foreign policy, Germany, and its European allies.

Muscular Isolationism and Transatlantic Relations

Trump 2.0 would mean an even more drastic break in transatlantic relations, especially for Germany, than

2017-2020 The key to a Trump administration approach to foreign policy, as [Claudia Schmucker correctly identified](#), is “Druckmittel” (leverage) – and not just in terms of economic negotiations.

The Heritage Foundation’s [Project 2025 report](#) admits divisions among conservatives over US support for Ukraine’s defense against the Russian invasion. These divisions were manifest in Trump’s first term, as his first secretaries of defense and state represented the “primacist” wing of Republican foreign policy, which had characterized GOP foreign policy since the end of World War II. Primacy, as [described by critics](#) Christopher Preble and William Ruger, “presumes that the United States is the indispensable nation, and that every problem, in any part of the world, must be resolved by U.S. leadership or else will impact American safety.”

Trump and Vance view Europe as an economic competitor and European states as taking advantage of US generosity.

Trump himself represents something closer to the “isolationist” wing, a position underscored by his selection of J.D. Vance, a vocal opponent to US support for Ukraine, as second on the ticket. But Trump also appreciates power projection, which made him like some primacist figures during his first term. Hence, as much as Trump bemoaned US military entanglements in Afghanistan and Syria, he increased military spending and ordered the Shyrat missile strike against the Syrian government.

In Trump’s mind, US military strength and support provide Washington with

leverage, and US allies should offer more in exchange for the bounty of US protection. This is a central part of Trump’s view of Europe in general, and Germany specifically, and is shared by Vance. As Vance wrote in an [op-ed in February 2024](#): “[W]e ought to view the money Europe hasn’t spent on defence for what it really is: an implied tax on the American people to allow for the security of Europe.”

Trump and Vance view Europe as an economic competitor and European states as taking advantage of US generosity. This is particularly true of Germany, which is seen as playing economic hardball, outperforming the United States, and ignoring US security concerns (Nord Stream and 5G) while taking advantage of its protection. At the same time, a Trump administration would see individual EU

likely to “terminate US aid” or “predicate it on concessions by Ukraine and by European partner countries.”

The top line is that a Trump 2.0 administration will expect returns for its provision of European security. This could take the form of support for US policy toward China and/or Russia/Ukraine/Iran. Or it could mean more robust US weapons purchases and trade concessions, or some mixture of the above. It will certainly entail making fewer US commitments and expecting more obvious benefits from the relationship. European allies should expect immediate pressure to either take over the burden of military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine or support Trump efforts to achieve a ceasefire.

Since Trump and Vance have no commitment to European unity (because its direct benefits to the United States are not obvious) they will happily encourage European divisions and play favorites. Some European countries may be able to secure good relations with significant arms purchases from the United States. Germany, with its trade surplus and history of defense underspending, is often a focus of critique by both Vance and Trump and cannot expect to be a favorite.

PRESIDENT HARRIS 1.0

In comparison to Trump 2.0, the foreign policy of a Kamala Harris presidency is at the same time more and less difficult to estimate. Although Vice President Harris is not unexperienced, her public record on issues is thin. As vice president, her role was to represent and present Biden’s foreign policy rather than shape it.

Restrained and Principled Leadership and Transatlantic Relations

In her acceptance [speech](#) at the Democratic National Convention on August 23, Harris devoted a few minutes to foreign policy. The positions she took

signaled alignment with the foreign policy of the Biden administration, including on the importance of US leadership and values: “I will make sure that we lead the world into the future on space and artificial intelligence. That America, not China, wins the competition for the 21st century and that we strengthen, not abdicate, our global leadership.”

A Harris administration would be closely aligned with the EU. But this also means that the EU would have to act on its rhetoric.

For more evidence on Harris’s foreign policy thinking, look to her current foreign policy advisor, Philip H. Gordon, who served both president Bill Clinton and President Obama. He has [been characterized as a transatlanticist](#), “intrinsically appreciative of what the EU has done.” At the same time, in an article published in 2019, Gordon together with Jeremy Shapiro from ECFR argues for [a new transatlantic bargain](#): “one based on a more realistic bargain between Europe and the United States, and one that better addresses the needs of both partners.” After his time in the Obama administration, Gordon also wrote a book on the folly of US regime-change attempts in the Middle East. A Harris administration foreign policy is likely to be keenly aware of the limits of US power and its past mistakes, while seeking to provide positive leadership with partners.

The contrast between this restrained and principled leadership style and the likely Trump positions outlined above is stark. European countries can expect demands from a Harris administration, but these will be well-meaning and placed on allies viewed as important if underperforming. A Harris administration would likely be at least as interested in coordinating policy with partners as the Biden administration was (which is to say, consistently but imperfectly).

A President Harris would continue strong support for Ukraine against Russia and underscore US commitment to NATO. But unless the Democrats win majorities in both bodies of Congress, which seems unlikely, her ability to secure funding at 2022 levels will be severely limited. In terms of European security more broadly, a Harris administration (similar to the Obama administration) would expect the European pillar of NATO to become more capable. On many issues from global minimum taxes to climate change and international climate justice, a Harris administration would be closely aligned with the EU. But this also means that the EU would have to act on its rhetoric.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

In transatlantic relations with Trump 2.0, it will be key to think in terms of leverage. Berlin should be ready for a Trump administration to prioritize bilateral relations with European governments more to Trump’s liking. These could be politically aligned leaders such as Hungary’s Orbán or Italy’s Meloni, but also countries that impress him, such as Finland, which enjoyed good security relations with the first Trump administration.

To prevent divisions among Europeans, Berlin should proactively consider what it can put on the table. The Trump administration will want or

need cooperation from Germany on various issues: Berlin must be ready to communicate (ideally jointly with EU partners) what it wants and what it can offer in terms of NATO, transatlantic and global trade, tech competition with China, etc.

If Kamala Harris wins in November

Berlin and the other European NATO countries will be offered the opportunity to remake – with US support – the alliance into something that can retain bipartisan US support. Berlin must do its part to make the EU a strong – and strategic – partner. Rather than complain about the pivot to Asia (which will certainly continue), Berlin needs to offer itself as a useful partner for transatlantic security and global strategy, and as a partner which can help shape a new bargain. For this, though Berlin will need to have a vision of where and how it wants the transatlantic relationship to go forward.

ON UKRAINE

Regardless of the elections, Europe needs to prepare to take on an ever-greater share of the burden of supporting Ukraine. In the case of a Trump victory, immediately and fully, but also with a President Harris if the Democrats do not control both House and Senate. Together with Kyiv, the EU and UK need to make realistic assessments and plan accordingly – before December. This will require assessing what support Ukraine’s European partners can actually deliver, how quickly, and for how long, and what options this leaves for Kyiv.



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