

Global Reordering, German Responses

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Germany is increasingly wedged between the aspirations of three global superpowers building spheres of influence. While the European Union has demonstrated the value of internal cohesion against imperialist ambitions, Germany also needs other like-minded middle powers and a clear strategy of its own to avoid subordination by a drastically changed United States. It must achieve a higher degree of independence in energy security and supply chains. In this series of memos, DGAP takes stock of affected policy fields and outlines a path forward.

THE SHIFT

FROM AMERICAN HEGEMONY TO IMPERIAL COLLUSION

While the era of American hegemony has been fading for some time, it is now being replaced by competition and, in parallel, collusion among three imperial great powers: the United States, China, and Russia. While the demise of the liberal hegemon has been a gradual process, renewed great-power competition has emerged suddenly. It is characterized by attempts to demarcate geographical as well as digital zones of influence. This development can be traced to Donald Trump's second term as US president and, more specifically, to the January 2026 toppling of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and Trump's threats to annex Greenland – amounting to the military implementation of an imperial foreign-policy strategy. This moment marks a rupture in the world order.

For Germany, as for Europe as a whole, this shift is of fundamental strategic relevance, as America's benevolent

dominance has underwritten European security (through NATO) since World War II. Now, neither benevolence nor the NATO commitment can be taken for granted, as the United States has already stated its interest in taking over territory of two NATO allies: Denmark and Canada. Core liberal norms – such as respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations – can no longer be considered universally accepted, not even within NATO.

This shift comes at a time when Europe's and Germany's security as well as energy supplies are being disrupted by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Russian gas has been largely replaced by price-volatile American LNG. European industry has been hit by competition from heavily subsidized Chinese technologies – such as in electric vehicle production – and by export restrictions on critical raw materials essential to key digital and green technologies. Non-traditional threats, including pandemics and climate change, have emerged; however, prevention has taken a back seat to crisis management.

In the midst of this volatile situation, the transatlantic relationship, the bedrock of German foreign policy, is in its deepest crisis to date. Its future is uncertain. And even if it continues to function in some form, it is likely to do so in a post-Western world of illiberal dominance, with liberal countries potentially becoming a minority faction.

THE IMPLICATIONS

THREATS TO SOVEREIGNTY

The significance of these developments for German foreign policy can hardly be overstated.

As power increasingly governs interstate relations, and as the most powerful nations are no longer constrained by norms and rules, the United Nations – and with it the system of multilateral governance – is suffering. Its capacity for effective and collaborative problem-solving has been greatly diminished ([see Tim Bosch and Mechthild Becker: America's Estranged Relationship with the United Nations: Europe's Search](#)

[for a Response](#)). The security order has been weakened as NATO's reliability and future has become uncertain ([see Patrick Keller, Emil Archambault and Max Becker: To Ensure Its Security, Europe Needs a Stronger Hand in NATO](#)). Since the use of force can no longer be effectively deterred or punished, as demonstrated by the shift in the US position vis-à-vis Russian aggression in Ukraine, illiberal powers such as Russia, China, and Iran stand to benefit ([see Stefan Meister: Ukraine as a Litmus Test: Germany Must Redefine Its Role in Europe and the World](#)).

Economic interdependence, long seen as a guarantor of stability and prosperity, is being systematically weaponized; financial integration may be a liability; and support for the collective resolution of conflicts (for example in trade) is increasingly perceived as a weakness. At the same time, the United States' new transactionalism has proven to be extortionate ([see Claudia Schmucker: The Alliance of Middle Powers as a Check on the New Power-Based Trading System](#)). Energy and resource dependencies are being exploited ([see Loyle Campbell: European Energy Security Amid Blackmail, Dependency, and Dominance](#)). Digital sovereignty lacks adequate infrastructure ([see Katja Muñoz and Valentin Weber: Tech Cooperation and Tech Sovereignty in the New World Order](#)). The unity of the European Union, as the guardian of liberal democratic values, is being put to the test ([see Linn Selle: What the European Union Must Do to Confront Global Bullies](#)). Even science has become a field of strategic competition ([see Abdullah Fahimi, Kira Vinke, Anna Sperber and Luca Patapoutian: Science as a Domain of Strategic Competition: The Security Costs of Research Cuts](#)). These implications accumulate to a set of threats to state sovereignty through which weaker countries are coerced to align themselves to the interests of one of the superpowers. Germany, confronted with hybrid attacks from Moscow, Chinese price dumping, and bullying by the Trump

administration, is in constant danger of appeasing superpowers instead of developing a clear strategy of its own.

THE RESPONSE

GOODBYE NOSTALGIA

The first order of business is to see the world as it is, rather than searching for signs of recovery. The global system as we knew it – the liberal international order – is broken. It is crucial to assess now what might succeed and try to shape it. The good news is that middle powers are not powerless, as was evidenced by the US-European clash over Greenland after which the Trump administration backed down. Middle powers like Germany can [build alliances](#) and resilience, thereby hedging against uncertainty and insuring themselves against the dangers of subordination. This begins with an effort to develop greater strategic independence from all three great powers in defense and finance, in supply chains and critical minerals, in food and fuel, and in energy systems.

Middle powers have the capacity to construct elements of a new order. The triumvirate of illiberal leaders in Beijing, Moscow, and Washington – different as they and the systems they oversee may be – does not have the ability to control the rest of the world, especially not if the best of the rest unite. This means there is space for middle powers to collaborate in building strategic independence, an interest they all share.

For Germany, such cooperation does not require equidistance to the members of the imperial triumvirate. And it also does not mean abandoning certain liberal norms in international relations such as human rights, freedom, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities. Protecting these norms is in fact the purpose of [hedging against illiberal superpowers](#). But governments that are like-minded in these areas also need to remain open to and even foster partnerships with states that may differ in other

areas. Finland's President Alexander Stubb calls this approach "[values-based realism](#)," acknowledging the reality that not all countries are liberal democracies and that cooperation with them may, at times, require compromises.

Germany's inner circle of cooperation should remain the EU, but it needs to build a stronger outer ring of partnerships. To advance specific agenda points, such as defense cooperation, it may also need to set the pace with only a handful of European partners [to avoid being trapped](#) in slow-moving, process-heavy, EU institutionalism. This is particularly true considering long-standing anti-European and pro-Russian sentiments of actors like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Germany also has yet to [reorder its national priorities](#) to meet contemporary geopolitical challenges. Some progress has been made: It is on its way to rearmament, but not yet on a path to economic reform necessary to regain economic strength. It has not yet resolved its challenges in supply chains and natural resources, digitization and energy, innovation and bureaucracy, but has identified steps in the right direction.

Importantly, Germany will need to manage its relationship with the United States carefully while charting its path to greater independence. The United States may be able to stage a rupture in its relations with Germany and Europe; Germany cannot. For Berlin, NATO remains essential. Should a rupture with the US nevertheless occur, Germany will want to keep open the option of strategic reconnection. While there will be no return to the *status quo ante*, even a diminished democracy with free elections can eventually remove an illiberal leader and thereby forge the path toward a different relationship.



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