

*German-American Conference 2019:
Strengthening Transatlantic Resilience in
Uncertain Times*

Berlin, 12.06.2019

The transatlantic partnership in 2020

by Sigmar Gabriel

Distinguished audience, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you very much for inviting me as a speaker at this years German American Conference.

You asked me to speak about the transatlantic partnership in 2020 today.

And of course many Germans are looking forward to the next presidential elections in the US when it comes to the future of our transatlantic partnership.

Although I believe that the presidential election in the US next year is an important issue, I would like to use this opportunity to take a wider scope. When looking into the future of the transatlantic relations, we need to ask ourselves: Where do we come from – where are we – and what has changed?

In answering these questions, we must look beyond the current political situation and see

the wider geopolitical context. Because what we are witnessing here has much less to do with President Donald Trump than we commonly like to think, but with a tectonic shift of the world's power axes, and with it the political and strategic orientation of the world. This shift began gaining momentum before Trump was elected President of the United States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The age of eurocentrism, that began with the discovery of the Americas by the Portuguese in the 15th century, and lasted 600 years, is gone for good. No longer is the Atlantic the

centre of gravity of the global value chain. It has been replaced by the Pacific.

Henry Kissinger said on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Atlantic Bridge in 1992 in Hamburg, that the Atlantic Alliance will not be as it was after the fall of the iron curtain. And that it will not be enough to repeat the great history of the Atlantic Alliance again and again. Kissinger reminded us to put new content in our Alliance which should reflect the new geopolitical realities. Maybe we did not listen to him carefully enough.

But he also said on this occasion, that whatever the West wants to achieve, it will

not be possible without the United States and without Germany.

So, the tectonic shift was underway since nearly three decades and it is not the result of the policy of the current US Administration.

Feeling the strains of “hegemonic overstretch” it was the Obama administration that initiated the U.S. abandoning of the global stage for the town hall dance floor. Old revisionist powers like Russia soon stepped up to fill the resulting vacuum.

It was also President Obama who proclaimed the U.S. pivot to Asia. China, although by other means than Russia has also made clear that it is seeking a revision of the international

balance of power. It has been identified by the U.S. as its primary strategic rival in its National Security in 2015, and we are witness to an increasing antagonism between China and the United States.

My point here is that to a large extent Donald Trumps foreign policy is a continuation of U.S. policies for which the foundations were laid earlier. What is new about the Trump administration is that unlike any of the previous administrations, Trump is obviously blind to what made the United States so powerful in the past 70 years, and where it differs from the revisionist autocratic powers like Russia and China: that the United States has friends, partners, and allies. Over time it

was this ability to maintain a close network of allies that was the key force multiplier of American power.

Donald Trump has taken a sharp turn from this policy. Europe, for example, a partner and U.S. ally for the past 70 years, now seems to be a conspiracy against American Interests. This ideology is worrying me much more than differences on trade, Iran or North Stream 2. Over time, the transatlantic partnership has shown that it can overcome differences of similar and even graver nature. Just think of the early eighties, and the debate about the stationing mid-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

So where are we as Germans and Europeans in this? To put it simply - if we don't wake up to these new realities, then the future world order will be a G-2 world shaped by the U.S. and China. We are at risk of becoming geopolitically irrelevant. Already, there are signs of Europe's geopolitical increased insignificance - in our direct neighbourhood wars and conflicts are being decided without a discernible European role in their resolution.

We Europeans seemed to be the last geopolitical vegetarians in a world of

carnivours. And if UK will leave the European Union we will be seen as vegans.

If Europe wants to prevent a world characterized by U.S. -Chinese antagonism, and at least maintain chances for a future G-3 world order, then it needs to stand closer together than we have done previously.

Looking back at the force multiplying effect and mutual benefits the transatlantic relations have produced in the past 70 years, investing in friends, partners and allies is in our best interest as much as it would be in the U.S.'s. Investing time and energy in discord and finger-pointing, however, isn't.

What is clear is, that the “ethical foreign policy” based on values to which particularly we Germans aspire, will not be enough to survive in a world dominated by economic, political and military self-interest. In this situation, Europe will need strategic capabilities it didn’t need before.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This means that the “German question” is back on the table – but in inverted form.

After 1945, this question was about tying Germany in and preventing the country from ever again trying to go it alone. Today, the

question is about my country's willingness to shoulder more responsibility. We may have learned to do that – but only in economic terms. There are good reasons why my country has become a geopolitical teetotaller since the end of the Second World War, because whenever we weren't, the consequences for the world were disastrous.

Over the years, however, we have become comfortable in this role of geopolitical vegetarians. But, in this changed situation, our country – Germany - is too large to be able to shirk the issue. I don't want to change Europe and Germany into a carnivore, but maybe we have to be something like a flexitarian.

The direction Europe takes will depend very much on the attitude Germany takes. If we try to stay on the sidelines and to be a sort of second Switzerland – economically significant but politically irrelevant internationally – Europe will stay weak. If we are willing to help develop a projection of European power, we will have to do so in a way that does not result in any renewed hegemonic goals. For seventy years, others and specially the US have kept us safe: now, we need to learn to do it ourselves. Certainly we won't be able to keep out of it.

As I say, the “German question”, or rather, the “questions for us Germans” is back. Answering it requires a cautious balancing act by Germany

– but also clear signals that it stands true to its course of euro-Atlantic integration.

Germany's transatlantic orientation is highly relevant to many of its European neighbours. To speak frankly: not a small number in Europe think that Germany's economic and political power can be tied in and contained by the United States alone, and not like in previous times by France and the U.S. If Germany were to react wrongly to the differences with the current U.S. administration, and relativize or give up the transatlantic partnership, this would not unify Europe, but divide it. Germany's role as central power in Europa therefore must have the twofold objective of

European integration and strengthening Europe while simultaneously strengthen the transatlantic ties and never giving up this relationship. Germany has always carried on two shoulders: on the European, and on the Atlantic one. This must continue, if we do not want to divide Europe.

An important measure for Germany's willingness to take up more responsibility is its military spending. I have no quarrels with the demand that Germany should invest a larger share of its GDP on defence – but I fear that neither the transatlantic relationship, nor the European project, will profit much if Germany spends 2 % of its GDP or 80 billion Euros,

double that of France, which by the way is a nuclear power after all, per year only on our national defence. Doing so would mean to neglect historical fears of Germany's European neighbours. After all, their experience with a revisionist Germany was less than a life-time ago.

Having said that, this argument should not be misused to go away from our responsible inside NATO.

Germany should increase its defence spending in a way that clearly signals that it pays more than just lip-service to euro-atlantic defence and security: To the U.S. it needs to

demonstrate that it is willing to make a credible contribution to Europe's ability to defend the Alliance in Europe against external threats; to its European neighbours fearing a newly revisionist Germany that it remains firmly committed to European integration and the European idea; to its neighbours questioning whether Germany will live up to the essence of NATO Article 5, that there can be no doubt about Germany's resolve to live up to this commitment if tested.

To achieve these goals, Germany should split the 2 percent increase of defence spending by earmarking 1,5 % on re-instating the Bundeswehr, and 0,5% of the GDP on a NATO

fund used for the modernization of NATO's Eastern European Members defence forces.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Much is at stake for the United States, Germany, and Europe if the transatlantic partnership is eroding further. The United States is risking the force-multiplier that has proven to be more effective than its nuclear arsenal and that gave it its unique power base – a close network of allies, friends and partners. Europe is at risk to not only lose its most important ally, but also to become irrelevant as a partner in a fundamentally changed geopolitical context.

The prerequisite for overcoming our differences and developing common strategies on all these issues seems to me to be approaching these challenges with new realism rather than too much sentimentality.

The old transatlantic relationship, in which Europe could focus on itself and - with the exception of the United Kingdom and France - was internationally abstinent and the US had to deal with all unpleasant questions, is finally over. It does not come back either. But the US, too, hopefully notes that even in the world of tomorrow, alliances and allies are important in protecting one's own values and also national interests. Bowling alone is not only a very

unpleasant life in private terms but also in international terms.

From a European perspective, we should recognize that the US is going to change permanently: in just a few years, the majority of Americans will no longer have European roots, but Asian, Latin American and African ones. This new America will also look at transatlantic relations differently. And by the way, not necessarily friendly. The first generations of immigrants often have a much cooler, tougher and, above all, interest-oriented view of political realities. And they will also not look back to the past.

In my view, it is therefore time to invest much more in a new transatlantic relationship. To define common values but above all also common interests and to distribute our roles. We Europeans should invest a lot in the America of tomorrow: in the next generation, in Hispanics, the descendants of Asian and African immigrants. And we should not just go to NY, Washington, and California, but look at the cultural, political, and economic breadth of this great country far more.

Investing into the future, rather than looking back was what made the relationship between Germany and the United States so strong in the past, and made the miracle

possible: Former enemies turned into allies, whose trust in each other and the shared vision of a liberal world order ruled by the rule of law rather than the law of the jungle could not be put into question by differences over specific questions.

The German-American friendship could grow so strong and resilient because from the beginning, it invested in the relations between people. Mistrust can only be replaced by trust if this trust is experienced – and that is best achieved if people meet each other rather than talking about each other.

For today's challenges, there is much to be taken away from how the German-American friendship developed after the World War II. And as much as I am convinced that we need to increase our investment into the America of tomorrow, I am convinced that we should take other European partners along in this investment. This way, it may not only help the resilience of the transatlantic partnership, but also give new momentum to the European idea.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before we enter the conversation with Susan Glasser, I would like to end this speech with some concluding remarks:

I am convinced that especially we Europeans are at a crossroad which we are faced with only every few hundred years on our continent. To explain what I mean we have to look back exactly 600 years to the year 1418.

At that time the Portugese Emperor Henry the Navigator sent his European sailors into the unknown along the coastline of Westafrica to discover the sea passage to India. The Sailors

were ready to enter in a very risky trip into a complete unknown and insecure world.

Europe stepped on the global stage - it was the beginning of 600 years of European and transatlantic dominance.

At the same time the Chinese Emperor commanded the most powerful fleet in the world. But while the Portuguese Prince, Henry the Navigator, was sending out his fleet, Emperor Hongxi in China decided to let his fleet fall into disrepair, despite its magnificence and the fact that it had spent the previous 300 years exploring the world. He believed his empire to have more pressing problems. It was the beginning of China's

withdrawal from the global stage which it would not return to for another 600 years, while Europe set out to dominate the world on every continent.

So, the question is: what will people tell about us and our century in around 600 years from now? Will it be described as the return of Chinas dominance in Eurasia and the decline of the old European West? Or will they see us as a generation which again was willing to take risks and which was entering again a new, uncertain and unknown world to balance the new power of China and others and to defend our European and transatlantic interests.

It's up to us to give the answer.

Thank you very much for your attention.