

Germany needs to step up to Europe's defense

Order from Chaos

Germany has had a lot of nasty geopolitical surprises in recent years. But the worst by far — what strategy wonks call a black swan — wasn't Russian aggression on Europe's doorstep, China's quest for global dominance or Turkey stoking conflict in the eastern Mediterranean. It was the election of Donald Trump as US president. Consequently, the nation is mesmerized by the possibility of his re-election on November 3.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, a dedicated transatlanticist, never established the kind of rapport with Mr Trump that she'd had with his predecessors George W Bush and Barack Obama. Mr Trump is the first postwar US president not to have made a state visit to Germany in his first term. But Berlin's troubles with Washington go beyond the two leaders and extend across the political aisle. On many points of contention, there is near-bipartisan agreement.

Trade protectionists have Germany's surpluses in their sight. Middle East hawks are upset that Berlin (locking arms with Paris and London) wants to preserve the Iran nuclear agreement. China hawks accuse Ms Merkel of being soft on Beijing. Russia hands are upset at Germany's reluctance to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. The defence community is deeply underwhelmed that the country spends no more than 1.5 per cent of its gross domestic product on defence.

Of course, a second term for Mr Trump would have a wholly different impact on US-German relations than would a Joe Biden presidency. It is conceivable that a victorious Mr Trump would push hard to end US wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and take American troops out of Europe. He might even hope to make an ally of Russia against China. It would almost certainly be the end of Nato.

Mr Biden cherishes the transatlantic alliance and appreciates the EU's economic and regulatory heft. Yet bogged down by a multitude of domestic challenges, his administration would have to focus urgently on China's rise. The burden of

regional security — from north Africa via the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East all the way to the Caucasus, Ukraine and Belarus — will fall to Europe.

In either election outcome, the simple truth is that the onus is on Europe's most powerful country to turn itself into the continent's security anchor. Germany is unprepared for this, says Norbert Röttgen, chair of the Bundestag foreign affairs committee.

Still, there is a new sense of urgency in Berlin. In the summer, Germany backed a massive debt-financed recovery programme for the pandemic-stricken EU. It has supported new sanctions against senior Kremlin figures after the assassination attempt on Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. And while Ms Merkel still appears unwilling to suspend Nord Stream 2, for the first time she has refused to rule it out. The legislature is considering a law that would effectively ban the Chinese telecoms provider Huawei from Germany's 5G network.

As for the US, German defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer gave a forceful speech last week in which she said Germany would have to become a "strategic giver" and play a stronger role in the security of Europe's neighbourhood. Foreign minister Heiko Maas followed with an op-ed warning that the "profiteers of our differences sit in Beijing and Moscow, but also in Tehran and Pyongyang". Both emphasised the need to co-operate on confronting Chinese assertiveness — but the fear of being dragged into a confrontation by the US is palpable.

Berlin's dilemma is that it badly wants to reserve the right to agree to disagree with Washington, regardless of who is the next president. But it is a long way from being able to afford to.

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