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# Obama and Merkel – Building a Partnership

## German-American Relations (2009-2016). A Polish View

Jadwiga Kiwerska



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## 1.

# Antecedents

German-American relations have always served as a mainstay for the involvement of the United States in Europe. Since the end of World War II, the time when, having abandoned the principle of isolationism, the American superpower chose to get actively involved in matters of Europe, it was West Germany that became its main focus. From its establishment in 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany enjoyed a special covenant with the United States. West Germany owed a great deal to Washington which supported and endorsed it in various ways ranging from assistance in democracy building and restoring the economy after Germany's defeat and breakup post World War II, to military protection extended throughout the Cold War period.

On the other hand, geopolitically speaking, the splitting of Germany reflected the division of Europe. Europe became divided along the lines that reflected the Cold War rivalry between the western world and the world controlled by the communists. Therefore, in the American strategy, West Germany served as a bulwark against any imperial aspirations of the Soviet Union towards Western Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the reunification of Germany a year later, American-German relations changed dramatically. Such changes came in the aftermath of new international circumstances and, first and foremost, of the disappearance of the communist threat, the emergence of new problems and challenges and the result of the reunified Germany regaining complete sovereignty and formulating new political aspirations.

At the time, Washington expected Germany to play a more active role in the international arena. In fact, in May 1989, on the eve of great transformations on the European continent, President George H. W. Bush senior offered the Federal Republic of Germany a formula for "partnership in leadership"<sup>1</sup>. The offer was mainly a courtesy to then Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who turned out to be an incredibly loyal ally of Washington. At the time, Bonn, which in the late 1989 and the early 1990 was involved in the greatly challenging project of

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<sup>1</sup> This took place exactly on May 31, 1989, during Bush's visit in West Germany: G. H. W. B u s h, *Speaking of Freedom. The Collected Speeches*, New York 2009, p. 52. See also K. L. P r u i t, *Die amerikanische Deutschlandpolitik in der Bush-Ära. Wandel einer historischen Partnerschaft*, München 1995, p. 68.

reunifying the two German states, was not prepared to accept this special role in relations with the United States.

After all, it still subscribed to the “restraint culture” which for years was an imperative of West German foreign policy. This notwithstanding, the successive U.S. administrations led by William J. Clinton, George W. Bush Junior, and Barack H. Obama had high hopes for Germany. The expectation was that a reunified and sovereign Germany would become a key partner supporting the American effort to shape and stabilize the world and resolve regional and global problems. However, its success with getting the Federal Republic of Germany to commit to this role was varying.

Equally fickle were American-German relations in the last quarter of a century. It is difficult to overlook the changes that have taken place in relations between Washington and Bonn and later Berlin since 1989. They affected the operation of the transatlantic treaty and Berlin’s bilateral relations, for instance with Warsaw. While the formula alone of reunifying the two German states in which the “new” Germany took over the alliances of the “old” Federal Republic, including its NATO membership, while maintaining in power the elites associated with western values, appeared to ensure an Atlantic orientation.

Relations with America also rested on the solid foundation built on shared values and objectives and good Cold-War experience. A powerful and geographically enlarged Germany has emerged in the center of Europe, capable of pursuing, independently and “normally”, at least in the sense of being liberated from third-state tutelage, a fully sovereign foreign policy that reflected its own interests and priorities. New geopolitical considerations and especially the disappearance of the communist threat gave the reunified Germany more freedom to act, all the while forcing German diplomacy to confront new challenges.

Initially, such factors were of little consequence for relations with the American superpower and for Germany’s behavior in transatlantic relations. German leaders stressed that close relations with the U.S. had the effect of anchoring their foreign policy. Chancellor H. Kohl, who led the *CDU/CSU-FDP* coalition government, reaffirmed his commitments to the United States on multiple occasions. He maintained excellent relations with President G. H. W. Bush as well as previously with Ronald Reagan.

While appreciating the value of the Atlantic Alliance, Washington’s expectations of Germany’s greater international involvement, also in military terms, were received with considerably less enthusiasm. Germany refrained from deploying its military in the first Persian Gulf war in the early 1991 limiting itself to “checkbook diplomacy”, which involved contributing funds to the war



effort of the coalition of states involved in the US-led operation Desert Storm. Bonn explained its insistence on the “restraint culture” with historic legacies as well as constitutional and social constraints<sup>2</sup>.

A 1994 ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court, which sanctioned Germany’s active role in NATO’s armed out-of-area operations, was a breakthrough in German foreign and security policy. It opened up new opportunities for Germany’s functioning in the transatlantic relationship, allowing it to play a greater role in fulfilling American expectations in this realm.

Washington clearly welcomed the Constitutional Court ruling. The expectation at the time was that Germany would join the states that shared (also militarily) responsibility for solving international problems<sup>3</sup>. This was indeed what happened. Initially on a small scale in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the armed NATO operation in Kosovo, carried out in 1999 without the UN mandate, was a practical test of Germany’s true preparedness to dispatch its troops in a war. Although very meager, the involvement of the Bundeswehr in NATO wartime operations was of great symbolic and political significance. Not only did Germany fulfill the expectations of the United States but it also reaffirmed the preparedness of the Federal Republic to deliver on commitments that were broader than those seen previously within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance.

In view of the political identity of the two leftist parties *SPD* and Alliance ‘90/The Greens, this step represented a crossing of the Rubicon. The fact of the matter was that in the name of transatlantic solidarity, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Affairs Minister Joschka Fischer rejected radical pacifism and anti-Americanism and, even though their motivations were humanitarian, chose to deploy the *Bundeswehr* in an operation that, no matter how it is presented, violated binding international law. This meant getting into trouble with their constituents and even members of their own parties. This unprecedented move also evidenced that the German approach to foreign policy and the Federal Republic’s role in the international arena had undergone a major transformation<sup>4</sup>.

This did not signify a departure from the *Zivilmacht* (civil power) tradition or the recognition that, as was the will of the Americans, NATO and its member

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<sup>2</sup> H. Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1990-1994*, München 2007, p. 311; also Ch. H a c k e, *Die Aussenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von Adenauer bis Kohl*, Propyläen 1997, pp. 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> *Interview mit B. Clinton: Deutschland muss eine Führungsrolle übernehmen*, “Süddeutsche Zeitung” July 4, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> For more see: K. M a l i n o w s k i, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa koalicji SPD/Sojusz 90/Zieloni*, “Przegląd Zachodni” issue 4, 2002, p. 41.

states had broad global objectives and tasks to accomplish. The thinking of the Germans was dominated by the conviction that diplomacy is better than force and that civilian efforts should be given priority. Hence their diplomatic engagement to resolve the Balkan conflict and the subsequent involvement of the Federal Republic in attempts to stabilize the region.

German politicians showed a great deal of restraint towards Washington's suggestion to broaden NATO's impact and transform it from a European defensive pact into "a force for peace from the Middle East to Central Asia". They did not want the Atlantic Alliance to play the role of "a world policeman" that intervenes worldwide at will, which is what the Clinton administration appeared to envision<sup>5</sup>.

None of this altered the fact that the politicians of the "red-and-green" coalition got along fairly well with the Clinton administration. They liked the multilateral approach of the Democratic administration to many international issues and its ability to find common ground with allies and partners. On the contrary, the relationship with G.W. Bush, who took the office of the U.S. President in January 2001, turned out to be troubled from the very outset. Not only did the partners fail to forge emotional ties, they were also divided by fundamental differences on foreign policy values, goals, methods and priorities.

Against this background, the German Chancellor Schröder's reaction to the 9/11 attacks, with a nearly immediate declaration of *uneingeschränkte Solidarität* with America, could raise some eyebrows. This, however, was an almost natural response that fit into the general sentiment of sympathy and support that the world showed the Americans after the Al-Kaida attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Soon afterwards, the German leader announced his country's readiness to engage in military action, legitimized by, among other things, the unprecedented (in NATO's history) implementation of art. 5 of the Washington Treaty. Chancellor Schröder was even prepared to risk the collapse of his own government to get the *Bundestag* to approve the deployment of German troops in a military operation against Al-Kaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan. As Germany agreed to join military operations, even at the price of "going against the flow" of popular sentiment, the SPD-Alliance '90/The Greens-led government was motivated not only by its desire to deliver on its Alliance commitments and remain loyal to the United States but also by its sense of responsibility for international security<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see: J. K i w e r s k a, *Niemcy we współpracy transatlantyckiej*, in: *Polityka zagraniczna zjednoczonych Niemiec*, Poznań 2011, pp. 204-206.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. M a l i n o w s k i, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa...*, p. 44 ff.

The proclamation of the “Bush doctrine” in 2002 opened a new chapter in U.S.-German relations. At the time, Berlin harshly criticized both the American tactic and the extension of counter-terrorist operations to Iraq. While Germany showed solidarity with Washington in its war on terrorism, it had legitimate objections to the approach of its American ally’s unilateralism, lack of consultation, its concept of preventive war and its preference for the use of force as a dominant instrument for resolving international issues, all of which was the essence of the “Bush doctrine”<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, the long-standing anti-Americanism of the German public opinion was now accompanied by a growing criticism of the United States coming from the German government. Chancellor Schröder even sought to benefit from Germans’ aversion to the war with Iraq, President Bush and American policies in his *Bundestag* election campaign in 2002. In such an atmosphere, the relations between Washington and Berlin were described as poisoned<sup>8</sup>. Further turbulence followed in the late 2002 and the early 2003 when, next to Paris and Moscow, Berlin found itself among the architects of the so-called refusal front which severely criticized American plans towards Iraq. In February 2003, Germany contributed to the biggest ever decision-making crisis in the NATO as it blocked Bush’s plans to strengthen Turkey’s missile defense capabilities.

Berlin’s anti-Americanism, aligned directly with the sentiments of the majority of the German public, was not only an expression of disapproval for the use of force and war as a way to resolve the Iraqi crisis. It was also a consequence of changes in Germany’s view of its role in the world and an attempt to take advantage of its new-found status as a fully-sovereign and “normal” state that was also the strongest in Europe. On the one hand, this meant that faced with conflicts, Germany could and had to join forces with other powers but should not shirk responsibility. On the other hand, the resulting sense of power and importance created a will to act independently if not confrontationally<sup>9</sup>.

This collapse of American-German relations had broader implications which posed danger to the transatlantic relationship, as it weakened it in unpre-

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<sup>7</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States, Washington, The White House, September 2002; see also I. H. D a l d e r, J. M. L i n d s a y, *The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of America’s Foreign Policy*, Washington 2003, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in: R. W o l f f e, H. S i m o n i a n, H. W i l l i a m s o n, *US condemns “poisoned” relations with Berlin*, “Financial Times” September 21, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> An interesting analysis of the factors that influenced the stances taken by the German government was presented on May 11, 2004 during a speech by K. D. Voigt at *Georg August Universität* in Göttingen, *Deutsch-amerikanische Beziehungen – Krise oder Neuanfang?* [www.auswaertiges-amt.de/www/de/augebe\\_archiv?archiv\\_id=5695](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/www/de/augebe_archiv?archiv_id=5695)

cedented ways<sup>10</sup>. This led to tensions in Berlin's relationships with partners in Central and Eastern Europe and especially Poland, which adopted a strongly pro-American approach to the Iraq conflict. Pressures on the Atlantic Alliance were nevertheless the dominant issue. This, at least, was the assessment, at the time, of the developments between Berlin and Washington. Hence the need to clear the air in mutual relations. Yet, improvements in American-German relations required time, changes in the mutual approach and a new set of circumstances. Over time, political disagreements calmed down and the parties showed willingness to restore proper relations.

However, it was not until the electoral win of the Christian Democrats in 2005 and the assumption of the chancellor office by Angela Merkel that a real change was accomplished. The new leader of the German coalition government, which, next to *CDU/CSU*, was also composed of the *SPD*, saw good relations with the American superpower as a factor for strengthening Germany's position not only in Europe but also worldwide. Thus, despite the skepticism that continued to pervade German society and the public disapproval of the Bush administration, anti-Americanism was no longer the major factor in Berlin's foreign policy. The new Chancellor restored, in German politics, the paradigm of avoiding the choice between transatlantic cooperation and European integration.

In fact, changes were seen also on the other side of the Atlantic. Even the Bush administration realized the need for more multilateral relations with its allies, including Germany. In this sense, the collapse of American-German relations may be viewed as having favorable impact on the Atlantic Alliance, as it made it less asymmetrical. As a consequence, it was particularly Berlin that gained the ability to influence American foreign policy, as evidenced by lesser reluctance from Bush to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A clear improvement was seen in Washington-Berlin relations while the United States "recovered" Germany as its ally<sup>11</sup>.

As a result of recent events, American-German relations took on a whole new shape becoming nearly partner-based. The events weakened America's international standing, its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan strongly undermining the superpower's image. This put Chancellor Merkel in a uniquely advantageous position vis-à-vis the United States. More than ever before, Germany realized its strength internationally and, most of all, its growing

<sup>10</sup> I. H. D a a l d e r, *The End of Atlanticism*, "Survival" vol. 45, no. 2, 2003, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> J. J a n e s, E. S a n d s c h n e i d e r, *The New and Old Agenda. Restoring the German-American Relationship*, "Internationale Politik" (Transatlantic Edition), Special Issue 2006, pp. 8-11.

influence in the European Union. Equally important was the fact that Berlin had behind it the experience of divergence with Washington, which gave it the confidence that it did not have to agree with its American ally on all issues or fully embrace its policies.

Without fearing the consequences, Chancellor Merkel felt at liberty to criticize the Bush administration for its actions and empowered to block some American plans such as its strategy to bring Ukraine and Georgia closer to Atlantic Alliance membership, as proposed during the NATO summit of April 2008. In fact, Germany's independence from the United States and its assertiveness and skepticism on some suggestions and expectations of the Americans was hardly avoidable at a time when anti-Americanism became part and parcel of Germany's public life and when Bush-led America evoked more disapproval than fondness in Germany and the rest of the world.

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## 2.

### A tough start

Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. Presidential election probably was not the outcome that Angela Merkel, who had demonstrated remarkable loyalty to the Republican administration, had hoped for. This explains why, in July 2008, the German leader refused to allow Senator Obama, at the time the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Presidency, to deliver a speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The official reason for the refusal was that the site had special significance and was reserved for exceptional occasions and special guests. The site was used in 1987 by President Reagan, who appeared on the western side of the Brandenburg Gate appealing to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov to tear down the Berlin Wall. Later, in 1994, President Clinton spoke in front of the Brandenburg Gate in reunified Berlin. The real reason was that the German Chancellor did not want to make the impression that she favored the Democratic candidate leaving the Republican candidate Senator John McCain at a disadvantage. There was even disagreement over the issue within the "Grand Coalition", as *SPD* was prepared to allow the African-American Senator from Illinois to appear in front of the Brandenburg Gate.

What made Merkel's refusal all the more significant was that the Democratic candidate was received enthusiastically wherever he traveled in Europe during his election campaign. Besides Germany, he also visited France and the United Kingdom. And yet it was in Berlin that he was applauded with particular fervor. There is no denying that a crowd of some 200,000 Germans applauding the U.S. Presidential candidate, who was forced to appear in front of the Victory Column rather than the Brandenburg Gate, was a remarkable sight. The enthusiasm that the Germans expressed for Obama was – to put it simply – a show of a nearly unanimous rejection by the German public of President Bush, who was still in office at the time. It showed also that, much like the vast majority of the European public and the Old World leaders, Germans were dismayed with the policies of the Bush administration and waited anxiously for the new occupant of the White House to "return the good America" to them<sup>12</sup>. One might get the impression that anti-American sentiments, which ran strong in

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<sup>12</sup> These words appeared in a headline in "Die Zeit" daily published shortly before the Congressional election in November 2006.

the Federal Republic, were personal and signified a profoundly critical view of Bush and his actions rather than the United States as a nation. This explains the enthusiasm with which crowds in Berlin received Obama's remark: "(...) I know my country is not perfect itself (...) but we need each other. America has no better partner than Europe. Now is the time (...) to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century"<sup>13</sup>.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Obama's victory in November 2008 evoked such a warm welcome in Germany. Note that no American politician in a long time elicited such fondness and even enthusiasm as the new U.S. President. After all, Germans followed the general European trend of nearly adoring the African-American resident of the White House. Even at the very start of his presidency, Obama had a number of things going for him: support from the vast majority of Europeans, reinforced with a sense of relief about the White House being no longer occupied by the loathed G. W. Bush, who was severely criticized for his Iraq involvement, his arrogance and even incompetence. On the other hand, the foreign policy style proclaimed by Obama in his election campaign, which was to emphasize collaboration and listening to partners and which, in relations with adversaries, was to focus on negotiations and political pressure rather than the use of force, matched the preferences of many European capitals, not least Berlin. Such an approach to foreign politics appeared to be closer to a "Venusian" Europe and the German principle of *Zivilmacht*. It could also offer Germany better prospects for realizing its aspirations in the international arena while allowing for a certain degree of restraint and full sovereignty.

On the other hand, the fact that Chancellor Merkel got along so well with Bush, which might be the reason why she withheld her permission to the victorious, as it later turned out, Democratic candidate to appear in front of the Brandenburg Gate, made her position vis-à-vis the new U.S. President rather precarious not to say more difficult. One should nevertheless stress that the first persons that President Obama spoke to almost immediately upon taking office at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January 2009 were – right next to the French President – no other but the German Chancellor. In the case of both of these heads of state/government, Obama was offered a commitment to work together "in a resolute fashion"<sup>14</sup>, especially in reconstructing Afghanistan and overcoming the global financial and economic crises which – as is commonly

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<sup>13</sup> The quote comes from: *Sen o wolności*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" July 26-27, 2008; see also *Bundesregierung will Obama beim Wort nehmen*, Spiegel Online, July 26, 2008, [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-568234,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-568234,00.html)

<sup>14</sup> Cited in: *Obama Calls Europe, Gets Largely Cooperative Response*, Deutsche Welle, January 27, 2009, [www.dw-world.com/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,,3978615,00.html](http://www.dw-world.com/popups/popup_printcontent/0,,3978615,00.html)

known – emanated from the United States to other parts of the world towards the end of Bush’s term of office.

During the first year of Obama’s Presidency, German and U.S. leaders met on multiple occasions. These included two visits to Washington in June and November 2009 made by the German leader to see the U.S. President. When commenting on the event, observers agreed that the two politicians were separated by a polite distance and restraint – their relations were certainly less heartfelt than those between Merkel and Bush. Yet, the only reason for this was President Obama’s general manner of treating his foreign interlocutors less cordially.

Although one cannot dismiss the significance of the temperature and atmosphere of meetings between these politicians, they did not really define the state of American-German relations. There were too many challenges and problems waiting to be addressed and resolved, most of them with a broader transatlantic context. In addition to the world financial and economic crises, the most important of them included the escalation of fighting in Afghanistan and their spread as far as the Afghan-Pakistani border. There were also the issues of Iraq, which was far from achieving stability, the threat of Iran acquiring nuclear capabilities, which was quite real even then, the danger of further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the slow-down in the peace process in the Middle East, environmental and energy issues, the unsettled war on terrorism and, finally, the redefining of relations with Russia. Collaboration in addressing these challenges was critical not only for American-German relations but also for restoring the significance, consistency and effectiveness of the transatlantic relationship.

As Obama modified the tone and style of foreign policy, which became dominated by the willingness to work together and engage in dialogue and negotiations as well as by promises to close down the Guantanamo prison, combat climate change, and resort to soft power, the U.S. President managed to improve America’s image very quickly. His pragmatism in action and his habit of consulting his partners took the place of ideology-driven policy setting and authoritative decision-making which characterized the Bush administration. The European part of the Atlantic Alliance could feel more appreciated, essential and responsible. The flip side of the coin was that Washington expected Europe, and especially Berlin, to engage more broadly internationally in support of American efforts. A number of issues that were difficult for both sides awaited resolution. The way they would be addressed and resolved could define the future mutual relationship.



The key issue was the Afghan problem which, due to the political reluctance to increase military deployments on the part of the majority of the states participating in the Atlantic Alliance's ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission, became an example of decline in NATO solidarity. If the transatlantic community were to be strengthened and given a renewed momentum, the success of the Afghan mission or at least a greater sense of responsibility and greater willingness to work together appeared to be *sine qua non* conditions. The role of the Federal Republic in this process was clearly substantial. Even during the first meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington in the early February 2009, Foreign Affairs Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was told that Germany should play a greater role in Afghanistan. "We need our closest allies, like Germany, to help us ensure the success and stability of the Afghan nation at this very important moment", said the new head of American diplomacy<sup>15</sup>. Many commentators had no doubt that the Obama administration viewed greater engagement in Afghanistan by European allies as critical for the "new transatlantic agenda"<sup>16</sup>.

In late March 2009, President Obama presented his own strategy for Afghanistan aimed at reversing the course of the Hindu Kush war. Emphasis in the strategy was placed on political efforts: it proposed to launch negotiations with various parties in Afghanistan, including the moderate fractions of the Taliban, expand Afghan military and police training, and engage more broadly in restoring the country and promoting its growth. Only as a secondary consideration did it suggest to increase military presence in Afghanistan (both American, by close to 30,000 personnel, and allied).

Admittedly, Berlin welcomed such plans, and especially the intention to step up civilian and political efforts. They were consistent with the nature of German political behavior and the opinions long expressed by German analysts<sup>17</sup>. On the contrary, President Obama's appeal to European partners during his visit in Europe in the early April of 2009, for the placement of more allied forces in Afghanistan (with police officers and experts to be deployed in addition to military personnel), was received as coldly as the requests of the Bush administration in the past. Such reluctance was expressed not only by Germany. It was with the greatest of difficulties that European NATO members managed

<sup>15</sup> Clinton Calls for German Help in Afghanistan, February 3, 2009, [www.dw-world.com/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,4000396,00.html](http://www.dw-world.com/popups/popup_printcontent/0,4000396,00.html)

<sup>16</sup> Clinton preist deutschen Afghanistan-Einsatz, Spiegel Online, February 3, 2009, [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-605347,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-605347,00.html)

<sup>17</sup> J. R i e s t e r, *Waiting for September: German-American Relations between Elections*, AICGS, No. 30, June 2009, p. 2.

to gather a 4000-strong contingent, comprised mainly of police officers and trainers, and send it to Afghanistan. Even this deployment was made only for the duration of the presidential election in August 2009.

Even weaker was the response of the European allies to another Afghan strategy, which President Obama announced in December 2009. The strategy envisioned sending another 35,000 American troops to Afghanistan and increasing deployments from other countries. The American leader recalled the NATO nature of the ISAF mission arguing that the allies should feel responsible for how events would unfold in that part of the world. This was another test of allied solidarity. Europe reacted to Obama's appeal unenthusiastically. The United Kingdom, America's most loyal ally in the Old World, offered to dispatch as few as 500 troops. A similar offer came from Turkey. France, in its turn, withheld any promises even though President Nicolas Sarkozy applauded Obama's plan as "bold, firm and clear". Against this background, the decision of the Polish authorities, taken against popular sentiment back home (a mere 15-20 percent of the Poles polled supported Polish presence in Hindu Kush), to send another 600 troops to Afghanistan and Slovakia's commitment to send 250 soldiers, were exceptionally generous. Especially in view of the actual capacities and potentials of the two states<sup>18</sup>.

Particular circumstances emerged in Germany where the matter of deploying additional *Bundeswehr* forces sparked a heated debate not only between the opposition and the government but also within the ruling coalition. After the *Bundestage* election of September 29, 2009, the coalition was made up of *CDU/CSU* and *FDP*. During the debate, tragic circumstances of the September 2009 came to light. Ordered by the German command of the Kunduz Province base, American aircraft struck a target that was indicated to them. This apparently grave mistake left more than 70 Afghans, mostly civilians, dead. The facts revealed in December 2009 showed the forces were carrying out a secret plan to eliminate key rebel leaders with the approval of the Berlin government. The German public, which was opposed not only to armed operations in Afghanistan but also to the very presence of German troops in that country (prior surveys showed that only 32% of the Germans supported maintaining a German contingent near the Hindu Kush)<sup>19</sup>, was deeply shocked. Even in September 2009, the German officers and high-ranking officials responsible for the tragic incident were discharged. Further dismissals were planned for December 2009.

<sup>18</sup> The data was given in the "Gazeta Wyborcza" issues of November 10-11, 2009 and December 3, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *Germans positive about NATO leaders, dislike Afghanistan mission*, Deutsche Welle, April 3, 2009, [www.dw-world.de](http://www.dw-world.de)

Under such circumstances, Chancellor Merkel's effort to persuade *FDP* coalition partners to send additional *Bundeswehr* soldiers to the Hindu Kush came across as an act of political valor and an expression of exceptional allied solidarity. The German contingent in Afghanistan, which amounted to ca. 4300 troops, was to be increased by another 500, whereas 350 soldiers were to comprise a special reserve prepared for deployment in the conflict region. The decision was announced on January 26, 2010, while in February the *Bundestag* extended the *Bundeswehr's* military mission in Afghanistan increasing the German contingent to 5350 troops. The full plan was to raise the numbers up to 5000 troops by the end of 2010. Furthermore, over the following 5 years, Berlin resolved to appropriate US\$ 71 million to Afghanistan's restoration and development<sup>20</sup>. The gesture was meant to reduce the impression that the *CDU/CSU-FDP* coalition was departing from the *Zivilmacht* principle by sending successive troops to the Hindu Kush.

It is nevertheless true that in approving, against public sentiment, an additional deployment of the German military (ca. 250,000 *Bundeswehr* troops), which although limited in numbers proved to be a significant act of transatlantic solidarity, Chancellor Merkel reasserted her commitments not only to seeking improvements in German-American relations but also to strengthening the Atlantic Alliance. On the other hand, Germans' reluctance to engage in the Afghan war in keeping with allied obligations turned out not to be solely the result of their dislike of the previous U.S. President. The German public and the majority of Berlin politicians never saw the Afghan war as a fight for survival against terrorism. Rather, they viewed the conflict as one forced upon them by their alliance with the United States and perhaps their NATO obligations but not as a threat to German interests. That prompted reluctance to Washington's appeals even though they came from President Obama, who was generally popular in Germany.

The same was arguably true for the majority of European partners. Although Afghanistan was commonly seen as a big test of NATO's resilience and significance in transatlantic relations, Europe nevertheless showed a great deal of restraint in responding to appeals from the U.S. President. While demonstrating a strong determination to consult and cooperate with European countries, the President nevertheless expected them to increase their engagement and assume obligations in both Afghanistan and elsewhere on the international

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<sup>20</sup> Statement der Bundeskanzlerin zur Konzeption der Bundesregierung für die Afghanistan-Konferenz in London, January 26, 2010, [www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2010/01/2](http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2010/01/2)

arena. However, neither Berlin nor any other European capital was prepared to assume a much larger burden and go along with the Americans' request for partnership. There were even malicious opinions that all Obama wanted from Europe was its help in beefing up his military presence in Afghanistan<sup>21</sup>. Without a doubt, it became increasingly clear that the new U.S. President would assess their European partners on their willingness to play along and share responsibilities. He appeared to have been irritated by the sluggishness of the European Union which, despite their declared commitments to the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), proved unable to take a clear, bold and effective stance as a major international actor.

Not without a good reason, German analysts argued that Berlin should play a greater role in mobilizing the European community. They warned that failing such efforts, "the Obama administration would end up being discouraged by the passivity of the European Union and might turn to other partners and focus on other fields of cooperation". Germany would lose influence "not only if it fails to fulfill the hopes and expectations associated with this country but also if it does not take initiative and does not stimulate others"<sup>22</sup>. It appears that this was precisely what the Obama administration hoped to see from Berlin. All despite the "polite distance" that remained between the U.S. President and Madame Chancellor.

It is against this backdrop that one should assess Chancellor Merkel's visit to Washington in the early November 2009. Its defining moment was the address on Capitol Hill by the German leader. The fact that this was only the second time in the history of American-German relations that the German leader was given an opportunity to speak to a joint meeting of Congress should be viewed as a particular distinction. Before Merkel, it was only Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, "the founding father of post-war Germany" and the architect of the Atlantic orientation in Germany's foreign policy that appeared on Capitol Hill in 1957. Therefore, the invitation extended to Angela Merkel could only be interpreted as confirmation of the special international role of the Federal Republic and its importance as a partner in Washington's calculations. In fact, the entire address by the German leader, which devoted an equal amount of space to historical reflection, emotions and visions of the future, was designed to support that view. Some of the key parts of the speech related to transatlantic relations in which Chancellor Merkel depicted herself as Europe's leader

<sup>21</sup> Cf. statements made during the Washington summit within the framework of the *Bergerdorfer Gesprächskreis* (March 9-11, 2010) published in: *Grenzen der Macht: Europa und Amerika in einer neuen Weltordnung*, Hamburg 2010, pp. 28-30.

<sup>22</sup> J. R i e s t e r, *Waiting for September...*, p. 7.

speaking for Europe and presenting a vision that was adequate for a unifying Continent.

Recalling a memorable phrase used by President Bush Senior in May 1989, the Chancellor called American-European relations “a partnership in leadership”. In this way, she demonstrated a new and more balanced nature of the transatlantic relationship. She claimed that the “partnership in leadership should be expressed by jointly resolving key problems, conflicts and challenges of the present day: the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iran and its nuclear program, climate change and economic difficulties. “Germany stands single, Europe is reunified. This is what we have achieved. Today’s generation needs to prove that it can meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (...) we are able to tear down walls of today”, said the German Chancellor nearly in the spirit of the American mission. As she addressed Americans, she called for stronger engagement in combatting climate change. She concluded: “The world will look to us. We have no time to lose”<sup>23</sup>.

Although the German leader never received a formal mandate to speak on behalf of Europe, the vision of Atlantic cooperation she presented must have struck the right chords in Washington even though it lacked concrete proposals and, for the most part, remained in the realm of lofty rhetoric. The address was definitely in line with the expectations expressed by President Obama. The German Chancellor also associated her country’s new role and significance in an integrating Europe with greater responsibility for global security, economy, environmental protection and other more or less serious international problems. She strengthened the image of a strong unified Germany which, contrary to its past record, no longer constituted a threat or a challenge and, rather, had become part and parcel of the democratic order. More effectively than ever before in post-war history, Germany was in a position to contribute to shaping the face of contemporary world. The question remains whether Germany or Europe will follow their words with action. Will they be willing to commit to deliver on what is expected of them and play the role of a strategic partner to the United States? Clearly, this will require greater sacrifice, the commitment of more resources, overcoming public reluctance and developing a shared strategic vision.

The main remaining forum for developing such a common vision was NATO, where a debate on a new strategic concept was ongoing. Among many issues and topic raised, attempts were made during the debate and the

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<sup>23</sup> Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel before the United States Congress, November 3, 2009, [www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2009/2009-11-03-merkel-usa-kon...](http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2009/2009-11-03-merkel-usa-kon...)

subsequent analyses to define the nature of NATO and specifically determine whether it was to remain a defensive organization focused on the Euro-Atlantic region or a force for common security with greater expeditionary profile and a well-established record of interventions around the globe. The point therefore was to settle the dilemma of whether or not to globalize the Atlantic Alliance<sup>24</sup>.

It therefore became necessary to return to the deliberations that dominated the debate on NATO's new strategic concept a decade earlier. The difference this time was that the Atlantic Alliance had practically made its choice already. By launching a military mission in Afghanistan and "crossing the Rubicon", NATO refused to limit itself to the Euro-Atlantic region. Its assumption of responsibility for the entire Afghan operation ranging from military action to the construction of roads and schools, became a test of sorts for its transformative capabilities<sup>25</sup>. According to some commentators, this meant it was no longer subject to debate where and whether NATO was free to operate. Geographic limitations no longer applied to the Alliance's military operations. If any barriers existed, they were political in nature as the deployment of forces was subject to the consensus of states and their possible agreement to participate. In other words, "with little fanfare (...), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has gone global. (...) Only a truly global alliance can address the global challenges of the day", argued analysts<sup>26</sup>.

Nevertheless, the issue was not fully settled and viewed as a foregone conclusion by everyone involved. Its nature boiled down to the single question of whether NATO was to serve as "the world policeman" becoming an element of the American global policy, which is something that the Clinton administration had fought for in vein. Or should its main responsibility be for protecting the territories of the member states, i.e. should it adhere to the Alliance's original role? While opinions on the issue varied, they also evolved driven by the emergence of new facts in the international arena<sup>27</sup>. Early on in 2006, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer argued in an interview for a Polish newspaper that "NATO is not and will never be the world policeman. I am against the idea to create any global NATO"<sup>28</sup>. A few years later, in March

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *NATO 2020. Zapewnione bezpieczeństwo. Dynamiczne zaangażowanie. "Raport Albright"*, preface and editing A.D. Rotfeld, Warsaw 2010, pp. 10-12.

<sup>25</sup> M. Berdal, D. Ucko, *NATO at 60*, "Survival" vol. 51, no. 2, 2009, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> I. H. Daalder, J. Goldgeier, *Global NATO*, [www.brookings.edu/articles/2006/09globalgovernance\\_daalder.aspx?p=1](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2006/09globalgovernance_daalder.aspx?p=1); see also A. Bilski, *Globalne NATO? – Yes we can!* "Gazeta Wyborcza" February 20, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. M. Berdal, D. Ucko, *NATO at 60...* p. 72-73.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer: *NATO nie będzie żandarmem świata*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" November 8, 2006.

2009, NATO's head was no longer so uncompromising. While he maintained that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization may not become another UN, he added that its responsibilities may not be limited to protecting the territories of its member states. "A changing world requires a changing NATO", he stressed in an interview for "Der Spiegel"<sup>29</sup>.

Different German politicians saw the issue differently. Under the "grand coalition" of the *CDU/CSU-SPD*, the head of German diplomacy Steinmeier consistently rejected the concept of transforming the Atlantic Alliance into a global security organization: "I am confident that Euroatlantic security must remain NATO's priority. Our goal may not be to turn it into a 'World Policeman'"<sup>30</sup>. Chancellor Merkel admitted that NATO must define its mission in broader terms and even outline a framework for collaboration with other organizations to resolve such global challenges as terrorism, climate change and natural disasters<sup>31</sup>. Meanwhile, the German military community suggested that NATO should confine its missions. Its main goal continues to be to maintain peace and stabilize Europe. It must not waste its precious resources on missions that far depart from its treaty-defined rule such as combating natural disasters or securing e.g. sporting events<sup>32</sup>.

Even in Poland, which could not at the time possibly be blamed for avoiding involvement in out-of-area operations, opinions varied widely. "We expect the Alliance to develop a sustainable defense policy. While perceiving remote threats, it shall not lose sight of its original function, which is to collectively defend its member states. Efforts to protect the territories of the member states should be viewed as a priority", wrote Aleksander Szczygło and Witold Waszczykowski, then heads of the National Security Office, in March 2009. High-ranking officials associated with President Lech Kaczyński added that before engaging in remote operations, we should define our goals and ambitions. Is the only purpose of an operation to avert a crisis to keep it from reaching our borders? Or is there a broader goal of resolving world problems<sup>33</sup>. Statements

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer: *Wir rauchen ein neues Konzept*, "Der Spiegel" March 28, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in: *Verteidigungsbündnis: Für Merkel soll NATO-Gipfel Bündnis stärken*, Zeit online, [www.zeit.de/news/artikel/2009/03/28/2762069.xm](http://www.zeit.de/news/artikel/2009/03/28/2762069.xm)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> U. W e i s s e r, *Breaking the Taboos*, "The Security Times" February 2009; also in *Die NATO kann nicht als Weltpolizist eingesetzt werden*. Interview with former head of the NATO Military Commission retired gen. Harald Kujat, Deutschlandfunk, April 3, 2009, [www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/interview\\_dlf/945089/](http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/interview_dlf/945089/)

<sup>33</sup> A. S z c z y g ł o, W. W a s z c z y k o w s k i, *Jakiego NATO chcemy*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" March 16, 2009.

made in a similar vein came from then Minister of National Defense Bogdan Klich: "Poland is in favor of maintaining the traditional nature of the Alliance [as one protecting the NATO's territory – note by J.K.] while improving the common capacities to carry out stabilization missions"<sup>34</sup>.

However, the main concern for Polish politicians as well as the leaders of other Central and Eastern European states, was whether NATO would develop contingency plans to defend itself from attacks on its Eastern Flank. The option of retaining the traditional defensive focus of the Atlantic Alliance entailed the once heatedly debated issue of allies' security obligations enshrined in art. 5 of the Washington Treaty. The Treaty obliged all states to come to the rescue of any attacked ally as soon as possible and to bear down on the attacker with the greatest possible force. Note that article 5 has only been used once so far, in the wake of the terrorist attack on America in September 2001. Even then, skeptics were doubtful as to whether the allied countries were obliged to provide unconditional support and who should define its scope. At the time, the question was merely theoretical as the Bush administration never actually chose to use allied help in its attack on Afghanistan (other than that of the United Kingdom and, sporadically, other NATO member states). The fact of the matter, therefore, is that art. 5 has never been applied.

The matter returned to agendas during a debate on the new strategy for the Atlantic Alliance and in the context of the announced rejoining of the integrated military NATO structure by France. The debate was further fueled by Russia's intervention in Georgia in August 2008, which ended with its separation into two republics: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Georgian conflict showed that European security could not be taken for granted. At the time, serious concerns were expressed by the Baltic countries which realized that not only did no plans exist for defending their territories but that it was also very doubtful that a general will existed to take such action. Therefore, the parties began deliberating not only how to fulfill art. 5 guarantees in practice but also whether its application was at all obligatory. France, for instance, rejected the automatic application of art. 5 claiming it had the right to use its discretion and make its own decisions accordingly to circumstances. Similar opinions were voiced by Germany at the time<sup>35</sup>.

Statements of this sort, repeated by other member states, could completely demolish the foundation on which NATO was built or at least undermine the

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Bogdan Klich: *NATO jak muszkieterowie*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" February 19, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> N. B u s e, *Krieg gegen Russland? Die Nato diskutiert über die Lehren aus dem Georgien-Konflikt*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" November 3, 2008.



credibility and significance of the Atlantic Alliance. Therefore, it was not the issue of the Alliance's actions and having it assume a global scope but rather that of recognizing art. 5 as central to the organization that came to the forefront. It was therefore necessary and crucial to remove any ambiguities from the wording of the Washington Treaty. Hence, the significance of the April 2009 declaration adopted during the NATO summit in Strasburg and Kehl, which stated clearly that: "A strong collective defense of our populations, territory and forces is the core purpose of the Alliance and remains our most important security task"<sup>36</sup>. This provided an excellent starting point for the development of a new strategic concept of the Alliance, once its very foundation has been safeguarded.

As for the globalization of NATO's operations, the head of Polish diplomacy Radosław Sikorski agreed that the European pillar of NATO should, in response to Washington's expectations, assume greater responsibility for the tasks that are essential for today's interests. Next to Afghanistan, the Alliance extend the scope of its interests and activities to the Iran threat, the situation in Africa and even environmental protection issues<sup>37</sup>. The global scope of the Atlantic Alliance was promoted by the security analyst Artur Bilski who argued that a psychological barrier has been overcome and that, after the intervention in Afghanistan, nothing stands in the way of extending the NATO doctrine beyond the transatlantic region. Therefore, the new strategic concept should make the Alliance a global organization or, in fact, reinforce its already acquired broad nature<sup>38</sup>.

Meanwhile, while recognizing NATO's key significance to Euroatlantic security, the Obama administration expected the Alliance's member states to make global commitments and offer greater support to the United States in out-of-area operations. This concerned not only Afghanistan, as critical as it was. Out-of-area operations were a test of NATO's true capabilities and effectiveness and could determine the Alliance's future. The Obama administration hoped also to see Europe assume more obligations in transatlantic defensive structures. He expressed such hopes explicitly at the NATO summit of April 2009. They were mentioned as well by American experts, who asked questions of utmost importance for the debate over the Alliance's ability to handle further challenges. The American analyst Charles A. Kupchan wondered whether, in view of the difficulties faced by NATO in the Hindu Kush region, the allies

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<sup>36</sup> NATO Summit: Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration, April 2009, [www.acronym.org.uk/official-and-govt-documents/nato-summit-strasbourgkehl-summit-declaration-april-2009](http://www.acronym.org.uk/official-and-govt-documents/nato-summit-strasbourgkehl-summit-declaration-april-2009)

<sup>37</sup> R. S i k o r s k i, *Good luck, Mr. President*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" January 20, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> A. B i l s k i, *Globalne NATO? – Yes we can!...*

were indeed capable of assuming new responsibilities e.g. in the Gaza Strip or other parts of the world far removed from the Euroatlantic arena<sup>39</sup>.

Another project was also proposed, which drew on the Afghan experience and which consisted in turning NATO into an alliance of two groups. One of them, the “hard power”, would be made up of the states willing to send their soldiers to fight and whose militaries were fit for combat. In addition to the United States, the group would include Poland, Canada and the United Kingdom. Group two, the “soft power”, would combine the countries less willing to engage in armed combat. This group, expected to provide military, training, economic and financial assistance, would include France and the Benelux as well as Germany. The idea to divide responsibilities within the Alliance was circulated among politicians and experts but failed to evoke enthusiasm in the majority of the member states.

In view of such numerous dilemmas and problems that affected the condition of the Atlantic Alliance, it is no wonder that its strengthening was closely associated with the new strategic concept. Its adoption at the NATO summit in Lisbon on November 19, 2010 was considered a major step towards consolidating the Atlantic Alliance<sup>40</sup>. The Lisbon document was in fact an attempt to resolve the fundamental dilemma of the North Atlantic Pact that resulted from tensions between the two basic roles of the Alliance and its global engagement.

The strategic concept defined expressly the three fundamental missions of the Alliance, which were to ensure collective defense, manage crises and ensure defensive security. The concept sought to harmonize out-of-area operations with the primary defensive function of NATO. To that end, it was essential to recognize the significance of defending the territories of the member states, which was still the *raison d'être* of the Alliance. To strengthen that function, the Alliance engaged in assurance measures (it updated contingency plans, built a missile defense shield and conducted military maneuvers in new member states). Meanwhile, a broader definition was adopted for the defense of allied territories, which included out-of-area military interventions. The Lisbon Strategy stated: “Crises and conflicts beyond NATO borders can pose a direct threat to the security of Alliance territory and populations. NATO will therefore

<sup>39</sup> Ch. A. Kupchan, *NATO's Hard Choices*, “New York Times” March 31, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon “Active Engagement, Modern Defense”. Elaboration on some of the precepts of the Concept was provided in the Lisbon Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Lisbon on 20 November 2010. Press Release PR/CP(2010)0155.

engage, where possible and when necessary, to prevent crises, manage crises, stabilize post-conflict situations and support reconstruction”<sup>41</sup>.

The strengthening of the American-European relations per se was discussed in a passage that stressed the significance of the European Union, which it described as “a special and key partner to NATO”. It was emphasized expressly that the two organizations should play complimentary roles in supporting peace and security across the world. Furthermore, NATO declared its commitment to strengthen cooperation in anti-crisis operations (through e.g. coordinated planning and operational collaboration) and military capabilities. If anything was missing in NATO-EU relations, it was certainly a proclamation to create a single forum for dialogue with a broader political agenda. Nevertheless, one should admit that the new strategic concept expressed the will and need to deepen NATO’s transatlantic dimension by tightening its institutional ties with the EU.

In assessing the importance of the Strategic Concept that was adopted in Lisbon, one should admit that it undoubtedly succeeded in resolving the Atlantic Alliance’s main dilemma that caused friction among some of its members, or at least that the dilemma’s disintegrating effects were diluted. The language of compromise used in reference to out-of-area operations and the strengthening of the Alliance’s primary function, which was to secure collective defense, helped restore cohesion within NATO, brightening its prospects for its future. Nevertheless, although such efforts stopped short of completely eliminating discrepancies in the positions adopted by individual member states, the fact that such discrepancies were well diagnosed and that genuine attempts were made to resolve them was also of crucial importance. At any rate, the Strategic Concept was thought to have ushered in a new stage in NATO’s actions and prepared the Alliance to respond to a variety of challenges and threats<sup>42</sup>. All this notwithstanding, the basic question that remained was whether the member states would accept the Lisbon conclusions and especially whether or not they would manage to overcome public aversion to military engagement. This, in fact, was the root cause of the dispute and the main reason behind differences in the positions taken. Evidently, this could also influence American-German relations and especially partnership building.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> K. M a l i n o w s k i, *Europa i USA wobec przyszłości Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego*, “Przegląd Zachodni” no. 1, 2013, p. 157-159.

## A common perspective – Russia and disarmament

Regardless of how the provisions of the Strategic Concept were implemented and how the process influenced relations between the United States and its European allies, one area of interest shared between the Obama administration and the Berlin government that was clearly of vital importance was the Russian Federation. This convergence of interests resulted from a change in Washington's approach to Russia, commonly referred to as a reset in mutual relations. The Obama administration proclaimed this new milestone in relations with Moscow during the annual Munich Security Conference in February 2009. "It is time to press the reset button and reinvest in the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia", announced Vice-President Joseph R. Biden in the capital of Bavaria<sup>43</sup>. In today's world of soundbites, the word "reset" became a widespread and popular slogan. And yet, as it turned out quickly, the Obama administration viewed the reset in relations with Russia not only as a clever slogan but also as a real focus of American policy.

There is no denying that the building of lasting security in Europe and resolving global and regional challenges, especially in the face of the emergence of new powers, in particular China, without the help from Russia as a partner, appeared to be significantly more daunting, if not impossible. Therefore, relations with Moscow fit into the new style of the Obama administration which was centered on seeking cooperation and mutual understanding. Hence, the "reset" in relations with Moscow led to the signing, on April 8, 2010, of a new *START* document, which placed significant restrictions on American and Russian nuclear warheads. The document was crucial as the *START I* Treaty, signed back in December 1991 by G. H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, was due to expire shortly.

The Russia-linked interests of the United States included the continued use of the Russian (post-Soviet) air- and land-space to transport supplies to western allies stationed in Afghanistan. Such logistic help was an almost *sine qua non* condition for the success of the NATO/American mission in the Hindu Kush

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<sup>43</sup> J. R. Biden, Speech at the 45th Munich Conference, February 7, 2009, [www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2009=&menu\\_konfer](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konfer)

region. The list of problems that would become significantly harder to settle without Russia's involvement included curbing the Iranian nuclear program and resolving the Middle East conflict. Over time, the list was expanded by the addition of such further challenges as the so called Arab Spring and the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. Russia's approach to such issues was essential – its firm veto in the Security Council of United Nations could block the efforts of the United States and other western countries. If nothing else, such global and regional challenges were reason enough to get along with Moscow.

Without a doubt, the issue of improving Washington-Moscow relations was of vital interest to German politicians. In an article published in the early February 2009, which incidentally was written together with the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Chancellor Merkel argued that although the Georgian conflict created the need to debate the “trust issue” in relations with Moscow, a return to the Cold War was out of the question and “trust-based” relations were still possible. Merkel actually demonstrated the significance of a strong partnership between Europe and both the United States and Russia<sup>44</sup>. While Merkel did indeed abandon the exceptional intimacy that characterized the relations between Chancellor Schröder and President Vladimir Putin and was at times critical of various aspects of Russian policies, Berlin nevertheless admitted that everyone stood to gain from improving U.S.-Russian relations and that transatlantic security could not be built in spite of or in opposition to Russia<sup>45</sup>.

The view of Russia as crucial for pan-European security architecture was held in particular by the German left. In February 2009, when the reset in relations with Russia was announced in Munich, former head of German diplomacy Fischer of the Green party went as far as to support the admission of the Russian Federation into NATO. In his view, it was better to bring a difficult partner into the community than to hold a strategic rival at arm's length<sup>46</sup>. Steinmeier, then Foreign Affairs Minister, too sought to ensure, in a spirit that was typical of German Social-Democrats, that Germany remain sensitive to Russian interests. Although he never considered Russian membership in NATO as a viable option, he nevertheless supported the establishment of a “common security zone stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok”<sup>47</sup>. It is

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<sup>44</sup> “Süddeutsche Zeitung” February 4, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> For more, see: S. Żerko, *Rosja w polityce Niemiec*, in: J. Kiwerska, B. Koszel, M. Tomczak, S. Żerko, *Polityka zagraniczna zjednoczonych Niemiec*, Poznań 2011, pp. 324-336.

<sup>46</sup> J. Fischer, *Difficult partner or strategic rival?* “The German Times” vol. 3, no. 2, February 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 45<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference, February 6, 2009, [www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Reden?2009/090206-BM](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Reden?2009/090206-BM)

therefore hardly surprising that Berlin welcomed the suggestions by Obama and his administration that Russia should not be isolated from the transatlantic area as it was an integral part of Europe and as making it an enemy would be counterproductive.

Although applauded by Berlin, the policy of “resetting” relations with Russia did not come without a price, which the Obama administration paid in relations with Central and Eastern European countries and especially with Poland. While the reset led to the signing of a new *START* Treaty, the United States was forced to make far-reaching concessions to Moscow. A case in point is the Obama administration’s abandonment of the missile-defense shield, whose elements were to be installed in Poland and the Czech Republic. The element to be placed in Poland was a ballistic missile interceptor site – its installation there was guaranteed under the Declaration on Strategic Cooperation signed in August 20, 2008. The Civic Platform and Polish People’s Alliance-led coalition government in Warsaw signed it together with the outgoing Bush administration, which was due to leave the White House a few months later. Poles counted on a closer alignment of their security interests with the priorities of the United States<sup>48</sup>.

When the Democratic administration moved into the White House, the future of the missile defense project became highly uncertain. Ever since he took office, the new president expressed skepticism regarding his predecessor’s armament plans. Poland nevertheless hoped that Obama would not forsake the agreements concluded by President Bush. They believed that certain rules of continuity applied to issues that involved America’s dedicated allies. And yet, to its disappointment, the Warsaw government was officially notified on September 17, 2009 of a change of plans: the Obama administration abandoned the installation of a ballistic missile interceptor site in Poland<sup>49</sup>. Still, the move did not result in a complete departure from the prior plans to build a missile defense shield but rather in their modification. It was nevertheless difficult to overlook the political aspect of the whole affair. There was definitely more to it than technical and financial considerations alone. The new program seemed not only cheaper – it was also technologically superior and, as such, as it was claimed, better suited to guarantee security to the United States and its allies.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. J. K i w e r s k a, *Kwestie bezpieczeństwa w stosunkach polsko-amerykańskich. Trendy i perspektywy*, in: S. Wojciechowski, A. Potyrała (ed.), *Bezpieczeństwo Polski. Współczesne wyzwania*, Warsaw 2014, p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> Many commentators in Europe and nearly all in Poland noted the exceptionally unfortunate coincidence in the dates – September 17 was an anniversary of Russian aggression against Poland in 1939.

However, there was one aspect of much greater importance to Poland in this context: the Russian factor. Realizing that by placing American missile defense installations in Russia's immediate neighborhood, the U.S. would irk Moscow and prompt its fierce reaction, the Obama administration chose to abandon the line of its predecessor. Once President Obama and his associates began to view Russia as a state of special significance and one literally indispensable for overcoming international challenges and resolving international problems, they chose to make a friendly gesture.

All this happened at the expense of relationships with certain Central and Eastern European countries. The negative resonance of the decision could not be fixed by plans to install a different missile defense technology in that part of Europe, the possible positioning of American troops in the region, or courtesy visits by Vice-President Biden in the region's capitals in the fall of 2009. Although there is no denying that the states of Central and Eastern Europe, and especially Poland, overestimated their strength and position in relations with the United States, it is only understandable that Obama administration's treatment of this part of the continent must have evoked criticism<sup>50</sup>.

Of great significance in this context was the absence of President Obama in Berlin in November 9, 2009, during the celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of tearing down the Berlin Wall, which commemorated the collapse of communism and the start of the integration of Central and Eastern Europe with the transatlantic community. Considering that the capital of Germany was visited by all European leaders, having Secretary of State H. Clinton appear in place of the U.S. President made for a very low-ranking presence. It not only revealed President Obama's poor grasp of the importance of the event celebrated in Berlin but also demonstrated his lack of interest in this part of the continent.

The subsequent developments showing the United States' approach to Central and Eastern Europe/Poland only strengthened this initial impression. The famous off-the-record exchange between Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in March 2012, in which the U.S. President whispered that "after my reelection would have more flexibility" on "missile defense", fit perfectly into that tone<sup>51</sup>. It led to a sad reflection on the credibility of the U.S. President who concealed his true intentions from allies while revealing them to Russia which, however one sees that country, was by all indications more of a rival than an ally of the United States. The resulting impression was that,

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. J. Kiwerska, *Kwestie bezpieczeństwa w stosunkach polsko-amerykańskich...*, pp. 63-64, 74.

<sup>51</sup> J. Kiwerska, "Po wyborach będę miał większą elastyczność", *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego* no. 79/2012, <http://www.iz.poznan.pl>

faced with Moscow's persistent opposition against the installation of a missile defense system in Europe, also in its new version, President Obama intended to make decisions that would primarily suit Russia but not necessarily some of its European allies, including Poland. This is precisely what one could infer from the leaked fragments of conversation between the two leaders. Clearly, such conclusions could in no way depict the U.S. President's treatment of its European partners as favorable.

This bitter experience forced Poland's authorities to subject both its expectations of the United States and its perception of its place in American politics to a "reality check". This confirmed the predictions made by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who wrote in December 2009 that from America's viewpoint, only Europe as a whole but not any individual Central and Eastern European state could be its partner<sup>52</sup>. If Poland ever thought it could take Germany's place in U.S. politics or at least become a significant partner for Washington, Obama's initial years in office in the White House fully dispelled this unrealistic myth.

By and large, it was difficult not to get the impression that Obama administration's policies towards Russia made some European states feel insecure. One could even speak of new divisions that complicated transatlantic relations, of which the European countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence had been an important part ever since 1999. After all, a very different approach was taken by e.g. Germany, which traditionally considered Russia an important part of the pan-European security architecture.

Similar to the German approach to security was the announcement by the Obama administration on the disarmament process. There would be no exaggeration in saying that disarmament negotiations were put on the back burner during the Bush Junior Presidency as attention was drawn to other foreign policy priorities, and especially the war on terrorism. When the topic was brought up, if at all, it was more in the context of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and the threat that terrorists would acquire weapons of mass destruction than as a proposal to conclude new disarmament treaties.

The issue of limiting and checking disarmament returned to the political agenda shortly after the arrival of the Democrats in the White House. Actually, this also became necessary due to the circumstances: the *START I* Treaty was due to expire in the late 2009. Signed back in December 1991, the accord reduced Russian and U.S. arsenals to ca. 5,000 warheads on each side. The

<sup>52</sup> The exact quote can be translated as: "From America's viewpoint, only Europe as a whole may a partner in relations. Representatives of Central Europe should not come to Washington to vent their fears", Z. B r e z i ń s k i, *Rosja nostalgii, Rosja nadziei*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" December 12-13, 2009.



situation was further complicated by the fact that the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in connection with work on the missile defense system.

The first American commitments to seek disarmament were made during the Munich Security Conference in February 2009. The issue was first raised by Henry Kissinger, who proposed a clearly designed program for reaching fundamental decisions regarding multi-faceted arms reduction and control and cutting the number of nuclear warheads held by each side by 2,000<sup>53</sup>. The suggestions evoked a response from Vice-President Biden, who explicitly declared that the Obama administration aimed to achieve progress on the disarmament issue. This commitment was in fact reaffirmed by President Obama himself during his visit to Prague in the early April 2009, when he announced he would build a world without nuclear weapons<sup>54</sup>.

Obama's declaration was bigger on idealism, which U.S. Presidents find hard to escape, than political realism. It is difficult to imagine, in the realities of the late first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how various forces and groups lacking the capability and willingness to negotiate, could possibly be able to give up lethal weapons within the foreseeable future or prevent such threats from emerging in other parts of the globe. President Obama's proposal was primarily pure rhetoric and a popular vision designed to elicit enthusiasm from crowds and drum up support amidst European intellectual elites (a few months later, the proposal won Obama the Nobel Peace Prize) rather than being a feasible plan. Nevertheless, the Prague speech boosted the image of the new U.S. President as a visionary leader determined to make real changes. This helped the United States restore its rank in Europe as a superpower with "soft power" attributes.

This aspect of Obama administration's activities gained strong support from Germany. As a matter of fact, the head of the German diplomacy Steinmeier himself appealed as early as February 2009: "We should seek a world in which nuclear weapons no longer play a role. For now, though, let us focus on ways to reduce it". On another occasion, he argued that those who want to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons must be genuinely prepared to reduce their arsenals<sup>55</sup>. Chancellor Merkel was clearly impressed with Obama's address in Prague. "This is not just a long-term goal", said Merkel. "President Obama

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<sup>53</sup> H. Kissinger, Speech at the 45<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference, February 6, 2009, [www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2009=&menu\\_konfer](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konfer)

<sup>54</sup> Remarks by President Barack Obama, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office)

<sup>55</sup> Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 45<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference...

has also proposed practical measures such as negotiations with Russia on a new *START* Treaty, which could lead to disarmament steps in the short term”.

Opposition politicians did not conceal their enthusiasm for Obama’s plans. Claudia Roth, the co-leader of the Greens party, called the speech by the U.S. President “a watershed event” while Guido Westerwelle, the head of *FDP*, used the mood to renew his call for the removal from Germany of all nuclear warheads still stockpiled there. “They are a relic of the Cold War (...). The German government must promptly begin talks with NATO regarding their pullout”, he contended in a television interview<sup>56</sup>. Some German military commanders went even further in their postulates towards the United States. The former chief strategic planner in the German Ministry of Defense Ulrich Weisser claimed one should put the installation of a missile defense system in Europe on hold until the debate on the architecture of European security has been settled.

Against this background, Berlin responded quite naturally to Obama administration’s decision to abandon the construction of the “missile defense shield” and install its components in Poland and the Czech Republic. By forsaking a project envisioned to protect the United States and NATO allies against a missile attack from “rough states” and, as a side benefit, strengthen the position of Warsaw and Prague in relations with the United States, the U.S. President made another friendly gesture to Russia. This aspect of Obama’s decision received a great deal of publicity in German commentaries. They said that by withdrawing from a project that evoked so much irritation and opposition from Moscow, the U.S. eliminated the main bone of contention with Russia in exchange for hopes of receiving Russian support in Afghanistan and its help with averting the Iranian nuclear threat. This is where the perceived significance of Obama administration’s decision was to lie. It is nevertheless notable that German commentators seemed to understand the disappointment with which the Washington decision was received in Central and Eastern Europe capitals, especially in Warsaw and Prague<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> German leaders back Obama’s call for nuclear disarmament, April 6, 2009, [www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4155778,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4155778,00.html). G. Westerwelle made his demand to rid Germany of nuclear weapons in June 2008; he restated his postulate in October 2009 when, after a *Bundestag* election, he assumed office as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new *CDU/CSU-FDP* coalition government, this time, however, he called for a removal of such weapons to take place within 4 years. *Opposition fordert atomwaffenfreies Deutschland*, June 23, 2008, [www.ftd.de/politik/europa/376750.html?mode=print](http://www.ftd.de/politik/europa/376750.html?mode=print); *Experts support Westerwelle’s quest to rid Germany of US nuclear arms*, October 4, 2009, [www.dw-world.com/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,,4753409,00.html](http://www.dw-world.com/popups/popup_printcontent/0,,4753409,00.html)

<sup>57</sup> G. P. S c h m i t z, *Obama umgarnt Russland*, Spiegel Online, September 7, 2008, [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-649752.00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-649752.00.html)

Still, the general lines followed in Obama's policies towards Russia to reset U.S.-Russian relations, gained Germany's approval. After all, by departing markedly from the nature and style of the policies of their predecessor, the Obama administration quickly managed to regain trust among the German public. This was the most visible success of the new U.S. President. Surveys by *Transatlantic Trends* published in September 2009 showed that a staggering 92 percent of Germans approved the way President Obama acted in the international arena. A year earlier, when the presidency was still in the hands of Bush, only 12 percent of Germans approved of American policies. Now, an impressive 65 percent of Germany's residents wanted a strong U.S. leadership internationally. Thus, a fundamental change of heart regarding America took place in the German public. The change was accompanied by a slight reversal of trends in Central and Eastern Europe where approval for U.S. policies subsided. The steepest declines were seen in Poland as only 42 percent of Poles spoke in favor of a strong global leadership by the U.S. while 55 percent approved of Obama's actions on the international stage<sup>58</sup>.

This evident shift in views in Germany and the increase in support for the U.S. became a major factor for further tightening of American-German relations. More than anything, it helped Germany live up to Washington's expectations of Berlin and Europe in general. It was hard to expect that the mutual relations would rest solely on lofty rhetoric regarding shared values and the common recent historic experience. "This must be a pragmatic deal defined by the shared goals and collaboration in NATO and Afghanistan as well as with respect to other global issues and challenges", wrote Jessica Riester, associated with the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, an institution of vital importance for American-German relations<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Findings of research by the *German Marshall Fund*, published in "Gazeta Wyborcza" September 10, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> J. Riester, *Waiting for September...* p. 7.

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## 4.

### A more assertive Germany

Very quickly, this “pragmatic deal” between the U.S. and Germany was put to a rigorous test visibly disappointing one party while definitively confirming the assertive policy of the other. One such test and challenge for the Western world was the “Arab Spring”. The outbreak of public unrest in the Arab countries of Africa and the Middle East, which began in December 2010 in Tunisia and which, by 2011, spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria, to name only the key countries swept up by the revolt, landing both America and Europe in a difficult quandary. The problem was that some of the crumbling authoritarian regimes, and especially that of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, had up to then been the West’s main allies in the region.

This caused a certain hesitation if not sluggishness in the West’s reaction to the developments in North Africa<sup>60</sup>. One may even venture to say that the west took too long to realize the full significance of the events that unfolded in this part of the world. On the other hand, there was undeniable wisdom in such a balanced, although ambivalent tactic adopted by the U.S. administration which, impeded by a number of complex factors, including its bad experience with the armed intervention in Iraq, found itself unable to act swiftly and decisively. Rather, it tried to keep a safe distance from the thick of things not to preclude alternative courses of action or close off relations with any of the parties to this violent conflict. In this tactic, the American approach was hardly different from the formula adopted by its European allies<sup>61</sup>.

This fairly reserved approach had one significant exception: Libya. In mid-February 2011, the streets of Libyan cities filled with protesters expressing their opposition to the Colonel Moammar Gaddafi regime. The military and security forces tried to quell the unrest. The number of the wounded and dead kept growing. The country became embroiled in a bloody civil war. Although as early as late February 2011, Gaddafi lost control over a large portion of oil-rich

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. S. H a m i d, *How Obama Got Egypt Wrong*, January 28, 2011, [www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/01/28-egypt-obama-hamid](http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/01/28-egypt-obama-hamid)

<sup>61</sup> For more, see: J. K i w e r s k a, *Stany Zjednoczone wobec kryzysów regionalnych – aspekt transatlantycki*, IZ Policy Papers no. 7/2013, pp. 37-43.

western Libya, he had no intention of giving up power or making concessions to his adversaries.

As in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the United States distanced itself from the developments early on. It was only after the violent response by the Gaddafi regime that the Obama administration took more decisive steps. It began by imposing economic sanctions on Libya, freezing US\$ 32 billion worth of the Libyan assets deposited in American banks. Subsequently, President Obama sought to persuade other states to follow suit. Meanwhile, the U.S. launched a broad international campaign. Even as early as February 26, 2011, the U.S. authorities demanded, before the United Nations, the imposition of an embargo on Libya's arms trade. Another option considered was the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya to protect the civilian population from airstrikes by forces faithful to Gaddafi.

While Washington was deliberating military options (although it was still far from reaching final decisions), Europe turned out to be more determined, which is almost unprecedented. Previously, in the face of conflicts and crises, it was commonly the USA that sought to adopt effective military solutions while its European partners opted for less radical measures. This time, it was France and the United Kingdom that found themselves on the front lines of a struggle to bear down hard on the Gaddafi regime. Supported by the Arab League, which was traditionally aversive to Gaddafi and whose members now literally demanded a military intervention, France and the United Kingdom submitted to the Security Council UN, in mid-March 2011, a proposal to establish a no-fly zone over Libya and use any means necessary to protect civilians.

President Obama chose to back the efforts undertaken by France and the United Kingdom. In fact, it appears that the White House had no other choice. It had to either take action or face accusations, which would not be entirely groundless, that it was not only withdrawing from a role of a global leader but also retreating from a highly critical region. Note also that although the proposal went far beyond establishing a no-fly zone, it was not vetoed by Russia or China, despite what was the two countries' usual practice. This time around, next to Brazil, India and Germany [sic], Russia and China only abstained from voting. As a consequence, as early as March 17, 2011, the Security Council adopted a resolution that followed the broad formula proposed by Paris and London.

The approach of France and the United Kingdom failed to gain the general support of other European countries. Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal were opposed to any armed operations, which is what was likely to happen as a result of establishing the no-fly zone and seeking to protect civilians. Germany's

position proved to be of great significance. As a non-permanent member of the Security Council, Germany withheld its support for the resolution on Libya, showing clearly a lack of solidarity with Paris, London and Washington.

Such differences in the positions of European states became evident at a time when it was essential to shoulder the burden of implementing the Security Council resolution, i.e. engage in a NATO military intervention in Libya. In addition to Germany, the countries which refused to take part in the military operation which commenced on March 19, 2011, initially called Odyssey Dawn and later renamed to Unified Protector, also included Poland, which set a precedent. During its relatively short membership in NATO, Poland was one of the countries which showed solidarity by loyally engaging in armed operations conducted not only under the banner of the Alliance, but also those held outside of NATO, alongside the U.S., as in Iraq. This time, although the operation in Libya had a much stronger legal mandate than the Iraq invasion, Warsaw broke rank on the grounds of the lack of vital interests in the Arab world and the fact it was carrying sufficiently large military and financial burdens in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Berlin stance – although consistent with the traditional German principle of restraint – could bewilder or even dismay the American ally. Besides its categorical refusal to take part in operation Unified Protector, which significantly weakened the military potential available in Libya to the European component of the Atlantic Alliance, the Federal Republic, joined Russia and China in abstaining from a vote on the resolution in the Security Council. Such a standpoint on the part of Germany was criticized by Nicolas Burns, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, then Undersecretary of State under the G. W. Bush administration, who did not mince words: “The fact that Germany, the largest European member of the Alliance and a state that plays a key role within its structures in diverse ways, withheld its support for a NATO mission may, I think, be of determining significance for its success”. Germany’s actions, in Burns’s view, were all the more confounding that the Alliance’s operation had the support of the Arab world and a UN mandate. “It’s a shame that Germany could not see its way toward supporting it as well”, added the American diplomat<sup>62</sup>.

Harsh words directed at Germany came also from U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. During a meeting of NATO ministers of defense in Brussels in June 2011, the Head of the Pentagon blamed Germany for its lack of allied

<sup>62</sup> N. Burns’ interview for *Deutsche Welle* titled *Berlin’s stance on Libya has isolated Germany in NATO*, April 13, 2011, [www.dw-world.de/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,,14985036,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/popups/popup_printcontent/0,,14985036,00.html); see also J. Dempsey, *Germany Would Join Aid Mission to Libya*, “The New York Times” April 8, 2011.

solidarity<sup>63</sup>. A similar charge was expressed with respect to Poland, which could be viewed as very unfair. In the light of Warsaw's consistent record of loyalty until that time and the fact it had suffered being ostracized by Berlin, throwing Poland into the same category as Germany and accusing it of lacking allied solidarity only because it missed one armed NATO operation, could evoke bitterness.

However, one cannot deny one other accusation from Gates, this time directed at all European allies, regarding the unwillingness to make contribute more to the cause of defense and security. The American Secretary of Defense saw Europe as clinging to the role of an active fan who also enjoys full security guarantees from the U.S. While such critical remarks were made at a time when an operation in Libya, initiated by Paris and London and involving a number of other European countries, was well under way, apparently proving the Head of the Pentagon wrong, it is difficult to deny the very essence of his complaint: Europe lets its military capacities diminish and fails to address security challenges to the extent of its ability and contrary to American expectations<sup>64</sup>. As a consequence, there was "a real possibility of a dim if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance", argued the U.S. Secretary of Defense<sup>65</sup>.

Without a doubt, the criticism by the ranking representative of the Obama administration also concerned Germany, which failed to meet Washington's expectations, as well as America's other European allies. In his pragmatic approach, Obama viewed Europe mainly in the context of other issues which constituted a true challenge for American interests and priorities. It appeared that Europe was no longer the main security concern of the United States – it was relatively stable and engaged in its integration project. Therefore other U.S. foreign policy goals were given a higher priority. This view was elaborated by Robert Kagan, who said: "Obama is in fact the first post-cold-war U.S. President. He is not very emotional about Europe. (...) As a man in charge of a superpower

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. S. F i d l e r, J. B a r n e s, *Gates Calls Others to Join Libya Fight*, "The Wall Street Journal" June 9, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> This statement was confirmed by the way the Libya operation unfolded. The participating countries soon realized the weakness of their military capacities and, as a consequence, within several weeks (the whole operation lasted more than 7 months), the U.S. had to take over the brunt of the burden of this intervention (among others, the American forces carried out the majority of air missions and attacks, the Americans also ensured communications and aerial refueling).

<sup>65</sup> Cited in: Th. S h a n k e r, *Defense Secretary Warns NATO of "Dim" Future*, "The New York Times" June 10, 2011. Note that, at the time, these statements by Gates provoked American observers to speak out in a similar tone. "The Washington Post" (June 17, 2011) published an opinion of the famous journalist George F. Will, a Pulitzer Prize winner, who called NATO "a Potemkin alliance" and proposed that "when the Libyan misadventure is finished, America should debate whether NATO also should be finished".

that is experiencing numerous problems, he is concerned mainly about what Europe can do for him. And Europe's strategic significance is dwindling from one year to the next – at its own request, as a result of what Europe does and what it fails to do"<sup>66</sup>.

The Obama administration clearly wanted a Europe it could count on in resolving a variety of problems and which would engage to the extent of its considerable abilities in various parts of the globe, even in places far removed from the European theater. "We want strong allies. We are not looking to be patrons of Europe. We are looking to be partners of Europe", said President Obama in April 2009 during his first trip to Europe<sup>67</sup>. In the face of various challenges, such as global economic problems, terrorism, the threat of proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the Middle East conflict, the Obama administration sought to work together with anyone willing to offer effective assistance in resolving such problems. This is where Washington envisioned that a particular role would be played by its European allies<sup>68</sup>. In practice, this meant ensuring an equal footing in transatlantic relations and new burden sharing.

Meanwhile, although integrated within the European Union, European countries failed to present themselves as an effective and active player in the international arena that could speak in a single voice. Europeans failed to become an important player in international relations despite the European Union's potential and the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty. To make things worse, despite the passage of time, the deficit of European diplomacy, its shared vision and willingness to act continued to persist. Europe lacked a well-defined common foreign policy for dealing with the world's key affairs. It also failed to assume political leadership or define its role in the world<sup>69</sup>.

It was not only growing competition from China but also disappointment with Europe's inertia that led to the famous U.S. pivot to the Pacific Rim. In November 2011, during his tour of the Pacific Region, President Obama declared: "I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia-Pacific a top priority". Appearing before the Australian Parliament, he underlined that as a Pacific power, the United States should help shape the region. Therefore, the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific Region

<sup>66</sup> Interview with R. Kagan: *Obama – cudu nie było*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" January 16-17, 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in: M. E. O'Hanlon, *Obama's Solid First Year on Foreign Policy*, [www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0101\\_obama\\_foreign\\_policy\\_ohanlon.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0101_obama_foreign_policy_ohanlon.aspx)

<sup>68</sup> Cf. interview with B. Obama: *Potrzebujemy siebie nawzajem*, "Polityka" June 8-14, 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Z. Brzeziński, *From Hope to Audacity. Appraising Obama's Foreign Policy*, "Foreign Affairs" No. 1, January/February 2010, p. 28.



was to be given the highest priority in American foreign policy<sup>70</sup>. In effect, the vision presented quite bluntly a few months earlier by Secretary of Defense Gates and subsequently developed by American analysts and experts, almost became reality. One of them, Richard N. Haass, head of the New York-based *Council on Foreign Relations*, the most influential U.S. foreign politics opinion-maker, argued in “The Washington Post” that Europe’s role in the world would diminish rapidly. “For the United States, the conclusions are simple. No amount of harping on what European governments are failing to do will push them to do what some in Washington want them to do. They have changed. We have changed. The world has changed”, wrote Haass. “It is time to look for new equal partners in Asia, which is becoming the world’s center of gravity”<sup>71</sup>.

Regarding Germany, one should nevertheless admit that the Obama administration consistently expected that if any country would prompt Europe to become more active, it would be Germany. An inspiration of sorts to accept the challenge came with another distinction conferred upon Chancellor Merkel in June 2011. During her visit in Washington, the German Chancellor received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award of the United States. All this despite Berlin’s restrained, to say the least, stance on the intervention in Libya and its reluctance to engage more of its potential in common NATO operations, for instance in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, in Washington’s calculations, Germany remained a partner whose potential was hard to overestimate. Therefore, when decorating the German leader, President Obama said: “Germany at the heart of Europe is one of our strongest allies and Chancellor Merkel is one of my closest partners”. He then added: “I hope that (...) in many fields, Germany will offer its full and broad support”<sup>72</sup>.

It is relevant to add that – to the surprise of many commentators – remarks in a similar vein came from Polish Foreign Affairs Minister R. Sikorski. Appearing before the prestigious *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* in Berlin, the head of Polish diplomacy appealed in November 2011 to Germany to step up its involvement in politics and economy. He said: “I will probably be the first Polish foreign minister in history to say so, but here it is: I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity”. The commentators were surprised to see a huge change in Warsaw’s perception of Germany, which was

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<sup>70</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, November 17, 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)

<sup>71</sup> R. N. H a a s s, *Why Europe no longer matters*, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-europe-no-longer-matters/2011/06/15/AG7eCCZH\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-europe-no-longer-matters/2011/06/15/AG7eCCZH_story_1.html)

<sup>72</sup> [www.dw.com/pl/merkel-w-usa-order-zobowi%C4%85zuj/a-15140924](http://www.dw.com/pl/merkel-w-usa-order-zobowi%C4%85zuj/a-15140924)

no longer seen as a threat in view of its strength but rather as a country whose potential was considered to be an argument for its adoption of leadership in Europe<sup>73</sup>. This is what Polish diplomacy expected at the time, manifestly sharing the views espoused by the Obama administration.

Yet, the actual developments in American-German relations that followed appeared to contradict a harmonious relationship or fulfilling Washington's expectations towards Berlin. In May 2013, early in Obama's second term in the White House, an eavesdropping scandal broke out. It was started by Edward Snowden, a computer system administrator in the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), who revealed to the international community that the United States conducted a nearly total world surveillance. In addition to leaking U.S. intelligence secrets, Snowden proved that the American intelligence services tapped cellular phones and surveilled Internet communications not only at home but also abroad, all across the world. The eavesdropping was extended even to the leaders and politicians from countries befriended with the United States, including the German Chancellor. Merkel's response was harsh because, as was commonly emphasized, "you don't spy among friends". In a telephone conversation with President Obama, the German leader demanded clarifications and putting a stop to such practices. She did so more as a show for the appalled German public than to use the "phone-tapping scandal" as an argument to loosen relations with America.

Such relations appeared to be tightening gradually. This is because of Germany's growing significance at a time when the financial and economic crises increasingly affected events in Europe, the United States and the world. Americans saw Germany as leading Europe's effort to avert the Eurozone crisis. And although the American path to recovery from the recession by kickstarting the economy with an influx of funds differed fundamentally from that of Germany and Europe, which relied on budget savings, the Obama administration pinned most of its hopes on German reforms and the pressures applied by Berlin on other European capitals. In Washington's view, the European Union's success in recovering from the economic collapse and the financial crisis hinged on Chancellor Merkel's resolve and effectiveness. American analysts even expressed the opinion that, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Germany's economic role corresponded to that played by the United States in the previous century.

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. J. Heilbrunn, *All Roads Lead to Berlin*, "The National Interest" no. 122, November/December 2012, p. 41; also: B. Giegerich, M. Terhalle, *The Munich Consensus and the Purpose of German Power*, "Survival" vol. 58, no. 2, 2016, p. 156.

All this provided a background for another visit to Germany by President Obama. The visit could be assessed as a return of sorts to the past, except that it was done *à rebours*. The visit coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the memorable speech by President John F. Kennedy who, in June 1963, assured West Germany of U.S. support and declared himself to be a Berliner. When appearing in Berlin, this time in front of the Brandenburg Gate on June 19, 2013, President Obama did not captivate the crowd to the extent he did in 2008, when the speech in the *Siegessäule* by the Democratic candidate received applause from some 200,000 Germans. Neither was this a historic address of the same caliber as that by Kennedy a half a century earlier. Obama's proposal to the Russian government to reduce nuclear arsenals, including nuclear weapons, by 1/3, was mainly for show, similarly to the Prague appeal in 2009 to denuclearize the world. Due to a very reluctant reaction from President Putin, this attempt also never proceeded beyond the proposal, even despite its genuine support by Germany.

There was also another reason why the U.S. President's stay in the German capital was particularly significant. His presence signified the recognition and acknowledgement of Germany's role as a leader in European politics and economy. Also of importance were Obama's expressions, made in Berlin, of the hope that European relations were and would remain "a milestone for the security and freedom" of the United States. Although fitted into courtesy rhetoric, they sounded nice to European ears dispelling anxieties about America's widely advertised "pivot" to the Pacific. One undeniable fact was that – as a potential leader of Europe – Germany would assume a significant place in American calculations.

## The Ukrainian conflict and its consequences

Meanwhile, as further events unfolded, Obama's remarks on the significance of relations with Europe for U.S. security turned out to be of exceptional significance and consequence. The armed overpowering by Russia, in the late February and early March 2014, of Crimea, which was an integral part of Ukrainian territory, followed by its annexation, and the escalation of the conflict in the eastern Ukrainian district of Donbass, with Moscow deploying troops, heavy equipment and weaponry, led to the most severe security crisis that Europe had seen since the end of the Cold War. The gravity of the situation was further escalated by uncertainty over how far the Russian leader intended to take his aggression. Would he employ a tactic of "soft destabilization", i.e. psychological warfare and propaganda to extend his neo-imperial ambitions to other former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia? After all, such states could also be subject to Putin's new doctrine that called for protecting the interests of ethnic Russians in neighboring countries by military means if only Moscow deemed such interests to be threatened now or in the future<sup>74</sup>. The sense of security was upset also in other post-Soviet countries such as Poland which, although it lacked a Russian minority, felt directly threatened due to its geographic proximity in the immediate neighborhood of the war-ravaged region as well as its bitter historical experience.

Without a doubt, the Ukrainian conflict posed a major challenge to the entire western world. The annexation of Crimea and Moscow-driven armed operations in eastern Ukraine were an act of aggression against a sovereign state that violated international standards. One felt instinctively that at a time as critical and dramatic as the Ukraine events, which threatened to escalate and undermine European security, the only power capable of standing up to Russia's ambitions and of stopping it effectively in its tracks was the United States. All eyes turned to Washington awaiting its reaction. The Ukrainian

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<sup>74</sup> M. M e n k i s z a k, *Doktryna Putina: tworzenie koncepcyjnych podstaw rosyjskiej dominacji na obszarze postradzieckim*, Komentarze OSW, no. 131 March 28, 2014, [www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/komentarze\\_131.pdf](http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/komentarze_131.pdf)

crisis was to become a big test of credibility for America's world leadership<sup>75</sup>. It was clear also that the U.S. would need Europe to bolster any of its measures against Moscow in the spirit of allied solidarity. The role of Germany at this critical time in history as a leading member of the European Union could not be overestimated.

One must admit that the United States' response to Moscow's actions was relatively swift and forceful<sup>76</sup>. Reacting to the annexation of Crimea almost immediately, i.e. in the early March 2014, the Obama administration imposed its first sanctions. The restrictions targeted, among others, a number of financial institutions in Russia. Bans on entry into the United States were imposed on selected politicians and business people linked directly to President Putin. While the restrictions did not threaten Russia's survival, they carried a lot of political weight<sup>77</sup>. Of much prestigious significance was certainly the U.S. decision to suspend preparations for the Sochi G8 summit of the most highly industrialized countries scheduled for June 2014. And then, after other G8 states made a similar decision, to move the meeting to Brussels and exclude Russia from the G8 club, thereby returning to the original G7 formula.

This fairly decisive response by Washington acquired particular significance when compared to the initial actions, or rather the lack thereof, on the part of the European allies. Although the European Union displayed a certain degree of resolve, and even managed to criticize Russia, moving beyond its traditional inertia and restraint in dealing with Moscow, it continued to find it difficult to adopt a clear and firm position. All this despite the vital importance, at that time, for America and Europe of presenting a united front regarding the Ukrainian events.

Especially that in this game with Moscow, European countries held some very strong cards. Their strength lied partly in many of them being Russia's key trading partners and the buyers of Russia's energy resources, which was its

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. testimony of Ian J. Brzezinski, the son of Zbigniew Brzeziński (who, unlike his father associated with the Republican Party, is an analyst of the reputable think tank *Atlantic Council*) before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on April 10, 2014. Testimony of Ian J. Brzezinski, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Subcommittee on European Affairs, April 10, 2014, [www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Brzeziński\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Brzeziński_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Cf. criticism of Moscow quoted in: J. K i e r s k a, *Ukraina i stosunki transatlantyckie*, "Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej" no. 9, 2015, pp. 353-354.

<sup>77</sup> That the sanctions imposed by a group of business people and politicians with ties to the Kremlin were far from adequate was an argument by I. Brzezinski made before the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs in April 2014. In his opinion: "Russians take pride in having succeeded in overcoming economic crises throughout history. Limited to a closed circle of people and a handful of banks, such sanctions will not force an authoritarian regime to think over its actions". Testimony of Ian J. Brzezinski...

key export commodity accounting for more than 70 percent of the country's foreign trade revenues. The significance of Europe as an importer resulted from it receiving a staggering 80 percent of Russian gas exports. It is equally notable that taxes on the sales of crude oil and natural gas account for roughly a half of Russia's budget revenues. It is difficult to overestimate the value for Russia of Western technology and capital, without which the Russian economy would be seriously troubled. It is also very clear that Russia's most important economic partner in Europe was Germany. Its main export to Russia were automobiles and machinery. Russia, in its turn, provided ca. 40 percent of the gas and oil consumed in Germany.

However, the very advantages that Europe and Germany had in negotiations with Russia were also the causes of fears over the consequences that commercial or economic sanctions, once imposed on Russia, would have for the economies of individual European countries. After all, Europe's billion-euro contracts for the supplies of gas and oil from Russia (in 2012, Russia sold a staggering €175 billion worth of raw materials and unprocessed goods to Europe) meant that the majority of European Union member states grew dependent on Russian energy resources, the best example of which was Germany. It was European countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe, that were interested in the Russian market to which they sold more than €120 billion worth of goods. Compared to these figures, the Russian exports to the United States in 2013 amounted to a meager US\$ 27 billion while its imports from the US were even lower at US\$ 11.2 billion. Against this background, the imposition of sanctions by the European Union carried the risk of reprisal from Moscow, which could adopt its own trade restrictions that would be much more painful for European countries than for the American economy.

Nevertheless, the joint response by the United States and the European Union was of fundamental importance and only such an approach to Russia stood a chance of being effective. Therefore, President Obama strove tirelessly to convince his European partners to show transatlantic solidarity on the Ukrainian issue by taking decisive and mutually complimentary steps against Russia. This was a dominant topic in the talks held by Obama during his presidential career's first [sic] visit to EU institutions in Brussels. During the EU-US summit in late March 2014, President Obama sought to convince his European partners to ignore their exceptional dependence on Russian fossil fuel supplies and oppose its policies by imposing economic sanctions. "Russia's leadership is challenging truths that only a few weeks ago seemed self-evident, that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the borders of Europe cannot be redrawn

with force (...). That kind of casual indifference would ignore the lessons that are written in the cemeteries of this continent”, said the American leader<sup>78</sup>.

The European partners were unable to take decisive steps, at least at this stage of the conflict. References to the commonality of values could not take precedence over economic interests. Although in response to the annexation of Crimea, the European Union drafted a list of Russians whose assets were frozen and who were barred from entering the territories of EU countries (the list was successively expanded) and threatened to impose economic sanctions against Russia should Moscow continue to destabilize Ukraine, such steps nevertheless fell short of the expectations of the United States. President Obama appealed to Europe to take joint action towards Russia together with America but saw no or little solidarity largely for the simple reason that solidarity was also lacking in the European Union. The problem resulted from differences in approach towards Russia among the union’s member states rooted not only in the extent of their economic links with Moscow but also in their specific positions on Russia which, after all, is a large and geographically close Euro-Asiatic power. In the case of some of the countries, and particularly Germany, such an approach was manifested through long-lasting attempts to include Moscow in the European power game.

In Germany, sanctions were opposed mainly by the business sector, whose representatives invested billions of euros in Russia. Therefore, although Berlin firmly condemned the annexation of Crimea as a violation of Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty, the effort to reach a consensus on the imposition of sanctions failed initially due to fears it would strongly backfire against German economic and financial interests<sup>79</sup>. The position of Chancellor Merkel, who had no sentiments for Putin and who sought to push through a rather harsh stance on the Kremlin, was further complicated by the fact that even at that juncture, its government coalition partner *SPD*, which had for years supported close collaboration with Moscow, opposed such harsh treatment of Russia. Foreign Affairs Minister Steinmeier appeared to remain faithful to the traditional belief of the Social Democrats, which was that order in Europe can only be achieved “with Russia but not against it”. At a time when Moscow itself dramatically violated that order, following this belief no longer made sense and was even

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<sup>78</sup> President Obama gives speech addressing Europe, Russia on March 26, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-president-obama-gives-speech-addressing-europe-russia-on-march-26/2014/03/26/07ae80ae-b503-11e3-b899-20667de76985\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b177434a9b17](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-president-obama-gives-speech-addressing-europe-russia-on-march-26/2014/03/26/07ae80ae-b503-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html?utm_term=.b177434a9b17)

<sup>79</sup> M. Matthews, *The Three Faces of German Leadership*, “Survival” vol. 58, no. 2, 2016, p. 147.

against Europe's interests<sup>80</sup>. However, some previously prominent politicians of the German left, such as the former Chancellor G. Schröder, held very lucrative positions in various Russian-German consortia and, together with entrepreneurs, formed a powerful pro-Russian lobby. The result at this stage of the game was that despite harsh statements from Chancellor Merkel herself, Americans could not count on Germany or secure its unequivocal support for severe political sanctions.

Only an event as dramatic as the downing on July 17, 2014 of the Malaysian airlines plane over eastern Ukraine, most likely by Russian separatists, changed the hearts of EU member states increasing their resolve in handling Moscow. The tragic death of 298 passengers, many of whom were nationals of European countries (the victims included as many as 173 Dutch citizens) were linked directly to President Putin. It was Russia that armed and equipped the rebels with heavy weaponry and missiles and deployed Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. It thus took a crime of this magnitude for the European Union to choose to impose economic sanctions on Russia.

Importantly, the extent and nature of the restrictions surprised even the biggest skeptics who had previously doubted that the European Union had what it takes to deliver such a powerful blow. The sectoral sanctions imposed in the late July 2014 targeted key sectors of the Russian economy and, among others, Russian banks and enterprises which they largely cut off from access to international capital markets. Equally painful were restrictions imposed on the energy sector, which included a ban on technology exports to Russia. As part of the response, certain armament industry transactions were blocked while the scope of personal sanctions was extended. Without a doubt, Germany, which followed the guidelines of the Chancellor's Office to a greater extent than those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contributed to the development of and strongly supported<sup>81</sup> the sanctions policy towards Russia<sup>81</sup>.

Warsaw did not conceal its satisfaction with the turn of events. The outcomes were consistent with the paradigm of Poland's eastern policy, which was to support democracy in Ukraine and bring it into the western sphere of influence, first through an association with the European Union and then through full EU membership and admission to NATO. Hence the overwhelming support from Poland in the winter of 2013/2014 for the pro-western Euromaidan, i.e. Ukraine's mass resistance against President Victor Yanukovich and his policy

<sup>80</sup> Cf. K. Malinowski, *Stanowisko Niemiec wobec konfliktu na Ukrainie i implikacje dla Polski*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 175/2014, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



of pushing Ukraine into Moscow's sphere of influence<sup>82</sup>. Hence efforts by the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk who, in response to the Kiev events, visited EU capitals seeking to make European politicians sensitive to the growing Ukraine crisis. The Warsaw government, which since the very outset steadfastly promoted sanctions against Russia, searched for supporters to back its plans.

One should state firmly that in the summer of 2014, Germany turned out to be the kind of faithful partner that the Polish government was looking for and even an architect of a consensus in the European Union on both the Ukrainian question and the sanctions targeted at Russia. The fundamental question for Warsaw was only whether Berlin would persevere in its firm stance on Russia and uphold its sanction policy. Would it resist Russia's diverse "external" pressures and the internal ones, exerted by a pro-Russian industrial lobby, Moscow-favoring sentiments among the German public and, last but not least, its own diplomats, headed by Steinmeier who was willing to make concessions to Russia?

All in all, thanks to Germany's firmness, the sanctions were ultimately imposed while the Union demonstrated its solidarity to the satisfaction of the U.S. partner and to Putin's distress. This foiled Putin's intentions to drive a wedge between the United States and the European Union. Russia's President counted on the anti-Americanism of European elites, especially in Germany, and their reluctance to escalate tensions with Moscow and risk damaging mutual economic relations with Russia. The European Union's relatively tough stance on Russia showed that, although criticized fairly for its lack of resolve and inertia, the community nevertheless managed to live up to the task. Despite all of its sluggishness and reluctance, the European community proved to be capable of reaching decisions that reflected its full potential. It demonstrated an ability to play an active role internationally.

What is more, to Kremlin's surprise, the European Union fulfilled Washington's expectations. Once again, it became clear that coordination and unity between America and Europe was the most effective way to influence Moscow and, by the same token, a very desirable factor for success in shaping international affairs. In this instance, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic, acting in response to Russia's continued military engagement in eastern Ukraine, appeared to see eye to eye on the Euro-Asian power recognizing it as a state that was neither rational nor constructive and that, on the contrary, posed a threat

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<sup>82</sup> Note the unprecedented, in its formula, attempt to stop bloodshed in Kiev. At the request of the head of EU diplomacy, the task of mediating between President Yanukovych and the Euro-maidan protesters was assumed by the heads of Polish, German and French diplomacy. Their harmonious collaboration and resolve at a certain stage of the crisis proved to be highly effective.

and a challenge that needed to be averted together<sup>83</sup>. Quite emblematic in this context was the evolution of sorts seen in Minister Steinmeier's position. While visiting Yekaterinburg [sic] in December 2014, the head of German diplomacy spoke directly on Putin's actions undermining the European order. He stated expressly that Russia may only achieve security "with Europe but not against it". While the form of his statement remained rather veiled, the message was sufficiently clear.

As for the resolve demonstrated by the European Union, it should be noted that the European allies / Germany went so far as to dethrone the United States as a country that seemed to be indispensable for mitigating or resolving the Ukrainian conflict. Thus, the "first fiddle" in the diplomatic battle to settle the Ukrainian conflict was now played by Germany and France. One could think that the two countries were returning to their traditional role as European Union leaders. Undeniably, during the time in office of Chancellor Kohl and President François Mitterrand, they were considered to be drivers of European integration. In collaboration, the two leaders set the course for the European Community. Now, it was Chancellor Merkel and President François Hollande that lived up to the challenge and engaged in negotiations with Russia in the so called Normandy format, i.e. one that included Ukraine but dispensed with the involvement of the United States<sup>84</sup>. The move was risky as while it did not guarantee success, it could, in the case of a failure, undermine the authority of the two leaders and strengthen Putin, who would not yield to pressure.

Nevertheless, despite the initial lack of clear backing from Washington, Chancellor Merkel took the risk<sup>85</sup>. After all, the Normandy format, forced by Moscow and accepted by Ukraine, Merkel and Hollande, meant removing the United States from the negotiating table<sup>86</sup>. This precisely was what Putin sought to achieve – he wanted to eliminate the American rival from the diplomatic battle for Ukraine and thus undermine its status while strengthening its negotiating position. Berlin accepted the rules of the game set forth by Moscow at the risk of upsetting American-German relations. The appropriate question

<sup>83</sup> F Hill, C. G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin*, Washington 2015, pp. 264-265.

<sup>84</sup> The Normandy format was devised on June 6, 2014 during a meeting between Merkel, Hollande, Putin and Petro Poroshenko, the President of Ukraine, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the allied landing in northern France.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. J. Janning, A. Möller, *Leading from the Centre: Germany's New Role in Europe*, European Council on Foreign Relations, "Policy Brief" July 2016, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> Earlier, i.e. shortly after the Russian invasion of Crimea, talks were held in the "Geneva format", i.e. involving the USA, a representative of the European Union, Ukraine and Russia. Although the talks had little effect as Moscow had no intention of abiding by the agreement of April 17, 2014 that called for e.g. the disarmament of pro-Russian militias in Donbass or giving up its plans to control eastern Ukraine.

to ask is whether the stakes the talks were about were really worth it. After all, they concerned stopping bloodshed in eastern Ukraine and preventing an escalation of conflict.

The first agreement, negotiated in the Normandy format and signed in Minsk on September 5, 2014 by Putin and Petro Poroshenko, the President of Ukraine as well as by representatives of Donbass separatists, and providing, among others, for OSCE controls on the east Ukrainian border, soon turned out to be worthless. This could be considered as conforming that the presence of the United States as the only effective counterbalance for Russia in the negotiation process was truly indispensable. However, no substantial changes were made: the Normandy format was maintained and the Ukrainian crisis went through successive stages of escalation despite efforts to stop it.

Finally, the second Minsk Agreement was signed on February 12, 2015. Its focal point was a ceasefire in Ukraine and the pullout of heavy equipment from the front lines. Although the provisions of the Minsk II Agreement were repeatedly violated, the tensions and fighting in eastern Ukraine subsided to some extent. Without a doubt, much of the credit for this political success should be given to Chancellor Merkel, who – despite having the French President by her side, ended up bearing the brunt of the burden of this difficult negotiation<sup>87</sup>. The German press rightfully described the German leader as the “Chancellor of the World” (*Weltkanzlerin*)<sup>88</sup>. Merkel’s leadership was not put into question even by the revelation that her diplomatic effort had been consulted with, inter alia, President Obama, who tried to exert pressure on Putin by telephone. Thus, despite its initial skepticism, Washington agreed to an unprecedented solution in which talks on such a matter of such key significance for Europe’s security were held without the involvement of the United States. In fact, one should stress that the interests and viewpoints of the United States were represented by Berlin.

However, there was another aspect to the Ukrainian conflict, in which the United States played a leading role. Putin’s neo-imperial policy on Ukraine made the Obama administration realize that the stability of Europe is not given once and for all and that the sense of security in the Old World may be illusory and fleeting. Russia again posed a threat to the established order on the continent and challenged the global role and rank of the United States. Therefore, matters of Europe should not be placed in the back burner but rather made a top

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. M. Książkiewicz, *Niechciany partner. Rola Niemiec w rozwiązywaniu konfliktu na Ukrainie*, Biuletyn Niemiecki no. 57, March 31, 2015, pp. 4-6.

<sup>88</sup> *Die Welt-Kanzlerin*, “Bild” February 9, 2015.

if not the very top security priority and obligation on the part of the U.S. Thus, the threat posed by Russia's expansive policy drove America to "pivot" back towards Europe. The Obama administration did not stop at declaring assistance to the central and eastern part of the continent, which were potentially at the greatest risk of suffering from Putin's neo-imperial policy, and took concrete steps. Among other things, Washington sent to Poland and the Baltic states the U.S. F-16 fighter jets and American troops, who were to maintain a rotational presence. The Pentagon also doubled the number of aircraft deployed to patrol airspace over Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and positioned NATO warships on the Baltic Sea.

In fact, realizing the ominous consequences of Putin's actions that were looming on the horizon, including his deliberate inroads into the airspace of some western countries, European countries began to "close ranks" and prepare to assume greater responsibility for their collective defense. This meant in particular efforts to strengthen military capabilities and increase European contributions to NATO. Europe realized again that the principle of collective defense enshrined in the Washington Treaty required that every NATO member state deliver on its obligations to other members<sup>89</sup>.

The need for a stronger commitment of the United States to European security and a stepped up effort on the part of the European allies was reaffirmed at the NATO summit in Newport (Wales) in the early September 2014. During the summit, member state leaders reached a number of key decisions, including that to establish the so called NATO spearhead (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF) envisioned to comprise approximately 5,000 troops ready to engage in combat on very short notice (merely 48 hours)<sup>90</sup>. They also resolved to strengthen the defensive capabilities of NATO's eastern flank by intensifying military maneuvers in the area, increasing the rotating presence of American/NATO forces and bringing heavy military equipment into the region. They also planned to position key commands on the eastern flank, including the main logistic base of the "NATO spearhead" in Szczecin (Poland)<sup>91</sup>.

These fundamental decisions again made NATO an effective and critical pillar of transatlantic cooperation deterring potential adversaries. The New-

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. I. Krastev, M. Leonard, *Europe's Shattered Dream of Order*, "Foreign Affairs" May/June 2015, pp. 50-52.

<sup>90</sup> The "NATO spearhead" was created by doubling to 40,000 the number of troops in the NATO Response Force (NRF).

<sup>91</sup> Wales Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council Wales, September 5, 2014, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm)

port summit demonstrated that the key task of the Atlantic Alliance remains, as noted by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: “to live up to the shared responsibility of all allies for maintaining security” which nobody should doubt<sup>92</sup>. This meant that any escalation of Putin’s imperialist ambitions resulting in an encroachment into any NATO member state will be met with an adequate response from the Alliance, in pursuance with art. 5 of the Washington Treaty.

The surprising thing evident to observers of the Newport summit was the considerable convergence of opinions and positions among the Alliance’s member states. Such unity under the leadership of the United States at NATO’s negotiating table has not been seen for long. The sense of being threatened by Russia heavily influenced the stances adopted by the majority of the member states. It forced them to show solidarity despite the cost which was not always easy to accept<sup>93</sup>. It was certainly not easy for France to refuse to hand over the Mistral assault vessels to Russia at the risk of having to pay billions in damages and losing shipyard jobs. Paris nevertheless went ahead with the decision to withhold the warships from Russia. The vessels were subsequently sold to Egypt.

In the case of Germany, the problem resulted from its insistence on maintaining an equilibrium between the Alliance’s two focal activities of deterrence/defense and dialogue/détente. The point behind deterrence and defense was to demonstrate allied solidarity, including readiness to accept greater military obligations within the framework of NATO. Emphasis was also placed on continuing dialogue and mitigating tensions in relations with Russia as well as avoiding actions that could make such dialogue completely impossible. Thus, on the one hand, Russia’s threat to European security prompted the German government to recognize the need for strengthening collective defense within NATO, especially on the eastern flank. It not only supported the idea to establish a “NATO spearhead” but also, together with the Netherlands, to create a framework nation responsible for the formation of the VJTF. It was also thought advisable to strengthen the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin and beef it up with additional units<sup>94</sup>.

From Warsaw’s viewpoint, the position presented by Berlin at the Newport summit was highly significant as it aligned perfectly with Poland’s security

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<sup>92</sup> J. Stoltenberg, *NATO Rosji się nie boi*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” October 6, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. I. Krastev, M. Leonard, *Europe’s Shattered Dream of Order...*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. K. Malinowski, *Stanowisko Niemiec wobec konfliktu na Ukrainie i implikacje dla Polski*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 175/2014, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

interests. By helping strengthen NATO's eastern flank, Germany demonstrated it understood the fears and aspiration of the eastern ally/allies. On the other hand, Germany upheld its firm opposition to establishing a permanent NATO base in Poland and to permanently [sic] stationing the Atlantic Alliance's units in its territory, as proposed by some members of the Polish political elite. Germany consistently resisted such ideas in the conviction they ran against the grain of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations between NATO and Russia of 1997. The Act stated, among other things, that NATO has no intention to position permanent combat forces in the territories of the new member states, referring at the time to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary<sup>95</sup>. For the German diplomacy, then headed by an *SPD* politician, it became obvious that a drastic violation of the Founding Act of 1997 by, for instance, establishing NATO bases on the eastern flank, would result in severing communication with Russia and further escalating tensions between the Alliance and Putin's country.

This dualism of Germany's approach to NATO's new plans, which left it torn between defense and dialogue, changed little until the following meeting of NATO member state leaders. The NATO summit of July 8-9, 2016 provided another forum for intensely strengthening defense and deterrence capabilities. This, in fact, was the main message which the Obama-led U.S. delegation brought to Warsaw. The Americans sought in particular to solidify the Alliance's main functions of deterrence and defense. And while the Obama administration saw the need for maintaining communication channels with Moscow, among them the NATO-Russia Council, whose framework was used in May 2016 for a meeting between the ambassadors of both sides, the question of dialogue remained secondary in the American strategy. Washington could not be persuaded to set up permanent bases in NATO's eastern flank countries due not as much to opposition from Germany but rather to the need to protect American interests as such bases would inevitably become an extra financial burden for the U.S. to bear. However, other decisions reached in Warsaw demonstrated a great commitment of the United States to maintaining security in this part of the continent.

Of particular significance in this context was the decision to maintain a permanent presence of American combat groups comprising an armored brigade in six Central and Eastern European countries, including Poland. Once one set

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<sup>95</sup> The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-Operation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, published in: "Studia Europejskie", Centrum Europejskie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, no. 2, 1997, pp. 157-168.

of such groups would finish their exercise, they would be replaced with others, thus ensuring a continuous rotational presence of a large group comprised of over 4,000 troops. The plan also included fitting the brigade with modern equipment, including tanks and armored vehicles. The entire project would be financed by the United States<sup>96</sup>. Specific placement decisions were also made: four multinational battalions, including at least one under American command would be stationed in the Baltic states and Poland. This meant more equipment, logistics and military experience on NATO's eastern flank.

For Berlin, the Warsaw summit was a time of important choices, some of them difficult, especially those regarding the performance of the duties associated with allied solidarity while demonstrating care for Russia's interests and promoting a dialogue with Russia, which was the result of different viewpoints persisting in the government coalition. Very telling in this context was the speech by Minister Steinmeier in June 2016, three weeks before the Warsaw summit, referring to the big exercise which took place in Poland at the time and which involved nearly 30,000 troops from NATO member states, including Germany (which sent merely a 400-strong explosive ordinance disposal unit, i.e. no combat units), and states participating in the Partnership for Peace, and calling it unnecessary and an obstacle to constructive dialogue with Russia. In an interview for the German press, Steinmeier described NATO maneuvers as a "tank parade", "sabre rattling and shrill war-cries"<sup>97</sup>.

Such statements by the head of German diplomacy differed markedly from the American position which strongly emphasized the Russian threat and, in this context, the need to consolidate the Atlantic Alliance and have the U.S. engage extensively. The Anaconda-2016 exercise alone involved approximately 10,000 American troops. While Americans avoided calling Russia an enemy, they no longer saw it as a party with which to build a partnership. "While we don't consider Russia an enemy, it's also true that we no longer consider Russia a partner", said the U.S. Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute in May 2016.

Meanwhile, *SPD* politicians continued to use a rhetoric that emphasized their care for restoring and maintaining relations with Moscow, relaxing sanctions against Russia and finally distinguishing their view from the hard unrelenting position of Chancellor Merkel and Christian-Democratic politi-

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<sup>96</sup> In 2014, in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the Obama administration created a special *European Reassurance Initiative* program. The *ERI* was expected to generate US\$ 3.4 billion in 2017 to be used to finance American projects in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>97</sup> Steinmeier's statement quoted in: "Bild am Sonntag" June 19, 2016.

cians<sup>98</sup>. In fact, Steinmeier's statements met with a severe reaction from *CDU* politicians. According to unofficial reports, the head of government herself was very irritated with the opinion expressed by the head of diplomacy. Unfavorable comments appeared in the press blaming the Foreign Affairs Minister for his unprecedented disloyalty to the Atlantic Alliance, for downplaying Russia's aggressive policies and for encouraging President Putin to continue his destruction.

The position of Steinmeier and other Social-Democratic politicians, among them Sigmar Gabriel, who, as Vice-Chancellor in the Merkel government and the *SPD* leader headed the Ministry of Economy and Energy, i.e. the key department responsible for Germany's links with Russian exports, was an expression of disloyalty, mainly to Poland and its security interests. For Warsaw, the *Anaconda-2016* exercise was of great significance. It was seen as a boost to Poland's sense of security. It comprised the largest military maneuvers in the history of Poland's NATO membership and even since 1989. It provided an invaluable test of the military, logistic and human capabilities of the Atlantic Alliance, including the combat readiness of Polish troops, of which 12,000 took part. And yet, the German Foreign Affairs Minister deprecated the value and need for the *Anaconda-2016* exercise while contesting and dismissing Poland's claim to security. Regardless of the tone of Steinmeier's statement, which was highly undiplomatic, Poles could feel offended also in the political sense.

For a number of reasons, Poland never officially commented on the statement, limiting its response to isolated critical remarks from Polish experts and analysts. Warsaw nevertheless understood that in addition to the traditional support for Russia and the Russians, one of the main reasons behind the rhetoric of social-democratic politicians were their internal political calculations. Their aim was to gain new constituents from among pacifists and leftists and use them to sway the *Bundestag* election in September 2017. Warsaw's well-justified assumption was that the key decisions on whether Germany would show allied solidarity towards countries distraught with Russia's aggressive policies, i.e. deliver on its military obligations remained up to Chancellor Merkel.

Her involvement in the NATO Summit in Warsaw, together with Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and Head of Diplomacy, was decisive for the approval and implementation of a deterrence strategy. By taking command over one of four multinational battalions stationed in the Baltic states and Poland (the "German" battalion was to be rotate in Lithuania, the "American" one

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<sup>98</sup> At that time (June 18-19, 2016), "Süddeutsche Zeitung" published an interview with G. Schröder in which the former Chancellor scrupulously endorsed Russian arguments and interests.



in Poland) and by sending roughly one thousand *Bundeswehr* troops to man them, Germany showed clearly it was a credible and responsible member of NATO that cared for securing its eastern flank. Despite the fact that Berlin consistently supported maintaining communication channels with Russia via the NATO-Russia Council or OSCE, which in 2016 operated under the German presidency, it departed from its previous line of opposing the presence of the Atlantic Alliance in the region. The Federal Republic proved itself to be a worthy ally that implements the understandings and decisions reached in Newport concerning, among other things, the establishment of the “NATO spearhead”, with Germany appearing as a framework nation, in full combat readiness<sup>99</sup>.

There would be no exaggeration in claiming that, in Warsaw, Germany demonstrated its aspiration and preparedness to play the role of a state that significantly contributes to shaping the international order and making decisions regarding European and global security. In the face of growing threats and challenges posed by various parties, Berlin demonstrated a will to treat military might more pragmatically as an instrument of pressure and defense, and showed its greater propensity to forsake its traditional policy of restraint. Although the dualism in the approach to Russia was still present in the German government coalition (Minister Steinmeier appeared to have remained skeptical towards certain summit conclusions), Germany nevertheless reaffirmed its solidarity with its allies in Warsaw, also with respect to NATO’s eastern flank. Its stance definitely supported Poland’s interests as well as those of other Atlantic Alliance members from its region.

From the American viewpoint, one vital issue, which pertained not only to Germany, was that of burden sharing within the Alliance. The U.S. defense spending in 2016 (which amounted to close to US\$ 600 billion) accounted for an astounding 70 percent of the value of the defensive budgets of all NATO member states put together (approximately US\$ 900 billion). This fact was used by the Republican presidential candidate Donald J. Trump, who criticized NATO and even undermined its *raison d’être* while blaming his European allies for their reluctance to pay adequately for their defense. The issue of burden sharing returned during the Warsaw summit, similarly as at Newport in 2014, when the member states committed to gradually increase their defense spending to 2 percent of GDP. Only five of them managed to achieve that level before the Warsaw summit (the United Kingdom, Poland, Greece and Estonia

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<sup>99</sup> K. Szubart, *Szczyt NATO w Warszawie – konsekwencje dla Niemiec*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 260/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

and the USA – the U.S. exceeded 3 percent of GDP). The defense spending of the European Union’s most robust economy, i.e. Germany, was a mere 1.19 percent of GDP. Meanwhile, defense spending continued to decline in Italy, Bulgaria and Croatia.

However, during the Warsaw summit, Chancellor Merkel not only committed to reach 2 percent GDP relatively quickly but also appealed to all NATO member states to fulfill that obligation. This was a marked change of rhetoric by the German leader whose approach in Newport was considerably more cautious as she then stressed it would be unlikely for Germany to fulfill its 2 percent GDP obligation in the foreseeable future. Note also that, to the surprise of observers, statements regarding Germany’s defense capabilities published in the *White Book 2016*, which appeared almost as soon as the morning after the Warsaw NATO summit, concerned defense spending and emphasized that the Federal Republic sought to increase military expenditures to the recommended level while seeking to use *Bundeswehr* resources more effectively.

With respect to the *White Book 2016*, one should note that it was equally important for the Obama administration to reaffirm the significance of anchoring Germany in both European and transatlantic structures. The document referred to “allied solidarity” even as “a part of the German *raison d’état*” and called it “an obligation and a duty”. More emphasis than in previous documents of its type was placed on Germany’s commitment to “actively contribute to shaping the world order” and even assuming responsibility for such an order<sup>100</sup>. This was precisely what Americans have long expected of the European Union’s most powerful state and its vital NATO ally.

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<sup>100</sup>K. Szubart, *Biała Księga 2016 – niemiecka odpowiedź na obecne wyzwania w zakresie bezpieczeństwa*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 266/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

## Syria, the so called Islamic State and the migrant crisis

The active display of solidarity with NATO's eastern flank countries seriously upset Russia's aggressive policy. Nevertheless, the German delegation to Warsaw also clearly ensured a proper balancing of the engagements of the Atlantic Alliance demonstrating its concern for the other major source of threats coming from the south and south-east. Its concern regarded one of the biggest challenges and the very tragic consequences faced by the contemporary world and Europe in particular and associated with the war in Syria and terrorism, with its most dangerous manifestation: the so called Islamic State, as well as the unsolved problem of the waves of refugees and immigrants streaming across European Union borders.

The constraints of this article do not allow for a more detailed elaboration of the topic of the dramatic bloody conflict in Syria, which has lasted 6 years. However, the topic certainly deserves at least a mention in a discussion of the consequences of these events for Europe and the rest of the world as well as international relations and, first and foremost, their humanitarian aspect. While the "Arab Spring" of 2011 toppled authoritarian regimes in the majority of the countries it affected, which by no means meant political stabilization, Syria failed to oust President Bashar al-Assad and saw its mass demonstrations and protests turn into a civil war. Government forces attacked rebels with no holds barred and with complete disregard for the victims. The number of casualties soared, mainly among civilians – conservative estimates in mid-2013 placed the death toll at more than 100,000.

Despite the fact that Syria became the site of the most bloody and widespread fighting, much like the rest of the international community, the United States appeared to be at ease with the tragedy. Although humanitarian aid was provided, mainly to hundreds of thousands of civilians searching for refuge in neighboring countries, the U.S. withheld military assistance refusing even to deliver military equipment to the insurgents who fought the Assad regime.

Not even the use of chemical weapons against the insurgents in August 2013, most likely by the Damascus government, which resulted in killing over 1400 Syrians, was seen as a turning point in the Syrian conflict that

would force the U.S. to intervene. Only a year earlier, at the peak of his election campaign, President Obama proclaimed that any use of weapons of mass destruction in the Syrian conflict would be viewed as crossing a “red line” and would be met with a harsh response from America<sup>101</sup>. No such response ever came. The President first tried to shift responsibility for the use of force against the Damascus government to Congress, requesting that it approve an armed intervention (his request concerned nothing more than the bombing of Syrian military installations by means of remotely controlled missiles). The fact of the matter was that Obama did not need to seek such approval under the law. Note that as commander in chief of the armed forces, the President may initiate armed operations at his risk while Congressional approval is only required for operations lasting more than 60 days. In fact, Obama was unlikely to receive such approval as the overall public sentiment, expressed also on Capitol Hill, was clearly turned against such engagement<sup>102</sup>.

Therefore, a convenient deliverance from Obama’s difficult dilemma of whether to act on his word and face criticism from the American people or renege on his promise at the risk of losing his face as world leader, came with the proposal of Russia, the chief protector of the Assad regime, which suggested that the Syrian chemical weapons be surrendered to international observers and subsequently destroyed. The Russian initiative met with an almost instantaneous reaction from Washington, even though, after the affair precipitated by Snowden, who had found refuge in Russia, and due to Putin’s opposition to Obama’s disarmament proposals and the differences in the approach to Syria that divided Russia and the United States, relations by that time were rather frigid. When, in mid September 2013, yielding to pressure from Russia, the Damascus authorities accepted an agreement, including its provisions on the handover and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, expressed in the form of a UN resolution, and once the resolution’s implementation commenced, this stage of the Syrian crisis was considered closed.

Yet, this triumph of diplomacy was not quite as big a success as it appeared. Some of the parties engaged in the negotiations of a deal deserved more credit than others. The acquisition under international supervision and then the gradual destruction of Syrian chemical weapon stockpiles certainly marked

<sup>101</sup> Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps); see also J. Ball, *Obama issues Syria a “red line” warning on chemical weapons*, “The Washington Post” August 20, 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. S. Telhami, *President Obama’s Confused Logic on Syria*, [www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/10-president-obama-syria-telha](http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/10-president-obama-syria-telha); see also J. Kiwerska, *Światowe przywództwo Ameryki w XXI wieku*, Poznań 2015, pp. 171-172.

progress in mitigating threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. However, the main actor and winner in the Syria game turned out to be Russia, which used it to derive the most political benefits and prestige boosts. Meanwhile, the United States emerged from this phase of the Syrian conflict with its authority undermined. President Obama displayed a striking lack of determination and consistency as well as an inability to make difficult decisions. And even though some good reasons can be found for the actions of the Obama administration, which proved to be apprehensive after the recent experience of disastrous U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is difficult not to notice certain other negative and dangerous consequences.

There was a huge disappointment among Syrian fighters for whom the agreement with Assad meant mainly that Americans would not engage in armed interventions. They had counted on the U.S. to strike the strategic facilities of the Syrian army. The outcome led them to realize that the western world cared little for the fates of the insurgents in their struggle with the regime forces and that the rebels could no longer hope for U.S. support. This created a dangerous situation, opening up space for Islamic radicals and even terrorists. It was the intensified activity of the latter that led, in June 2014, to the establishment in eastern Syria and western Iraq of a caliphate called the Islamic State (the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS). The threat posed by the so-called Islamic State resulted largely from its potential to gain influence, conquer successive territories and acquire oil fields and oil refineries, thereby securing financing for further fighting.

The tragedy that resulted from the formation of the so called Islamic State lied primarily in the methods employed by its leaders and militants. All ISIS-controlled territories experienced a reign of terror becoming sites of ethnic cleansings, brutal murders of members of the opposition and mass executions. Over time, the so-called Islamic State became a magnet for volunteers from various parts of the world, including western countries. The volunteers from Europe and America who joined the jihadists in Syria and Iraq would later return to their home countries to continue waging “the Holy War”, recruit further volunteers and carry out terrorist attacks in Europe (France, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden) and the United States, for which the so-called Islamic State would claim responsibility. The western world faced a massive challenge which it was not prepared to handle.

As early as August 2014, the United States launched airstrikes on jihadist positions in the so-called Islamic State, initially on Iraqi territory and then, a month later, also in Syria. Early on, the operation quickly gained momentum.

It was claimed to have the support and involvement of such Middle Eastern states as Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates as well as the political backing of more than 30 countries in other parts of the world. Appearing before the UN General Assembly in September 2014, President Obama announced that: “the United States will act in a broad coalition to eliminate this network of death. (...) We will use our military might in an airstrike campaign that will destroy ISIS”<sup>103</sup>.

However, the results of year-long airstrikes on the positions of the so-called Islamic State were far from spectacular. The jihadists’ great mobility allowed them to evade the raids. Even in April 2015, it appeared that the self-proclaimed caliphate was retreating, at least in Iraq where it had lost control over more than 20-30 percent of its previously-held territory. This meant that, combined with operations by Iraqi forces on the ground, the airstrikes proved to be effective. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria looked very different. Despite the raids on jihadist positions in Syria carried out between August 2014 and April 2015 (80 percent of which were performed by American forces), more than 1.300 fighters of the so-called Islamic State not only maintained their territory but also captured new land, for instance around Damascus and Syria’s other major town of Himsu. By mid 2015, Assad’s regime controlled only one fifth of the country’s territory.

The problem with Syria was that everyone there fought everyone else and that the United States was left without any allies to turn to for support. The Free Syrian Army and the moderate Assad opponents associated with it could hardly count. However, other insurgents continued to fight government forces gradually destroying the country. The worst consequences of the Syrian civil war, which had already lasted four years, and of the fighting with the so-called Islamic State, were those suffered by the Syrians themselves: in 2015, the death-toll rose to more than 200,000 with some four million refugees remaining in refugee camps in adjacent countries, including Turkey.

Such spectacular failures of the United States and its coalition partners in the fight against the so-called Islamic State provided Russia with an opportunity to again become an international player after its recent actions (in 2014, as retribution for its actions in Ukraine) barred it from such engagements. In the summer of 2015, Russia began to transfer modern military equipment, including bombers, ground-attack and fighter planes as well as elite combat

<sup>103</sup> President Barack Obama’s address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, September 24, 2014 in: “Gazeta Wyborcza” September 27-28, 2014; see also Th. Wright, *Why Obama’s U.N. Speech is a Major Turning Point*, September 24, 2014, [www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/09/24-obama-un-speech-wright](http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/09/24-obama-un-speech-wright)

units, to Syria. Officially, Moscow was out to conduct a counter-terrorism operation aimed at supporting Syrian government forces in their fight against the so-called Islamic State.

In reality, the Russians joined the ongoing civil war by siding with Assad's regime, whom Putin had consistently supported. Thus, an inevitable price for Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict was the strengthening and, as it soon turned out, the survival of the Damascus government. It should also be mentioned that Russian forces engaged, among other things, in conquering Aleppo, Syria's largest pre-war metropolis, fought for by Assad's regime forces and the rebels since 2011. The government forces had been unable to regain control over the city. Russia began massive bombings, demolishing neighborhoods occupied by Assad's enemies and killing further thousands of civilians in the process. All this made the situation of the local population even more tragic.

Paradoxically, the United States and its allies appeared to initially approve of Russia's actions as if recognizing that the radicals of the so-called Islamic State could not be defeated without Russia's help. It actually appeared that Americans were happy to see Putin assume some of the burden of fighting ISIS. Even then, however, it was fairly clear that allowing Russia to engage in the Syrian conflict and recognizing it as a partner in resolving the Syrian problem could soon backfire. "Watching the Russians take the initiative is the most clear example yet of the complete abdication of U.S. leadership and responsibility in the region", claimed Christopher Harmer, analyst with the Washington-based *Institute for the Study of War*<sup>104</sup>. Indeed, it was very likely that the United States would agree to give up some of its influence in the Middle East in Russia's favor in return for Moscow's assumption of some of the burden of combating terrorism in that part of the world.

On the other hand, it was also clear that the stakes might actually be higher than just defeating the so-called Islamic State or maintaining America's influence in this strategically important part of the world and that the overall international status of the U.S. could also be affected. Note that speaking before the UN in September 2014 President Obama declared: "I stand before you today committed to investing American strength in working with nations to address the problems we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century"<sup>105</sup>. His entire speech, which was a profession of faith, as it were, in America's role in a turbulent world, demonstrated that the United States wished to maintain its leading role, not

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<sup>104</sup> Cited in: N. A. Youssef, S. Harris, *Russia to Start Bombing in Syria ASAP*, September 21, 2015, [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/21/russia-to-start-bombing-in-syria-asap.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/21/russia-to-start-bombing-in-syria-asap.html)

<sup>105</sup> Speech by President Barack Obama before the General Assembly of the United Nations.

only by setting the objectives to be achieved in the international arena but also by defining the way in which problems were to be solved, with clear emphasis on cooperation. Therefore in its war on the terrorist caliphate, the U.S. counted on the support of its allies, provided preferably in armed combat (relatively strong support for the coalition came from France and the United Kingdom). In fact, the U.S. viewed any other display of solidarity contributing to the effort to defeat the so-called Islamic State as equally precious.

At the NATO summit in Warsaw, the American delegation expressed recognition for Germany's expression of allied solidarity in the fight against the so-called Islamic State. During a meeting in Warsaw, Germany unequivocally committed to support the effort of the international coalition against the so-called Islamic State by engaging its AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) surveillance aircraft stationed in the German town of Geilenkirchen. They chose to deploy them in Turkey and over the Mediterranean Sea. The significance of the German decision lied in the fact that more than 50 percent of AWACS aircraft crews were *Bundeswehr* soldiers. As it turned out, the German military contingent in the region would be enlarged substantially. In fact, since as early as January 2016, six German Tornado fighter jets and the Airbus 310 MRTT flying tanker were stationed in the Incirlik air base in Turkey, which was used for patrols and reconnaissance operations over Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, 150 *Bundeswehr* soldiers were stationed in northern Iraq, tasked with training Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga, who fought mainly the militants of the so-called Islamic State.

Without overestimating the significance of Germany's engagement in operations on NATO's southern and south-eastern flanks, especially in view of Germany's overall capacities, one should nevertheless admit that from Berlin's perspective, a significant effort was made and that Germany's approach to the use of military force became more realistic. Nevertheless, compared to the engagements of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, both of which, operating under American command, constituted a pillar of the international coalition against Syria and the so-called Islamic State, the German contribution was substantially more modest. This notwithstanding, Germany's effort deserved credit and appreciation from Washington.

One should nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that Berlin had specific interests in seeking to resolve the Syrian conflict or at least strengthen control over the Mediterranean region. The fact of the matter was that an incredibly dramatic consequence of the Syrian war was a mass influx of migrants who, deprived of all hopes for a better life at home, left refugee camps in Turkey and



the Middle East, fled from the parts of Syria engulfed in fighting and attempted to cross the Balkans and the Mediterranean Sea towards the European Union. They were joined by immigrants from other poor and conflict-torn regions of the world who looked for a better life – even in 2014, the EU borders were illegally crossed by close to a quarter of a million people. By 2015, the migration wave peaked at close to a million desperate people who made it into the EU. This mass migration of unprecedented proportions in modern history posed an enormous challenge for western societies forcing them to find ways to handle the massive numbers of refugees and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Sub-Saharan Africa, and even the Balkans.

The situation of Germany in this context was somewhat unique as traditionally, for economic and social reasons and due to its relatively liberal asylum policy, the country was one of the most attractive destinations for migrants in the European Union. In the early September 2015, when a massive wave of refugees streamed into Hungary and Austria, Chancellor Merkel made a rare gesture by announcing an “open-door policy”, aimed particularly at people camping out in those two countries. This act of kindness for the arriving refugees and migrants, designed to defuse the dramatic situation of Germany’s southern neighbor under the slogan *Wir schaffen das* (“we will manage”), turned out to be highly consequential. It was taken as an invitation of sorts by further desperate refugees and economic migrants who came to Europe with the intention of reaching Germany. The situation evolved into a crisis as such unprecedented numbers of refugees and migrants (some one million people reached Germany in 2015) turned out to be very difficult to control. Germans’ initial sympathy for the arrivals began to shift as more immigrants flowed in, as the problems they generated grew more serious and as the topic of refugees dominated the political and social debate. Chancellor Merkel ended up in the crosshairs of criticism<sup>106</sup>.

One should nevertheless stress that her decision in September 2015 was a direct response to the humanitarian refugee crisis in Hungary and an attempt to defuse the dramatic predicament of that country. It was a Christian-like moral gesture which for Merkel, the daughter of a Protestant pastor, was both natural and necessary. Originally, it was all about helping the victims of the war in Syria. Therefore, for a long time, despite growing criticism, the German leader insisted on upholding its “open-door policy”. She stressed that there was

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<sup>106</sup> B. K o s z e l, *Unia Europejska, Niemcy i problem uchodźców (2014-2016)*, “Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej” no. 10, 2016, pp. 143-156.

no alternative to accepting refugees and argued that Germany was well capable of living up to the challenge.

In time, it turned out that even if driven by the most noble intentions, a policy cannot go against the grain of public opinion. Rising animosity towards the immigrants and the mounting criticism of the “open-door policy” cost Chancellor Merkel public confidence while boosting the popularity of the anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland – AfD*). Opposition to Merkel’s unyielding migrant policies arose also within the ranks of the Christian Democrats (it was particularly forceful coming from the *CSU* leader Horst Seehofer and no wonder, as this former Minister-President of Bavaria, the German federal state crossed by the main refugee route leading from the south-east, was confronted with most daunting challenges)<sup>107</sup>. All this was a major factor.

Secondly, Chancellor Merkel had to face criticism from many European Union countries. Especially when, confronted with an overwhelming refugee/migrant challenge, Berlin began to insist on a comprehensive pan-European solution of distributing asylum seekers among the member states of the European Union. Germany counted on solidarity among the union’s members and the engagement of all countries in refugee relocation. It was deeply disappointed, especially by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and its hard core: the Visegrad Group comprised of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Although initially, under the rule of the Civic Platform/Polish People’s Alliance-led government, Warsaw agreed to take in ca. 7,000 refugees (after vetting them thoroughly), its position changed with the Parliamentary election followed by the rise to power, in November 2015, of the Law and Justice party, whose election program relied in part on anti-immigration slogans. Once in power, the new government refused to accept any refugees. Opposition to the German concept of distributing the refugees and migrants arriving to the European Union united the Visegrad Group and hampered Warsaw-Berlin relations.

In searching for the solution, all options had to be considered. Undoubtedly, one possible although limited measure could be to fully or partially seal the borders of countries situated along the Balkan route, which was followed by the majority of the refugees and migrants reaching the European Union, mainly on their way from Turkey. A breakthrough in overcoming the migrant crisis came with the agreement between the European Union and Turkey concluded on March 18, 2016. Under its terms, Turkey committed to stop illegal migration

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<sup>107</sup> For more, see: P. K u b i a k, *Kanclerz Angela Merkel w ogniu krytyki*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 193/2015, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

to the European Union by sea and land. In return, the European community offered € 6 billion in aid for the refugees remaining in camps within Turkey (the first tranche of € 3 billion in such aid was to be transferred immediately while the balance would follow by the end of 2018). Other commitments included the liberalization of the visa regime with Turkey and restoring negotiations on Turkey's membership in the European Union<sup>108</sup>.

The impact of the agreement was spectacular. The influx of migrants was stemmed while control was restored over the Mediterranean Sea. It would be no exaggeration to claim that a key role in reaching the agreement was played by Germany. Chancellor Merkel not only negotiated its terms with Turkey's Prime Minister but also prepared a preliminary draft of the agreement. She additionally managed to persuade her EU partners to share the cost of concluding the agreement with Turkey. Although the full implementation of the provisions remained open and depended on the state of current relations between Turkey and the European Union or Germany, this does not undermine the success of German diplomacy.

There is no denying that Berlin is partly to blame for having precipitated the migrant crisis by announcing its "open-door policy". Nevertheless, the conclusion of an agreement with Turkey, which turned out to provide a partial solution and certainly reduced the influx of illegal immigrants, reasserted Germany in its key role as a representative of the European Union in international relations. All things considered, Germany turned out to be the most effective country in handling the challenge of the uncontrolled stream of migrants and refugees. While Chancellor Merkel's prior efforts and her concept of relocating refugees weakened her position within Germany and in the European Union, leaving Germany abandoned and solitary and certainly increasing tensions between Berlin and Central and Eastern European capitals, particularly those of the Visegrad Group, the measures that Germany took in 2016 changed the situation ensuring what Berlin considered to be an improvement. All this made the impression that the massive migration, which at certain stage of the developments began to be called the migrant crisis, was under control, at least partially. Thus, having helped overcome and mitigate divisions in the European Union over the migrant crisis, Germany became a force for stabilization in the union and one that counteracted the factors that undermined the *status quo*.

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<sup>108</sup> For more, see: J. Dobrowolska-Polak, *Turcja, Unia Europejska i uchodźcy. Porozumienia w sprawie zarządzania kryzysem migracyjnym*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 229/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

## “On the right side of history”

The migrant crisis turned out to be a major challenge mainly for the countries of the European Union and in particular for Germany. It was at their door that hundreds of thousands of migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya showed up: Europe was faced with the largest migration since the end of World War II. On both sides of the Atlantic, questions arose about whether the problem was exclusively European. Should the United States not assume more responsibility for the fates of the refugees? How could America help people fleeing from the Middle East and Africa, and support its European allies?

Part of the reason why the questions appeared to be legitimate was that, as a country of immigrants, the United States had been built on the energy, enthusiasm and skills of people from all continents: Europe, Asia, Africa and finally Latin America. In this case, there was more: the United States was in fact responsible, in a way, for triggering the migrant crisis. This unprecedented wave of refugees was precipitated in part by the U.S. intervention in Iraq, which instead of democracy in the Middle East, as was expected by its neo-conservative initiators who advised President Bush, unleashed chaos in the region, triggering a massive surge in terrorism. Its extreme emanation was the so-called Islamic State, which was very dangerous in many ways and which succeeded in conquering large swathes of Iraq and Syria.

It is hard not to blame the ineffective and rather procrastinatory way in which the Obama administration approached the Syrian conflict for the massive migration. The refugees also included Afghans, who saw the U.S. intervention of 2001 and the prolonged presence of international stabilization forces fail to bring peace and prosperity. Instead, their country was turned into a place of turmoil and endless fighting. Finally, there were people fleeing from Libya and the poor countries of Black Africa, for whom the western world could certainly have done more. Perhaps it could even have prevented the collapse of the Libyan state, which ended up awash in terrorism and poverty, and consequently stop the massive exodus of its residents across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy and Spain.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the crisis was, in some ways, a consequence of failed and unfinished armed interventions by the United States in various regions of the globe. Its causes may well have also included the lack of coordination and collaboration between the U.S. and its European allies. Finally,

it was also prompted by the fact that terrorism remains a huge international threat. Despite the United States's unique potential, ability to employ a range of fighting methods and access to support from the international community, it failed to resolve the problem. It was therefore only natural to expect that the U.S. would at least take the trouble to address the migrant crisis, for which it was responsible.

All this notwithstanding, the U.S. made the Middle Eastern refugee problem a priority in its humanitarian effort long before the crisis reached its peak in 2015. Americans donated more than US\$ 4 billion in humanitarian aid to the Syrian nationals who still remained in Syria as well as those who moved to the neighboring countries in which refugee camps were set up. Note that the number of Syrians who left their home country fleeing from war, terror and chaos exceeded four million. A special U.S. food aid program helped more than 1.3 million Syrian refugee seekers in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Although in monetary terms, the U.S. humanitarian aid extended to Syrians was larger than any comparable contributions from other donors, it nevertheless failed to solve the problem.

The fact of the matter is that between 2011, which marked the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, and the fall of 2015, the United States resettled some 1500 Syrians into its territory. This number was disgracefully low, not only compared to the extent of the migrant crisis at the time but also to the officially defined number of asylums granted annually in the U.S., which stood at 70,000. Thus, between 2010 and 2014, a staggering 71 percent of all resettled refugees found a home in the United States. The majority came not from Syria itself but from Somalia, Burma (Myanmar) and Iraq (in 2013). They included 19,000 Iraqis, 16,000 Myanmarese, 7,600 Somalis and more than 2,000 Sudanese.

While America's effort certainly deserved praise – after all, the U.S. accepted the vast majority of asylum seekers “into their home” – it nevertheless chose to stand on the sidelines with respect to the 2015 challenge. Responding to what at the time was a dramatic migration, the State Department committed to accept 5,000 to 8,000 refugees from Syria in 2016. U.S. diplomacy head John Kerry also announced an increase from 2017 onwards in the number of asylums granted annually to 100,000 (the assumption at the time was that the number of asylums granted in 2016 would still be 85,000) and more aid to be provided to the Syrians remaining in refugee camps. In view of the sheer extent of the problem, such efforts were certainly insufficient. It was also unclear who, in January 2017, would become the U.S. President and to what degree

he or she would be prepared to deliver on the commitments of the previous administration.

Germany in particular, which, according to projections, would have to deal with approximately one million migrants, including economic ones, had every right to feel disappointed with such a limited scale of U.S. commitments. Comments to this effect followed Secretary of State Kerry's visit to Berlin in late September 2015, which coincided with the peak of the migrant crisis. In response to questions from journalists, the U.S. head of diplomacy argued that the United States could not do more at the time. He quoted budget restrictions and more stringent (post 9/11) procedures of vetting Muslim arrivals for links to terrorism. "We still need to do more, and we understand that", assured Kerry. He offered this much and no more<sup>109</sup>.

There was a number of reasons for the fairly restrained migration crisis policy of the Obama administration, which departed markedly from the American melting-pot tradition. It was not only that the crisis did not directly affect the situation in the U.S. A more important factor that influenced the approach to the refugee problem taken by the U.S. government was the campaign in the run-up to the November 2016 presidential and congressional elections. Thus, the migration issue became the topic of political disputes, especially after D. Trump, an eccentric New York billionaire, who by then had already announced his intention to run for U.S. Presidency as a possible Republican candidate, proposed to build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico to protect his country from an influx of illegal Mexican immigrants. His other professions, not only on illegal immigrants from Mexico but also on Muslims, further escalated reluctance towards refugees among the American public. Many Americans, and especially supporters of the Republican Party, were quite happy with what the United States had been doing to resolve the migrant crisis. In 2015, an astounding 57 percent of Republican Party backers assessed the efforts of the U.S. authorities as sufficient or even excessive. Such a view was expressed by 46 percent of the Americans who voted for the Democratic Party, of whom 50 percent wished for greater engagement. Meanwhile, slightly over 30 percent of Republican Party supporters wanted to see more done for refugees.

It was difficult to argue with the U.S. government which, after the memorable terrorist attacks of September 2001 in New York and Washington, adopted fairly complex and thorough procedures for granting asylum to followers of Islam, especially those from regions engulfed in wars waged by radicals and

<sup>109</sup> Cited in: M. R. G o r d o n, A. S m a l e, R. L y m a n, *U.S. Will Accept More Refugees as Crisis Grows*, "The New York Times" September 21, 2016.

terrorists. Despite such considerations, the general impression was that the Obama administration did not do enough and failed to use its full potential to help Europe and Germany overcome the migrant crisis. However, American observers were convinced that a particular role in the refugee crisis was played by Germany and personally by Chancellor Merkel. This only confirmed the general agreement among the Americans regarding U.S. relations with Europe that Germany remained the main European player and is close to being America's most important partner in the Old World. For the U.S. administration, Chancellor Merkel symbolized hope for effectively overcoming the challenges faced not only by Germany but also by the entire European Union.

An expression of such esteem for Germany's role as a leader on the European political and economic scene was made during President Obama's visit to Germany on April 23 and 24, 2016. It was preceded by a spectacular sojourn by the U.S. President on the British Isles, where Obama made an emotional appeal to the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union. However, it was the visit in Hanover that proved Germany's importance to the U.S. President and confirmed his special ties with Chancellor Merkel. There would be no exaggeration in claiming that Obama viewed the German leader as at least the most important among European leaders. He also trusted her completely. He declared confidently: "You have been a trusted partner throughout my entire presidency". And although one cannot overlook the courtesy nature of the visit in Germany – it appeared at the time that it would be his last, becoming a farewell at the end of Obama's second term as President – it nevertheless had a concrete dimension and significance for the interests of both leaders.

Merkel, who was then severely criticized by the public and politicians in her own country and some European capitals, could not hope for greater praise than that from Obama who said that, by opening Germany to an unprecedented wave of refugees, she found herself on "the right side of history". In a subsequent press interview, Obama argued: "We cannot simply shut the door before fellow men who are in need". Any other decision, said Obama, would amount to "a betrayal of our values"<sup>110</sup>. His was certainly a genuine recognition and support for Chancellor Merkel offered at what for her was a very difficult time.

One cannot ignore the significance of such words even though they were expressed by the leader of a state that did not experience pressures from refugees and migrants to the extent that countries of Europe did. One should also consider that Obama was still highly popular in Germany: according to a survey,

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<sup>110</sup> Cited in: A. S m a l e, M. D. S h e a r, *Obama Joins Angela Merkel in Pushing Trade Deal to a Wary Germany*, "The New York Times" April 24, 2016.

as many as 62 percent of the Germans regretted he could not remain in the White House for a third term (although his approval ratings did slip from the 90 percent he enjoyed at the start of his Presidency). Thus, for many of them, the African-American President became an authority or at least a valued leader whose words receive due attention.

The significance of this praise was not depreciated by the clearly defined goal which the U.S. President hope to achieve in Germany, which he visited along with a sizable delegation of top U.S. corporate leaders with whom he attended the opening of an industrial fair in Hanover. The fact that it was with Chancellor Merkel that President Obama discussed the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) was very significant. Especially at a time when skepticism over the TTIP was expressed by numerous European politicians and a substantial proportion of the European public. In Germany alone, the TTIP was supported by a mere 39 percent of the citizens. On the day before Obama's arrival, some 30,000 people took to the streets of Hanover to protest against the TTIP. The negotiations itself over the TTIP were very troubled. The fact that Obama turned to Merkel meant he saw her as the actual leader of Europe who could make things happen. Hers was the "single phone number for Europe" that Kissinger wanted as he complained that in an emergency, Washington did not know how to call in Europe.

Even Obama's meeting with an extended group that included the French President and the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Italy, who debated key international problems, including the Syrian civil war and the fight against the so-called Islamic State, did not change the impression that it was Chancellor Merkel that played a special role on the European arena. For President Obama, she remained a valued partner in talks on key international issues as well as an ally in decisions concerning relations with Russia, threats to security and stability or economic issues.

That is why Germany sent a crucial message from the U.S. President on Europe, transatlantic relations, the commonwealth of values and dangerous challenges. Without a doubt, the U.S. administration also saw that the European Union was undergoing a serious crisis. Obama began his speech by saying: "I've come [...], to the heart of Europe, to say that [...] the entire world, needs a strong and prosperous and democratic and united Europe". It is hard to deny that President Obama never before showed such dedication and style speaking of the European Union, its problems and ways to resolve them. At least he was never this resolute. "Perhaps you need an outsider, somebody who is not



European, to remind you of the magnitude of what you have achieved from the ruins of the second world war”, stressed the American leader<sup>111</sup>.

President Obama’s words were important as they came at a very difficult time for the European Union, amidst widespread skepticism regarding the sense of the European project, its current design and its institutions. It came at a time when so many residents of the European Union did not know any reality other than that of the community and found it hard to imagine the fatal implications of a disintegrated Europe. The U.S. President recalled the consequences of rivalry, intolerance and extreme nationalism that devastated Europe in the previous century. He appealed for an effort to integrate and bring together various ethnic and religious groups, including Muslims. He warned against mutual isolation (“Don’t turn inward”), growing populism and deepening distrust stressing that “a strong united Europe [...] remains vital to our international order” and that without a strongly unified European Union, its U.S. partner will not solve global problems<sup>112</sup>.

This incredibly compelling appeal for maintaining a strong Europe, made credible by the fact it came from the U.S. President, who was still popular on the European continent, was one of his farewell actions. Whether we want it or, the fact he was about to leave his office diminished the impact and effectiveness of the message. Nevertheless, by pressing Europe to settle its problems at a time that was crucial for the Old World, President Obama also stood on the right side of history. After that, it was up to the citizens of the United Kingdom, Germany and the rest of Europe to take the message seriously. One thing was clear: the U.S. President would not solve Europe’s problems for Europeans. Especially after January 2017, when a new host moved into the White House, a person least awaited by the international community and one whose arrival was only foreseen as the worst case scenario.

Another worst-case scenario was definitely the choice made by the UK on June 23, 2016 in a referendum to remove the United Kingdom from the European Union. Next to many other political and economic consequences that weaken the prospects for development of the European project, Brexit also meant that the European community would be left by a traditional close ally of the United States. One could assume that Brexit would further strengthen the position and role of Germany, not only within the European Union, where Brexit would solidify its leading role, but possibly also in relations with Washington.

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<sup>111</sup> Cited in: P. W i n t o u r, *Barack Obama says world needs a united Europe*, “The Guardian” April 25, 2016.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

One could state confidently that no one came close to having as tight a relationship with Barack Obama as Angela Merkel. The problem – again – was that at the time, Obama was already part of a lame duck administration. It is in this context that one should view what this time was truly President Obama's farewell visit to Berlin in mid-November 2016. The nature of the visit was made unique by the fact that only a few days earlier, on November 8, 2016, the U.S. presidential election was won by Donald Trump. Yet another worst-case scenario became reality. For the first time in history, Americans have elected a President who not only had a controversial personality but who also had no experience running state administration or dealing with international politics. Such a man was to assume the highest office in an exceptional country, a superpower with great responsibilities and obligations throughout the world.

From the European and German perspective, the biggest problem was not as much the inexperience of the New York billionaire in international affairs. He would not be the first as many U.S. Presidents before him also lacked such experience (suffice it to mention Harry Truman, B. Clinton and G. W. Bush Jr.). Those presidents learned on the job and some of them even went down in history as outstanding architects of American foreign policy. This time, the professions and slogans heard from the Republican candidate on the campaign trail made Europe anxious. In addition to the striking naïveté of his outlook on international affairs, Trump expressed views which undermined the very foundation of the Atlantic Alliance. He not only questioned art. 5 of the Washington Treaty, which is the cornerstone of NATO ("one for all and all for one") but also contested the rationale behind maintaining the Atlantic Alliance, calling it an antiquated ("obsolete") structure and suggesting that perhaps it should be replaced<sup>113</sup>.

Trump approached the issue of unequal burden sharing among his allies in the common security policy in a very harsh and determined manner. The problem was by no means new and had been raised repeatedly by prior U.S. administrations. Nevertheless, no one yet has proposed such far-reaching suggestions: "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense – and, if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves", announced the New York billionaire<sup>114</sup>. Such statements could terrify European partners. As difficult as it was to deny that the majority of them were less than generous in paying for their own security, questioning U.S.

<sup>113</sup> J. Kiwerska, "America First" – Trump o amerykańskiej polityce zagranicznej, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 240/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

<sup>114</sup> Trump's speech in the Center for National Interest (April 27, 2016), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>

security obligations for what appeared to be mercantile reasons was a powerful blow to the Atlantic Alliance. It was as if the fact that magnitude of America's global interests and obligations naturally had to translate into greater costs was being ignored.

Trump's strangely familiar but nevertheless portentous slogan "America First" was viewed as setting the tone for his foreign policy. It was once used by U.S. isolationists in the 1920s and '30s. As before, it proclaimed that American interests would always take precedence. It is quite easy to predict the implications that this may have for the U.S. position in the world, the international situation and, last but not least, for Europe. By keeping away from international matters and issues only because they are not linked to the vital interests of the United States, America will do a disservice to stabilization and international order. Interpreted in its original isolationist meaning, the slogan "America First" could be dangerous in its European and international dimensions.

Trump also expressed unusual praise for the Russian President Putin, as if charmed by the leader's strength and effectiveness. He announced he would bring the U.S. closer to Russia to solve problems together. It was not difficult to see the price of such collaboration. Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, which still applied, the issue of Syria, the eastern flank of NATO, and even European unity may become bargaining chips in relations between the rookie Trump administration and the cunning and crafty host of the Kremlin<sup>115</sup>.

It was therefore only natural for the majority of European leaders and the overwhelming majority of the public to support Trump's rival, the Democratic candidate and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Germany was no exception. While one could argue about H. Clinton's performance at the helm of American diplomacy, she was valued for her competence in international affairs. Unlike her competitor, Clinton assured European partners during the election campaign that the United States would respect its obligations and existing alliances. Her bitter experience in relations with Russia during an attempted policy reset suggested she was unlikely to approach Putin as enthusiastically as Trump. Her strengths in the eyes of Europe were her predictability and rationality. Considering the broad foreign policy powers vested in U.S. Presidents, these strengths were critical. Neither was there ever any question about the former first lady's intelligence, competencies or experience<sup>116</sup>.

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<sup>115</sup> J. Kiwerska, "America First"...

<sup>116</sup> J. Kiwerska, *Wybory amerykańskie i polityka zagraniczna*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 226/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

When Trump emerged victorious at the end of the election process, all campaign trail pronouncements made by the Republican candidate became valid concerns for America's European allies. Other than surprise or even shock, reactions in Europe/Germany included barely veiled disappointment with the choice that Americans had made. German analysts and journalists did not mince words. They called the future president "a liar, a racist, a man who scorned women and a political ignoramus" and, even more bluntly, "a rav-ing hate-mongering iconoclast". They suggested his win could pose a "critical challenge for the strength of American democracy"<sup>117</sup>. In analyzing the reasons for Trump's success, they associated it with the growing wave of populism, people's dissatisfaction and their resentment for the establishment. Trump's simple, clear and forthright but also frequently false statements offering easy solutions to key problems and challenges of the day, fulfilling the expectations of a myriad average Americans, tipped the scales of victory in his favor<sup>118</sup>.

Germany's leading politicians found it hard to conceal their disappointment with the election outcome. Although *CDU/CSU* representatives commented on Trump's victory in a balanced and restrained manner, they nevertheless expressed their apprehension about the consequences of the new circumstances for the future of the Atlantic Alliance and American-German relations. In her brief congratulations to Trump on his electoral victory, Chancellor Merkel resolutely emphasized the significance of Germany's relationship with the United States. She also referred to the values that are shared throughout the western world such as democracy, freedom, respect for the law and human dignity, thereby hinting at the disparaging and derogatory statements which Trump had made in his election campaign referring to women and ethnic minorities. According to the German leader, it was on such shared values that cooperation between Berlin and Washington should rest<sup>119</sup>. A more specific approach to the matter was taken by Minister of Defense U. von der Leyen, who concluded that, under the new circumstances and in view of Trump's statements on NATO, the European community would have to step up its efforts to strengthen its own security<sup>120</sup>.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. "Die Welt" November 9, 2016; "Die Zeit" November 9, 2016; "Süddeutsche Zeitung" November 9, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" November 9, 2016; November 10, 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Bundeskanzlerin Merkel gratuliert dem designierten Präsidenten der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, Donald Trump, Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, November 9, 2016, [www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2016/11/2016-11-09-trump.html](http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2016/11/2016-11-09-trump.html)

<sup>120</sup> *Deutsche Reaktionen auf Trump-Sieg. "Zusammenarbeit auf Basis demokratischer Werte"*, "Tagesschau" November 9, 2016, [www.tagesschau.de/inland/trump-deutschland-103.html](http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/trump-deutschland-103.html)

The politicians of the government coalition partner party *SPD* showed considerably less restraint in discussing the new U.S. President. The party's leader S. Gabriel called Trump "a pioneer in new, authoritarian and chauvinistic world leadership". More diplomatic descriptions came from Steinmeier, who admitted that the majority of the Germans would prefer a different election outcome but that one had to respect Americans' choice. Expressing concern over the shape of the future U.S. foreign policy, he stressed that the change may cause dangerous turbulence in the international arena. Generally, not unlike the statements by Christian Democrats, those by Social-Democratic politicians showed marked anxiety about the impact of Trump's victory on Europe and Germany<sup>121</sup>.

Even more emotional were the remarks made by opposition parties: The Left Party and Alliance '90 / the Greens. Some of them stated they witnessed "a black day for America and the world". The win by Trump, a man who did not hide his chauvinistic, racist and authoritarian inclinations, was "a departure from traditional western liberal values". After the election, the United States found itself on "a road to authoritarianism", argued the leader of the Left Bernd Riexinger<sup>122</sup>.

Only the politicians of the opposition populist party Alternative for Germany, which held no seats in the parliament, welcomed the victory of the New York multi-billionaire. They saw it as proof that populist movements were "in", which boded well for *AfD*'s results in the upcoming *Bundestag* election. *AfD* even posted the slogan "Make Germany great again" on its websites in an unmistakable reference to one of Trump's main election slogans: "Make America great again"<sup>123</sup>.

Admittedly, election campaigns follow their own rules. Many election promises are only designed to drum up voter approval and support and do not necessarily have to be implemented. Yet, in the case of Trump, a man with an over-inflated ego, the likelihood of such promises actually becoming reality was considerable. Fears of that happening had to be addressed by President Obama who, while still in office, arrived in Berlin on November 16, 2016 for a three-day farewell visit. The visit was originally intended to be triumphant as, despite failed attempts to conclude the TTIP, resolve the Syrian problem, defeat the so-called Islamic State and avert the threat of Russian neo-imperialism,

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> *Nichts wird einfacher, vieles wird schwieriger*, "Die Welt" November 10, 2016, [www.welt.de/die\\_welt/politik/article159394222/Nichts-wird-einfacher-vieles-wird-schwieriger.html](http://www.welt.de/die_welt/politik/article159394222/Nichts-wird-einfacher-vieles-wird-schwieriger.html)

<sup>123</sup> Cf. T. M o r o z o w s k i, *Reakcje Niemiec na wynik wyborów prezydenckich w USA*, Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego no. 278/2016, [www.iz.poznan.pl](http://www.iz.poznan.pl)

the overall balance of achievements in U.S.-European relations, and especially those between Washington and Berlin, was positive. One could even speak of a partnership having formed between the United States and Germany.

During this visit, the otherwise reserved and unemotional Obama used every opportunity to praise Chancellor Merkel, depicting her as a politician who carried the values and principles of the whole western world on her shoulders. He reiterated his remarks made a few months earlier about Merkel being his best partner, a wonderful leader and a highly moral person. "If I were German, I would vote for her in next year's election", stated Obama in a press conference. Referring to the future, on which a gloomy shadow was cast by the electoral victory of Trump and his questioning of the importance of transatlantic cooperation, President Obama did not hide his apprehension. He nevertheless tried to calm the moods by assuring that his successor in the White House would nevertheless remain faithful to existing alliances and that American commitments to NATO would be upheld<sup>124</sup>.

Although such words were comforting, it was unheard of to have to address matters which for so many decades had been imperatives of European / German security and to have to defend the United States's role as a guarantor of security in Europe. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that the Atlantic Alliance as well as American-German relations have entered a whole new phase and that their future was completely unforeseeable if not seriously imperiled. Undoubtedly, a big question mark has been placed over the continued existence of the partnership between the United States and Germany.

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<sup>124</sup> Cited in W. B. T. Wielński, *Obama stawia na Merkel*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" November 18, 2016; see also C. Stelzenmüller, *Is Angela Merkel the leader of the free world now? Not quite*, "The Washington Post" November 17, 2016.

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