

# Transatlantic Destruction

*How the German ship of state  
got hit by Trump's torpedoes.*

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

**B**efore getting to the world's "disrupter in chief" and his antics at the recent horrifying Brussels NATO summit, let us have a look at the collateral damage the presidency of Donald Trump is causing to the transatlantic community that was developed during the last seventy years on both sides of the Atlantic. "U.S.-loving Germans planning life without transatlantic ties" and "Germany bids farewell to the post-war order" have been recent headlines of *Handelsblatt Global*.

As someone who first came to the United States in 1964 as a junior banker and took over the position of U.S. correspondent for the German financial and business daily *Handelsblatt* in 1967, working in New York and Washington for almost two decades, I have seen U.S. presidencies and administrations come and go.

The experience from Berlin of watching as Trump puts all his energy into tearing down the foundations of transatlantic relations as the "world's disrupter in chief" is horrifying and depressing. What happened to Europe after World War I and leading to World War II is a reminder of why, for my generation, the European Union with all its failures is a peace project and NATO's Western military alliance has provided its protection.

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*U.S. President Donald Trump arrives at the NATO Summit Brussels 2018, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium.*

businesspeople among its members. Its goal is to foster German-American understanding and “trans-Atlanticism” under the assumption that good relationships between the United States, Canada, and Europe are essential to the security and prosperity of the liberal Western world order.

Not many know that it was the Atlantic Brücke that—in consideration of the millions of American service members who served in Germany during the postwar decades—supported meetings and discussions among the military leaderships on both sides of the Atlantic.

It was not surprising that recently, after the shocking and chaotic NATO summit in Brussels and on the day of the first Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, *Handelsblatt Global*—working together with its sister publication *WirtschaftsWoche*—looked back at a lunch meeting of Friedrich Merz and former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in New York. Merz has led Atlantic Brücke for nine years and was a high-ranking member of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union party. Kissinger and Merz agreed on a sad but simple fact: The era of

After decades of meetings on both sides of the Atlantic, contacts, insights, certainties, and friendships remain ingrained. No “fake news” or conspiracy theory can undermine what has been experienced. Watching Lawrence Kudlow on CNN and CNBC from Berlin, I recall sitting next to the man who is now Trump’s economic adviser at a conference for two days wondering why he was constantly hitting at Germany and the European Union as a bastion of socialism that would go under economically and politically. Writing for *TIE* since the 1980s, a magazine that was established as backup for stronger and broader economic and monetary cooperation in such fora as the G5, G7, and G20, became for me a transatlantic and global learning process for better understanding over the decades.

#### **THE ATLANTIC BRÜCKE AND THE COUNCIL ON GERMANY**

It was Marion Countess Dönhoff, publisher and chief editor of *Die Zeit*, Germany’s most influential liberal weekly newspaper, who suggested in the 1970s that I join the Atlantic Brücke (Atlantic Bridge), the elite non-profit organization set up in 1952. At that time, Germany’s first post-war chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, was making sure that the young Bundesrepublik built strong links to the West as a defense in the Cold War.

Atlantic Brücke is an invite-only organization that counts senior politicians, diplomats, and influential

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German and American partnership is probably over—a painful new reality.

This is why the diplomatic era ushered in by the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, says *Handelsblatt Global*, has been particularly depressing for those who are dedicated to working toward good transatlantic relations. In fact, they had to realize that this was the end of

the Western world they had known. As they saw it, the July NATO meeting, along with Trump's meeting with Putin, "were just opening acts for the final grand tragedy: the end of the transatlantic era."

"If there is anything good that we can say about Trump, it's this: He's been a wake-up call for Europe," says Peter Beyer, who is a recently appointed coordinator for transatlantic cooperation at the German foreign ministry. He is a member of the Atlantic Brücke and belongs to Merkel's party. "We have to stick together," is Beyer's credo when talking to his contacts on the other side of the Atlantic. The advice from dedicated transatlanticists is similar: "Keep calm, stay on good terms with contacts outside the White House, make sensible suggestions. Hope, they say, is always the last thing to die."

*Handelsblatt Global* goes on and quotes Frank Sportolari, who heads the multinational delivery and supply chain management company United Parcel Service, and serves as the president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Germany: "We just hope that the European reaction to this situation doesn't get worse."

This more optimistic view is not shared by all. Steven Sokol, president of the American Council on Germany, the organization that is the Atlantic Brücke counterpart in New York, "is not sure." He argues: "In seventy years of friendship, there were ups and downs and differences of opinion, but there was always an agreement on the end goals." Sokol makes the point "that Mr. Trump did not

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represent all Americans. That's why it's very important to build other friendships and relationships, outside of official channels." But Sokol concedes that "convincing the Germans to take care of their transatlantic pals gets more difficult. The more Germany focuses on German interests, the less influence the United States will have here."

Merz and his New York counterpart Sokol have one thing in common. They both hope that Donald Trump won't be in office long enough "to permanently scar the Western world order."

**HOW TRUMP MAKES GERMANY ENEMY NUMBER ONE**

History books will note that U.S. President Trump put Germany on his enemies list next to Russia and China. After the fiasco of the G7's summit last month in Canada, when the U.S. president refused to sign the final communiqué by sending angry tweets from Air Force One, *The Economist* came out with a cover story on the forthcoming NATO summit titled "The Rift." The editors reminded their readers: "America did as much as any country to create post-war Europe. In the late 1940s and the 1950s it was midwife to the treaty that became the European Union



*On the sidelines of the summit, Chancellor Merkel met with President Donald Trump. They discussed the transatlantic alliance and cooperation within NATO.*

**Trump Versus Merkel**

As *Der Spiegel* reported from Brussels, "Trump turned this week's NATO summit into a showdown with Germany and its chancellor—Trump against Merkel, Trump against Germany. At the peak of the crisis, Trump even threatened to withdraw the U.S. from the alliance. For two entire days, he allowed doubts to persist of NATO's very survival." He had started the day with a hate-filled tirade against Germany, lambasting the country as being a "captive of Russia," and even said that "Germany is totally controlled by Russia" because it allows the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to be built.

and to NATO, the military alliance that won the cold war.” Their somber message: “The Western alliance is in trouble. That should worry Europe, America, and the world.”

The magazine asked a pertinent question: Would the president who arrives at the NATO summit be Triumphant Trump, Tetchy Trump, or Torpedo Trump?

Under the first scenario, Trump could point to the increased defense spending among NATO’s twenty-nine member countries and the improvements of the military alliance capabilities under the leadership of NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, and could decide to declare victory. Under the second scenario as “Tetchy Trump,” he could keep up the pressure on America’s allies—pointing at the shortcomings of the readiness of NATO forces, and hitting Germany as Europe’s economically strongest country to meet NATO’s envisioned burden-sharing goal of 2 percent of GDP that was agreed upon at the alliance meeting in Wales in 2014. Under the Torpedo scenario, a frustrated Trump could openly question America’s commitment to Article 5, the alliance mutual defense clause, under which an attack on one member is viewed as an attack on all. Trump also could threaten the Germans that he would call back all or part of the 35,000 U.S. military service members now stationed in Germany.

As it turned out, the German ship of state, where female Chancellor Angela Merkel has stood on the command bridge since 2005, got hit by Trump torpedoes from all sides. His attack on the Germans in front of all the allies at the meeting of NATO’s most important body, the North Atlantic Council, was unprecedented. Trump even threatened that if all the alliance countries, includ-

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ing Germany, did not reach the 2 percent target by next year, he would “Go His Own Way” with the alliance.

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## German Military Comedy Routine?

According to the last comprehensive report of the independent commissioner of the German parliament, Hans-Peter Bartels, the German military is virtually “not deployable for collective defense.” None of its submarines are operational. German soldiers have used broomsticks for lack of machine guns in military exercises. The list of planes, helicopters, and tanks that are not deployable is frightening considering the worsening geopolitical landscape.

—K. Engelen

For two entire days, he allowed doubts to persist of NATO’s very survival.” He had started the day with a hate-filled tirade against Germany, lambasting the country as being a “captive of Russia,” and even said that “Germany is totally controlled by Russia” because it allows the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to be built.

As the news magazine continued, “Trump has attacked no other country to the degree he has Germany... The country that stood on the front lines of the Cold War, it seems, now becomes Trump’s Enemy No. 1. Trump rages about the German cars being driven on American roads, he harbors illusions about some horrendous uptick in crime in Germany ... Trump is convinced that Germany’s economic success is in large part attributable to what he perceives as the Germans’ highly adept ability in the past at exploiting the Americans.”

Never before in postwar history has a U.S. president attacked a German government as frontally as Trump has done, sums up *Der Spiegel*.

### ANGELA MERKEL KEPT HER COOL

Having just survived a revolt by the CSU’s Horst Seehofer, her newly appointed interior minister, over his contested move to reject those refugees at the German border who had been registered in other EU member countries—Merkel kept cool and matter-of-fact under the barrage of Trump’s criticism.

What again became apparent at the Brussels NATO summit was that Merkel has no illusions about Trump. As Berlin insiders report, Merkel was convinced from the beginning that Trump would implement his election promises one by one. From early on the German chancellor did not hide her concerns. When Trump was elected, she sent congratulations but admonished that the United States and Germany “are united by values such as

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democracy and respect for human dignity.” No German chancellor has ever before sent such a congratulations. Merkel, in effect, dared to remind the new U.S. president to respect the U.S. Constitution.

In response to Trump’s attack over NATO spending, the German chancellor countered that the Germans are already spending much more on defense than in the past. She pointed to the proposed new NATO logistic command center in Ulm, Germany, and reminded the summit participants that the Bundeswehr has been fighting at the side of the United States in Afghanistan for seventeen years, that Germany is NATO’s second-largest supplier of troops, and that Berlin will increase the military’s budget to 1.5 percent of GDP by 2024.

Trump pressured Merkel to give up the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, arguing that the Germans are filling the Russian coffers with billions of euros and then letting the United States provide the military protection against Russia, and in fact Germany would be a “captive of Russia” by depending on receiving about 70 percent of its gas supply from Russia. Merkel rejected Trump’s claim. Germany imports only 38 percent of its gas from Russia, amounting to only 9 percent of Germany’s total energy needs. Merkel reminded Trump that coming from East Germany, she experienced what living under Russian control means and that German democratically elected governments make decisions independently, taking into account what is in the interest of the country and its people.

On his bizarre European trip—where at the end Trump praised the results of the Brussels NATO summit—he also seemed to back down on his furious attacks

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on Nord Stream 2 after talking to Russian president Vladimir Putin at the bilateral summit in Helsinki.

Here’s the assessment from the Eurointelligence briefing after the Helsinki summit:

“While at the NATO summit, Trump described Russia as an adversary holding Germany hostage over Nord Stream 2. In Helsinki yesterday, Russia was a competitor in the natural gas market, and Trump hoped that U.S. LNG exports would compete successfully with the pipeline. Putin suggested the need for Russia and the United States to work together to stabilize energy prices.”

Normally, competing successfully doesn’t involve shutting down your competitor through sanctions. But with Trump one can never be certain. He might change his stance again. The United States’ strategic goal is to

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get U.S. liquefied natural gas sold in Europe. So, scrapping the pipeline may come back as a demand in trade negotiations. In any case, this all adds to the impression that Trump is the kind of leader who agrees publicly with the last person he spoke to.

#### **WHERE DONALD TRUMP HAS A POINT**

As Stephan Richter and Uwe Bott point out in their July 9, 2018, contribution to *The Globalist*, the German government should not need exhortations to raise its level of defense spending.

“With 35,000 American troops stationed in Germany, [Trump] has let it be known that he might consider withdrawing all or some of them in retaliation, making the country and Europe as a whole more vulnerable to Russian expansion.”

The dismal state of readiness of the German Bundeswehr—led by CDU/CSU ministers since Merkel became chancellor in 2005—is in the view of most military analysts a scandal. In fact, according to the last comprehensive report of the independent commissioner of the German parliament, Hans-Peter Bartels, the German military is virtually “not deployable for collective defense.” None of its submarines are operational. German soldiers have used broomsticks for lack of machine guns in military exercises. The list of planes, helicopters, and tanks that are not deployable is frightening considering the worsening geopolitical landscape.

As the highly respected former defense minister of Merkel’s party during the 1990s, Volker Rühle, laments, “German politicians have made the Bundeswehr into an orphan.” He told *Deutschlandfunk* in an interview, “We should ask ourselves whether we really need this monstrous Trump show, to make sure that the Bundeswehr gets what it needs.” ◆