

US foreign policy

Dismay in Berlin after Mike Pompeo scraps first trip to Germany

US secretary of state's aborted visit prompts concern over dire state of US-German relationship



Mike Pompeo talks to reporters on board his plane after cancelling his German visit and making a previously unannounced trip to Baghdad © AFP

Guy Chazan in Berlin MAY 8, 2019

If Germany needed any more clues as to the low esteem it is held in by the Trump administration, secretary of state Mike Pompeo just provided them.

His surprise decision to scrap his first official trip to Berlin at the last minute provoked widespread dismay in Germany and prompted a fresh bout of hand-wringing about the dire state of the US-German relationship.

Even if Mr Pompeo had good reason to [call off the trip](#) “it unfortunately fits in well with the current climate of relations between our two governments”, said Norbert Röttgen, head of the Bundestag’s foreign affairs committee.

Since he assumed office in 2017, US president Donald Trump has singled out Germany for repeated criticism over everything from its huge current account surplus to its inadequate [military spending](#). He has also attacked Berlin over its support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline carrying Russian gas across the Baltic Sea to Germany, saying the project was turning Germany into a [“captive” of Russia](#). Mr Trump’s threats to impose swingeing tariffs on Germany’s all-important car industry also still hangs over the relationship.

Mr Pompeo is less openly hostile towards Berlin than his boss. But since taking up the reins as secretary of state last year, he has never visited Germany.

That was supposed to change on Tuesday, when he was scheduled to meet both his German counterpart Heiko Maas and the chancellor Angela Merkel for talks in Berlin.

But he abandoned the visit at short notice, citing unidentified “pressing issues”. Instead he made an unannounced trip to Iraq, amid warnings that Iran could be preparing for attacks against US troops and other interests in the Middle East.

Mr Pompeo told journalists that he was heading to Iraq because of reports that Iran was “escalating their activity”. At the weekend, the US said it was sending [an aircraft carrier](#) strike group to the Central Command region, which includes Iran and the Middle East, in part to send a signal to Iran.

The disdain with which Germany is [now held in the US](#) stands in sharp contrast to the close relationship the two enjoyed under Mr Trump’s predecessor Barack Obama, who saw Germany “as the number one country”, said Martin Thunert, a political scientist at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. “They didn’t agree on everything, but were in constant contact,” he said.

Ms Merkel was his “go-to” world leader when it came to trying to resolve Europe’s sovereign debt crisis or standing up to Russia over the annexation of Crimea in 2014, said Mr Thunert. It was symbolic that Mr Obama chose Berlin as the site for his big foreign campaign speech when he first ran for the presidency in 2008, he added.

All that has now changed. “More than two years after Donald Trump became president, much of what until quite recently was praised as the German-American friendship is in tatters,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper wrote in its Wednesday edition.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said Mr Pompeo’s decision to cancel the trip was highly symbolic. “In Trump’s Washington, Germany is seen as an ideological opponent and . . . no longer as a good ally whose opinion might be appreciated in a crisis.”

As if to rub salt in the wound, Mr Pompeo resumed his European tour on Wednesday after the trip to Iraq, finding time to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in the UK.

German officials played down the snub, saying Mr Pompeo and Mr Maas had spoken on the phone and were working on scheduling another meeting. A spokesman for the foreign ministry said there had been “no shortage of bilateral talks” between the two men in the past few months.

But others, meanwhile, warned that the tensions in the transatlantic relationship were now so deep that they might endure even after Mr Trump left office. “The tone may change, but the fact is, the problems between Germany and the US are structural,” said Mr Thunert. “Things are not going to go back to the way they were before 2016.”