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## **A Crisis of Trust: NATO in the Age of Trump and Europe's Security Challenge**

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Next year on April 4, NATO will turn 70. While the alliance experienced many external and internal conflicts during its history, the current situation may well represent the most severe crisis ever. Donald Trump's "America First" policy has called into question the very core of the security community: Article 5 and the principle of multilateral cooperation. Trump's nationalist course means that European partners need to become more independent by strengthening security and defense cooperation and investing more in their armed forces. Germany is seen by many Europeans as a lead nation in spearheading this new responsibility. Yet, there is little indication that German society is willing to take up this task.

### *Declining Trust*

The speed by which Donald Trump's presidency has created uncertainty and mistrust among transatlantic allies is astonishing. In less than two years, Trump withdrew from the Paris climate agreement, substituted negotiations on the transatlantic trade deal TTIP with a trade war against Europe, and canceled the Iran nuclear deal. These policies were all significant transatlantic projects, which brought Europe and the US together on economic and security issues. More threatening, however, is Trump's NATO policy. At the Brussels summit last year, he initially refused to commit to NATO's Article 5, the provision that all NATO members protect each other in the case of an attack, and when he did, Trump claimed that European NATO members would treat the US unfairly. This year, Trump even threatened to withdraw the US from NATO if Europeans would not spend more on defense. While this demand is all but new, the threat that the US "would do their own thing" is unprecedented. Subsequently in an interview, Trump seemed ignorant of NATO's principle of collective defense when asked why the US should defend Montenegro, NATO's newest member state. Trump is more concerned with reestablishing relations to autocratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin or dictators such as Kim Jong-un than maintaining long-term alliances. In judging the impact of Trump, it is important to understand that the transatlantic community was founded on common values and that the principle of collective defense depends on mutual trust and reliable commitments. If these "soft" elements are in decline, the foundation of the alliance is endangered.

In Germany, the increasing mistrust towards the US is visible on many levels. In May 2017, German chancellor Angela Merkel held that the times are over when Europe could rely on others in terms of security. Similarly, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas explained in June 2018 that Trump's behavior "shook our confidence to fight for multilateralism and rule-based world order together with the USA". Opinion polls also show a steep decline in confidence towards the United States. According to a May 2018 poll by *Politbarometer*, Germans see China and Russia as more trustworthy partners than the US.

Europe's response to this situation, as suggested by Merkel but also French President Emmanuel Macron, is to become more independent in terms of security. Yet, at least for Germany, there are several indications why this might be easier said than done.

### *German Reluctance*

First, German armed forces are in utterly bad shape. After years of declining defense budgets well below NATO's two percent guideline and costly military deployments overseas, the Bundeswehr is hardly able to fulfill its most basic tasks within the alliance. Beyond funding, Germany's military also struggles with recruiting, management of larger defense investments, procurement, and the issue of cyber security.

Second, while many German politicians agree that the Bundeswehr is underfunded, there is also high resistance against committing to NATO's two percent goal, in particular among left wing parties. In view of the current political constellation, it is highly unlikely that Germany will fulfill its commitments any time soon.

Third, and most importantly, there is little support within German society for a leadership role of Germany in security and foreign policy. The traditional reluctance of Germany has survived the end of the Cold War and has not changed even in view of Putin's aggressive behavior in Ukraine or Trump's America First doctrine. Asked whether Germany should defend its NATO partners in case Russia would enter into a military conflict with another member state, only 40 percent support the use of force. According to this 2017 *Pew Research* poll, Germany is the only NATO country where a majority rejects to defend its allies in an Article 5 scenario.

### *The Way Ahead*

Trump's policies may be a necessary wake-up call for Europeans to finally accomplish the long-held goal of a defense community. Yet, this next step of European integration will not come free of charge, especially since Britain will no longer be a member of the European Union. Investments in defense, more frequent exercises with European partners, and improved integration of the armed forces will consume time as well as financial and political resources. Increased collaboration in foreign and defense policies needs to go hand in hand with continued political cooperation to avoid a brake-up of Europe from within. Regarding economic policies or migration, Germany needs to balance domestic demands with European expectations. The Ukraine crisis can be viewed as a reference point. In fact, Europeans took a leading role in negotiating the Minsk agreements, continued to speak with one voice regarding sanctions against Russia, and aimed at re-assuring the younger member states, especially the Baltic allies, that NATO's Article 5 is still valid. However, to fill the gap of America's evident decline from its traditional role as Europe's security guarantor necessitates much more. German politicians need to convince the public of the overarching importance of Europe maintaining freedom and security by its own means.