

Germany-US relations - state and perspectives

It is said that the only new host in the White House who does not make Europe anxious is one that is already known, especially as an incumbent president. "Known evil - lesser evil", as Timothy Garton Ash used to say. In the case of Barack Obama, it was also about his almost universal support among the European public opinion, which - if the decision was theirs to make - would vote for the Democratic candidate in 90% instead of Mitt Romney, the candidate of the Republicans. This degree of acceptance of the first African American President of the USA was also present in Germany. Therefore, one may pose the question of whether the high rate of support and liking for Obama in Germany reflected the actual state of Germany-US relations after his four years in the White House and if the second victory of Obama provides good perspectives for these relations.

Starting from the balance of Berlin-Washington relations within the last four years, it needs to be assessed in the context of the general change of the American policy towards Europe. The Obama Administration expected actual partnership from their European allies - increasing their participation and involvement in solving the most important international problems. Germany, on the other hand, was perceived on the Potomac River as a country which, because of its potential and position on the European arena, should become the initiator and driving force of the growing activeness of Europe/the European Union on a global scale, addressing different problems and challenges. It was mostly about increasing the military efforts of Germany in Afghanistan, but also the involvement of Berlin to overcome the economic crisis. Hence the exceptional setting of the trip of Chancellor Angela Merkel to Washington at the beginning of November 2009. The mere fact that she was the second Chancellor of the FRG in the history of Germany-US relations who had the honor of speaking before the Joint Houses of Congress was significant.

No. 110 / 2012
06'12'12

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

Author:
Jadwiga Kiwerska

Editorial Board:
Marta Götz
Radosław Grodzki
Krzysztof Malinowski

Also the honoring of Merkel with the highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in June 2011 during her trip to Washington, was considered very important. These events were undoubtedly spectacular, but they did not translate into any exceptionally close personal relations between Merkel and Obama. Commentators were quite unanimous in emphasizing that these two figures are divided by a certain polite distance and guardedness, the source of which was seen, among others, in the negative reaction of Merkel in July 2008 to the idea of the then-Senator Obama running for President to speak in Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate as part of his pre-election voyage. It also did not escape the observers' attention that President Obama, during his tenure, visited Germany only two times and it was never an official state visit, but more of a "by the way" stop, such as the one in 2009 during a NATO summit.

In terms of politics, it is also difficult to say that within the last four years Germany-US relations entered some special phase. Firstly, they became the resultant of the general disillusionment of America with its European allies, who did not fulfill the hopes pinned on them with regard to becoming an important player on the international arena. In the case of Germany it was, among others, about the lingering moderation of Berlin in investing more forces in Afghanistan and the military actions taking place there. The reaction of the German government to the military NATO operation in Libya taking place in spring 2011, legitimized by a UN resolution, complemented the situation. The Germans not only abstained from voting (together with Russia and China) on the resolution in the Security Council, but also refused to take part in the Libyan operation. As a consequence, they became the number one subject of Robert Gates' criticism aimed at some European countries in June 2011. The American Secretary of Defense not only blamed NATO that only several of its member states took part in the military operation in Libya, but also accused his European allies, especially the Germans, of the lack of willingness to get more involved in defense and security. Europe - according to the chief of Pentagon - still remains just an active spectator, at the same time enjoying full guarantees of security.

Secondly, the economic problems resulting from the global crisis also had detrimental influence on Berlin-Washington relations. Without going into details, it is enough to mention that the Obama Administration counted on more involvement of Berlin in fighting the recession and the problems of the eurozone. It is obvious that the mutual economic and financial Transatlantic relations do not allow for the separation of the American and European economies. Meanwhile, the problems within the European Union, which not long ago was considered competition for America, became the subject of strong irritation at the other side of the Atlantic. And vice versa, as the different recipes for dealing with the crisis



did not help: the European/German tendency towards budget cuts, forced also upon other troubled countries, and the American “addition” of money and the growing budget deficit of the USA. Taking into consideration the fact that Germany is still generally regarded, also in the USA, as the driving force of all actions of the European Union, they are viewed as the most responsible for all the failures in the fight with the crisis.

Thirdly, the American-German relations should also be perceived through the prism of the revaluation of the US policy priorities, which took place within the last few years. The change of the American orientation from the Atlantic to the Pacific was widely discussed (pivot to the Pacific Rim). It was a result of the new dynamics in the modern world, among other things, shaped by the relations between the USA and China, full of tension and mutual dependency. This is why the region of Asia, with the growing power of China, the economic center moving from the West to the East and the intensifying process of “political arousal” taking place there, became the most important challenge for the policy of Washington. In this context, Europe and Germany would no longer be an object of much interest for Washington, let alone an object of worry. They were assessed with regard to the support that they were able to provide for America in its effort to deal with the Asian challenge.

So what are the perspectives in the relations between Berlin and Washington? Should we expect a significant turn or will the situation develop in its previous course - stable, but not very effective?

Undoubtedly, the United States will remain an important reference point for the policy of Berlin, but maybe not always and not the most important one. It will mainly be concentrated on Europe/the European Union. This does not imply a change or weakening of the Atlantic orientation. However, the German-American relations, even though they refer to common rules and values, will to a significant extent constitute a pragmatic system determined by shared goals and cooperation, especially within NATO and with regard to certain problems and global challenges. At the same time, certain areas of common interest may be reduced or disappear, such as the controversy over Afghanistan, from which NATO is planning to withdraw all troops by 2014. Other areas may become intensified in accordance with the dynamics of global changes. The readiness of Germany to play an active role on the international arena, also in the dimension of military actions and taking on obligations and responsibilities, will shape the role and rank of Berlin in the American policy. The more joint actions and shared interests, the stronger the bond between Washington and Berlin, which will translate into a stronger Transatlantic system.

It is also about the perception of Germany as a country which, because of its potential and position on the European arena, is the initiator and driving force of the growing



activeness of Europe/the European Union in the world and the leader of an effective battle against the economic crisis and the problems disintegrating the European Union. It is even more important because the main criterion in the assessment of the “usefulness” and importance of a partner - in the American calculations - will be its readiness to take on obligations and global challenges side by side with America or even to substitute for it, as well as its efficiency in solving problems. In this matter, the Obama Administration will retain its previous method as assessing its European allies.

The region of the Far East will also remain an object of particular interest and care of the Obama Administration during the second tenure. Even if the famous pivot to Pacific should also be considered as a neat rhetorical phrase, it is still an event of great importance. This change of orientation in the American policy may be taken advantage of by the European allies and does not have to mean the elimination of European matters from the American scope or the further weakening of the rank of Europe in the calculations of the Obama Administration. Wouldn't the debate initiated by Berlin, concerning the common EU strategy towards China and the challenges associated with this economic giant, be a good way to strengthen its role and importance in the American policy? Facing the Chinese challenge together with America would also be an excellent form of strengthening the Transatlantic system and providing it with a new incentive.

At the same time, it is important to remember about one thing - just as Washington can no longer base its relations with Berlin on the premise that Germany can always be counted on, the FRG will not give up the more assertive policy towards the USA and the completely independent determination of its actions in relation to other important reference points, especially the European Union, but also Russia. It will not always be possible to speak about the common interest of America and Germany. Opposition and lack of coherence may become more common, especially if Germany identifies itself with the priorities of the European Union. However, the more clear differentiation of American and German/European interests, especially in the economic sphere, does not have to end in a serious dispute. It is only necessary to be aware that this is the context in which the American-German relations will be shaped in the nearest future.

Jadwiga Kiwerska - prof. dr hab., employee of Institute for Western Affairs and WSNHiD in Poznań, historian and political scientist, specialist in international relations, especially American policy.

This Publication is financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Society of the Institute for Western Affairs.

