

Opinion – Leading the Free World Through a Second Trump Administration

Written by Karsten Jung

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KARSTEN JUNG, JAN 15 2025

In late 2016, as his presidency drew to a close, Barack Obama made one final trip to Berlin. Over a private dinner, he implored his long-time partner, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to shepherd his international legacy – and the broader transatlantic partnership of liberal democracies – through the foreseeable turbulence of a Trump presidency. Against the backdrop of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and incursion in the Donbas, of the British vote to leave the European Union, and of metastasizing populist upheaval across the continent, Merkel’s Germany seemed like a last bastion of political stability: It was the most populous country in the EU, the world’s fourth-largest economy, a stable democracy, and a proven multilateral leader. With 12 years on the job, the Chancellor had more government experience than any of her peers in the EU. In 2015, Time magazine had aptly named her not merely person of the year, but “Chancellor of the Free World.”

Though uncomfortable with the title, Merkel reluctantly accepted the task. While many Western leaders eagerly vied for Trump’s favor, she offered him “close cooperation,” but expressly on the basis of shared fundamental values such as democracy, freedom, respect for the law and human dignity. She worked with Trump because – as she later said – “any German chancellor has a vested interest ... to work and talk together with any American President.” But she refused to submit to his purely transactional style of politics. Offering a counter-model to Trump’s dealmaking, Merkel saw an intrinsic value in alliances and partnerships, working to preserve them even in the face of active opposition or outright sabotage from Washington: Thus, she managed to keep the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCOPA) afloat after Washington’s withdrawal. She held the EU together despite Trump’s attempts at playing divide-and-rule. More controversially, she also shielded Germany’s dubious economic partnerships with Russia and China from mounting criticism.

Throughout the Trump years, Germany’s international leadership was considerably more popular in the world than America’s. Back home, however, Germans remained highly reluctant to take on a leading role. As soon as Trump had left, Merkel thus happily returned the baton of leadership to Washington. Marking the occasion, President Biden thanked her for “an exemplary life of groundbreaking service to Germany and, I might add — and I mean it from the bottom of my heart — to the world.” Biden quickly managed to undo some of the damage Trump had done: He re-joined the Paris agreement on climate change, strengthened the transatlantic alliance, and breathed new life into seemingly obscure formats like the Transatlantic Quad. Before long, these would prove to be crucial tools of American leadership in organizing the Western response to Russia’s attack on Ukraine.

Despite his accomplishments, however, Biden was unable to fully undo both the causes and consequences of Trump’s policies: Whether it will turn out to be gradual, intermittent, or abrupt, the return of Trump to the White House attests to a broader shift in America’s international role: Already, the incoming President is busy belittling long-standing partnerships, threatening to ignore alliance commitments, vowing to withdraw U.S. support for Ukraine, and alluding to annexing a NATO partner. Just as the West confronts the gravest threat to its freedom and security in decades, its traditional leader seems to be going AWOL.

If they are to take on the challenge presented by an aggressive Russia and assertive China, the Europeans – and liberal democracies around the world – will thus have to step up. Once again, “the world America made” (Kagan) is in

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need of a caretaker. Unlike Trump's first term, however, what lies ahead may not just be an interregnum, but the beginning of the end of "liberal hegemony" (Ikenberry). Structural majorities throughout the free world seem to be shifting from liberal internationalism towards nativist isolationism. A return to liberal internationalist policies in four years is hardly a given. And a viable candidate for leading the West through this transformational period is woefully missing.

Eight years after Obama dined with Merkel, Joe Biden, too, flew to Berlin. Observers testify to his solid working relationship with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz: In 2023, Biden gave Scholz political cover for his controversial decision to send main battle tanks to Ukraine. The Chancellor returned the favor when agreeing to release a convicted killer to Russia in exchange for the return of American political prisoners. Yet, unlike Merkel, Scholz lacks both a parliamentary majority and the trust of key European partners. His country, moreover, is going through a severe recession, its infrastructure is crumbling, and its military unprepared for major war. Whether Scholz' likely successor – Friedrich Merz of the Christian Democratic CDU – will fare better remains to be seen. He will likely invest in repairing some of the more important European relationships and perhaps prove a stauncher supporter of Ukraine, but he, too, will be hamstrung by the effects of Germany's economic dependence on China, misguided energy policy, and decades-long neglect of the military. Moreover, his party's almost religious adherence to the so called 'debt brake' will effectively prevent him from borrowing the money needed to underwrite any credible leadership role.

In other Western capitals, the situation looks equally bleak: In France, President Macron has berefted himself of a parliamentary majority. Keir Starmer in the UK has failed to capitalize on his electoral victory. Donald Tusk's position in Poland is marred by the previous government's illiberal inheritance. Italy's Giorgia Meloni is herself flirting with fascism. NATO's Mark Rutte and the EU's Ursula von der Leyen both lack the political independence and material power to function as effective leaders. At the moment, it therefore looks as if no single state or organization can fill in for America. Tellingly, on his farewell visit to Berlin, Biden did not meet with the German Chancellor alone, but with all three fellow leaders of the Transatlantic Quad, i.e. Scholz, Macron, and Starmer. But while Biden has used the format quite successfully in the past, Poland's vehement reaction to its exclusion from the Berlin meeting has effectively nullified its value as a coordinating mechanism. In any event, Trump can be expected to return to his previous practice of ignoring the format.

Perhaps more promising is a new E-5 format consisting of France, Germany, Poland, Italy and Great Britain, which recently convened at the defense ministers' level in Berlin. In a subsequent statement, the five professed to be "determined to develop ideas and lead the way to advance Europe's defence preparedness." The five countries' foreign ministers subsequently met in a similar setting together with their Spanish colleague, stating their determination "to think and act big on European security". Germany's opposition leader, Friedrich Merz, has proposed yet another format – a contact group comprised of Germany, France, Great Britain, and Poland to develop proposals for a European post-war order. Surely, there is no shortage of "minilateral" European initiatives vying for leadership in a post-Biden Europe. Just weeks before Donald Trump's inauguration, this seemingly uncoordinated cacophony testifies to a worrying lack of clarity in Europe about how to address the emerging leadership vacuum. The options are there, but a decision needs to be made.

To be viable, any institutional arrangement that is to guide the free world through the period of persistent uncertainty ahead, must be shielded from nationalistic and populist tendencies not only in the United States, but across the Western world. This can most effectively be guaranteed by means of a cooperative approach, which does not hinge on a single actor and its political dispositions, but is underwritten by a group of several key players that are both interested in and capable of preserving the liberal order. These criteria would be most succinctly met by the E-5 group, which brings together the five countries with Europe's highest defense expenditures and five of the continent's seven largest economies. Centering around a potentially revived Franco-German axis, it binds the UK to European structures, involves Poland as an advocate for Central and Eastern Europe, and allows for Meloni's Italy to function as a potential interlocutor with Trump.

The ultimate viability of such a setup depends on its members' readiness to act not only in their own self-interest, but also a broader European spirit. For Germany in particular, this will entail potentially challenging financial and political choices. Whether the country's new government will be prepared to make them, as Angela Merkel occasionally did,

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remains to be seen. The alternative, however, will likely be much more costly and upending in the long run.

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