



America Votes 2024: The Transatlantic Impact

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Geostrategy

US-German Relations After the US Election

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By Rachel Tausendfreund | May 23, 2024

The upcoming US presidential election is viewed in Berlin as especially consequential, with concerns over a return of Donald Trump to the White House spreading across the German political spectrum.

Ukraine is the European country with the most at stake in the outcome of the US elections in November, but Germany is a strong second. Concern over the consequences of a second term for Donald Trump is shared across Berlin, no less in the conservative opposition party than among the three governing parties. The only outlier is Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Party. In Trump's first term, Germany and its chancellor at the time, Angela Merkel, were often the targets of the president's ire and attacks. The main points of contention for Trump—the United States' substantial trade deficit with Germany, Germany's insufficient defense spending, and its global economic policies—have not fundamentally changed since 2020. Furthermore, the statements Trump has already made about policy plans, including proposed tariffs, would be painful for Germany. But on the economic front, Berlin has also had its challenges with the Biden administration and "Bidenomics".

Despite displeasure about economic policies that are viewed in Berlin as protectionist, for Germany a second Biden term would be met with relief. Chancellor Scholz has made a point of closely aligning himself with Biden, especially on Ukraine. Berlin's government and main opposition party are openly thankful for the Biden administration's decisive leadership in the early months of Russia's war against Ukraine. In 2024, a broad consensus has emerged in Germany that Europe needs to take on a bigger share of the burden for European defense and security (aided in part by the long delay in the US funding package that was finally passed in April). The chances that this realization will result in a big step forward in European security and defense capabilities and cooperation are still not high, as the EU and domestic politics are still challenging, but this is the central opportunity of a second Biden term. With a supportive nudge from a re-elected Biden, perhaps Germany and its EU partners in NATO can finally make a common security breakthrough. If not, the unsustainable status quo for Ukraine and for NATO is at least better than the alternative.

Berlin's worries about a second Biden term are in the economic realm. As a Social Democrat, Olaf Scholz may ideologically concur with Biden's "Foreign Policy for the Middle Class", but its costs for German businesses are a point of strife between the transatlantic partners. Germany's political and business classes still hope to save the multilateral free-trade order and expect difficulties from Washington even if Biden holds the White House. Berlin may also face increasing pressure from Washington to add more of a security lens to its economic relations with China.

A second term for Donald Trump is viewed with foreboding in Berlin. The Institute for German Business (IW) has estimated that a Trump victory will bring economic costs for Germany of up to [€150 billion](#), based on the blanket tariffs Trump has promised as well as the general slowdown of an expected escalation in the US-China trade battle. There are significant risks in the realm of politics and security as well. Under Trump, US support for Ukraine would likely drop rapidly and steeply.

Germany and Europe are not prepared to fill the gap. Berlin further worries that European countries would focus on bilateral security relations with the Trump administration, with Germany poorly positioned to compete. Though Scholz may receive less direct rancor from Trump than Merkel did (since he is not a woman and is not associated with generous immigration policies) there are prominent figures in Trump's orbit who are outspoken critics of Germany, most prominently Richard Grenell, who served as ambassador to Berlin in 2018–2020 and is [considered a likely Trump pick](#) for Secretary of State.

Berlin has been slow to prepare for a potential second Trump term. Efforts are underway to forge connections to those who might be influential in Trump circles. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock made a noteworthy [visit to Texas last year](#), for example, where she met with governor and Trump favorite Greg Abbott. As it is often unclear who may end up in Trump's inner circle, German politicians are building contacts with Republicans in Congress and state-level government as well as with influential conservatives in the business arena.

Numerous scenarios are being gamed out to try to plot pressure points and possible responses. But instead of planning possible responses to moves from Washington, Berlin should develop a proactive plan—ideally one developed with and supported by at least some of its EU partners. Since there is now political consensus among Berlin's mainstream parties that Germany needs to take on greater responsibility for European security—as exemplified by Defense Minister Pistorius' [May 9](#) speech—now would be the time to create a serious capacity-increasing plan, with targets and benchmarks, for a stronger EU pillar in NATO. Such a plan can be devised in a way that it would look like a significant political victory for the next US president, which will be especially important if his name is Trump. But even if Biden wins in November, Germany and its European partners should have their own strategic vision for putting the transatlantic relationship on a more secure footing while they have an ally in the White House.

Either way, Berlin will be in a stronger negotiating position if it comes to the table with some ideas and offers of its own.

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