

## Working Paper

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## Mutual Perceptions

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As a consequence of 9/11 as a transformative moment for U.S. foreign policy, long-standing structural problems in the transatlantic relationship have become more accentuated: firstly, the structural asymmetry resulting from the huge disparity in military power on both sides of the Atlantic; secondly, the deeply rooted strategic divergence in the perception of security threats and the response to them; and thirdly, diverging perspectives on world order, leading to conflicts over the role of international institutions and the unilateral thrust of United States foreign policy.

At first glance, it is somewhat amazing that those world order conflicts have become more divisive at a time when the publics on both sides of the Atlantic do share the perception of a common threat and are in their majority not so far apart in their views of the world.

According to opinion polls, Germans (and this holds true for other European countries) are almost as concerned as Americans about the threat of terrorist attacks – although one has to add: Islamist terrorism as a threat has a different salience in both countries. Most people in Germany (63%) believe that the United States not the Western world was the target of the 9-11 attacks; only 20% perceived the Western world to be the target.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is a sense of a common threat, and this probably explains why a majority of Germans (61%) approved of the war in Afghanistan (with 31% disapproving). But Germans do not perceive the war on terror as a war against evil, a war for civilization. 85% believe that the United States is acting mainly on its interests in the war on terror.<sup>2</sup> The axis of evil rhetoric is being highly disapproved (74%). The American and the European publics, including the German public are also not so far apart in their view of the world. They do not live on different planets, the one on Mars, the other on Venus, as Robert Kagan's now famous dictum says. Looking at the collective preferences on both sides of the Atlantic, we are no way drifting apart. In their majority, Americans and Europeans do share a positive view of international institutions, Americans are more multilateral than unilateral oriented; Europeans, even Germans, are by far less opposed to the use of military force, although they are inclined to support it for humanitarian purpose and for upholding international law. Although the use of military means for combating terrorism finds support among a majority of people across Europe, the preferred measures to combat terrorism lie – to a greater extent than among Americans – in the economic realm: in helping poor countries to develop their economies.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Americans and Germans do not live on different planets but those neoconservatives do, those – to quote former President Carter – "belligerent and divisive voices" now seemingly dominant in Washington, those whose vision of America's role in the world implies a basic strategic reorientation of American foreign policy. Using the dramatically increased perception of vulnerability to asymmetric threats and instrumentalizing the "war on terror" as the legitimizing principle, the hegemonic – or better: the imperial – wing of the conservative foreign policy elite effectively dominated the political discourse and left its imprint on a series of decisions. The more this neoconservative wing of the Republican party will shape American foreign policy, the more it will lead to a growing strategic divergence between the United States and Europe, especially with Germany.

While many in Germany had hoped that US foreign policy would become less unilateral and more cooperative in the wake of September 11, those expectations were soon to be frustrated. Although the Bush administration had to accept the necessity of international cooperation in combating terrorism, it did not draw the consequences for American grand strategy many had expected in Europe. A general preference for multilateral mechanisms, thereby giving other nations a chance to bring in their view, can hardly be found any more.

The Bush administration's version of a "realist" or "hard-headed multilateralism" – I better say: the State Department's version – is a pure instrumental notion of multilateralism, namely using international institutions and, more often, flexible ad-hoc coalitions, for the pursuit of national interests.

Apart from the fact that this kind of multilateralism does not play a big role in the Bush approach to international affairs – the European, certainly the German understanding of how an institutionalized rule-based multilateralism should look like is quite different. The foreign policy approach of the Bush administration does not include a general preference for a multilateral approach in dealing with international challenges. Yet such an

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<sup>1</sup> Der Spiegel, 18.5.2002, S. 26-31.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, American and Europeans Differ Widely on Foreign Policy Issues, April 20, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Worldviews 2002.

approach would reflect the logic of America's post-world war II "grand strategy" of benign hegemony. But the United States behaves more and more as a world power using its preponderant resources for the pursuit of its national security interests instead of acting in its traditional role as "benign hegemon" guided by a broader world order perspective suited to a globalizing world. This unilateral thrust has become even more prevalent as consequence of the "Bush doctrine", which entails fighting not only terrorists and states supporting them, but also so-called "terror states" seeking weapons of mass destruction.

In the case of Iraq, the lack of consultation and the lack of influence on American decisions had certainly contributed to the changed position of the German government, which reflects the prevailing sentiment among the German electorate. Chancellor Schröder recently aired his frustration in an interview with the New York Times, saying "consultation cannot mean that I get a phone call two hours in advance only to be told, "We are going in". Consultation among grown-up nations has to mean not just consultation about the how and the when, but also about the whether."

American predominant power and its unilateral use in the pursuit of narrowly defined interests have been, I would argue, the main factor that has contributed to a more negative view of the United States in German public opinion. Not the predominant power of the United States is the main problem, but the way this power is used. Almost two-thirds of the German public shares the view that the United States pursues only its interest while intervening in crises all over the world. Almost ten years ago, back in 1993, only 58% held this view. Even more significant of a changing view of the United States is the drop in the number of people who consider the United States a guarantor of peace and security in the world: Whereas in 1993 62% held this positive view, the number decreased to 48% in 2002; 50% rejected this role of the United States.

In the German case, a changing view of the United States can probably be linked to frustrated expectations of real partnership. Asked in 1993 how to judge German-American relations, there was a mixed response as to whether United States played a dominant role or whether Germany had become an equal partner (Remember: This was not long after an American president politely talked about partners in leadership!). Hardly ten years later German public opinion had lost all illusion: 73% credit the United States with the dominating role in this relationship, while 26% believe the Germany was an coequal partner.

A more skeptical view about the United States should not be equated with a growing anti-American sentiment. The number of Germans who consider themselves to be pro-American has dropped only slightly from 1993 to 2002: from 72% to 68%. And the number of those with an openly self-declared anti-American attitude has remained rather constant: they now comprise 27% of the population compared with 25% in 1993.<sup>4</sup>

An American war against Iraq with a huge number of civilian casualties and instability in the region will certainly feed this more negative view of the United States in Germany. Only a small minority of Germans (12%) would support a unilateral American intervention; a majority thinks that the United States should invade only with UN approval and support of allies, almost a third (28%) expresses a clear preference against any invasion. And a majority of more than 70% objects to Germany participating in a war against Iraq.

The "war on terror" and foremost the question of how to deal with Iraq has raised the most troublesome question for German-American relations: when can military force legitimately be used? Apart from the left wing in the political and intellectual elite, there was broad support for "Operation Enduring Freedom", which could be justified as a legitimate form of self-defense. Most people in Germany would not doubt that a military response was justified; that the conditions for the *ius ad bellum* were given. The way the war was waged, the number of civilian casualties raised a lot of concern. But equating those civilian casualties with the mass murder committed by terrorists on September 11 as those German intellectuals did who responded to the well-known letter of American intellectuals justifying the war seems to me a minority view in the German public.

The just war principles American intellectuals applied could serve as common point of reference in deciding about the legitimacy of military force. In Great Britain this tradition is well alive now in the debate of going to war against Iraq, where prominent bishops have argued that the just war criteria are not fulfilled and thus a war to overthrow the Iraqi regime would not be justified morally. In Germany, where the debate about the use of military force is foremost couched – or to some extent: camouflaged – in legal argument, there is a great reluctance to apply the principles of the just war tradition which is mostly perceived as a dangerous way of

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<sup>4</sup>Daten nach Der Spiegel, 18.5.2002.

morally legitimizing war. There is little awareness that in the United States the return to the just war tradition foremost had a critical function. (Just think about Michael Walzer's book *Just and Unjust Wars* and the resulting debates) The just war tradition is, I would argue, a critical challenge to those two widespread views on the legitimacy of war found in the United States that are, from a German perspective very problematic: One the hand, the "realist" view of international relations for which the use of military force in the pursuit of security interests does not pose much of a moral problem; on the other hand, the view that war against evil is morally justified or even a moral obligation, a view that reflects what William Fulbright once called "the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit".

Should the neoconservatives succeed in turning the United States into a crusader state waging so-called preventive wars, German-American relations will head to further estrangement. If the current debate on Iraq is indicative of things to come, the expectation of American neoconservatives that their European allies will in the end jump on the bandwagon might be disappointed, at least in the German case. In their despise of their irrelevant amoral European allies and in their overconfidence in American hard power resources, they simply ignore the value dimension of the current transatlantic conflicts. It is a conflict about different visions of world order.