

# Biden and Merkel to Meet

by George Friedman - July 13, 2021

U.S. President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are scheduled to meet Thursday in Washington, where they are expected to discuss issues such as cybersecurity, Nordstream 2 and Afghanistan. But as is often the case, the official agenda items are secondary to the more important aspect of the meeting. After all, Berlin has never been especially decisive in Afghanistan, cybersecurity is a threat that affects all countries, and Nordstream 2 is nearly completed.

The latter two issues necessarily implicate Russia, which goes to the heart of the meeting. The actual point of discussions between Biden and Merkel will be what the U.S. relationship with Germany is, and what Germany's relationship with Russia and Poland will be. Implicit in these questions is what Germany's relationship with Europe will be, a subject that will be touched on gingerly, if at all, but matters more than all other questions.

The European Union was created for two purposes, according the founding treaty: peace and prosperity in Europe. The memory of the two world wars haunted Europe, so if the Continent could figure out a way to shed national distinctions of their importance, peace would be possible, or so the theory went. The path to transcending nationalism was in constructing a union in which universal prosperity was achieved, and with it a common European interest. Along with this would come a common European identity, in which nation-states would decline in importance.

From the American point of view, the European Union would be a logical epilogue to the Marshall Plan. The U.S. had included within the principles of the plan the integration of Europe's national economies. It was a rocky trip, as European nationalism and mutual suspicion were inevitably high. The French in particular distrusted integration. But it was important to the United States, which was responsible for protecting Western Europe from a Soviet attack. To successfully do so, there had to be a restoration of European military power and integration into what would become NATO. Economic integration and military integration were, from the American point of view, inseparable. The European free trade zone emerged from the Marshall Plan, was redefined by the Europeans, and finally became the EU.

The legacy of the Marshall Plan was the principle of European integration. But Europe has become an entity in which military strategy, economic policy and foreign policy are uncoordinated. In terms of military policy, there are wide differences in Europe. Poland, always wary of Russia, is obsessed

with protecting itself from potential Russian aggression. For, say, Portugal, Poland's concerns are far from its own. From the German point of view, creating a military force equal to its economic power would both undermine its economy and revive historical fears of German power, both reasonable concerns with the first one dominant. NATO, which is the framework of both European defense policy and the trans-Atlantic relationship, has no common strategy, making NATO itself dysfunctional and rendering a strong trans-Atlantic relationship impossible.

A similar problem exists within the EU. The EU has created prosperity, but the prosperity is not equally enjoyed. Unlike regional disparities within a nation, these are regional disparities between nations, which ultimately retain their right to self-determination.

The EU has had three significant crises: the global financial crisis of 2008, the migration crisis in 2015, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic costs. In all cases, the interests of particular nations clashed with the strategy laid down by the EU. At the moment, the economic conditions of various countries within the eurozone have competing needs required to stimulate a recovery – and some members of the EU are not in the eurozone to complicate matters further. Germany, the leading economy in Europe and the fourth-largest in the world, wants to maintain an economy that does not run deficits, and it wants the European Central Bank to follow this course. Germany fears inflation. Italy and other countries are facing a profound economic crisis that requires, according to John Maynard Keynes, massive stimuli and deficits to create a framework for recovery. Germany's economic problem is not Italy's, but whereas there are many nations in the eurozone, there is one central bank and therefore one monetary policy. In all three of these crises, there was a wide diversion of interests and needs, and the EU sought to use its power to punish the countries that were unwilling to follow its policy.

This then leads to a difference in strategy. As one example, consider Nordstream 2, which will deliver Russian natural gas to Europe and which the U.S. believes will make Europe far too dependent on Russian energy. In the past, the Russians have cut off the flow of energy to Eastern European countries. It had few long-term consequences beyond inflicting fear. But under other circumstances, the Russians might use this power to bring about changes in behavior or even capitulations to its demands. The Poles are terrified of excessive dependence on Russian fuel, not only because of their position but also because they fear that other EU members might cooperate with Russian strategy to keep the fuel flowing.

Germany and Poland are neighbors with a long history. To Poland, Nordstream 2 is an existential threat. To Germany, it is a useful source of energy. The Germans think they can form a mutually

beneficial relationship with Russia based on German technology transfers and the like and avoid the threat of having energy cut off. The Poles see in this attitude that Germany has no interest in Polish needs, and so neither do NATO and the central bureaucracy of the EU.

The United States is inevitably drawn into this issue through its NATO membership. The U.S. has some forces in Poland but needs greater NATO involvement if it hopes to successfully deter Russia. There is no common NATO view in practice.

Similarly, there is no single view on the current economic crisis. The intention of the EU was to integrate Europe. What it has done is try to reconcile the diverse interests of European countries and, failing that, follow the interest of the more prosperous and powerful countries.

Germany is the most powerful country in Europe, and the problem Biden will have is discerning what European policy on various matters is and whether to link Nordstream to German pressure on Russia and German warfare, and make the U.S. dependent on Germany for that security area. But then Germany must also lead the EU, which is different from leading NATO or defining an immigration strategy. The production of a European strategy under these circumstances is complex in the extreme. The ability to understand that strategy is beyond the capability of putative allies.

The Europeans like to argue that the U.S. has turned away from the trans-Atlantic relationship. The fact is that trying to understand Europe's defense policy, economic policy, and grand strategy verges on the impossible. The only option is bypassing these institutions and dealing with individual states. Of course, these states are constrained by the reality of being part of this chaos. Zbigniew Brzezinski once said that the problem in dealing with Europe is finding Europe's telephone number. I would argue not that the U.S. has turned its back on Europe but that Europe has adopted a decision-making process designed to avoid clarity in what decision it has made.

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