

Mastering globalisation: today's cold war

Europe and US 30 years after Reagan

by John Kornblum in Berlin

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When President Ronald Reagan ascended the podium at the Brandenburg Gate on 12 June 1987, to utter his immortal phrase 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall,' he did not expect the wall to tumble any time soon.

Reagan's speech wasn't aimed at Moscow, but rather at Germany. His goal was to warn against growing pressure for appeasement of the Soviet Union and East Germany and to stress the importance of maintaining western solidarity in dealing with the cold war.

In 2017, the story has moved on. President Donald Trump has shed any pretence of pursuing common goals with Atlantic allies. His focus on 'America first' discards a commitment to US Atlantic and global leadership dating back to 1941. British Prime Minister Theresa May's determination to 'take back control' is only a slightly less aggressive version of the same thought. Instead, Germany is rapidly assuming the role of protector of Atlantic unity.

Chancellor Angela Merkel on 28 May expressed her frustration by stating: 'The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over... We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands' – albeit, she added, 'naturally' in friendship with the US and UK.

Trump's behaviour turned Merkel's relatively humdrum statement into a declaration of independence from a US bent on withdrawal. But there is no alternative for Europe other than pursuing closer integration with the US.

Europe has been dependent for seven decades on US leadership, resources and political will. For Europe to take another path to unity would require a readiness and commitment that Europeans show no signs of achieving.

Despite Trump's disruptive behaviour, the destinies of both Europe and the US remain irreversibly linked. Europeans must base any new sense of European destiny first on greater ability to understand how to influence the US.

In a little-known conversation between Winston Churchill and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in January 1945, Roosevelt is quoted as saying, 'Winston, the American public will never tolerate a permanent presence in Europe. You do Europe and we will take care of Japan.'

The US is not by nature the ambitious world power many grew accustomed to during the cold war. Isolationism is an expression of a national point of view. The US is a country built on rejection of the 'old world'. This explains much of Trump's anger.

If Europeans are skilful in presenting their goals, Americans can be motivated to remain engaged.

Rather than fighting American dominance in the digital world, Europeans should embrace US creativity and use it for their own purposes. In the globally integrated world no one can live in ignorance of the rest of the planet. Europe must understand there is no alternative to getting inside US society and learning how it works.

The two shores of the great Atlantic 'inland lake' – as renowned US commentator Walter Lippman called it – must define their common interests in the face of dramatic world changes.

The Atlantic relationship offers a trading power such as Europe a highly efficient platform for the pursuit of its economic interests. Only through solidarity within a strengthened Atlantic community can Europe, still burdened by regional differences, master the challenges of globalisation and digitalisation.

The same holds true for military security. US commitment to European security remains the glue which holds the European Union together. Whatever the debates over North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

spending, the reach of US military might protects European interests around the globe at essentially no cost to Europe.

For Europe, rebuilding strategic unity with the US is an essential, almost existential task. Today's functional equivalent to Reagan's Berlin speech would be a wake-up call which makes clear that dealing jointly with globalisation is the 21st century equivalent of fighting the cold war.

John Kornblum is a former US Ambassador to Germany, Senior Counsellor at Noerr LLP, and a Member of the OMFIF Advisory Board.