



Parting Ways

12 years later: Still a German-American crisis?

Chancellor Merkel shows President Trump a map with his ancestral home in Germany

The German-American split was a part of a larger crisis in the transatlantic relations that began with the end of the Cold War, increased with the current Bush presidency, and erupted with ferocity in the fall of 2002 over the war in Iraq. The drama reached its peak during winter and spring of 2003. That year, Stephen F. Szabo claims, proved to be a watershed in a relationship that had been of central importance to America since the end of World War II. What began as a temporary tactical shift of the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder toward Paris and away from Washington, maintains the scholar of German-American and transatlantic relations Szabo, came to possess a strategic significance: Europe had taken priority over Germany's transatlantic tie with the U.S., and U.S. power was regarded with suspicion, rather than as a stabilizing force in the global relations.

Photo, The White House, 27 April 2018



Szabo, a professor of European studies at The Johns Hopkins University, analyzes large shifts within the global system of international relations and also discusses profound consequences. Chapter one deals with the start of a poisoned relationship, the next one describes the drift from tight solidarity to reckless adventurism after 9/11. The next chapter deals with "Partner in Contradiction: From the Election to War" and delves into Germany's special circumstances. In "Is it Bush or America?" the author portrays trendy German images of the U.S., and in "Welcome to the Berlin Republic," he reflects the broad scene in Central Europe. Finally, he investigates the ongoing reshuffling in "From Alliance to Alignment."

What was at stake, according to the author? The current rift between Germany and the United States over Iraq should be viewed as the death of the canary in the coal mine, an early warning to both sides of the dangers of taking the other for granted and assuming that their relationship is strong enough to withstand bad politics and bad diplomacy. A united Europe could in the future become a peer competitor.

There remains a real possibility that, as Europe redefines itself, it will do so against the U.S. Here again, Germany is crucial. During the crisis over Iraq, Germany abandoned its traditional policy of positioning itself between Washington and Paris to create a counter-coalition with Russia and France against America. If Berlin follows the French road toward an independent Europe that can act as a counterbalance to the American hegemon, there will be the real prospect of a split in the West. Donald Rumsfeld's words about "old" Europe already indicated this trend. But, in reality, underlines Szabo, these conflicts were a mirror of deeper changes: George W. Bush and Chancellor Schroeder — who was not re-elected in the fall of 2005 — served as catalysts.

A Strategic Divergence

Some of Szabo's findings deserve emphasis. If Bush overplayed a strong hand, Schroeder overplayed a weak hand when he stated that Germany would not support a war even if the UN Security Council issued a mandate. Therefore, the German chancellor, along with the French president, bears a great deal of responsibility for the splitting of Europe, which the Bush administration then used for its own ends. What Schroeder called "pragmatics" could be seen as opportunism. He came from the party bureaucracy and had no university education, but earned a law degree attending night school. His foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, did not complete any professional training. He made his way inside the student Left and up into the Green party. In essence, Szabo says, the former street protesters, who during the German-American crisis over Iraq held the highest positions in government, were repeating their resistance against an American war.

On the American side, "neocons" had long held regime [change](#) in [Iraq](#) to be a high priority, believing that this was the key to putting into motion a reverse domino effect that would create a new democratic dynamic in the Middle East and offer prospects for a real settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute. Now, neither restricted by another superpower nor restrained by an American public looking for a heavy-handed [response](#) after the events of September 11, 2001, the [White House](#) and the Pentagon (led by Dick Cheney and Donald H. Rumsfeld) focused on regime [change](#). The elimination of Saddam's (non-existent) weapons of mass destruction was the putative reason. Saddam Husain did everything to make it easy for his enemies. Moreover, the strategic divergence between Berlin and [Washington](#) played into his hands. As we now know, he thought until the last moment that the new Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis could successfully prevent a war.

There are many reasons for the strategic [divergence](#) between parts of continental Europe and America. The decline in the perceived importance of Europe in U.S. defense policy, underlines Szabo, was due both to the shift of threats (and the very different [perceptions](#) of their [causes](#)) and the growing gap in military capabilities between the United States and most of its European allies. From this perspective, the reader might conclude that all the talk about so-called European soft power is nothing but an attempt to cover a position of weakness with somewhat more appealing, but equally ineffective, rhetoric.

Not at War?

Szabo's book also gives the impression that old Europe was in a deep [sleep](#) as well. Its leaders did not foresee the dramatic changes that were coming with the increasing violence in the Palestine conflict and a series of plots against America. While the U.S lived through a profound shock therapy that culminated in 9/11, most parts of Europe were busy with the unification process. America was developing the activist doctrines of preemptive and preventive war; Europe had no means for this at its disposal. Whereas America dived into a kind of militant unilateralism, Europe went full speed ahead with an overreaching multilateralism.

After the Madrid bombings, Javier Solana, the EU's high representative for foreign policy, declared, "Europe is not at war." Of course, he had taken into account the growing minorities of Muslims in Great Britain, France and Germany (and the delusionary idea that if you distance yourself from the American or Israeli policy of harsh punishment for terrorists, they would spare you somehow). Some have argued that the riots in Paris were the result of European complacency.

New Generations

Szabo also raises the question of [Leitkultur](#) (dominant culture). For the followers of the concept of multiculturalism in Europe (located especially in the Green parties and other liberal circles), there is no cultural model.

This could turn out to be a dangerous illusion. If we look forward with Szabo, there are indeed diverging values and interests between both sides over the Middle East, especially between Washington and Berlin. There has been a shift from strategic alliance to tactical alignment.

But no problem other than [terrorism](#) could divide the West more. Yes, there is still a shared set of values, but in the longer run even this might vanish if new generations come to power with a different [view](#) of [history](#) and the [future](#).

If there were a [British](#) prime minister of Pakistani descent, a French president with Arab roots and a German chancellor with a [Turkish](#) background, how would they see the history of their own regions and America? Or — a [step](#) closer — how do Muslim [representatives](#) in European parliaments regard relations with Washington?

Common Interests

Parting Ways is very well researched and written. It offers profound lessons from failures in leadership on both sides, on unilateralism and on deeper currents of change. Leadership and personality matter, but the personalization of conflicts rarely pays off. Dealing with others on equal terms and knowing their political [cultures](#) are [preconditions](#) of world leadership.

But, for some generations, Szabo's conclusion might be appalling:

"The future of the German-American relationship will not be founded on sentiment, friendship or common values, but rather on the cold calculation of self-interest.

No amount of good feeling or renewed pledges of friendship will overcome the absence of the mutual strategic interests that bound the countries during the Cold War.

The German political culture will no longer give any U.S. government the benefit of the doubt.

The key question for the future is whether the common strategic interests that remain can be shaped to give the relationship a realistic basis."

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Stephen F. Szabo: *Parting Ways: The Crisis in German-American Relations*. Brookings Institute Press, Washington, DC 2004, 196 pp.

Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is author of *Gold, Bankers, and Diplomats: A History of the German Orient Bank 1906-46* and editor, most recently, of *Germany and the Middle East in the Cold War*, author or editor of other books. This review appeared in *Middle East Policy*, 13(Spring 2006)1, 161-163. Its text was slightly changed, links and pictures were added.