

WORLD

Is Germany Becoming Germany — Again?

By VICTOR DAVIS HANSON | June 4, 2019 6:30 AM



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Axel Schmidt/Reuters)

Merkel's evident anti-Americanism is a familiar refrain.

The more things change, well, the more they . . . So it is with the perpetual German resentments of the U.S.

Recently German chancellor Angela Merkel reminded us of that German fixation, when she made some astounding statements to the German media that revealed what many Americans had long ago surmised.

Merkel all but announced that Germany, or for that matter Europe itself, *is no longer really an ally of the United States*: “There is no doubt that Europe needs to reposition itself in a changed world. . . . The old certainties of the post-war order no longer apply.”

She insisted that Germany views the democratic United States as not much different from autocratic Russia and Communist China: Urging Europe to present a united front in the face of Russia, China, and the U.S., she said, “They are forcing us, time and again, to find common positions.” And Merkel concluded that therefore Germany must find “political power” commensurate with its economic clout to forge a new independent European path.

In other words, in the calculus of the supposedly sober and judicious Merkel, the democracy that saved Europe twice from a carnivorous Germany — and Germany once from itself and once from becoming a Soviet vassal — is now similar to the world's two largest authoritarian dictatorships, nations that not so long ago murdered respectively 30 million and 70 million of their own citizens. And how odd a sentiment for someone who grew up in Communist East Germany, a nightmarish state whose collapse was largely attributable to the Reagan-era effort to bankrupt and roll back the Soviet empire.

Merkel's view of a new German trajectory is not entirely predicated on her well-known antagonism to the boisterous Trump presidency, given that she still simmers over the Obama-approved surveillance of German leaders. In her interview with German media, she also couched her differences with America in terms of issues as diverse as Ukraine and the perceived dangers of Silicon Valley technology conglomerates — but apparently not the U.S.-led NATO commitment to protect Germany in the case of an attack and Berlin's failure to live up to its promised contributions to the alliance.

But Merkel was not through with her potshots. More recently, when she visited Harvard University to deliver a commencement address, she won loud applause from the young grads in the audience for systematically damning American president Donald Trump — she made thinly veiled references to the president as an abject liar and to his policies as ignorant.

What might have been the political equivalent to this bizarre example of a German chancellor pandering to a hard-left American audience as she attacked a sitting conservative U.S. president *in his own country*?

Perhaps imagine something akin to Donald Trump's traveling to Munich to address a hard-right audience of Alternative für Deutschland members — and then winning their applause by systematically attacking Merkel's disastrous solar and wind energy policies, disastrous open-borders immigration dictates, disastrous subversion of NATO by her deliberate renegeing on past promises on defense investments — and then, without saying the word “Merkel,” calling her an abject liar for breaking her promises. The irony, of course, is that the supposedly reckless Trump, who is not shy about replying in kind anywhere in the world to ad hominem attacks from various foreign officials — would probably not fly to Germany to attack Merkel in a partisan setting in the way the supposedly stateswoman-like Merkel just did at Harvard. And if Trump had done so, the media — and the German — response would have been unhinged furor.

In Merkel's defense, Germany now polls as the most anti-American of any country in the European Union (only 35 percent of Germans have a positive view of their NATO ally, the U.S.). So Merkel's own antipathy apparently reflects broad support at home (of course, now conveniently different after the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet threat). Still, the wonder is not that Merkel hates the current tough-talking and often provocative American president or that she had harbored animus toward the U.S. even before the Trump presidency, but that she has the audacity to express such venom openly to the media and so unabashedly on American soil.

Why the angst? A skeptic might note that an America that is for the first time pushing back on Germany's refusal to meet its NATO requirements, that leaves the Paris climate accord and the Iran Deal, that complains about asymmetrical German trade and tariffs, and that is at odds with Germany's role in global illegal immigration would naturally offend German sensibilities, which have long assumed an acquiescent United States.

Merkel's Germany is no doubt the acknowledged political leader of Europe, given that its huge economy accounts for well over a quarter of the aggregate 27-member EU annual GDP. But its leadership remains a funny sort, with a spirit now more attuned to its imperious past than to its supposedly enlightened future.

Germany deliberately keeps the euro as low as possible, discourages consumer spending, gears up its industry for mercantile export, and seeks to warp both European and global commerce — a model that resembles China's approach more than America's, and that, if followed by other major Western powers, might wreck the international system of free trade. Indeed, Germany has piled up the world's largest account surplus at nearly \$300 billion — nearly twice as high as China's. One reason Merkel keeps emphasizing the importance of the European Union project is that Brussels is so often indistinguishable from Berlin.

So should we laugh or cry when Merkel states, "Our policies on Africa, too, now follow a common strategy, which a few years ago would have been unthinkable. So we keep putting one foot in front of the other. However, our political power is not yet commensurate with our economic strength"?

In one sense, the world might get the willies anytime a German chancellor inserts the ominous qualifier "not yet" in terms of doing the "unthinkable." If current German bullying of Europe is evidence that its considerable political power is "not yet" commensurate with its enormous economic strength, one wonders at what near future date and in what scenario Merkel believes it would be synonymous.

What are we to make of another, weirder Merkel assertion: "Simply stating that we've enjoyed seven decades of peace is no longer enough to justify the European project. Without forward-looking arguments to justify Europe, the European peace project would also be in greater jeopardy than one may think"?

Merkel's reference to "seven decades of peace," which she apparently credits to the "European project," reveals a funny sort of anti-American arithmetic.

Others more historically minded might have argued that, after 1949, a peaceful but weak Germany would probably at some point over its first 40 years been overrun by the Red Army had it not been for the post-war American military and the pledge to expose U.S. cities to Soviet nuclear attack as the cost of putting West Germany under the American nuclear umbrella.

Other more cynical students of internal European history might have attributed the 70-year peace to the American-led creation of NATO, whose purpose is often characterized as "Keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."

And an even more cynical critic could have assigned the absence of anything recent resembling the cataclysmic years of 1870–71, 1914–18, and 1939–45 to the post-war understanding that the weaker ancient rivals of Berlin's, Britain and France, would become nuclear and Germany would not.

What exactly is the new Germany that Merkel envisions? More or less an updated kinder, gentler version of the otherwise old Germany.

Berlin until recently had alienated most of Eastern Europe with its high-handed insistence on open borders and illegal immigration fiats issued under the guise of pan-Europeanism.

Its post-2008 financial standoff with southern Europe was in part due to a strange German insistence that bankrupt debtors always pay back in full rich German creditors for loans that no sane person ever believed should have been issued, much less that could have been serviced.

With regard to Brexit, Germany strives to make the terms of Britain's severance from the European Union so onerous that the exasperated British public will have to keep voting until they achieve the correct German result. In other words, Germany wishes to make an example of Britain *pour encourager les autres*.

As for the U.S., currently Germany runs about a \$68 billion annual trade deficit with the U.S., in part due to fossilized asymmetrical duties and tariffs. Berlin refuses to meet prior European NATO-member promises to invest 2 percent of its GDP on defense: It spends just 1.23 percent, thus likely ensuring that most NATO allies will follow suit and never meet their commitments. Germany passive-aggressively virtue-signals and blame-games the United States to ensure that Americans will always subsidize its defense needs.

Has Germany become so pacifist that it is politically impossible for it to spend much of anything on defense? Or does it merely enjoy playing the defiant anti-American role, with no need to worry about its anti-leadership's long-term effects on the survivability of the NATO alliance, as it enhances its real power by piling up huge trade and cash surpluses while under the protection of NATO and the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Apparently Merkel was shocked that her usual shtick of praising NATO to

the skies while welching on her promises to pay her fair share to the organization would not impress a businessman like Trump — elected in part on the promise he'd ignore utopian rhetoric abroad and instead concentrate on facts.

So Donald Trump did not create the wound with Germany. He simply tore off the scab, exposed, and poked at what was long festering beneath. When Merkel tsk-tsked, "The heads of [European] state and government will decide how far to let populism go," one wonders whether she is just repulsed by the contagious Trump-deplorables virus, or really believes that it is the right and duty of European governments such as her own to determine what the proverbial people will be allowed to think and do.

There are many reasons that Germany might not like Donald Trump's America. Germany certainly does not approve of American fracking or its abandonment of the Iran deal and the Paris climate accord. Trump is too close to Israel for Germany's comfort. Trump has an old-fashioned view that allies especially should practice trade reciprocity, and that what would not be tolerated with an enemy should certainly not be indulged with a friend. Trump's idea of sovereignty and the need for a secure border is at odds with Merkel's insistence that eastern and southern Europeans follow her own disastrous immigration debacles. Trump then, in Al Czervik style, sees no reason not to point out these obvious contradictions between Merkel's soaring humanitarian rhetoric and Berlin's often quite selfish and provocative commercial, political, and financial policies.

But true to past form, Germany antipathy may also persist because America at this late date simply was not supposed to have the world's most dynamic economy, or to have become the world's greatest oil and gas producer, or to have achieved a virtual monopoly on high tech, social media, and the Internet, or to have remained the essence of the NATO alliance that still subsidizes German security — or to have dared to ask for reciprocity among friends and demanded it with rivals.

After all, the idea that America is not supposed, or should not be able, to do many things (fill in the blanks) has been baked into the German mindset for nearly 150 years.

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