



IN A NUTSHELL

Stormy-Annika Mildner, Annika Mattes

Saying Good-Bye: Merkel's Farewell Visit to Washington

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"On behalf of the United States, thank you, Angela, for your career of strong, principled leadership. And thank you for speaking out for what is right and for never failing to defend human dignity." - President Biden

"We're close partners. I would like this to remain even after I have left office. And I think, with this visit, we probably paved the way to make it possible [...]." - Chancellor Merkel

July 15, 2021 - White House, Washington D.C.

On July 15, 2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited the White House for talks with U.S. President Joe Biden. This marked her 23rd official visit to the United States. Biden is the fourth U.S. President Merkel has worked with in her role as Chancellor. The previous Trump administration followed a unilateral strategy, and the transatlantic relationship suffered massively under its tenure. While U.S.-German relations still recover, the personal relationship between Biden and Merkel is strong. Both are old acquaintances, having worked together under the Obama administration, where Biden was Vice President. The trip was Merkel's last official visit to Washington D.C.. The future of transatlantic relations stood at the center of the visit, particularly how the bilateral partnership and multilateral commitment to international organizations might change after Merkel leaves office in September.

Keeping Expectations Realistic

Public expectations were high for Merkel and Biden to chart a positive course for the future of transatlantic relations. Government officials, however, stressed that there would be no surprises, and expectations were deliberately kept low. Topics on the agenda were Covid-19 travel restrictions, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Afghanistan, climate change, EU-US-China

relations, emerging technologies, intellectual property rights, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and post-pandemic economic recovery. With Merkel not seeking another term in the September elections, the talks also focused on how U.S.-German relations will develop under a new German legislature.

Key Results

The meeting had high symbolic value, manifesting that the United States and Germany remain close partners and committed to the transatlantic alliance. While all pending bilateral and multilateral issues were covered, concrete results were, however, limited – as expected.

On the plus side: new commitments were made, with the United States and Germany signing the Washington Declaration, pledging to follow democratic principles. Furthermore, to strengthen future cooperation, Merkel and Biden founded two new joint initiatives: the Futures Forum which intends to bring experts from different fields together to shape a shared future and a U.S.-German Economic Dialogue to strengthen economic relations. Both are important ideas, but it remains to be seen how they will be carried out.

Only a few days after the Merkel-Biden meeting, the White House and Chancellery agreed

on a Nord Stream 2 compromise. Both countries committed to standing together and defending Ukraine against Russian aggression, if necessary by sanctioning Russia. Germany also pledged to financially support the energy transition in Ukraine. For now, U.S. extraterritorial sanctions against Europeans are off the table. However, strong push-back has already emerged in Congress.

Less progress was made on U.S. travel restrictions for visitors from the EU. While Biden ensured that there would soon be a definitive solution, the travel ban is currently still in place.

No new developments regarding steel and aluminum tariffs and the Airbus-Boeing conflict were expected since both issues are being discussed at the EU level. Overall, however, the topic of trade and economic development fell short. Especially after the devastating impact Covid-19 had on international trade it would have been beneficial if two of the leading world economies would have pushed for a concrete recovery plan. Building on the last G7 summit, this could have included ideas on how to strengthen economic resilience and global supply chains. There was also little discussion on the future of the WTO.

The conversation also stagnated regarding the ever-present issue of the two percent NATO

spending target. While Germany has vowed to increase its military spending, it does not yet invest the promised two percent of GDP in defense. The conflict peaked under the Trump administration, but Biden also strongly calls on Germany to make substantial progress on defense spending.

The Future of German-U.S. Relations

With the signing of the Washington Declaration, the United States and Germany pledged to strengthen their relationship – independent of who will be Merkel's successor.

German-U.S. relations are thus back on track. In particular with Nord Stream 2, the White House signaled its commitment to rebuild the relationship. Yet, many issues remain unresolved, and many Germans remain cautious, believing the United States is not a fully reliable partner given the mood in the country and the polarization in Congress.

However, this is not the time to be cautious, but the time for bold action. Civil society and the business community on both sides of the Atlantic stand ready to kickstart the new initiatives. Let's seize the moment together before the window of opportunity closes again.

The Authors

In January 2021, **Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner** (M.Sc.) became Director of the Aspen Institute Germany in Berlin. From 2014 to 2020, she served as head of the Foreign Economic Policy department at the Federation of German Industries (BDI).



Annika Mattes supported Aspen Institute Germany from June to August 2021, working on transatlantic relations. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Economics at the Free University of Berlin.



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