

Quo Vadis USA? – der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

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„After the Big Chill: Relaunching German-American Relations”

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Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University, my name is Anja Schüler. Long time listeners of our program might have noticed that our podcast is coming to you with a new title this week. "Corona in den USA" has turned into "Quo Vadis USA?" Unfortunately, that does not mean that the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us. It also does not mean that we will not be talking about it anymore. But we do know that there is great interest out there in topics beyond the pandemic, especially since the Biden administration took office. In our podcast, we want to find out where the country is headed. So, thank you for joining us for the first episode of "Quo Vadis USA?" and I'm delighted to welcome Jeffrey Rathke for this relaunch. He is the director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University, a Washington, D.C., based think tank. Their work addresses policy issues affecting the United States, Germany, and the broader transatlantic relationship. Welcome to the HCA podcast.

Jeffrey Rathke: Well, it's a great pleasure to be with you, Anja. Thanks so much for the invitation.

Anja Schüler: So, it looks like the last few weeks were pretty good weeks as far as transatlantic relations are concerned. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin attended his first meeting of NATO defense ministers via video stream. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met virtually with his E.U. counterparts, and President Joe Biden addressed the Munich Security Conference from the White House and declared that "America is back." And indeed, the inauguration of the 46th president has generated much optimism about a restart of transatlantic relations. What are the most important topics of the transatlantic agenda?

Jeffrey Rathke: Well, thank you for that introduction, Anja, and I think it underscores how much has been happening in the early days of the Biden administration. Let's keep in mind that as we talk today, February 25th, this is day 36 of the Biden administration. And, if I could just observe at the start, there is always a bit of a mismatch in speeds at the start of a new American administration. On the one hand, you have a president who has won an election and who has articulated usually ambitious goals and a desire to move quickly on his agenda. At the same time, we have a system that requires nominations and confirmation of senior officials and that takes time, especially now – I'm sure we'll talk about the tight margins in the U.S. Congress in the course of our conversation today. So, you have a president who wants

to bolt out of the gate quickly and you've got a bureaucracy and a staffing system that moves a lot more slowly.

Anja Schüler: And let's not forget that the transition process didn't get off to a good start.

Jeffrey Rathke: You are absolutely right. And this year especially, for the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th, of course, which led to the second impeachment of Donald Trump, has cast a shadow over everything in Washington. But also, the fact that the presidential election was only acknowledged for Biden at a much later stage, which means that the nominations and so forth have moved much more slowly. So, that just maybe as an introductory observation. You know, if you talk about the transatlantic agenda, there is a transatlantic agenda in a narrow sense: What does the United States want to do with Europe on things that affect the transatlantic space? But I think there is a much broader conception of a transatlantic agenda that we hear from President Biden because he talks about the transatlantic relationship as the cornerstone, as a foundation of American foreign policy. So, what that means really is that, in a sense, almost everything is a transatlantic issue because the Biden administration's aspiration is to work with our close partners and allies in the advanced democracies that share our values and our view of the world. So, almost any issue is a transatlantic issue, whether it is the global trade framework, or the ways that we deal with the various challenges arising from China's growing role. So, I think if you look at the speech that Joe Biden gave in Munich on February 19th and you try to tease out what the transatlantic agenda is: It's everything. It is the pandemic; it is climate change; it is proliferation. Those are all global issues that are not about competition with great powers, which is a phrase that the Trump administration liked to use. But it's also about things like dealing with Russia; it is figuring out how we get the balance of our China policy right – I'm sure we'll talk more about China today; it's about how we provide for transatlantic security and defense, especially within NATO; and a whole host of other things. So, it's a big thing. And I think Biden sees his relationship with his European counterparts at the center of almost everything he wants to achieve internationally.

Anja Schüler: So almost everything is a transatlantic issue, and as you just mentioned, the E.U. is. Do you get a feeling that there is a certain priority for the Biden administration as far as the E.U. is concerned?

Jeffrey Rathke: Well, I think the first thing is again if you look at the way Joe Biden has spoken about the European Union, it's a dramatic change from the Trump administration. That's obvious, but I think it's worth stating at the start because the Trump administration's approach to Europe was in some ways fundamentally anti-E.U., in the same way that some aspects of the Trump administration's policy, I would argue, were anti-German. And so, that change in tone is not just symbolic, it is essential in a way. So, that's the first thing. But when you look at the European Union's competences, the areas where the E.U. itself and the European Commission

has the lead responsibility, there, I think, you will see the Biden administration wanting to work quite closely with them, whether it is questions of international trade, where, again, it's the Commission that's in charge, not the individual capitals. And I think that's in line with the vision that Ursula von der Leyen laid out at the start of her Commission presidency, which was to have a geopolitical Commission, as she put it. And the way I see that and I think the way she has described it is that doesn't mean the E.U. is going to aspire to be a geopolitical player in every area of interstate relations, but instead that it will build on those areas where the Commission already has the responsibility that it's been given by the member states and that so, again, trade, questions of international standards, to assert to a certain degree how we deal with big technology issues, I think those are all areas where the Biden administration is very open to cooperating with the European Union. And, of course, you said it in your introduction, Tony Blinken has already had a meeting with the E.U. foreign ministers. And I think that also shows that there's a desire to cooperate on the common foreign and security policy areas, that the E.U. highlights the coordinated sanctions approach, for example, with regard to Russia. In addition to that, there will be a number of issues where it will be ideal for the United States to coordinate with Europe, the European Union as a whole, rather than working individually with member states.

Anja Schüler: OK, but we're really here, I think, to talk about German-American relations. Do you think there's anything on the agenda that relates to Germany specifically?

Jeffrey Rathke: Well, yes, and that's a great transition from the topic we just discussed, which is the E.U., and then getting to the national, because, of course, the European Union is only as strong as its most powerful member states want it to be. And that's also where we have seen over many years the limits of the European Union's ability to act as a sort of unitary actor on the international stage. And so, everyone recognizes that and certainly – I was an American diplomat for almost twenty five years before I took this job, so it's something that I'm very familiar with – that if you want to get something done, there are times you work with your colleagues in Brussels, but there are other times where you simply have to talk to E.U. member states – Germany and France, obviously, but depending on the issue, there are quite a few other capitals that would play an important role. So, that brings us to the German-American agenda, and I would say that, for example, when it comes to Russia policy, there are a number of irritants, and we may talk about them, and there are a number of differing perspectives. But I think the overall imperative for the Biden administration is to reach an understanding about what our strategy is toward Russia. And then once there is this fundamental agreement, you can tolerate all sorts of variation and differences of emphasis underneath that big umbrella, but if, to use that metaphor, we need to repair that umbrella so that we, along with Berlin, have a shared understanding of where we think Russia is going; what our top priorities are with respect to Russia; and then how we can use the instruments at our disposal to try to

get there. And that's been missing for the last four years. So, it's going to take a little bit of time to rebuild that. And I think it's important to note, if we're focused on Russia for a minute, that in these big public displays last week in Munich, both the United States, President Biden, and Chancellor Merkel went out of their way to avoid focusing on the differences. And instead, they both emphasized the need for a shared understanding of a Russian policy. That creates some space to work on the details in diplomatic channels and then hopefully, in the course of the coming weeks and months, to have a firmer foundation in place on which we can then move forward. So again, that's just the Russia policy; China is the other big issue. Again, in some areas, for example international trade policy, the European Commission is going to be responsible for those negotiations. But there are a whole lot of other issues that relate to China that the United States wants to work closely with Berlin to address. And so that may be uncomfortable for Germany, because we've all seen the public opinion polls, and we all know that there is a kind of dominant paradigm in Germany that looks at this as Germany being forced to choose between the United States and China. I think that's an unhelpful way of looking at it, and I don't think it's accurate, but it is the dominant way the discussion gets carried out in Germany and in other parts of Europe. And so, I think the Biden administration has a challenge to find ways to redefine those China issues. And I think the way Chancellor Merkel addressed this – she did it only briefly in her Munich security conference speech, but she did touch on it – and she said something that I don't think I've ever heard her say before, and that is she said that there should be a shared transatlantic agenda with regard to China. And that's very different from what she said even as recently as January in her Davos speech, which was very much in this analytical framework of “we don't want to choose between the U.S. and China.” So, I think that is a reaction to on the one hand, the priority that this holds for the Biden administration and also the careful way that the United States under President Biden has been approaching this, not trying to force things back into that old paradigm. Of course, there are defense and NATO issues and other things, the troop presence issue on the German-American agenda, and maybe we'll talk a little bit about those two.

Anja Schüler: That's a really good point, and as much as we all want to put it behind us, I guess I have to come back to the Trump presidency one more time. You mentioned that it was a severe test for German-American relations, but you could also argue that this erosion of trust really dates back further before 2016, before Trump's election.

Jeffrey Rathke: If you look at the public opinion – you know, public opinion surveys are useful. They don't answer every question, but they certainly do give indications over the years of the dramatic rollercoaster of transatlantic relations. If you go back to the Iraq war in the early 2000s and the presidency of George W. Bush reaching a real low point; they rocketed back up in the Obama administration for a while, especially in the early years; started easing back down; hit another low point under President Trump; and now they are on their way back up. So, this is a characteristic that has

been with us for a while, and it has been largely one sided. It has been a change in European views and German views of the United States and of U.S. reliability. Whereas in the United States, people have tended to have a positive view of Germany and of Europe and of our relationship without it varying so much as it has on the other side.

Anja Schüler: How can we deal with that lopsidedness? I think that's really interesting that most Americans still think highly of Germany. This is not true, vice versa, mostly because Germans, a high percentage of Germans, really base their evaluation of the United States on domestic issues like the handling of the pandemic, for example. What do you make of that?

Jeffrey Rathke: Well, there's also an asymmetry and it's inevitable. The United States is the most powerful country on the planet, and it has, its actions have an outsized impact. So, of course, Europeans are going to notice and be disturbed by or elated by American actions to a greater degree than Americans will notice and pay attention to individual European countries actions. That's just the nature of the international system and the relative weight of the U.S. compared to other countries. So that, I think is never going to go away. And if you think about this from an American point of view, if you are not in Washington where there's a higher degree of engagement with international issues, which is natural, but if you're in some other part of the United States, you're not going to be paying close attention to the differences between Germany and France, or Italy and Poland. And, you know, that's a fairly small group of people. Instead, there's an overall positive view that these are countries that have the same values and more or less the same aspirations. So, I guess, coming back to your question, what can we do about this? There are limits to what we can do about it. But I think that the important thing is that you have an administration now that is focused on achieving things cooperatively, and I think that is a function of maybe two factors: one is a recognition that the United States has less ability to do things unilaterally, to be to be successful unilaterally; and second that there is a reaction to a lot of the Trump administration's very caustic rhetorical approach. So, I think that there's a natural correction that's going to happen. But over time, you know, there's always going to be this greater variation on the European side in views of the United States.

Anja Schüler: As you mentioned, the U.S. return to multilateralism, do you think the pandemic has anything to do with that at all, sort of making people realize that there are some issues that are so big that you can only solve them multilaterally? And also, of course, I'm always thinking of the development of the vaccine, the cooperation between Biontech and Pfizer.

Jeffrey Rathke: So, I think that's a great example, and, of course, there were enormous resources in Germany, in the United States that were put into this, including financial resources made available by governments on both sides of the Atlantic, but the actual work was done by private companies. So, the one bright spot in the pandemic

response has been the speed with which multiple vaccines have been developed, tested, and brought to market, but I think people see that, you know, of course, the government made that possible, but I think it is less compelling as a story of transatlantic cooperation for most people, because they're not looking at it as purely kind of state-to-state, government-to-government cooperation. But I think that also reflects the nature of the world has changed a lot since the Cold War era, where it was really about governments and our policies and the big issues of the day, which were deterrence, defense, and solidarity in the West. So, over the course of the last thirty years, the world has changed so that a lot of the international cooperation is being carried out by private companies, which in many cases are multinational or non-government organizations that are active across borders. So, we still have a very intense transatlantic relationship, but people don't always identify it as such because it is composed differently than it was when I was first becoming a government servant, civil servant, and a diplomat. So, it's a very different kind of a landscape now. But the other part of the pandemic that I think is important from an American context, I think the pandemic has underscored a couple of things. First, that government matters; that because you can make the argument and there's a lot to it, that basically the pandemic is the reason Donald Trump wasn't re-elected. Of course, he had low opinion polling numbers even before the pandemic but when you think about how close the election was in a few states that turned out to be decisive, you have to keep in mind that the pandemic was perhaps the thing that really made all the difference. And so that is, I think, the way that the pandemic is affecting our view of the role of government, the way that government should be run, and it's less the international aspect, I would say, for most Americans.

Anja Schüler: So let me ask you this before we go to wrap this up – after all these years of mistrust and division, and I'm not just talking about the Trump presidency, do you sort of see a return to transatlantic relations, as you and I used to know them? Or does Joe Biden have to build back better, in other words, will transatlantic relations maybe have a new quality in the future?

Jeffrey Rathke: That's a great way to wrap this up into a bigger package. I think transatlantic relations will be different, and I think the most important thing to keep in mind is that even for Joe Biden – the oldest man ever to take office, to be inaugurated as president – he has been very careful to talk about, he does say America is back, but he is not saying we are back to where we were in 2016 or in 2008, when he was elected Vice President, or at any other point in the past. And that's not just rhetoric. He and I think most of the party that supports him and his administration. They start from a recognition that America's unilateral power in the world is diminishing, China is used to growth, is becoming more powerful. And so that's a simple fact; it's not a value judgment. But in those circumstances, the United States has to do things in partnership with other countries and who better to work with than advanced democracies with which we have a long history of collaboration, so there is that. And I think future administrations are also going to have to recognize that as well. If you

want to change the WTO, you're not going to do it unilaterally. If you want to set new standards for how technology is going to be rolled out and affect societies around the globe, you're going to have to do that with a big regulatory superpower like the European Union, and so forth. But the difference that I would say is, as someone who came of age in the post-Cold War world, really, I mean most of my work was after the collapse of the Soviet Union, you know, that was a time when we spent a lot of time thinking about new structures, about the widening and deepening of the European Economic Community, which became the European Union, and of the relationship between NATO and the European Union. All these, you know, very interesting and intriguing, but in some cases very theoretical. I think the United States under President Biden is kind of beyond these sorts of concerns. So, Joe Biden is a multilateralist by inclination, and he is a transatlanticist by tradition. But he is not going to be very patient. We're getting wrapped up in theoretical discussions about competences between the E.U. and its member states or between the E.U. and NATO. He's going to be interested in getting things done. And I think most Americans, regardless of which party, are going to be as well. And I think this is going to place demands and maybe even some strains on the transatlantic relationship in the course of this administration because of what the United States ultimately wants to achieve is to be able to shape the future economy and the future international relations of this planet. And that will require, I think, our European partners to do some things differently maybe than they have done in the past and not to exist within the sometimes comfortable and routinized ways of doing things that have arisen over the last two or three decades. So, I think that's that is going to be a change, and I think, you know, we'll have to acknowledge that. And if we don't, then we'll be setting ourselves up for frustrations: Americans being disappointed that Europeans can't do things as quickly or in the way we want; Europeans being frustrated with the United States because we don't seem to respect, understand or engage with their institutions the way they would like us to.

Anja Schüler: We definitely have our work cut out for us. Thank you so much for this conversation, Jeffrey Rathke from the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, D.C. If you're interested in their work, check out their website and check out their podcast, "The Zeitgeist."

Jeffrey Rathke: Thanks so much.

Anja Schüler: And this was the first episode of "Quo Vadis USA?" the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. My name is Anja Schüler and in the weeks ahead, we will continue to focus on the domestic and international agenda of the Biden administration. Join me in two weeks, when I will look at the new U.S. commitments to multilateral organizations, especially the Paris Climate Agreement with Bastian Hermisson, the Executive Director of the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation's North America Office. Thank you for listening today, and we will look forward to welcoming you back in two weeks. Stay tuned and please stay healthy.