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“Creating a New Transatlantic Narrative”

**An address by
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Bob Kimmitt, Mr. Merz, ladies and gentlemen, friends: It is a great honor to be given the opportunity to open this year's German-American Conference focusing on a potential new narrative for transatlantic relations.

Prophecies – in general – have become a bold venture: From the end of history in the 1990s to a world that would be dominated solely by America, the last remaining superpower, we have seen a lot of flawed fortune-telling and crystal-ball gazing since the end of the Cold War. The end of transatlantic relations as a backbone of international order was of course a part of these. Still, few would have predicted the actual situation we are currently facing in Syria or the refugee crisis that has challenged Europe.

It is, at the same time, not a very bold assertion to say that we will have to face more such events in the years to come. The world is in turmoil. Decades-old, if not century-old, structures are crumbling, such as in the whole Middle East, and even established powers are challenging our international order, as we have observed with Russia in Ukraine.

In this difficult context, the transatlantic tandem has set the course during the last few months. Europe and America have provided the momentum for various multilateral agreements – from the nuclear deal with Iran to the COP21 agreement in Paris. The same holds true for tackling the crises and hostilities in Asia and the Middle East. Besides our long-term cooperation in reconstructing Afghanistan, the U.S. and Europe have been important drivers of the peace talks on Syria or of the efforts to empower a new central government in Libya – which are indeed only first steps in stabilizing those fragile regions.

While these crises and challenges are ongoing, there are further areas where the transatlantic partners will need to be in the driver's seat. The ongoing fight against the threat – on both sides of the Atlantic – of international terrorism and extremism is one such topic where especially our intelligence agencies will have to work more closely together.

So is the current migration crisis – as well as future migration flows. From tackling the root causes, to stabilizing and supporting transit countries, to providing humanitarian and development aid, to establishing strong border control as well as finding international mechanisms for the fair distribution of refugees – this global challenge can only be addressed and solved jointly by the U.S. and Europe. Also NATO, our traditional security backbone, needs to evolve more into an organization that can actually tackle these challenges – including a role in handling migration streams – and that can also extend its area of operations to new, nontraditional theaters.

The importance of our relations are, by the way, clearly reflected in the excellent cooperation we experience in our day-to-day work – also here in Washington – and which probably finds its culmination in the leadership duo of Obama and Merkel, as well as in the trustful relationship between Secretary Kerry and Minister Steinmeier. The recent headline of a German newspaper – “Best Buddies!” – could well summarize not only their relationship but also our bilateral relations.

Ladies and gentlemen, so am I just advocating for a simple “Keep it up!”? Shall we continue on known paths, maybe just extending our cooperation to a few new crises and regions? On the contrary, our excellent relations and our day-to-day interaction on all governmental levels should not lull us into complacency. The way transatlantic relations are viewed in our two societies, what we expect from each other is changing – and, on this level, we seem to be moving rather apart than together. The current

presidential race – and I am talking about the whole political spectrum – is excellent evidence of this trend. So when we speak about a new transatlantic narrative, what new challenges do we need to take into account?

First, in the U.S. debate, while people are yearning for a strong America, we see less appetite for assuming a leading role in foreign politics. President Obama made that clear in his interviews with Jeff Goldberg and on several other occasions. Donald Trump has been extremely outspoken in his very unique style, calling other countries in this context not only “free-riders,” but using worse labels. While we will see – and need – the U.S. in the lead, we will not be able to rely on the U.S. contribution of resources to international interventions as much as in the past.

There will be more demand for European contributions, and Europe will have to respond by providing more resources. This includes diplomacy, humanitarian and development aid, and, yes, also military action. And all this will be far from popular, especially among a German public that has very little appetite for becoming more militarily engaged in the world.

Second, we see a frightened middle class – and in parts also a frightened youth – in the U.S. and Europe which is growing more skeptical of globalization. They are flocking to populist parties in Europe or to Trump and Sanders in the U.S. Nationalism and isolationism are their responses to the changing landscape and the current turmoil in an increasingly connected, but also increasingly complex, world. This trend threatens transatlantic relations not only in general but also in respect to very specific projects, such as the establishment of a common trade zone or closer and broader cooperation between our nations within NATO. The opportunities of free trade and the necessity of international political and military cooperation need to be explained more clearly to the German and American public. At the same time, those who lose out on the benefits of trade need to be part of the discussion when negotiating TTIP and other trade agreements.

Third, similar groups to those mentioned above are feeling threatened by the influx of migration, by the open concept of our societies; they fear the loss of control and the failure of integration. We need to make sure that our societies remain open societies. With the immigrant populations growing in both our nations, we also have to come up with a more nuanced image of each other. A Hispanic American will – understandably – be less attached to the history of the Cold War in Europe, just as a young Turkish or Syrian immigrant in Germany will have a much looser connection to the historic role of the U.S. – let’s say – in liberating Germany from the Nazis and ending the Holocaust. We need to do more to spur our peoples’ interest in transatlantic relations and foster a new transatlantic dialogue – especially among people of the younger generation.

Fourth, digitization is already tremendously changing our jobs, our lives, and our societies as a whole. In the U.S., digitization is seen as a huge opportunity; IT companies as great employers. In Germany and Europe, the digital revolution – and with it, disruption in many sectors – is seen by many people more as a threat: the U.S. government as a hydra randomly collecting bulk personal data and U.S. companies as its accomplices.

Yet both our countries have mastered different aspects of modern innovation and technology. Silicon Valley has been unsurpassed in IT, while German engineering remains top-notch. Looking for synergies and cooperation in this field – what is now called Industry 4.0 or the “Industrial Internet” or the “Internet of Things” – will not only boost innovation and economic progress, it will also bring young

people closer together. At the same time, when talking about the opportunities of modern technology, we need to have a deeper exchange: Who owns our data? How much access should Google and Co. have to one's privacy? How should they handle personal information? What are the limits of government surveillance and bulk data collection?

Ladies and gentlemen, through recent decades, the U.S. and Europe have developed the experience, institutions, and tools to address complex issues. Few other regions are so closely connected to each other – politically, economically, culturally. This is why, in an increasingly stormy, complex world, only our relationship provides a foundation strong enough to weather and actively solve the upcoming crises. Yet, we need to make sure that we address the challenges of our changing societies, whose views are gradually moving away from a clear dedication to transatlantic cooperation and all that it entails. We need to engage on all levels to discuss economic, cultural, and social change. And we need to base our discussions more on the experience of the younger generations. They have to be part of our conversations!

The well-established networks that exist across the Atlantic are playing an important role here: The American Council on Germany and the Atlantik-Brücke are crucial cornerstones in this group – I am sure that under their auspices we will have a great discussion about the meaning of transatlantic relations today. And about the need to update our current bilateral narrative and to extend it to new topics – in an environment that sees fast-moving times for transatlantic cooperation. This is our common challenge!



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