



**AMERICAN
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CONFERENCE REPORT

“Walls or Bridges? The Transatlantic Relationship in Turbulent Times”

The XXXIX American-German Young Leaders Conference

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On a midsummer Friday, a group of Americans from varied walks of life and with a wide array of interests convened across the Atlantic for a brief respite in Munich before an intense week of delving into a host of issues affecting the transatlantic relationship. There, biking through the Marienplatz and the lovely Munich gardens, and sipping Bavaria's finest beers, the Americans selected for the American Council on Germany's 2017 American-German Young Leaders Conference launched a unique weeklong experience.

The American participants gathered at DLA Piper, together with host **Dominik Stuehler** (2012 Young Leader), for an orientation session and their first opportunity to meet as a group and share their backgrounds, an exercise they would undertake a couple more times throughout the week. This was followed by a traditional Bavarian meal in the city's *Altstadt* at Nürnberger Bratwurst Glöckl am Dom, hosted by **Michael Dzeba** (2015 YL). On Saturday, an excursion through the city on bikes, and a relaxing afternoon in a beer garden with a traditional Bavarian picnic, hosted by **Ludwig Preller** (2014 YL) and his wife, **Rebecca Preller** – accompanied by their smiling infant son, **Leo** – provided the only pause in pace the participants would experience for the rest of the week.

On Sunday, after the Americans arrived in Berlin via train from Munich, the German and American Young Leaders met and toasted each other at the opening night reception and dinner at the Berlin Grand Hyatt, the group's basecamp for the rest of the week. The evening provided an opportunity for the 45 or so young professionals to meet not only their peers for their time in Berlin, but also a number of alumni, who were able to share their own experiences and insights concerning the American Council on Germany program. The participants "sang for their supper," sharing each of their backgrounds – along with "fun facts" about themselves that further enlivened the conversation.

The 2017 group was diverse, with representatives from corporate offices and global banks and manufacturers, to NGOs and civic organizations, to venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, lawyers, and journalists. Some had deep transatlantic ties going back as far as student exchange programs in high school or working for a German company in the U.S. Some American participants had never been to Europe, let alone Germany. All of the participants were looking forward to engaging and experiencing the transatlantic relationship up close in what many agreed was a pivotal time for the German-American and U.S.-European relationship.

The 2016 U.S. Presidential elections and the resulting administration of President Donald Trump, as well as rising populism and growing far-right political movements across large swaths of Europe, raised serious questions for a group of largely millennials whose own worldviews seemed to differ in many ways from the brand of populism that has become a focus of concern on both sides of the Atlantic. There was an eagerness among the Americans to address the political environment in the U.S., and the German participants were interested in better understanding the evolving political dynamics in the U.S., while addressing and adding context to the political environment in Germany, where a national election would be held less than three months later.

Adding to the overarching political concerns, there were the policy issues that would be affected by the political swirl: trade agreements and new trade policies, Russia's renewed efforts to become a global player of import and influence, immigration and integration policies, the future of the European Union, and technology policies involving privacy and the economy. The challenge for the week, noted the members of the ACG Steering Committee – who helped select the participants and assisted in guiding the Young Leaders through the week's agenda – was not allowing the political debates on Trump and populism to overshadow the many topics where deeper discussion would engender greater understanding and engagement among the participants.

With those issues on the table and the participants taking to heart the admonition to make the most of a unique week, the ACG's opening night dinner pushed the participants right into the program with little prelude. At the dinner, participants heard from **Kent Logsdon**, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim at the U.S. Embassy in Germany. He spoke in lieu of the U.S. Ambassador since President Trump had not yet nominated one, although at the time, there was some speculation as to who it might be. He received pointed questions from participants who were wondering about how the State Department was operating and engaging during the early days of the Trump era, as media reports and the foreign policy establishment led some to believe that serious diplomatic efforts and programs were being downsized or diminished. He was upbeat and painted a mostly rosy picture of the situation, saying that the work of the embassy continued as normal. He also noted that the opportunity for serious engagement and frank conversation was ripe for those seeking to bridge the transatlantic divide.

On Monday, the participants departed for the Bundestag, where they held their first plenary discussion, on "Identity Politics: What Does It Mean to Be a German? An American?" and heard from their colleagues who presented on the subject. An American presenter who is Muslim American said he was concerned after Trump's election because he felt as if Muslims had been targeted in the election, particularly with Trump's proposal to ban Muslims from certain countries, a position that appeared to broadly target Muslim immigration overall. He said he "wrote down a message of hope that we're all the same people and that America is defined not by our President but by our people," especially since the country's diversity is growing, no matter what is being done to try to stop it.

A German participant said the Holocaust left very little room for Germans to be proud of their people. "Many Germans find it easier to have a European identity" than a German one. He said that many Germans were scared of the refugee crisis and the fact that it overstretched the country's resources. But an alternative viewpoint was that the migration crisis was "not a threat to our values but a statement of our values," because it could show Germany was a welcoming country doing good in the world. He said that Germans like traditions but reserve distrust in the government, lest it become too powerful, and are worried about the rise of isolationism in Germany.

A German participant said he believed "we opened our arms to migration" because "we've never considered ourselves an immigration country" but needed Turkish immigrants after World War II to rebuild the country – and it took 40 years to integrate the Turks.

A German participant said that connections and friendships are among the benefits of the EU; it's more than just the economic advantages. Another German participant said that some European citizens and countries benefit more than others, while an American participant asked: "Why doesn't Germany take the lead?" in Europe. A German participant answered that there is actually silent leadership in the country but no one wants to get out too far in front as a public leader. "No other country has the capacity to lead. ... Being European is a way of overcoming being German." But a different German participant said that a lot of Europeans think that the EU had grown too big.

The participants broke into smaller groups for more discussions. The sessions overall provided the Americans a far better insight into the thinking of Germans on issues that in some ways are more complex than those Americans face at home, given the unique history of Germany in the first half of the 20th century.

There is a sense of German patriotism that is linked to cultural identity. Additionally, within that cultural pride is a sense of "historic responsibility," an understanding that as Germany moves forward as a geopolitical and

industrial leader, it cannot forget its past and the pain it has caused. To be German is to maintain a mantra of “Never again, and never alone.” For Americans, the modern day has brought with it a complication of cultural identity from immigrants while maintaining a sense of national and regional identity.

Individually, many struggle with the understanding of what it means to be American alongside their ethnicity, as politics have made Americans deeply divided. This need for balance continues while minority groups and majorities in various regions deal with a socioeconomic divide. Ultimately, to be American, in some part, is to be everything and anything. It is to be an individual with the freedom to determine how you self-identify. Our shared values and our pride are built on the idea that anyone should be afforded an opportunity to gain the traditional, romantic notion of the American Dream. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are much more than a well-crafted legal construct.

It became evident during the discussions that identity in both countries is not homogeneous. Every American could give you a different answer – and so could every German, since the concept of identity is subjective. So there is not only one definition of what it means to be a German or an American. There are many variations. It depends on the individual life story, the values, the history of the countries, the regions where someone lives, the current political and education system, and so on.

History was one of the dominating topics of Working Group B. Americans tend to be more optimistic, and they have been sharing the concept of the American Dream since the very beginning of the U.S.: history, moving forward, leading a better life in the future, fighting for the country. They are patriotic and proud of their country. Because of Germany’s dark history, Germans are not positively engaged with their German identity; they are also more critical of the political system. Germans tend to be more sensitive about spending money, don’t like having debts, and are well organized. Compared to the U.S., Germany doesn’t have a very long and traditional immigration culture. Furthermore, a U.S. delegate underlined that Germans are more cautious and reflective regarding their history, especially the period of the Second World War. The U.S. delegate said Americans fail to reflect on certain periods of U.S. history – something they should do, and critically at that.

Diversity in America is of great importance; diversity has given America strength. In America you will find Mexican Americans, Muslim Americans, Latino Americans, and so on, and all of them can identify with the American nationality. In that context, a German delegate underlined that there might be hope that in the future they are going to have a parallel common identity also in the European Union: German Europeans, French Europeans – all of them united by one European identity. One might envision the ACG as “the American Council on Europe” in the future. The group also focused on values Americans share by and large: good education, democracy, diversity, freedom, and the possibility to choose different ways of life.

In the second plenary discussion – titled “Values vs. Principles: Is a ‘Special Relationship’ Everything It’s Cracked Up to Be?” – the participants were presented with the challenge of addressing the shift over the past century from a principles-based relationship with other countries to a more values-based relationship. The difference being that while principles tend to be unwavering positions and guideposts, values tend to shift based on events, changes in demographics, technology, and generational views. A German presenter said that nationalist forces are putting forward their own values and principles. Another German said that in Brussels, you could see the shift toward values, especially with trade policy. Some of these values include sustainability and anti-corruption. But they are not necessarily shared across the Atlantic. For example, the U.S. hasn’t signed on to all of the International Labor Organization principles for workers’ rights and conditions.

An American presenter noted the erosion of organized religion amid the diversity of countries and also the decline of family values. An American participant said rights should be an important part of the conversation.

Another asked: “What are your rights and responsibilities as a citizen?” “Why are we doing deals with countries that don’t live up to our values?” A U.S. presenter asked: “How do we enshrine our values?”

During the lunch session, “Encore in Berlin? The German Elections and Global Politics,” an all-star alumni panel of journalists – **Ali Aslan** (2010 YL), **Matthias Deiss** (2008 YL), and **Anton Troianovski** (2015 YL) – noted that the difference between America’s national campaigns and those of Germany – and the seemingly uncompetitive German election – was evidenced by Chancellor Angela Merkel taking a three-week vacation less than two months out from her re-election vote. One said that German campaigns rarely get as dirty compared to the U.S., with not as much mudslinging: “They never polarize the society.”

The panel discussed this comparatively low-key affair that featured less-intense coverage of what had been a very hot topic for much of the previous year: the migrant and refugee flow into Germany from the Middle East and elsewhere. They assured Young Leaders there is no grand conspiracy to avoid covering immigration issues in the media.

The avoidance of tough issues meant that things were exactly where they were four years ago, with the CDU/CSU in the lead, and the SPD and Greens struggling to build momentum. They also noted that it appeared that the FDP – voted out of federal government in the previous election due to their failure to reach the 5 percent threshold – would most likely return with a role in a coalition government. The panelists were troubled by the seeming certainty that far-right parties were making serious headway and would take seats in the Bundestag.

The Young Leaders also had the opportunity to hear the insights of **Johannes Vogel**, an FDP candidate for the Bundestag, who discussed the election in general as well as the FDP’s digital campaign and its (later-fulfilled) hopes to be represented in the Bundestag again.

In the afternoon plenary discussion, “Beyond the Pitchforks: Understanding Populism,” a German presenter said the state authorities “need to dispel the inaccurate populist arguments.” An American presenter said that after Trump was elected, pitchforks became a symbol of anger, whereas they used to be a symbol of hard work. A second German presenter noted that 30 percent of Germans identified as populists and that the trend reflects a polarization between the elites and the people. An American presenter asked the whole group who considered themselves populists and Trump supporters. No hands went up. They then asked if people knew voters who supported him. Many Americans’ hands went up.

An American participant said President Trump is supported by 82 percent of voters who have a “battle mentality against institutions and the media.” They feel like they’re not being heard. “They’re mad as hell and gripped by fear.” Some questioned whether they can be reasoned with. But it’s important to know the facts. “Basic knowledge” in the 21st century is part of being a citizen. An American participant cautioned that in a cohort such as the one gathered in Berlin, there are few, if any, with life experiences or backgrounds that match those who supported Trump, and that it would be good for so-called elites to better understand others’ perspectives.

A German panelist said society needs to make reforms, because it would be a dangerous path to populism if it doesn’t. “You need a system where people can trust again,” and you need a modern party. Populists are good at social media as well – they have to be combated there, too. One irony is that Chinese President Xi looks more like a free-trade supporter in “Communist” China than President Trump.

In the breakout sessions on this topic, a German participant said that it was important for an informed democratic electorate to receive accurate government information in order to preserve fact-based decision-making. This also has the benefit of increasing transparency, an American participant noted. The role of the media also came into the discussion, particularly digital or online media, where over the past several years populist or extremist outlets and organizations have been able to quickly share information or stories that are not true or inaccurate, but the speed at which they are disseminated and shared makes it difficult for the facts to be widely known. Participants noted that mainstream media serve as an amplifier for much of that kind of information in some form or another.

American and German participants also discussed the roles of social networks and media that are overly dependent on them for visibility. This was particularly true, an American noted, with the 2016 election and Russian influence. Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms need to determine what role they play and what broader responsibility they have in the public square. Increasingly, their roles will be in informing potential voters, and those votes need to be based on informed decisions, not just an image or a feeling.

An American participant noted his personal history with populism, first in China, and later the freedom he experienced upon coming to the United States at the same time that Barack Obama was being elected President. At the time, he said, America was perceived to be a welcoming and democratic nation for all. Today, under President Trump, that is not the perception. It has created uncertainty for many people, including him. Another American participant noted that despite the imagery of anger that a pitchfork portends, it still also represents a person who does hard labor, and that hardworking voice should not be ignored. We should try to hear the voice behind the movement, the participant said.

A German participant said populists tend to ignore opinions of minorities, criticize elites, and advocate for direct democracy. The participant also noted that while there is populism in Europe, it has not taken hold in the manner in which it has in the U.S. – and where it has, there is a sense that democracy and the promise of self-determination have let them down. Another contributing factor to populism that was noted: a middle class that is afraid of decline in economic prosperity, stature, and the opportunity for education and a future for their children.

Another participant cited Frank Luntz, saying there are three qualities of populists: first, they are mad as hell at the political system and media, and culturally and economically disconnected; second, they are gripped by fear, with negative feelings toward academic and other elite institutions; third, they feel that they aren't being heard and are powerless.

An American participant wondered how journalism might bridge the divide between elites and populists, noting that few in the room we occupied seemed to know many of the people in the “flyover states” that spurred Trump to victory. Another participant said Trump's early decisions or acts – withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, threatening terrorists, banning transgender individuals in the military – all reflected the will of the people who supported him. Another participant noted that Trump's approval rating was at 82 percent among Republican voters, with 40 percent approval overall in the U.S. Another American participant said: “People keep writing us off as crazy, racists, sexist. That's not it. Everyone wants to be understood.” Yet another participant noted that we all have to listen better.

In summing up the day and the discussion, an American participant said populism had been simmering for decades. Another American participant noted that the 2016 election tended to reflect historical trends inasmuch as voters pick a candidate with less international experience almost every time. A German participant said the Trump election was a response to a number of factors that converged with the election cycle – for example, political correctness running amok on college campuses and elsewhere in the culture.

Another German participant agreed, saying there is a feeling in Germany that PC culture has gone too far as well.

An American participant said Trump voters had taken “cultural refuge in Trump,” and that the perception that they are all poor is completely wrong; average salaries of Trump voters are actually higher than the median. The participant noted that there is an “us vs. them” attitude toward Trump voters. A German participant said democracy can’t work without a certain element of populism. “Fear draws populism. Voters feel like robots will steal their jobs.” An American participant urged people not to use the term “flyover states.’ Think about their message.” Another American said that the “erosion of critical social capital led to this round of populism” and said to look to the book *Bowling Alone*. Yet this is not a new phenomenon – Teddy Roosevelt was also an isolationist.

After a full day of discussions, the group walked from the Reichstag through the Brandenburg Gate and up to Deutsche Bank’s model consumer-banking center and conference space on Friedrichstrasse that had recently opened. The space, which during the day is a banking center, features banking staff but also e-services that allow customers to open accounts, manage their money, and handle financial planning on computer terminals. Financial planning courses are offered on weekends, with a space for child care. In the evenings and on weekends, the space can be used for conferences and discussions such as the one Deutsche Bank hosted for us that evening. **Jan Boehm**, Managing Director and Head of Government & Public Affairs Germany of Deutsche Bank, was the evening’s host, and he welcomed the group and introduced the evening’s speaker, **Steffen Kampeter**, Director-General of the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations (BDA), one of the most influential trade associations in the country, and a former State Secretary at the Finance Ministry.

Kampeter, who previously spoke with ACG Young Leaders in an earlier capacity, this time focused on the political and economic environment in Germany and Europe, with a focus on Germany’s role within the EU and the challenges the EU faces, both economically and politically, with players such as Greece and the UK. Following a German barbecue in the Deutsche Bank Urban Garden, the participants walked into the night looking for locales for their first late-night study session.

On Tuesday morning, participants found themselves literally a crosswalk away from last night’s social engagement, again on Friedrichstrasse, but this time at an innovation and entrepreneurship incubator, the German Tech Entrepreneurship Center (GTEC). Young Leader alumnus **Benjamin Rohé** (2011), an angel investor and founder of GTEC, gave a presentation on the “Berlin State of Mind,” saying that Germany used to be a country with management consultants and bankers but today has a growing number of entrepreneurs in the capital. The unemployment rate is at a record low, from 19 percent in the mid-2000s to 9 percent today. VC started much later in Europe than it did in America; it started in the mid-1990s, and there was an average negative 4 percent return. Rohé suggested that to encourage venture capital and grow an innovation economy in Germany, the government should find ways to make such investments more tax-friendly.

Entrepreneurs and Young Leader alumni **Ludwig Preller**, who had already given American participants a warm welcome in Munich, along with a primer in Bavarian *Gemütlichkeit*, and **Dennis Wetzig** (2016 YL) gave a behind-the-scenes look at the culture of entrepreneurship and corporate innovation in Germany. Together with other German entrepreneurs, they described the founding of multiple businesses, some of which succeeded and others of which did not. The failures, the presenters noted, were just as important as the successes, because in Germany failures have historically been frowned upon and viewed as “career killers.” Failures by entrepreneurs, who often are just entering their 20s, are no longer seen as black marks against them, but rather part of their evolution. It was interesting to note that the Germans spoke of wanting to be entrepreneurs as though it were a profession or vocation, something that is heard in the U.S. as well. This in

a way confirmed the sense that Germany and Europe are not that far apart in the reshaping of their economies.

Building on these economic angles, **Martin Kelleners**, Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for the Federal Budget at the Federal Ministry of Finance, came on location to GTEC to meet with the Young Leaders. He provided participants with an overview of the modernized German budget system, with an emphasis on the so-called “debt brake.”

After lunch, the participants hopped on a bus and took a roundabout way across town to the Federal Chancellery to get a more complete look at Berlin, with colorful historical commentary and animated anecdotes provided by Steering Committee member **Ron Granieri** (2000 YL). At the Chancellery, Young Leaders received two high-level briefings, from **Dr. Joachim Bertele**, Deputy National Security Advisor to Chancellor Angela Merkel, and **Dr. Christian Konow**, Head of the Refugee Policy Section for the federal government. Dr. Bertele said the working relationship with the Trump administration was different but also has elements of continuity, noting that Chancellor Merkel and President Trump got along well during their meetings in Hamburg earlier in the month, and that staff relationships were working and open. He said the Chancellery staff and the Foreign Ministry team had a very good relationship with National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and his team and the U.S. State Department.

If everyone seems focused on Russia, it is for good reason. Ukraine is of great concern in the region; the problems of Germany’s neighbors are Germany’s problems. There was a discussion on the importance of strengthening countries’ own security and economic capabilities to help them stand up to Russia. For that reason, economic development will be a big issue in the coming years. The discussion also focused on the role of NATO; Russian troops in the east are “raising eyebrows and anxiety” and underline the importance of Article 5.

Germany’s refugee crisis and the political fallout that might influence the upcoming elections had been a focus the day before in our discussions. Now we got a clearer view from the administration. At the height of the migrant crisis, 10,000 people were crossing into Germany every day, which posed real challenges to registering and accommodating everybody. The focus is now on returning unqualified people, both voluntarily and forcibly. The next challenge for Europe is integration, something that Germany has had to address in the past with its Turkish migrant labor force, many of whom chose to stay rather than return home back in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s.

Beyond integration, the challenge is also hardening EU borders, particularly their ports. An EU-Turkey agreement was struck in 2015, and Turkey has an interest in keeping control on its Western border. To give Turkey an incentive, Germany has paid Turkey billions of euros for its handling of Syrian refugees. Another challenge: The World Food Program didn’t have enough food for refugees. Germany has given billions, but Germans believe that it is important that the U.S. also give money. In a message to President Trump, one official said that more people lose their lives from auto accidents than terrorist attacks committed by refugees, and that it is “quite obvious” that refugees don’t commit as many crimes as citizens.

After the 90-minute discussion and briefings, the group was treated to a brief tour of the Chancellery, including Chancellor Merkel’s version of a cabinet room and the media briefing area. With about an hour before dinner, participants sought to use the time to rest up, catch up on emails and work, or grab souvenirs before the promised heavy lifting the following day.

On Tuesday evening, at a dinner sponsored by Pfizer, the participants heard from **Dr. Georg Schütte**, State Secretary at the German Ministry for Education and Research, a longtime friend of the American Council on Germany. Dr. Schütte said the German government remained focused on improving education and research opportunities, particularly in the medical and tech spaces. Increasingly, he said, whereas federal and state governments tended not to engage directly in education programming, today governments are looking for more of a say in where and how money is spent on education. Once again, relations with the U.S. and the Trump administration's initial forays into budgeting came into the discussion. Dr. Schütte noted that the Trump proposed budget would cut National Institutes of Health funding and energy research. He said Germany's motto in higher education and research is: "Open sciences, open innovation, and open to the world." America still leads the world in research, he said, but Germany has doubled scientific research to an annual 17.8 billion euros.

Bright and early Wednesday morning ushered in the fourth plenary session, titled "Policy Potpourri: Setting a Transatlantic Agenda." Whereas the first day's discussions had been intended to help Americans and Germans better understand each other and the countries they came from – in a sense looking back on history and heritage and other influencers in the culture – and the Tuesday meetings and discussions were intended to provide them with "scene setting" on the current state of play from the German perspective, the Wednesday agenda tasked the Young Leaders with developing a transatlantic agenda. They were expected to draw on what they had heard over the previous two days, as well as their experiences, both personal and professional.

The challenge in the first morning plenary session – which asked delegates to set a domestic and foreign policy for both the U.S. and Germany (and more broadly the EU) – was a twist devised by the Steering Committee: taking immigration/refugee policies and climate change off the table, thus removing two of the largest topics that almost certainly would have been part of the discussion. In doing so, the hope was that delegates would focus on issues of just as much import to the relationship, but which oftentimes get less attention than they perhaps should.

The big foreign policy focus with one working group was trade. The German presenters on the topic focused on Germany's *Mittelstand* (the small and midsized firms that they said were holding back on international investments because of a shortage of skilled workers), the uncertainty about smart energy investment, and Brexit, as well as trade relations with China. One German presenter said 45 American states export more to the EU than China, but that given the turbulence around U.S.-EU relations and the lack of talk about a transatlantic trade treaty, it is important to "de-risk the relationship and diversify to China."

An American presenter focused on health care, noting that it has been both a political and policy issue at least since FDR was in office, and that Presidents always seem to be working on this issue. In discussing U.S.-China relations, another American presenter said any engagement should consider the need for Chinese cooperation to take on North Korea. Yet another American said that as with other foreign policy considerations, we are spread thin in the Middle East but must remain engaged there beyond a military role. There was also discussion about how best to engage globally on cybersecurity issues, but both delegations noted that Germany and the U.S. diverge on this issue in many ways, particularly regarding privacy policy. More broadly, it was noted that the EU negotiators on data tariffs will make it difficult for any serious headway, and such tariffs threaten research and other potential transatlantic partnerships. A German participant said that if a transatlantic trade deal is to be struck, there is a real need to rebuild or make more robust the multilateral organizations that can press ahead, such as the United Nations, the G20, and the WTO.

In another working group, delegates agreed that nearly every domestic issue could also be an international issue, as America and Germany are linked closely in economic and security terms and beyond.

The participants started with the topic of cybersecurity, calling it one of the most important issues on the agenda. A German delegate noted that the German government sees many cyberattacks on hospitals and heavy industry, but the awareness of citizens and companies is still very low.

An American said the EU recognizes the inherent risk of data-sharing and more flexible privacy policies, while the American public is more willing to give up data privacy in exchange for services, such as on Google, Facebook, or Twitter. An American said: “My perspective is, my data is going to get stolen at some point, but with the ease of using technology platforms like Google, it outweighs the risk.” It was noted that there are likely generational differences in views on data, with perhaps more concern from older generations as compared with millennials. Two American delegates said their information is out there in the military and they understand this.

An American delegate said 95 percent of Americans don’t have any idea about the struggle American technology companies have with trust issues. He said Americans see how Europeans respond to data privacy issues and don’t understand what the big deal is. “We let the tech companies do what they want with our data as an exchange to get their services for free,” he said.

Another American suggested that the U.S. public doesn’t understand the threat of their data once this information is in the hands of businesses. The American noted that some large Internet-based companies have backdoor access to some data points, particularly if a consumer is logged in to multiple websites with data flowing back and forth – the ads one looks at, the products one buys or views, etc. The delegate said that some European regulators or government officials might have a far better understanding of these risks than others.

An American said that increasingly online data are becoming relevant in combating terrorism and for trade and commerce. Another American said that early in policy discussions around data maintenance for security issues, the thinking in the U.S. government was that it was acceptable to keep data on foreigners when combating terrorism. There has since been a shift to understand that countering terrorism includes monitoring Americans as well, and some Americans now have an issue with the practice. In the context of national security and data collection, Americans now debate if data privacy includes all Americans or just some Americans.

For years, there has been talk of how foreign intelligence agencies might be able to share information for antiterrorism efforts. Part of the challenge, an American said, was that there is no agreeable technology platform for exchange.

A German explained the difference between data-sharing and a contributory database. In data-sharing, when you can see your data, you can see my data. This makes hacking much easier, because the data are accessible via a centralized database. A contributory database, on the other hand, has no centralization of data; we cannot see each other’s data but we can help each other solve problems. For example, airline representatives can see passenger data, ask about a passenger, and get an answer without entering the secure database.

Finally, a German pointed out that the entire discussion was evidence of a need for ongoing discussions and the sharing of best practices across the Atlantic.

In another working group, where data and trade were being discussed, a German argued that the economy and the relationship between the U.S. and Europe are more important than cyber and data privacy. The

majority of citizens do not care about data security, he said; they are concerned about unemployment. The focus of the relationship should be economic, and Americans and Germans could learn from each other about the efforts to improve the economy in special regions like eastern Germany.

From a transatlantic point of view, trade deals like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are necessary to improve the economy in both countries. Unfortunately, one big issue is the resistance of people in the United States and Germany to transatlantic trade. This may be due to the number of special interests involved, but the players in these deals are different from those who are opposed to trade deals with Asia. For example, organized labor in the U.S. tends to be far more open to transatlantic trade deals because so many European businesses, especially German businesses, tend to fall into similar labor pools and regulations.

So both countries should focus on negotiating trade issues, but the concerns of citizens also have to be taken seriously. Especially some Germans think that TTIP had the intention only to save and improve the American economy. Another concern is that countries could be judged by the courts of the other side.

Another participant argued that we should discuss trade issues on a case-by-case basis and should not focus on TTIP. Many American firms want to invest in Europe, and many German firms want to invest in America. But the latter might feel they are not welcome in light of Trump's concept of "America First."

An American asked if regulations might help encourage these firms to invest in the U.S. and to alleviate some of their worries and concerns. But the participants agreed that regulations aren't the issue; rather, it is the perception of a negative global attitude in the U.S. right now. Creating a more welcoming overarching philosophy is needed.

On the trade issue, there was broad support for some form of re-engagement on TTIP or some other transatlantic trade treaty, but with the understanding that reaching the middle – where both sides give to get a deal – will be difficult to reach with an American administration that seems focused on "winning" versus what is best for all and possibly the best for both countries or regions. Another American delegate was pessimistic about the success of any type of serious, overarching trade accord within the next decade.

Some of the conversation turned to jobs and job creation. An American asked his German colleagues whether Germans or Europeans were as focused on job creation as some Americans appeared to be related to trade agreements. One German delegate said that the average European is not as concerned about jobs as Americans are, but that the concern also depends on what country one is talking about trading with. With respect to China, yes, there is concern about jobs being taken there. With the U.S., no, there is not a concern. Another German said the notion of job creation is also a bit different from the U.S. to Germany, where trade groups and the *Mittelstand* tend to take a different approach to such issues and negotiations. An American said that when considering jobs in manufacturing in other countries beyond the U.S. and EU – perhaps in the developing world, where there are lower wages and poorer working conditions – we cannot make a value judgment on countries that are completely different from ours.

A German said trade was not necessarily viewed as an issue to be revisited until TTIP was proposed and put on the table for potential negotiations. Because of the lack of traction and the controversy around it even before the 2016 elections, he didn't believe TTIP would be reconsidered anytime soon.

An American said free trade can be a very dangerous thing when considering the environmental risks that trade deals with China could enable. She pointed out that lower prices and lower costs in China, one of the

globe's largest polluters – if not *the* largest – would encourage greater economic growth there and even greater environmental damage due to increased manufacturing. Another American delegate pushed back on that free-trade view, noting that in the past, freer trade has lifted people out of poverty, created cheaper products, and more.

The other working group took up additional foreign policy issues that engage both the U.S. and Germany/the EU: the threat of North Korea and relations with Russia on both sides of the Atlantic.

On the topic of North Korea, there was consensus among the breakout session that while this might be a global issue, European perspectives were that the U.S. was in the best position to put pressure on both North Korea and its ally, China, for potential results.

A German said Germany is “less affected by North Korean policy,” though he noted that because Germany was once divided – with one side democratic, the other side Communist – Korean counterparts he comes into contact with are often interested in learning from the German experience in unification. He said the U.S. has more opportunities to influence China to then put pressure on North Korea.

An American participant agreed, noting that 90 percent of North Korean imports come from China. Thus any serious effort on the part of China to tighten exports to North Korea would have a serious impact. It was also noted that placing greater pressure diplomatically and via trade (or the lack thereof) on China and North Korea, respectively, has been on the table with the UN, and that aid from other countries was still not reaching those in need in North Korea.

An American participant said the focus of negotiations, such as they are, with North Korean officials remained denuclearization, which is a nonstarter for them. “We’re dealing with a lot of things all of the time, but North Korea’s sole obsession is to push back on the U.S., so we tell North Korea that until you’re ready to remove nuclear capability, we’re going to focus on other topics. We’re talking past each other.” It was also noted that there is a lack of faith that sanctions will work; it harms the people inside North Korea we would like to help, and puts the government there under almost constant threat.

There was consensus that any approach to North Korea should be U.S.-led, with engagement from China and allies around the globe pressing China for tougher action against North Korea.

Meanwhile, sanctions against Russia were also discussed, and while there may have been a sense that sanctions properly administered against North Korea might help bring North Korea to the table, it was less clear – at least among the more vocal Americans – that sanctions were working with Russia.

One American said Russian convoys are building up every day on the western front, while America, and by extension NATO, also continues to show demonstrations of force. Since the Cold War, many Russian sympathizers exist in some parts of Ukraine and even some of the former captive nations, which is how they are able to build up. Sanctions should be strengthened.

Another American said the Russian sanctions are working. Congress recently overwhelmingly approved a bill to continue this work, putting more pressure on Russia. There needs to be a clear message that for the sake of Ukraine, we respect sovereignty.

An American participant disagreed, calling sanctions not very effective. “It’s the people of Russia that suffer the most. You cannot order half of the menu at a restaurant, because they don’t have the lettuce That’s not hurting Putin with his wealth.”

A German said that “Sanctions probably aren’t perfect, but we don’t have a lot of other options, so we should do what we can.” Another German delegate noted that Germans will always have a slightly different point of view on sanctions against Russia, mostly because sanctions will also have a secondary and unintended impact on Germany’s economy and security given its close proximity to Russia, something that must be factored into such decisions.

In the plenary conclusion, there was general consensus that any U.S. or German agenda could not be shaped in the vacuum of domestic or foreign policy issues. Too many issues that earlier might have been viewed as purely domestic now have foreign implications, such as trade and domestic economic growth with foreign-owned companies in the U.S., for example. Another focus on shaping the agenda was whether trust among leaders and people was a crucial facet to be considered, though an American participant said there are examples in history where leaders didn’t trust each other: “Obama and Merkel worked together but still spied on each other.”

Russia and China remained a focus of transatlantic discussion during the next plenary session, called “Three’s Company: Setting a Transatlantic Agenda with a Third Wheel.” Both the American and German presenters directed attention to the roles Russia and China play globally, and also the importance they have vis-à-vis the U.S. and Germany and, by extension, the EU.

A German presenter said China has the advantage of being the world’s most populous country, and a significant economy. He added that China will succeed the U.S. as the largest economy by 2030. Germany wants China to democratize and change from an export economy to one focused on innovative growth. There are 5,000 German companies in China but only 900 Chinese companies in Germany.

It was noted by an American that Russia and the EU as well as the U.S. share common interests, for example in combating terrorism. There are also economic and trade issues where shared interests could draw Russia closer. Germany (and other parts of the EU) are (at least partly) dependent on Russian gas. A new gas line is about to be built. It has been quite controversial on the global stage, but Germany has pushed the plan, as it is dependent on gas from Russia.

Three theses were presented by those who introduced the topics in the plenary session: First, there is no need for a third wheel. Second, regardless of the role Russia and China may play, dialogue and cooperation are necessary. Third, as the global political and economic scene shifts and evolves, perhaps Russia and China will be encouraged to evolve as well. In the working groups that followed, polls were taken on whether to talk and work with Russia and China, and whether an expanded role for them is warranted or necessary. The majority of the participants voted in favor of talking with Russia and China.

Participants agreed that, regarding Russia, Putin has been a major problem, but not the only problem. An American said the oligarchical political and economic systems he established will not simply go away if Putin exits the scene. A German noted his country’s proximity to Russia: “Russia is right at the EU’s doorstep. To Germany this is a permanent threat.”

Within the group, the consensus was that Russia is not an ally that is especially open to working with, or perhaps even capable of working with, either country on more than a limited range of issues, and is instead

focused on its own agenda (as evidenced with Ukraine and Syria). “We concluded that Russia cannot be an ally at the moment, but cannot be ignored, either,” said a working-group facilitator.

China, on the other hand, though it remains a competing economic and political ideological rival to the West, was viewed as perhaps a more viable option. Participants cited several reasons for this: China has a far larger population than Russia, and a culture that is quite different, but it is a country where global trade is common ground.

A German said the relationship with China is a purely transactional one. An example would be the automotive industry. Nowadays, other countries, for example Germany, benefit from China competing in this market and driving economic growth. The same cannot be said for the U.S., though both Germany and China benefit from the American marketplace.

Others raised concerns about China’s role: One participant raised the specter of Chinese theft of intellectual property, a not-insignificant issue for U.S. and European innovators. It was also noted that China is not above its own attempts at extending its borders or areas of influence – for example, building the islands in the South China Sea.

When considering what positive role a “third wheel” might play in broader geopolitical engagement with countries bound to the transatlantic relationship, the working groups came back to the discussion of the first day: values vs. principles, and the role they play in policy and governance. It is not wholly clear that either country, Russia or China, that aspires to serving as a global leader or “superpower” shares the same values or principles as those of the U.S. or Germany or the broader EU. China perhaps shares some of the same principles when considering trade or economic engagement, but even that may be a stretch.

Russia, likewise, has shown indications that on some security matters, it shares like-mindedness with the U.S. and the EU, for example on terrorism or regional security matters. A delegate noted that Russia sits on almost all international organizations and fora, such as the WTO, Council of Europe, the United Nations Human Rights Council, G20, and OECD. “Bottom line: Cooperation and dialogue with Russia are necessary and happening on a daily basis.”

In the end, the consensus was that while both Russia and China do play, and will continue to play, important or prominent roles in global issues – oftentimes as either an antagonist or a protagonist – neither is in a position to serve in the same role that the United States or Germany/the EU have traditionally played.

The final plenary of the day was a reflection, at least in part, on the U.S. exit from the Paris climate accord earlier that spring. This session and the breakouts asked the delegates to revisit four major treaties or organizational agreements. For this session, “Rome If You Want To: Renegotiating Key Treaties for Today’s Circumstances,” participants examined the Treaty of Rome, which created the foundation for the European Union; the North Atlantic Treaty, or NATO accord; the Paris Agreement; and the Damascus peace talks. Unsurprisingly, the Paris accord was the most popular, though the participants took the challenge of renegotiation in good humor and with good discussions.

Given current events surrounding migrants and refugees, as well as Brexit, the Young Leaders found the discussion around the Treaty of Rome to be timely. One participant noted that the group focused on that treaty tried to banish war in Europe, regulate or “deregulate” borders, and redesign the budgetary and regulatory burden of the continent. An American said that the treaty was viewed by some in Europe as their opportunity to do for their region what the Founding Fathers did for the U.S. in Philadelphia: “their Philly

moment.” But other Americans said that such a process that reduced the roles of individual states and their control would never fly in the U.S.

On the Paris Agreement, a German participant spelled out some figures for Europe and the stakes involved: 800 million people and \$42 trillion that would be affected by climate-change policies. An American participant said that 55 nations signed the treaty to make it effective and called it “urgent and potentially irreversible.” While some viewed America’s exit as an act that would undercut the overall success of the agreement, others believed it might actually improve the outcome, forcing other nations to step up. Other delegates were unsure whether the U.S. exit helped or harmed efforts to draw developing behemoths, such as China and India, into the agreement more closely. A German participant said that the poles are melting and there was “big irritation” after Trump’s withdrawal but that “resolve” was increasing.

In the NATO discussion, an American participant said the goal today must be to build an interoperable military, noting that there are 17 different fighter jets in NATO. “Do we really need that many?” it was asked. A German delegate said a new NATO needed “very quick mobility.” Another German delegate said that “The current focus is conducting freedom-of-movement operations, but we should be adding psy-ops and countering the Russian border exercise.”

The group discussed what other roles might be built into a redraft of the NATO accord, including humanitarian responses in the wake of NATO military actions. There was also a discussion regarding Article 5, another area that gained attention due to questions about the Trump administration’s support for it going forward.

A German participant said that Article 5 was invoked only once, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and it is still in place. “Can a military alliance project values?” one American delegate asked. Another American delegate suggested that NATO needs to redefine modern warfare and place Article 5 in contemporary circumstances. For example, when does cyber-aggression trigger Article 5? Cyberattack retaliation? Do we also conduct cyberattacks on Russia? Does NATO need a cyber section? NATO needs to define cyberattacks and illustrate corresponding rules of engagement.

There were also discussions about the benchmark of 2 percent of GDP that members are expected to contribute, and who should be allowed to join as a full member of NATO, with one delegate noting that the U.S. is not technically a European player, so perhaps other non-European players should be considered.

In discussing the Damascus peace talks, an American participant said Syria had been a “cat toy” for the U.S. and Russia. “We’ve wavered on whether Assad can stay” or should go. “There has to be an end to the conflict, a deal that protects civilians and Christians, and tries to identify a group that can be a successor to Assad. We also have to determine what to do with ISIS and al-Qaeda.”

A German participant said that there are 6.3 million internal refugees in Syria and 1.5 million outside the country. \$9 billion has been pledged to help them. There are several peace processes at work. What’s challenging is that all of the different players have different interests.

In formulating a proposed resolution for the Syria situation, several underlying issues were discussed, including Kurdish independence and the concerns of the Turkish government (and to a lesser extent, other neighboring countries that have a sizable Kurdish population that might try to secede eventually). Another question: how to build consensus among the seven stakeholders – nations and regional players that were not nations – on a treaty. One idea: build consensus around eliminating ISIS and al-Qaeda and focus on the core security issues for the region.

Another topic discussed was why the U.S. was getting significantly involved here, given many other competing demands abroad and resource constraints at home. Ultimately, the redrafted accord took regime change off the table, placing the onus for restraining Assad on Russia, while other stakeholders in the process, including the U.S., would take a step back. The new draft also ushered in a more local approach with other nations in the region – including the Arab states, Jordan, and perhaps Iran – to address the ISIS threat and ongoing terrorism issues.

After the plenary session drew to a close, Young Leaders had a briefing with **Dr. Philipp Steinberg**, Director General of Economic Policy at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Dr. Steinberg, who has dual U.S. and German citizenship, shared his insights on the eurozone, including economic policy coordination within the EU and prospects for improving economic governance and regulatory frameworks.

It had been a long day at the Grand Hyatt, with few breaks, but the sense that the week was quickly coming to a close was also taking hold. After a short break to clean up and put on finer attire, the full delegation went out the back door of the hotel for the short walk to Haus Huth, Daimler's historic offices. As **Jörn Holtmeier** (2008 YL), Senior Manager for Automotive and Environmental Policy at Daimler, explained, Haus Huth had served as an intellectual and business salon for almost a century, and due to its unique architectural design was one of the few structures on Potsdamer Platz to survive the Allied bombing of Berlin in World War II. Now, given Daimler's global role and large presence in the United States, it serves as a great symbol of what can be achieved through the transatlantic relationship.

Another symbol of the transatlantic relationship was that evening's speaker, **Vice Admiral Joachim Rühle**, the Deputy Chief of Defense at the German Ministry of Defense, who had studied in the United States and participated in a number of joint U.S.-German military programs, including time spent in Rhode Island. Vice Admiral Rühle spoke of the need for a transatlantic relationship characterized by passion, attention, and foresight. He said Germany needs a strong America that is a reliable partner, and that diplomacy and political action are key with North Korea and China, not military action.

Concluding the evening was an opportunity back at the Grand Hyatt for this year's delegates to meet with about 40 alumni of the ACG's Young Leaders program. Over a nightcap (or more), experiences were shared and the value of the program and the relationships being developed came into focus. The mini-reunion of sorts represented the tangible results of an ongoing transatlantic relationship on the personal level.

The final formal discussion during the conference began Thursday morning. While most participants had spent extended time the previous night and early that morning focused on the "study sessions," all were seated on time for what all of them knew would be some of their final hours together as a group.

The plenary session harked to the original set of discussions the group had had on Monday morning and afternoon: "Americans and Germans: Values and Principles: Reconsidering the Transatlantic Relationship." Whereas earlier in the week, the conversations were perhaps a bit more stilted and participants were still feeling out the process and the dynamics of the group, four days of increased familiarity made the discussions easier and more personal.

Rather than 30,000-foot discussions about the U.S. and the EU, or a focus on Trump, participants drilled down on advancing their understanding of the values and common ground and differences between the two nations. The consensus among delegates was that the principles of democracy, freedom, and respect for individual human dignity were at the core for both the U.S. and Germany.

Some Young Leaders questioned whether Trump’s rhetoric – some of it ostensibly anti-German or anti-NATO – could damage the relationship or mislead others into believing the transatlantic relationship was no longer strong or important. Others argued that many people view the rhetoric as intended for a U.S. audience – and that even if the leaders are not getting along, people below them are working together.

One German participant noted that the G20 earlier in the year opened many opportunities for those dialogues. An American participant asked whether meaningful relationships can really form when the two leaders are so far apart in style and values.

One of the topics raised on Monday that was revisited on Thursday was Germany’s perceived hesitancy to take on the mantle of a global leader. Monday’s discussion turned the topic around to focus on the role of the EU. Delegates on Thursday raised that issue, noting that Germany must be cognizant of its role and position in the EU, and that it is not like the relationship between an American state and the federal government.

But also on Thursday, German participants were more clearly willing to say that Germany does serve, and should serve, as a world leader. One participant pointed out that Germany is actually already leading but with a different leadership style. He noted that the American style is closer to “telling everyone you are the leaders and explain[ing] your plan,” while the German style is more of an “invisible hand” that focuses on consensus-building and influencing others to act together.

In turning to U.S. identity, it was agreed that America is shaped by its history as an immigrant nation, and the different cultures that shaped it from its founding, with one delegate noting that people are almost always identified by their cultural or racial characteristics: Asian American, Mexican American, and so on. Other American delegates said race remains an ongoing factor in shaping American identity, something that Germany has also dealt with in the past half century or so, and that the racial and socioeconomic disparities have increasingly become a point of dialogue and controversy across the country. An American delegate noted that with Trump’s election, value differences in the U.S. have become more noticeable, if not pronounced, and have sparked more frank discussions. Some U.S. delegates saw this as a good thing and as an opportunity in opening dialogues and bridging understanding.

In turning to the value differences between the two countries, participants felt the differences were more about the internal debates among Americans and among Germans, rather than between the two countries. In America those value divisions tend to run between right and left. In Germany such divisions are less obvious or less frequently debated, and other debates tend to focus on pro-EU vs. pro-German identity, and divisions on specific issues.

There was consensus that many of the challenges the two countries face where there is a shared agenda – security issues like North Korea or Russia or trade or climate change – are surmountable, together, as long as there is some understanding about the other’s experiences and situation. For example, the proximity of Russia to Germany and Germany’s dependence on Russian natural gas adds layers to how Germany can interact with Russia on other matters. And Germany should also not make broad general assumptions about U.S. intentions based on tweets.

An American participant added that there is a disconnect between the economic and intellectual elites and the rest of society, a point that was also made earlier in the week as delegates attempted to understand or explain the outcome of the 2016 U.S. election. The participants were generally glad that issues related to the

Trump administration didn't dominate the conference dialogue, but the division between elites and others is a topic that bears further attention going forward.

As the morning came to a close, it was time in a more formal way for the participants to share final thoughts on the remarkable week they had spent together. In this regard, there was little debate on the experience each had shared, though each delegate could point to different defining moments. An American participant said with emotion that she would carry the conference experience with her moving forward. The participants thanked the ACG Steering Committee – **Tony Finkelburg** (2008 YL), **Ron Granieri**, **Sarmad Hussain** (2005 YL), and Committee Chairman **Ed McFadden** (2002 YL) – as well as the ACG leadership, President **Dr. Steven E. Sokol**, Executive Vice President **Karen Furey**, and Vice President **Michele Ruehs Steinbuch**, for the experience and for guiding them through the process.

The American Council on Germany's 2017 American-German Young Leaders Conference closed that evening with a dinner hosted by the global law firm of Noerr LLP at The Grand, a short subway ride from the Grand Hyatt. Even though the conference sessions were technically over, additional speakers were yet to come. First, over cocktails, **Dirk Wiese**, Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, promoted the German-U.S. economic relationship and the green energy revolution in Germany.

During dinner, **Dr. Emily Haber**, State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, addressed several issues, noting the increased divide between the U.S. and Germany on trade and climate change resulting from the 2016 election. She made it clear, however, that the relationship between the two nations remained strong on a host of issues.

And that, perhaps, is the biggest takeaway from the conference. Almost 50 individuals gathered in Berlin prepared to discuss differences and to debate – and in the end, discovered that it was far more productive to focus on the common challenges they face. The difference is that moving forward, rather than focusing on those challenges as individuals, we will share them with each other and the broader ACG community.



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