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***Transatlantic Relations During Election Times***

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Dear guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

**1. Obama and the Germans**

I was asked to speak to you about transatlantic cooperation after the U.S. elections of last November 4 and a couple of months before parliamentary elections in Germany on September 27. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency has raised great hopes in the U.S. and in many other countries for a fundamental change in American policies. Also in Germany the majority of the people across party affiliations have enormous trust in the new president. When he visited Berlin during his campaign, more than 200,000 citizens flocked to Tiergarten park to listen to his speech. Between 70 and 80 percent of Germans would have voted for him (if that had been possible). His first acts in government were very well received, for instance his announcement to close the detention camp at Guantanamo, his positive signals to the Muslim world and his readiness to listen to international partners and review the hitherto existing approach to central foreign policy issues. Also the media coverage of the president's tour in early April to the summits in London (G20), Strasbourg and Kehl (NATO), Prague (EU-U.S.), and to Turkey and Iraq was far more positive in Germany than in the U.S.

This positive attitude in the German population and media about the new U.S. president makes it easy for me in Germany to promote a strong partnership with the United States. Germany and its European partners should use the present opportunity to revitalize the transatlantic relations because these relations have lost nothing of their importance. The U.S. will remain Germany's most important partner outside the European Union. We are NATO partners and share many common values, interests and the historical memory of the Berlin Airlift, the partnership during the Cold War and the reunification of Germany.

At the same time, I always caution my compatriots against pinning unrealistic expectations on the new U.S. president. Even if the conditions for a positive development of the transatlantic relations are favorable, occasional political and economic divergences will remain also in the future. President Obama must and will first and foremost defend American interests and might have to take tough choices that Europeans will not always like. The priorities and choices of the Obama Administration will reflect the world power status and responsibilities of the United States, whereas the political culture of European nations is that of regional powers with limited resources and spheres of interest.

From the American perspective, the priorities of the new president will bring about a significant change in U.S. foreign policy. From the European perspective, also the continuities of American politics will remain visible. A look at the development of the transatlantic relations during the last decade reveals long-term continuities and discontinuities that will also affect the future of our relations.

## **2. Change and continuity**

Relations with the United States have been central to German foreign and security policy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although obviously in different shapes during different historical phases. In the first half of the century, Germany triggered global conflicts, which put Germany and the United States on opposite sides. In the second half of the century, Germany was part of the power equation of the Cold War, with a Western part staunchly allied to the United States and an Eastern part under the control of the Soviet Union. The Federal Republic of Germany existentially depended on the protection guaranteed by the United States and was largely an importer of security.

After the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union, this situation changed profoundly. Germany is no longer in the center of a global conflict or a cause of conflicts, as in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has rather become itself an exporter of security and stability. The centuries-old German question has been resolved by united Germany's integration into a stable and peaceful European order. All post-war borders are recognized, and our neighbors have no reason anymore to see Germany as a threat. In fact, Germany is now for the first time ever surrounded exclusively by friends and allies.

However, in the 1990s also the first disagreements between the transatlantic partners came to the fore. The allies did not seem to depend as much on each other any more as they had during the Cold War. While the Europeans were busy enlarging and deepening their Union and building up international agreements and institutions such as the Kyoto Protocol and the International Court of Justice, the United States remained convinced that the international community primarily had to be protected from rogue states and other threats and that the world depended on American leadership for this. The conflicts in the disintegrating Yugoslavia, which could not be contained without America stepping in, seemed ample proof of this U.S. point of view. In addition, the U.S. and Europe quarreled over U.S. laws with extra-territorial impacts, such as the sanctions laws against Iran, Libya and Cuba.

September 11 and the Iraq war were further milestones in the development of transatlantic relations. In their immediate reaction to the terrorist attacks, Germans and the whole Western world emotionally felt closer to the Americans than ever before. Huge crowds turned out in European capitals to demonstrate their solidarity. Europeans understood that the Western "system" as such was the target and that new bloody attacks could be carried out in their own countries at any time. In consequence of that the U.S. and its allies went to war in Afghanistan. Until today, Germany is the third largest troop provider in the ISAF stabilization mission. Yet only two years after September 11, European-American disagreements as well as disunity within the EU over the Iraq war reminded us that sometimes opinions differ even between the closest allies and that strong and stable transatlantic relations and a steady consensus on security issues can no longer be taken for granted.

The ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan/Pakistan and in Iraq, the Caucasus crisis between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 and the most recent outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza show that conflict areas are shifting from Central Europe to the European periphery, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. Therefore the U.S. concentrates its security policy increasingly on those regions. This means for Germany that its main relevance for America today depends on its role in the EU and NATO and on its willingness and ability to help resolve problems in crisis regions beyond European borders. While the former U.S.-Administration believed that the U.S. could be successful in Iraq and other conflict regions on its own or with the help of ad hoc coalitions, the new president Obama and Secretary of State Clinton declared that even a country as powerful as the U.S. relies on partners and will seek their advice and support.

Furthermore the U.S. wants Germany and other European states as partners to cope with the financial and economic crisis, climate change, international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other global challenges. These problems, too, can neither be solved by America nor by Europe alone. Close transatlantic cooperation on these issues is a necessary precondition for viable solutions. Rising powers such as China, India, Brazil and Russia also need to be closely engaged. The initiative for creative solutions, however, will for quite some time mainly have to be taken by the transatlantic partners. From the perspective of the U.S. the biggest challenges and threats today are either global or have their origins in regions outside Europe. Nonetheless, their most reliable allies are in Europe.

Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany has developed from a security consumer to an active partner of the U.S. in international politics. Germany is increasingly asked by its neighbors and allies to act as an exporter of security, stability and development. For historical reasons, Germany's population is still skeptical of using any kind of military force. Still, the German government and the German parliament have continued to support mandates for foreign missions of German troops in order to protect Germany's security interests and fulfill its alliance commitments.

The U.S. government and Congress often favor a stronger international commitment on the part of Germany. However, as a European middle-sized power with limited geographic interests, capacities and resources, we can only act selectively also in the future. We will have to balance humanitarian aims and alliance based considerations with our own interests and limited capacities. For good reasons, Germany will remain cautious about using military force.

This, of course, is a very relevant point for the government and for members of parliament, particularly in an election year. Germany will elect a new Bundestag (parliament) and thereby also a new federal government on September 27. We will also elect a new President (who has a rather ceremonial function in our system) this coming May, a new European parliament in June as well as a number of regional German parliaments. Although it is very difficult for politicians in such times to stick to unpopular decisions such as sending our soldiers abroad, our parliament has remarkably stayed the course. With the exception of the post-Communist "Left Party", there is a strong foreign policy consensus in the Bundestag. The realization that we Germans do have interests beyond our borders and the borders of NATO, and the willingness to make sacrifices for our security and the stabilization of conflict regions, show

that German political culture is undergoing a change that will also have an impact on our future relations to the U.S.

### **3. Constants in transatlantic relations**

Although the geopolitical framework of transatlantic relations is always changing, a set of political constants remains in U.S.-German relations, as well as in the relations between the U.S. and other European countries. Despite its close ties with Europe, the U.S. differs from its partners in a number of central aspects. Obviously, the U.S. is bigger than European countries in terms of size and power, but it differs also in its self-perception as the world-wide provider of stability and promoter of democracy and human rights. Ultimately the U.S. sees itself as the force for good in the world.

Thus, irrespective of the president's party affiliation, the U.S. protects its interests actively and confidently. While the U.S. is not averse to multilateralism, it is also willing to act alone if necessary. Freedom, democracy and economic liberalism are regarded as the basis for a stable international order and for the preservation of American supremacy. The foreign policy of former president Bush, which was often criticized as an aberration, actually went along the lines of this tradition. Although the new President and his Secretary of State have promised to accentuate diplomacy and multilateralism, Europeans should not expect that in the future the U.S. will give up its claim to lead the international community and guarantee the global order.

One of Obama's most important foreign policy statement was his aim to restore the moral authority of the U.S. In the future, America should not only be a power, but a role-model and an "idea" again. For instance, Obama announced that his government will withdraw American troops from Iraq gradually and "responsibly" (the last stated date of withdrawal for the combat troops was August 2010) and close the detention camp in Guantanamo. He also wants America to take the lead in coping with global problems, such as climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, poverty and underdevelopment of whole world regions. According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the U.S. needs to combine its "hard power" of military strength with the "soft power" of its cultural and political appeal, in order to become a "smart power".

In principle, the combination of power and "idea" is not new in American policy. This duality can be traced back to the origins of American democracy and even further to the early settlement history. It depends on the respective presidency and the historical context how exactly the two aspects interrelate. Barack Obama embodies America as an "idea" in an ideal way. Due to his life-story Obama is seen among his supporters as the embodiment of the American dream. He gave back to the Americans the faith in themselves and in their positive

mission in the world. To his foreign admirers, Obama has an extraordinary international and multicultural appeal. He is perceived to stand above the boundaries between countries, continents and races.

Europeans were enthused by the fact that, on his second day in office, the new president introduced "executive orders" to close down the Guantanamo detention camp within a year and all CIA prisons as quickly as possible. The president also suspended current proceedings at military tribunals in Guantanamo and made clear that America does not permit torture. For the Americans this makes evident that America stays true to its values. German Foreign Minister Steinmeier even published an open letter to President Obama in early January, in which he welcomed the decision to close Guantanamo and called on the international community and Europe to help the new U.S. Administration fulfill this task. I hope that Obama's efforts will also be received positively in the Islamic world. The new President announced a new initiative to restore U.S. relations to the Islamic world. In his address to the Turkish parliament on April 6, president Obama made clear that "the United States is not at war with Islam" and that the partnership with the Muslim world is "critical in rolling back [al-Qaeda's] fringe ideology."

Although Europeans warmly welcomed all these developments, occasional dissent between the transatlantic partners will remain also in the future. The President is sometimes forced to take tough decisions that are not liked by everyone abroad. Particularly at the beginning, the new American President and Congress will show their willingness to approach the European partners and take multilateral institutions seriously. However, we should not expect that the U.S. will place as much value on multilateralism as for example Germany does. For the U.S. multilateralism is an option. Due to Germany's historical experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for us multilateralism is a principle of national interest.

Unlike the German Basic Law, the U.S. legal order will never accept international law as a superior authority which supersedes national laws. That would run counter to the U.S. constitutional tradition and political culture. Eventually, a world power will not allow its hands to be tied. Even Barack Obama has never ruled out the use of military power, unilaterally if necessary, when it comes to defending important American security interests. Europeans should be aware of the fact that America will hold on to its self-image and power and that a world without American supremacy might also not be very desirable for our safety.

In the long run, the transatlantic relationship will remain one between unequal partners. This asymmetry belongs to the constants in the transatlantic relationship. The U.S. will stay the world's most powerful country despite its current economic difficulties. Germany, on the other hand, abandoned all hegemonic ambitions in Europe after World War II and found its role as European middle power with close relations to its neighbors and allies. In Article 26 of German Basic Law, the preparation of a war of aggression is declared as unconstitutional and liable to prosecution. Article 2 of the Two-plus-four Agreement of September 12, 1990, affirms this position and declares that "unified Germany will never use any of its arms, except in accordance with its constitution and the UN Charter".

Generations of German postwar politicians have defined European interests as being identical to German interests. By means of this self-limitation, Germany has paradoxically been able to further its own interests. With its particular history, geographical position in the center of Europe and as a trading nation, Germany strongly depends on good relations with its neighbors and on the stable economic and political framework of the EU. Such considerations are naturally less relevant for a world power like the United States. Even if American foreign policy will become more multilateral than before, the U.S. will still be less willing than Germany to commit to international rules and to limit its own room for maneuver.

Another factor of the asymmetrical German-American relationship is the fact that Germany depends on NATO for its protection and therefore automatically on the U.S. But unlike during the Cold War, today Germany is no more dependent on NATO than other European states. While the Cold War conflict had its center in Germany and Soviet troops were deployed on German soil, our country has objectively gained in security since 1989. Today's threats posed by terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and failing states are not directed particularly against Germany but against the international community as a whole. By contrast, American security concerns intensified with the terrorist attacks of September 11. The trauma of being attacked on their own soil profoundly affected the American psyche and considerably shaped the foreign policy agenda of the Bush Administration.

The asymmetry of the American-European relationship has an impact on public opinion in Europe. At times, a powerful partner is not necessarily a popular one. By the way, as Germans, we have had this experience with our neighbors. A Europe-wide survey by the German Marshall Fund shows that public support for a global leadership role of the U.S. remains low. Even six years after U.S. troops invaded Iraq, the endorsement rate in 12 European countries still lingers around 36%. Back in 2002 this figure stood at 64%! However,

the discontent of many Europeans over U.S. policy has a lot to do with the awareness of their own weakness. While the EU is a global economic power with a strong unified voice in trade policy, its Common Foreign and Security Policy is still in its infancy. The Irish "no" to the Lisbon Treaty in the June 12 referendum 2008 made things worse. Even in other European nations, the support for a stronger EU integration remains limited.

The U.S. used to be skeptical of the development of a Common European Security and Defense Policy and considered it as a potential obstacle to the Atlantic Alliance. Today the U.S. would welcome a stronger European role, particularly in terms of more burden-sharing in international security policy. "We want strong allies," President Obama said after he arrived in Strasbourg to participate in the NATO summit of April 3-4. Europe should see this as a chance and overcome its inner weaknesses. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once called the U.S. an "indispensable nation". At the same time, Europe should emerge as an "indispensable partner", and become more capable and willing to act in order to make its voice heard in Washington. Only then will Europe's political priorities and concepts be acknowledged and the transatlantic asymmetry partly overcome. Otherwise the U.S. might direct its political and economic attention ever more towards the Asia-Pacific region and see Europe as only one of many potential partners. This, of course, would not be in the European interest.

#### **4. New perspectives in transatlantic relations**

The election of Barack Obama as the new American president is a great opportunity for the renewal of the transatlantic relations. Already in his electoral campaign, Obama argued for a "strong partnership with the European Union". His Secretary of State has reminded that "in most global issues, the U.S. has no closer allies" than the Europeans. Thus, despite all realism concerning objective possibilities, there is enormous optimism over the perspectives for the European-American relationship. In his open letter from January 11, 2009, German Foreign Minister Steinmeier offered to President Obama a closer cooperation and the creation of a "new transatlantic agenda". We should take advantage of this spirit of optimism between the transatlantic partners in order to make progress in central international conflicts and global challenges.

For instance, President Obama argues that a "Green Economy" with climate-friendly technologies and the use of renewable energy provides opportunities for employment and economic growth. Europe can share its positive experiences in this field with the U.S. Like

the German and other European governments, Obama does not see economic growth and environmental protection as contradictory. In fact, Obama sees them as two equal and mutually reinforcing goals. Accordingly, the President wants America to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions to the level of 1990 until 2020 and 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. A legislative bill to this effect has just been introduced in the House of Representatives. Obama also plans to invest billions in the development of alternative energy sources. Furthermore he announced that the U.S. will take an active and constructive role at the negotiations for a follow-up-agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. These developments have received a very positive response in Europe and particularly in Germany, which has always been in favor of advancing climate protection. It is also a good sign that the promotion of alternative energy and energy saving plays such a prominent role in the U.S. stimulus package. The current economic crisis could turn out to be a chance to reform the U.S. economy.

Obama's reaction to the current crisis also shows that he is more open to an increased financial transparency and to a thorough reform of the global financial system than the previous American governments. For instance, the president wants to put hedge funds and the markets for derivatives under supervision. At the G20 Summit in London in early April, together with other world leaders he agreed to the establishment of a new set of rules that will provide more transparency, oversight, and stability to the international financial system and a fairer share of responsibility to the rising economic powers. In the so-called "real economy", the U.S. and Europe are also facing the same problems. In the current deep recession, they are both struggling against the banking and automobile crises, falling exports, and rising unemployment. Both try to fight the crisis by means of enormous economic stimulus packages and measures to stabilize the financial markets. Now the U.S. and Europe must coordinate their measures and refrain from worsening the situation by taking protectionist and populist measures. General Motors and its European subsidiary Opel for example are so closely connected that a sustainable solution, which saves both companies and many thousand jobs, can only be found if the two countries and the company work together. Today, already 14 million jobs on both sides of the Atlantic depend on transatlantic trade and investment. The U.S. and Europe should intensify this cooperation, for instance through the Transatlantic Economic Council, which reduces trade and investment obstacles, bringing down the cost for European and American businesses.

Since President Obama took office, there is also a positive rapprochement between the U.S. and Europe in terms of sociopolitical issues. The stimulus package passed by Congress in the middle of February 2009 includes higher public spending on education of children from

underprivileged families, on unemployment benefits and on the public health insurance of unemployed and low-income earners. Even before this package was passed, Obama signed a bill extending health coverage to 4 million uninsured children ("State Children's Health Insurance Program") and also signed the "Lilly Ledbetter Act", which improves the possibilities of employees to file a lawsuit against wage discrimination. Even if the U.S. will not develop into a European-style social welfare state, we can expect that President Obama will pay more attention to employees and the socially deprived than his predecessor.

In addition, Europeans have welcomed President Obama's readiness to launch new initiatives in disarmament and arms control. Over the last years trust between the U.S. and Russia eroded, leading to a stand-still in the bilateral disarmament process. Barack Obama has confirmed his aim to negotiate a further reduction of the nuclear arsenals with Russia. American-Russian talks on a follow-up agreement to the START I treaty on the reduction of strategic nuclear weapons are scheduled to start soon. In his speech of April 5 in Prague he even stated his commitment to the long-term goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. In Prague, he also announced to pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, a strengthening of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty and the negotiation of a new treaty that would end the production of fissile materials intended for use in nuclear weapons. Within the next year, the U.S. government also plans to host a global summit on nuclear security that tackles the problem of black markets for vulnerable nuclear material around the world.

The German government will support these aims and hopes for constructive negotiations between the new U.S. Administration and Russia on further disarmament steps. Even though it remains necessary to criticize Russia for authoritarian tendencies in its domestic politics and for its behavior toward its neighbors, we must engage Russia in finding solutions for international problems and try to rebuild mutual trust. Recent remarks by President Obama, Vice President Biden and Secretary of State Clinton indicate that the U.S. is ready to cooperate with Russia where possible.

The U.S. and Europe are also converging in their strategies to stabilize regional conflict situations. While the government of former President Bush partly undertook the transformation of repressive governments by force, actively exported Western ideas of democracy and sharply confronted authoritarian, anti-Western regimes, President Obama wants to recalibrate American foreign policy. He announced to offer direct talks even to difficult governments such as those of Iran and Syria in order to test the possible room to negotiate. In her nomination hearing before the Senate, Hillary Clinton said: "Smart power

requires reaching out to both friends and adversaries." In late March 2009 President Obama sent a video message to the people of Iran in which he restated his commitment to dialogue. This willingness to talk shows a new openness and respect for the opinions even of opponents while at the same time stating the limits of such a dialogue. In the case of Iran these limits remain the rejection of any possible nuclear armament of Iran and of its support for terrorist organizations in the Middle East. The German and other European governments have long identified with this approach.

Another long-term conflict on the international agenda is the one between Israel and the Palestinians. Instead of waiting like his predecessors, Obama dedicated himself to the Middle East immediately after taking office and named former Senator (and negotiator in the Northern Ireland conflict) George Mitchell his Special Envoy for the region. The fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip around the turn of the year 2008/2009 showed how necessary a strong engagement of the U.S. in the Middle East remains. Even if there seems to be little reason for hope at the moment, Europe and the U.S. must remain committed to help the conflicting parties to find a workable solution that guarantees Israel's security and gives the Palestinians the prospect of having their own state and living peacefully and prosperously side by side with Israel.

The stabilization of Afghanistan also remains high up on the transatlantic agenda. Richard Holbrooke, the President's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has already traveled the region and consulted with European allies about the numerous challenges. In late March, president Obama announced a new strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan increasing troops that fight the Taliban by 17,000 and deploying further 4,000 troops to massively step up the training of Afghan security forces. Besides a larger troop deployment his strategy also includes more support for civilian reconstruction, a stronger focus on the role of key states in Afghanistan's neighborhood such as Pakistan and Iran, and the possibility of a dialogue with so-called "moderate Taliban". Generally, the new administration seems to be ready for a more realistic and down-to-earth assessment of achievable goals. This new U.S. approach to the Afghanistan conflict is very close to European thinking. Of course, the U.S. also expects further commitments to Afghanistan from the Europeans, not only further troops, but in particular also contributions to reconstruction and development, more training for the Afghan army and police etc. Europeans should figure out quickly where they are able and ready to help. They have already pledged more development aid and financial aid to build up the Afghan security forces. And some countries will also send more soldiers, for instance Great

Britain, Germany and Poland. Moreover, Europeans can bring in their non-military capabilities and expertise with nation-building and with the support for civil society.

## 5. **Summing up**

The German-American and even the European-American partnership will remain an asymmetrical one in the foreseeable future. Consequently, Europe will only have a limited influence on certain constants in American politics. Yet the transatlantic partners will not be able to meet the global challenges if they do not closely cooperate. Not only Europe but also the U.S. needs partners in order to find solutions to the most pressing problems of our time. The last years have given ample proof of this. While the United States has encountered limits to its power in Iraq and in Afghanistan, Germany has widened its – obviously much tighter – frame of action since reunification. Germany sent troops and civilian reconstruction teams to the Balkans, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and the shores of Lebanon in order to contribute to international security. Many observers forget that this development was not necessarily to be expected in 1989.

In Germany and the EU the U.S. finds proven allies whose interests and values are closest to America's own. The new U.S. Administration has clearly expressed its readiness for close cooperation with its European partners. The Europeans should take this seriously and offer their commitment to shape all relevant fields of international policy. Occasionally, there will still be different opinions and foreign policy approaches between Europe and the U.S. After all both have their specific traditions, political cultures, historical experiences and geostrategic roles, which will remain. Americans and Europeans should take these differences in their stride and not forget the many challenges, interests and values they have in common. Only when the transatlantic partners closely work together will they have the chance to shape the world positively and make it a safer and more prosperous place.

Thank you.