Between Washington and Berlin

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Between Washington and Berlin : the dilemma of Europeans security policy.

Christoph von Marschall, a distinguished German journalist currently with Der Tagesspiegel, brings a wealth of experience to the discussion on transatlantic relations and European defence. Having been accredited to the White House during the Obama Administration, Mr von Marschall offers an interesting perspective on the evolving landscape of European security. In this context, he shares his expert views on the future of European defence and the strategic dynamics shaping the Atlantic alliance.

Theodor: Mr von Marschall, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. We always start by asking about the young Christoph von Marschall. Why did he decide to go into journalism and pursue international politics ?

We were always internationally interested in the family. My father studied and taught abroad, we spent time abroad, and I was already in the USA as a child. I started journalism during my studies — originally to earn some money, at the Badische Zeitung. But I soon realised that the incentive systems were completely different: A term paper takes weeks and might be read by the professor, while an article is read across town the next day, and you even get paid. I then worked for the Badische Zeitung during my studies, and later for DIE ZEIT and the FAZ. That's how journalism finally became my career aspiration. The international aspect came through my studies of Eastern European history, even before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and my studies in Poland.

Theodor: If we ask ourselves what role journalists play in international politics, for example by producing opinions or disseminating news, what political responsibility do they bear, including in security policy debates?

Journalists have responsibility and should try to analyse and present the facts. In my opinion, sensationalist headlines are not a good approach for responsible reporting on foreign and security policy, even if they do occur. In open societies such as in Europe or North America, readers have a choice as to whom they trust. In my experience, you can build up a reputation for serious work

overtime — or never get that reputation or lose it again if you work dubiously. Many media users have a sense of what to take seriously. If they develop trust or interest in certain journalists, they often remain loyal with the expectation of continuing to receive reliable and serious information.

Theodor: The point about seriousness is interesting. Has the commitment to seriousness changed not only among the senders but also among the recipients of media?

My personal experience is: I organise 50 to 60 discussion events a year. Of course, this is not a representative cross-section, it is mainly politically interested people who attend. But my impression is that many of them are well aware that security, prosperity and stability in Germany can no longer be taken for granted. They may not know the details, such as the situation of the Bundeswehr or NATO defence in an emergency, but they have a sense that the world has changed and that we are no longer in the situation we were in 10 or 20 years ago.

This is precisely why it is important to engage in dialogue with these people. Many people complain that politicians don't talk to them openly, but often just deliver platitudes. I would like to see politicians take the situation more seriously and speak more clearly to citizens, especially in view of the new federal government. If we don't act quickly, there is not only the threat of economic decline, there is also the risk of a direct confrontation with Russia. Both are avoidable, but this requires clear words, honest analyses and swift reforms. We need to reorganise our priorities, draw up sustainable budgets and stop financing the country permanently on credit. Illusions that everything can continue as before will not help. Now is the time to take responsibility openly, honestly and resolutely.

Theodor: Now we have taken the perspective on German politicians out of the perspective on US politicians? With Trump, we now have another politician in the White House about whom many things can be said, but who has announced many things that are now being implemented. Is this someone who doesn't play favourites but talks straight, and is that something that stands in contrast to European politicians?

I have spent about ten of the last 20 years in the USA and the rest in Germany and Europe. Political disputes are much more brutal in the USA, which is not always a good thing, as it also leads to exaggeration. The main problem I see with Trump is that, although he has a very good feel for pressing issues, his political style is unserious and undisciplined. He ignores facts, makes false claims: yet his radicalism brings movement to encrusted structures. In Europe, we would sometimes also like to see more pressure for change.

Trump is therefore a mixed experience: his style is to be rejected, but his sense of unresolved issues is real. Many of these issues – such as Europe's foreign

and security policy autonomy – have been known for decades, but have been ignored or covered up with money. Trump's pressure on Europe is risky, for example when he questions the NATO guarantee – this sends dangerous signals to opponents such as Putin. But if this pressure leads to Europe finally taking responsibility and becoming capable of independent deterrence, then it has been constructive to a certain extent.

Another example is irregular migration – a problem in both the USA and Europe. Political credibility depends on whether governments credibly demonstrate that they have understood the issue and are looking for realistic solutions. If they fail to do so, right-wing populist parties such as the AfD will continue to gain strength. We therefore urgently need a realistic asylum and migration policy. Trump is tackling the issue in a way that we in Germany would consider to be incitement to hatred – and quite rightly so. At the same time, he is sending clear signals that irregular migration does not promise success. Such signals can act as a deterrent – which is necessary if you want to prevent people smugglers from selling false hopes.

Theodor: You have always mentioned Germany in the context of the budget and independence. Would you also relate this to Europe?

I welcome the fact that we have finally recognised the importance of increased spending on defence, infrastructure, and research. But I think it is wrong to finance this by softening the debt brake. In a functioning state, it should be possible to reallocate existing funds so that priorities such as security and innovation are paid for from the regular budget. However, German politicians do not appear to be in a position to do this – there is a lack of will to make cuts elsewhere or to tighten the budget. Most EU countries are already over the Maastricht limits anyway. And it must be clearly stated: EU debts are not 'other' debts. They, too, must ultimately be repaid proportionately by the nation states. It is not honest to incur debt via the EU just because the national room for manoeuvre has been exhausted – you end up increasing national debt anyway. In my view, this behaviour is irresponsible. It is being pretended that European debt is something completely different – when it is not.

Elyse: From this perspective, how do you assess Europe's foreign policy role in the current world situation, and to what extent does it correspond to public perception within the EU?

The European Union is in the midst of a development that was initially received very positively. In the 1990s and early 2000s, things happened that generations had dreamed of: the common market, several enlargements, political union, the single currency, the Schengen system – it all progressed very quickly. What was neglected, however, was the reform of the decision-making mechanisms.

Today, the EU consists of 27, soon over 30 states – it is not structurally equipped for this. Yet the EU has enormous potential: economically, it is one of the three strongest blocs in the world, together with the USA and China. Nothing comes after that for a long time.

So why are we afraid of Russia, even though we have seven times more economic power? If we organised our resources better, Russia would have reason to fear us – not the other way round. Europe certainly has leverage – in data protection, for example. Large US companies such as Google and Microsoft have to abide by our rules.

Europe also carries weight when it comes to free trade agreements. However, nobody is afraid of the EU because it is seen as weak in decision-making. Instead of consequences, Brussels often only threatens to make concessions – more carrot than stick. This applies not only to third countries, but also within the EU. Member states regularly break rules – such as the Maastricht criteria on national debt or the Dublin Agreement on migration – without any real sanctions. Brussels also typically fails to act in defence of democracy and the rule of law, even though these are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. Countries such as Hungary and Poland are criticised, but other states – such as Bulgaria, Romania, Malta, and even the Netherlands – also have serious abuses, such as attacks on journalists with suspected links to politics. The basic problem is that all reforms in the EU are unanimous. Many states use this to gain advantages – they block necessary changes as long as they do not receive anything in return. The dealmaking that we criticise in Trump's case has long since become part of everyday politics in Brussels. Treaties are no longer honoured out of conviction, but only when it pays off. This is a dangerous development.

Elyse: How do you assess Barack Obama's influence on Europe's strategic foreign and security policy?

I learned two important things from Barack Obama: firstly, the distinction between the world as we would like it to be and the world as it actually is. He emphasized this in his Nobel Prize speech: you have to accept reality, even if it is different from what you would like it to be. This is especially true for Germany: we have to get away from "the world according to Germany" and recognize the actual situation. Secondly, if you want to get people to change, it's not enough just to put pressure on them with negative scenarios. You have to encourage people and show that change is possible. For example, the claim that you cannot spend 3.5 percent of the budget on defence without jeopardizing education, research or social issues is not true. In the 1960s and 1970s, this was possible without any problems. It is normal for a country to want to be the master of its own destiny, especially when the EU is as economically strong as the USA and China, and Germany is one of the largest economic powers in the world.

Theodor: You mentioned the word leverage, in general that there are mechanisms for implementing decisions and for making the EU a political heavyweight again. If we look at defence policy. There are always initiatives such as we need a European army, a European defence umbrella, uniform EU procurement regulations. How realistic do you think this or the EU initiatives on these issues are?

In view of the geopolitical situation, it is clear that we require quick and reliable decisions on security issues — and this is precisely where the EU often fails. If there is a threat on NATO's eastern flank, for example in the Baltic States or Poland, and it is unclear whether the USA will still provide support under Trump, I would not rely on the EU, but on a coalition of the willing. There is no veto there: you are in or out. This coalition could consist of around a dozen countries with Germany as a central, of the political and economic player. We cannot rely on to carry the security burden. Political support is good, military substance tends to come from the north and east of Europe. This 'coalition of the willing' would have a quadruple economic superiority over Russia, enough to act as an effective deterrent if we deploy our resources decisively. At the moment, however, the military situation seems like an invitation to Putin to test whether the Baltic States can be annexed. He will only refrain from attacking us if we are credible and well-defended. At the moment, we are not. Anyone who thinks that Russia will not attack NATO is misjudging reality. Russia is on the advance again in the east. Ukraine will not be able to recapture its territories without massive Western help. If we give in now, as some are demanding, and push Ukraine towards a lazy peace, Putin believes he only has to hold out, and the West will fall over. Peace on Putin's terms would only be a pause before the next war.

Elyse: On the coalition of the willing: do you think Turkey could participate in this coalition?

Turkey could certainly support a coalition of the willing — but it is a special case with two faces. On the one hand, Ankara is aware of its dependence on the West; on the other, President Erdoğan pursues clear national and personal interests. In cases of conflict, he tends to decide in favour of his own advantage rather than a common Western interest. Putin has respect for Erdoğan, not because they are partners, but because Erdoğan is pursuing power politics. Russia has indirectly lost to him in two conflicts (Karabakh and Syria). That impresses Putin more than EU diplomacy. Both are pursuing a realpolitik that has little to do with Western European values and the rules-based system.

Our idea that every war ends with negotiations under neutral mediation is often illusory. Many wars freeze without being resolved — see the Middle East, Georgia, or Ukraine. And when negotiations do take place, mediators are usually anything but neutral: Erdoğan, for example, played an important role in both the grain agreement and the prisoner exchange but not as a neutral

actor. We should therefore critically scrutinize our Western-influenced beliefs — for example, that conflicts can be resolved through neutral diplomacy. They typically correspond more to wishful thinking than reality. In this respect, France is even ahead of Germany: more realpolitik thinking is recognizable there than here.

Theodor: Would you understand Doha or Saudi Arabia as neutral mediators ?

I don't see Saudi Arabia as a mediator, but rather as a place where Americans and Russians talk to each other, which could just as well happen in Turkey. So far, however, there have been no serious negotiations. Trump made proposals that were unacceptable to Ukraine, and Putin did not respond with concessions but repeated his maximum demands.

Only military counter-pressure can stop Putin. If the USA fails to do this, we Europeans must act quickly, otherwise there is a risk of a new war. Our generation should realize that 80 years of peace in Europe — even if the Ukraine crisis is taken into account — are at risk. We have long been indirectly at war, even if many do not want to admit it. Putin's actions such as attacks on communications infrastructure and the testing of NATO responses clearly show this. We are no longer at peace, even if there is no shooting yet.

Theodor: Finally, two more questions that relate to the NATO alliance. I recently heard a report on Deutschlandfunk radio that tried to categorize Trump's demands for Canada to become the 51st federal state. If the USA is an unreliable partner in NATO under Trump, the consequence is that the USA will fall away or even turn against NATO territory.

The many headlines that Trump is making should be viewed with a little distance: What of it will remain important in a year's time, what is just yesterday's talk?

You can certainly be wrong, but my thesis is: In a year's time, we will no longer be talking about Canada or Greenland, but will still be talking about the war in Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East and, above all, alliance reliability. The important issues will be what happens in Eastern Europe, how the economy develops, and how the trade conflict in the West is defused.

The problem is not necessarily whether the US wants to help under Trump, but that his uncertain statements encourage Putin to risk it. If the US does intervene, Trump can always row back and settle for minor concessions. This will test how determined the West really is to repel military aggression, or whether it is satisfied with ceding territory.

Another scenario being discussed by American security experts is a double war: China could attack Taiwan while Putin sets his sights on the Baltic States. The USA would then concentrate on Asia and Europe would have to deal with Putin alone. This is precisely why we Europeans must be able to do

it, we must not rely on Trump being reasonable or on another president coming in after three years. We have to take responsibility for our own security.

This mental "turning point" needs support, through organizations, in discussions, in politics. Europe must finally become the master of its own destiny and use its resources to reliably guarantee security and prosperity for the next generation. This is in our hands, and we must not leave it to others.

Theodor: It is precisely this defensive capability that you mentioned that ties in well with my last question. 24 years ago, you wrote a commentary on September 11, 2001. In the last sentence, it says: Germany must be capable of alliance and take responsibility. Conversely, America must listen to its allies and show moderation. An alliance binds both. How would you classify this quote today?

It is sad that it was only due to pressure from the USA that we realized that we had to be able to defend ourselves. Moving from our current military dependence on the USA to genuine self-reliance requires their help, and not just financially. Germany has relaxed the debt brake and theoretically has unlimited money for armaments, but money alone is not enough. Systems must first be produced. American Patriot missiles are sold out until the mid-2030s. We must therefore be able to build them ourselves, here we need US support, for example through licences. Europe requires air defence systems quickly, months' worth of ammunition and must produce tens of thousands of drones. This can only be achieved with cooperation between the "coalition of the willing" and the EU.

The European arms market should be designed in such a way that we have to work together. Airbus shows that the civilian example works, why not the military too? We require fewer different types of weapons, but effective systems and more economy of scale.

The good times after 1990, when we thought liberalism and democracy had won, are over. Powers like Russia and China are threatening us with missiles and cyberattacks. We have to respond, and we can. The message remains positive: Germany and Europe can overcome the crisis if we want to.

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