

SECURITY STRATEGY

American primacy

BY THIERRY DE MONTBRIAL

There are two main reasons the United States will maintain its primacy on the world stage. The first is that, in a world of weak or broken identities, theirs remains strong, despite racial tensions and the growth of social inequality. The US is a land of immigrants, who swept the plate clean – almost – of its indigenous populations. From the outset, Americans have been bound together by a sacred text, the US Constitution, which has survived more than two centuries of adventures and crises.

The most recent crisis is Trump's electoral college victory following a campaign marked by a populism that broadly rejected all traditional political elites. But the new president also represents the American Dream. His slogan "Make America Great Again" and his desire to serve the national interest according to right-wing gospel are not wholly out of tune with much of the US populace, despite the anger and disgust of a majority of voters.

The political and media elites, and much of the population as a whole, have maintained an unshakeable faith in the country's institutions. Any president that fails to respect them would be voted out of office.

That issue has many ramifications. For example, regardless of the 45th president's intent to stop Mexicans from illegally crossing the border, the US will remain a land of immigration, yet one comprising a rigorous framework premised on the immigrants' commitment to obey American law as it flows from the Constitution.

This is something altogether different from, for example, French-style ideological liberalism, which prioritizes unconditional "diversity." The Constitution's role as the cornerstone of American identity cannot be overemphasized. Only if an active minority were to one day transgress it, would there be reason to embrace serious concern for the country's identity and future. That day has not yet come.

The second reason for the primacy of the United States is its effective "grand strategy" of means based on a simple idea: in all circumstances, the US armed forces must be larger than any imaginable foreign coalition, regardless of any current constellation of allies and adversaries. The arms industry and, more generally, the high-tech activities it encompasses are top priority.

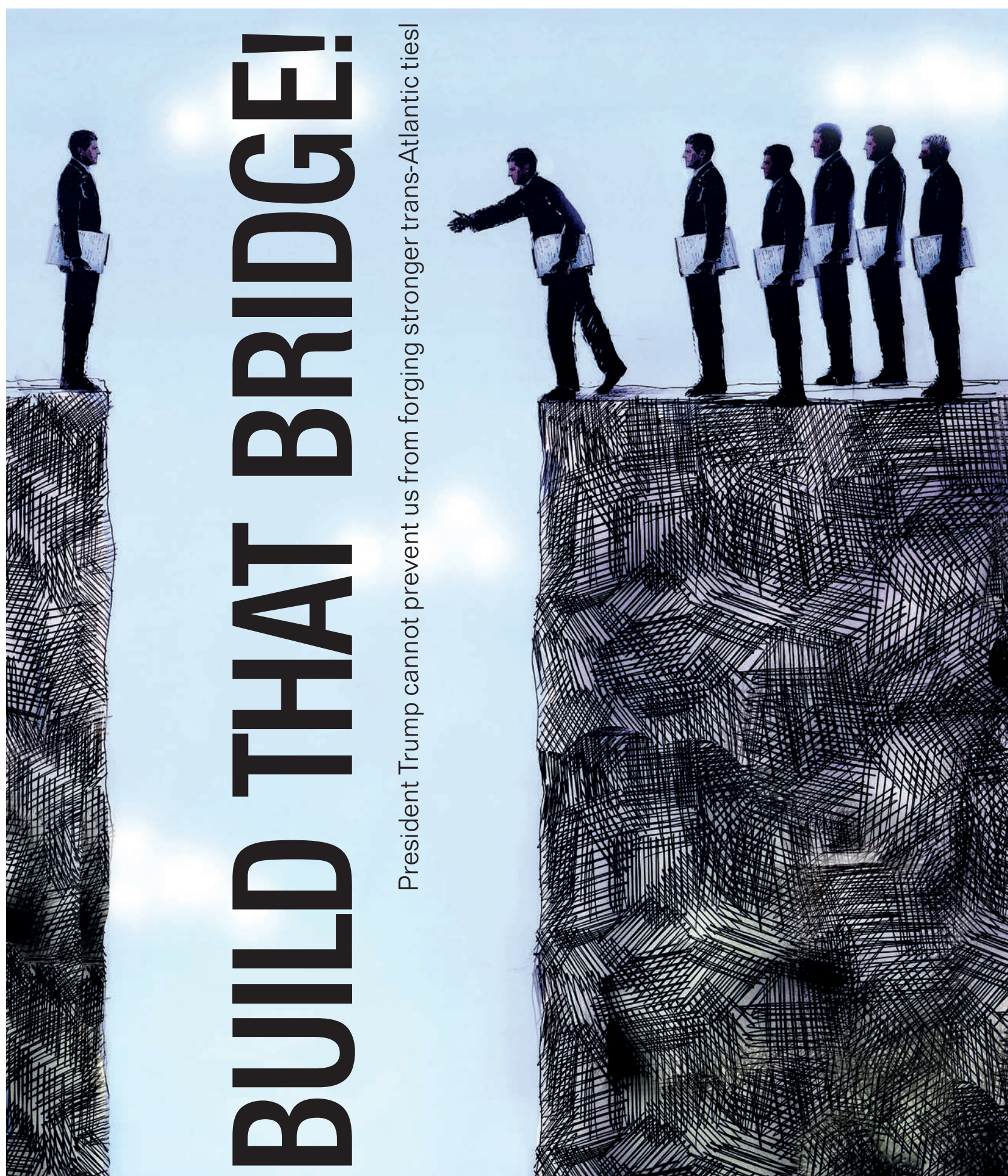
And there's more. Considerably well protected by its geography, the US has always aimed for energy independence and increasingly overt dominance in terms of information control. Technology has allowed the US to achieve both goals. The only possible challenger in the foreseeable future is China, which is striving to catch up.

The acronym GAFAM provides an apt summation of the situation: search engines (Google), mobility (Apple), social media (Facebook) and e-commerce (Amazon), not to mention Microsoft. The singular combination of an unparalleled entrepreneurial culture with the active support of the government has enabled the US, and in particular California, to become the undisputed champion of big data, the internet and innovation.

No country, not even China, can hope to overtake it anytime soon. The US has the whole world under surveillance and, militarily, can strike any target on the globe while bearing next to no risk – except in the extreme event of war with other nuclear powers.

America dominates the digital world, which is still embryonic but growing at a brisk pace. Its dominance in this realm is such that it can afford to make mistakes that the rest of the world cannot. While it is not immune to cyberattacks, unpleasant revelations from Wikileaks, disinformation campaigns (whether or not they can be categorized as post-truth) or other attempts at destabilization, the US is currently better prepared to overcome such setbacks than any other country in the world.

And yet, the United States is in no position to govern the world. Firstly, this would not be compatible with its ideology, and, even if it were, the country has frequently changed course throughout its history. Protecting its territory and national identity; furthering its economic interests from a position of strength; making and unmaking alliances accordingly; reserving the sovereign right to strike abroad without fearing a counterstrike; and fostering the spread of its values to boost its soft power are the implicit, unchanging foundations of its foreign policy. Not only is it less volatile in the long term than it may seem to be in the short or medium term, it also always reflects a unique, pragmatic combination where interests and values dovetail.



BY METIN HAKVERDI

“As far as the world economy is concerned, it is interlinked,” deadpanned the famous German satirist Kurt Tucholsky in the early 1930s. Although uttered in the Weimar Republic, the remark applies today as much as ever. Indeed, while some observers see President Donald Trump's words at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos – “America first does not mean America alone” – as a gesture of conciliation, this would be an incorrect reading. American economic policy will be part of a new global public policy that has a tangible impact on Germany as well. After Davos, there can be no doubt about this.

And yet, as unpleasant and protectionist as Trump's “America first” slogan may sound, it is nothing we haven't heard before. While his term – or terms – in office will be sure to drag on, his administration will not usher in the “demise of the West.” Although Trump is indeed fostering a sense of alienation among trans-Atlantic partners, he is far from legitimizing the reasons for doing so.

The debate launched by the recent “In Spite of It All, America” manifesto examining the future of the trans-Atlantic relationship is on the right path, but it is too monothematic in parts. Although my intention is by no means to question or deny the importance of foreign and security policy, an approach that reduces the debate to this topic alone gets me thinking. After all, this approach neglects the fact that globalization, automation and digitization have long since caused domestic and foreign policy to move closer together while blurring the lines distinguishing one policy field from the other.

Unlike any president before him, Trump has been able to convince people who were not profiting from our new world order that he understood their woes. In fact, these were the very people who put him in office. Indeed, the 2016 election has been referred to as the “can you hear me now?” elec-

tion. Today, these “losers of modernization” are exerting their influence on the future of the Western world order. That being said, we cannot forget that this development is not entirely new; and it's not just taking place in the US.

Has the trans-Atlantic relationship been shattered by the efforts of one person? Certainly not. At this point, our approach should be to take advantage of Trump's political egoism, his contempt for national and international institutions, his rejection of multilateralism and his utter disdain for the idea of a united Europe as an opportunity to revitalize and redefine the trans-Atlantic relationship. Indeed, it is up to us to do our homework now so we can enjoy the fruits of our labor while Trump is still president and, more importantly, when he is no longer in office.

The US and Germany share a common horizon of experience that began – however inauspiciously – during World War II. With this in mind, it is important to note that one reason for today's rising alienation is a generational shift in the political sphere, one that has nothing to do with the current US administration. Over the past several years, a number of political figures whose yearning for the West had been fed by the direct experience of WWII and the post-war years have retired from politics. As more and more eyewitnesses of that era – those with vivid recollections of the liberation of Germany – fade into the background, the more difficult it becomes for the younger generation to bridge this emotional gap.

This is why we need new narratives that can revitalize our trans-Atlantic relationship. These stories can no longer revolve around military liberation; instead, they must focus on what makes liberal democracies such as the US and Germany so successful.

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This involves shared liberal democratic values, equality before the law and an open, tolerant society. In fact, in order to be a part of this community, our countries need not even share interests – which, indeed, they often do not.

First of all, it would suffice to have open and fair elections. Indeed, for all of us who doubt the strength of democracy under Trump, we need only look at the latest elections for governor in New Jersey and Virginia as well as the Senate special election in Alabama. The results show that the liberal tradition not only alive, but vibrant – and that we would behoove us to put aside our typical German pessimism in this case. The confident and professional media so despised by Trump is serving its purpose by fulfilling its journalistic mandate. In other words, there will be a time after Trump – and we should be prepared for it.

What can we do in the meantime to revitalize and redefine the trans-Atlantic relationship? While Trump is in office, it is urgent and necessary to identify and reach out to the president's antagonists, especially those working in the complicated US system of checks and balances. These include elected members of Congress, scientists, academics, local politicians and all those who see multilateralism as self-evident and desirable. For example, in the realm of climate protection, California is currently showing that it is possible for reasonable environmental policies to succeed even without adherence to the Paris Climate Agreement.

In fact, there are plenty of areas in which we can work now to refine our shared values. For example, it is urgent that we explore the impact of digitization on the economy and the workplace in both our countries. Our response to the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution will have to reflect our liberal tradition and thus be differ greatly from the solutions offered by authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. But how exactly can this work in a globalized market?

In our era of growing populism within liberal democracies, the “future of work” is perhaps the most important trans-Atlantic theme on which to

focus. How can we achieve a fair tax and trade policy? What should be the nature of internet regulation? In order to answer these and other questions, it is imperative that we engage in an intensive trans-Atlantic dialogue.

I am optimistic that we will succeed in this endeavor. On my travels throughout the US, which have often taken me deep into rural areas, I have experienced an American society steeped in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson; that is, not only do people want a better America, they also want a better world. At its core, the community of values in the West has always been shaped by an image of man as a bearer of freedom and dignity.

Anyone who travels through the industrial wastelands of the Ohio Valley and then visits Germany's Ruhr Valley – both of which have been hit hard by the structural changes of recent decades – will immediately recognize that liberal and Western democracies will have to work together to provide political solutions to address the anger and hopelessness felt by those referred to in German as Rationalisierungsverlierer, or “rationalization losers.” This is where domestic and foreign policy intersect; indeed, without the anger and hopelessness felt by former coalminers in the Rust Belt, Trump's electoral success would have been inconceivable – and there would have been no resulting shift in policy alliances in the West.

Politicians of my generation are now obliged to use the coming years to establish reliable and sustainable contacts as well as to address the key challenges of our time – both in and outside of the political sphere. The self-absorption of Trump's presidency provides us with a living reminder that we must explore, nurture and develop our shared values on both sides of the Atlantic time and again. After all, the more we know about each other, the less Trump will be able to spread his (mis-)interpretation of the situation. We must never forget that the trans-Atlantic relationship does not belong to the president in Washington; it belongs to the people who fill it with life.