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Ulrich Franke  
*University of Erfurt*

Hermann Kurthen  
*Grand Valley State University, kurthenh@gvsu.edu*

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# Still lacking self-reflection after all these years? (De)stabilizing factors of transatlantic relations according to German and US foreign policy experts between 2011 and 2017

Ulrich Franke<sup>1</sup> · Hermann Kurthen<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

This article compares the trends and theoretical positions found in the recent academic literature on the status and trajectory of transatlantic relations with the beliefs of 96 German and US foreign policy experts. The qualitative data are derived from open-ended in-depth interviews about the political, economic, and cultural factors that influence transatlantic cooperation and friction. Conducted in Berlin in 2011 and in Washington, D.C., in 2017, the interviews correspond with optimist and pessimist perceptions found in the academic literature and align roughly with realist, respectively, liberal/institutionalist and constructivist theoretical positions in International Relations theory and left/right political leanings. The study concludes with suggestions about the prospects for transatlantic relations, and the methodological benefits of comparing beliefs of foreign policy actors with theoretical paradigms and trends in the academic literature.

**Keywords** Transatlantic relations · Foreign policy expert beliefs · United States of America and Germany · IR theory · Classical pragmatism's rules for action concept

## Introduction and question

Instead of revealing the decadence and weakness of what President Putin mocks as the collective West, Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought the USA, Canada, Germany and most European countries closer together again. In their response to the

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✉ Ulrich Franke  
ulrich.franke@uni-erfurt.de

Hermann Kurthen  
kurthenh@gvsu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Grand Valley State University, Allendale, USA



attack the transatlantic partners refute the notion of a lack of unity after years of tensions and disagreements, particularly under US Presidents Trump and G.W. Bush. In fact, the ups and downs of transatlantic relations (TR)<sup>1</sup> after the end of the Cold War have received a great deal of attention both in politics and in academia, splitting many practitioners and observers of TR into optimists and pessimists.<sup>2</sup>

This study uses a novel approach to assess the stabilizing and destabilizing factors that underlie the binary optimist–pessimist assessment of the trajectory of TR in the past, present, and future. First, it reconstructs the beliefs of German and US experts about what holds in their views the transatlantic relationship together and contributes to its stability and what drives it apart and creates instability. Applying a “grounded” qualitative analysis informed by the philosophy and social theory of classical pragmatism, the data are based on open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 96 foreign policy experts<sup>3</sup> from the executive branch, parliament, think tanks, media, and academia in Berlin and Washington, D.C. between 2011 and 2017. Second, it compares positions in International Relations (IR) theory<sup>4</sup> and expectations in the academic literature about the status and trajectory of TR with the experts’ optimist/pessimist beliefs and their left/right political leanings.<sup>5</sup> Despite the

<sup>1</sup> Transatlantic relations are defined here as a broad concept encompassing economic, political, and cultural dimensions between the USA, Canada, as well as the EU and European NATO members. Conflicts that received particular attention among allies concerned NATO enlargement, the Yugoslav wars, the second Iraq War, and the first Libyan civil war.

<sup>2</sup> Similar classifications have been used in the literature. See, for instance, Florian Böller, Steffen Hagemann, Anja Opitz, and Jürgen Wilzewski, eds., *Die Zukunft der transatlantischen Gemeinschaft: Externe und interne Herausforderungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017); Stewart Patrick, ‘World order: what, exactly, are the rules?’, *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2016): 7–27; and Stefan Fröhlich, *The New Geopolitics of Transatlantic Relations: Coordinated Responses to Common Dangers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). We are aware that this binary classification is insufficient because there are also undecided voices who literally “sit on the fence”, or take “neither...nor” respectively “and/or” positions.

<sup>3</sup> A broad definition of foreign policy experts is used as there is no standardized unambiguous definition of this profession. Consequently, this study is not about individual actors and their professional and institutional affiliation and direct impact on foreign policy action. It is about extracting patterns of experts’ beliefs using classical pragmatism’s concept of (policy) beliefs as “rules for action”.

<sup>4</sup> In this study we define in broad strokes realism as emphasizing the competitive and conflictual nature of international politics. Liberalism/institutionalism assumes that institutions (international as well as domestic ones) enable peaceful cooperation between nations and proposes the strengthening of institutions and orderly cooperative relations between nations. Constructivism maintains the importance of historical and societal conditionality of international political relations. A similar condensed interpretation of mainstream IR positions is used by Michael E. Smith, ‘Transatlantic security relations since the European security strategy: what role for the EU in its pursuit of strategic autonomy?’, *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 5 (2018): 605–20; Böller et al., eds., *Die Zukunft*; John Peterson, ‘All Roads Don’t Lead to Brussels (But Most Do): European Integration and Transatlantic Relations’, in Riccardo Alcaro, John Peterson, and Ettore Greco, eds., *The West and the Global Power Shift: Transatlantic Relations and Global Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 101–25; and Serena Simoni, *Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West?* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Political leaning is defined here for the USA as follows: Democrats and Independents are considered belonging to the left/centre, whereas Republicans and Libertarians are considered belonging to the centre/right. For Germany, members of or affiliation with the Left Party, the Green Party, and Social Democrats are considered left/centre, whereas members of and affiliates with the Free Democratic Party (Liberals), the Christian Democratic Union, the Christian Social Union (of Bavaria), and the Alternative for Germany are considered centre/right.



limitations of the two qualitative samples and the interview period, the findings are relevant and innovative because they compare foreign policy expert beliefs about the status and prospect of TR in two very important member states of the transatlantic alliance<sup>6</sup> with trends in the literature, analytical assumptions of three major IR theories, and political left/right leanings.

What emerges from the interviews goes beyond stereotypical narratives about a US–German divide over Iraq, Iran and Libya, Germany’s alleged “free riding” on US defence spending, and its supposedly selfish economic engagement with both Russia and China versus German criticism of US unilateralism and loose use of force in world affairs. Instead, very detailed and nuanced evidence of transatlantic cooperation, friction, and ambivalence in political, economic, and cultural arenas is presented. For one, optimists lean towards the political centre as well as liberalist/institutionalist and constructivist positions, while pessimists are more inclined towards the political fringes and variants of IR realism. Moreover, non-mainstream IR paradigms are rarely present and practical concerns outweigh deeper theoretical reflections among foreign policy experts, who, importantly, rarely question their own political-ideological stances, instead unreflectively buying into a narrative of Western universalism and superior morality. In addition, partnership status and grand strategy differences are palpable between German and US respondents, as well as conflicting expectations about the integration of adversaries.

The article is organized as follows: After a short overview of the scholarship on TR and policy prescriptions based on mainstream IR schools of thought, the samples and pragmatist methodology used for the interview evaluation are described. This is followed by a presentation of the political, economic, and cultural factors that in the optimist/pessimist view of foreign policy experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C. either stabilize or destabilize TR. The conclusion summarizes the findings, comments on the prospects of transatlantic relations, and discusses the benefits of empirically comparing beliefs of foreign policy actors with theoretical paradigms and trends in the academic literature.

## **Scholarship on transatlantic relations: optimists versus pessimists**

As any summary of a broad academic literature about the status and expected trajectory of TR, the binary “optimist” versus “pessimist” categorization used in this study is imperfect because it ignores in its generalizing manner subtle differences, ambivalences, and idiosyncrasies of academic predictions, including those that fall into the category of “neither/nor” or “both-and-also” positions (all of which deserve more space and detail than can be granted here). Similarly, we are aware that the grouping of mainstream IR theories under the condensed labels of realism, liberalism/institutionalism, and constructivism is only an analytical tool to hypothesize

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<sup>6</sup> While the USA and Germany represent in 2023 only two out of 31 NATO member states, they are both of crucial importance because of US dominance in military, political, and economic matters, and Germany’s central status in Europe. This article rests on the assumption that the USA and Germany are necessary for the study of current TR but not sufficient to draw general conclusions.



grand trends and links between empirical data, theories, and academic predictions. This study does not deny the existence of significant undercurrents and nuances in broad IR research programmes.<sup>7</sup> Nor are we unaware of the existence of other schools of thought that relate to foreign, international, and global affairs, like Critical theory/Marxism, Feminism, Post-structuralism, Post-colonialism, or the English School.<sup>8</sup> Quite the contrary, the widespread absence of those concepts in the academic debate about TR could be considered a flaw that warrants more attention in separate studies.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the abridged labels and categories that will be used here should not be interpreted as theoretical ignorance or promotion of binary views but as an attempt to condense complex findings in a succinct and understandable manner to identify alignments between analytical concepts and predictions in the academic literature and “messy” empirical observations based on meticulously reconstructed expert beliefs about TR. We believe that such an approach is useful and legitimate because it allows us to identify similarities and differences between beliefs of experts, theoretical orientations, and predictions in the literature<sup>10</sup> about the status and trajectory of TR. This approach of identifying general trends and patterns of interrelation between the literature, theoretical concepts, and expert beliefs is commensurate with previous attempts of researchers to bring these elements together (see previous footnotes).

Using an unsystematic random selection of about fifty articles, chapters, and books concerning TR in the last two decades (see References section), this study

<sup>7</sup> As a reviewer of this article commented, “before Russia’s invasion in the Ukraine neo-realist and structural realist scholars have made gloomy assessments and predictions about TR, whereas classical and neo-classical realists, considering the role of unit-level variables and normative factors in shaping systemic outcomes, did not necessarily share that pessimism. Similarly, it might be worth to stress existing undercurrents also in the liberal camp, where classical liberals, democratic peace theorists, and liberal/institutionalist scholars have often made quite diverse assessments of the status of the transatlantic relationship”.

<sup>8</sup> See for an overview of such approaches Robert E. Goodin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80, 675–784.

<sup>9</sup> Post-colonialists, the strongest force outside IR’s mainstream, for example, rarely participate in academic debates about TR, even though they deal with this topic intensively. They criticize the normative presumptions and ideological blinders that underlie the mainstream IR discourse, which silences a critique of the unquestioned notion of Western civilizational mission, its supposedly exceptional and universal character, and assumptions of a quasi-natural right of global domination. See, for example, Rachel Tausendfreund, ‘The West Is Not the World’, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 14, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See Hans Binnendijk, ‘Between continuity and erosion: three scenarios for the future of transatlantic relations’, *CEPOB: College of Europe Policy Brief*, 7/2018; or Sonja Kaufmann and Mathis Lohaus, ‘Ever closer or lost at sea? Scenarios for the future of transatlantic relations’, *Futures: For the Interdisciplinary Study of Futures, Anticipation and Foresight* 97 (2018): 18–25.



distinguishes between two general schools of thought. *Optimists* centre on what unites North America and Europe,<sup>11</sup> whereas *pessimists* stress divisions, differences, and a possible failure of that relationship.<sup>12</sup> Optimists recognize the bumpy character of TR but assume that eventually shared interests and values will maintain transatlantic unity given economic, technological, political, and military challenges to Western dominance. Episodes of nationalist foreign policy, like under President Trump, represent in their opinion a short-lived interruption of a sound relationship that can be repaired, continue, and evolve further, even if “scars” will remain.<sup>13</sup>

Pessimists reject the optimists’ expectations. They assume that after the end of the Cold War an inevitable decline of the US–European relationship began because of a shift of fundamental parameters. They believe that after having experienced a brief unipolar moment, the USA eventually became victim of its own post-Cold War success by attempting to remake the international order in its own image. They argue that the 9/11 attack—itself both a cause and effect of this hubris—led to the demise of US hegemonic world power status. The USA became involved in multiple military conflicts and regime change attempts draining its resources, legitimacy, and prestige. At the same time, other regions and nations, like China, began to eclipse the USA economically, technologically, and politically. Some pessimists claim that only its military superpower status allows the USA to retain its global hegemonic capability.<sup>14</sup>

A third and much smaller group of scholars are those that do not fit the above optimist/pessimist interpretations. They occupy an *undecided* position that cannot be associated unequivocally with optimists or pessimists and stress the conditionality

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Dunn, ‘The European Union’s Permanent Structured Cooperation: Implications for Transatlantic Security’, *Strategic Forum*, no. 302, National Defense University Press, 2020; Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness* (Munich Security Conference 2020); and Wyn Rees and Lance Davies, ‘The Anglo-American military relationship: Institutional rules, practices, and narratives’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 40, no. 3 (2019): 312–34.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Dimitrova, ‘Troubled Times for Transatlantic Relations’, in *Europe in Trouble: Developing under the Constraint of Crises*, ed. Hartmut Marhold (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2016), 151–8; Jolyon Howorth, ‘Strategic autonomy and EU-NATO cooperation: threat or opportunity for transatlantic defence relations?’, *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 5 (2018): 523–37; and Robert Kagan, ‘The New German question: What Happens When Europe Comes Apart’, *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (July/August 2019): 108–120.

<sup>13</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, John Peterson, and Ettore Greco, eds., *The West and the Global Power Shift: Transatlantic Relations and Global Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Florian Böller, Steffen Hagemann, Anja Opitz, and Jürgen Wilzewski, eds., *Die Zukunft der transatlantischen Gemeinschaft: Externe und interne Herausforderungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017); Dimitrova, ‘Troubled’; and Deirdre Berger et al., ‘In Spite of It All, America: A Trans-Atlantic Manifesto in Times of Donald Trump – a German Perspective’, *New York Times*, October 11, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Federiga Bindi, ed., *Europe and America: The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019); Stanley R. Sloan, ‘Transatlantic Relations: A Perfect Storm across the Atlantic?’, *Fokus* (AIES) 1/2017; and Johannes Varwick et al., ‘Entfremdung zwischen den USA und Europa: Geht das «amerikanische Jahrhundert» zu Ende?’ *ifo Schnelldienst* 70, no. 14 (2017): 3–23.



of TR on a variety of unpredictable and uncontrollable domestic and foreign developments, which undergo cycles of deterioration, revival, and reform.<sup>15</sup> We consider most of those positions as de facto “light” versions of optimism because they eventually assume an evolutionary perspective where TR remain viable and persistent *longue durée* in some form or another.

Using again a broad brush, we looked for associations in the reviewed academic literature between the above optimist/pessimist TR trajectory expectations with theoretical orientations either expressed directly or that we were able to infer. We concluded that “mainstream” IR paradigms are overrepresented in the academic debate, whereas other theoretical approaches are rarely present.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we concluded that realist scholars do not figure prominently among optimists, not least because TR are not typically of central interest for realists. Instead, realists often focus on the role of global power structures, the polarity of the international system, and how states must adapt to this scenario.<sup>17</sup> But realists are not completely outside the optimist camp. From a realist perspective, the key to maintaining the stability of TR lies in common adversaries, against whom rearmament and military cooperation are necessary. Russia and China, for instance, are characterized as “new geopolitical realities”<sup>18</sup> that challenge Western dominance and require transatlantic collaboration. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014, realist geopolitical thinking has gained new currency, implying a division of the earth’s surface into spheres of influence of major regional or world powers, such as Russia, China, and the USA.

Contrary to realists, liberals/institutionalists as well as constructivists assume that flourishing TR do not require per se common opponents. Institutionalists often stress the liberal character of the international order established after World War II and its global spread after the demise of the Soviet Union. They emphasize the contribution of the West, mostly the USA, to global prosperity and institutionalized rules that protect free trade and market economies.<sup>19</sup> Shared interests and responsibility

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Gunther Hellmann, ‘Inevitable Decline versus Predestined Stability: Disciplinary Explanations of the Evolving Transatlantic Order’, in Jeffrey J. Anderson, G. John Ikenberry, and Thomas Risse, eds., *The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 28–52.

<sup>16</sup> See Footnotes 4 and 9.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen M. Walt, ‘The ties that fray: Why Europe and America are drifting apart’, *National Interest* 54 (1998): 3–11; and John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Back to the future: instability in Europe after the Cold War’, *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56.

<sup>18</sup> Fröhlich, *The New*. For more recent calls to adapt the international order and the transatlantic partners’ strategies to new geopolitical realities such as the advent of a multipolar system and the rise of China, see Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, *Present at the Re-Creation: A Global Strategy for Revitalizing, Adapting, and Defending a Rules-Based International System* (Atlantic Council, 2019); Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, ‘The Day after Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order’, *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 7–25; Andrés Ortega, *The US–China Race and the Fate of Transatlantic Relations Part II: Bridging Differing Geopolitical Views* (Center for Strategic and International Relations, 2020); and Rebin Fard, ‘The new foreign policy pendulum: geopolitical codes of German foreign policy in the post-bipolar world order’, *Politics in Central Europe* 15, no. 3 (2020): 383–418.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson et al., *The End*; and Benjamin Pohl, ‘Neither Bandwagoning nor Balancing: Explaining Europe’s Security Policy’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 34, no. 2 (2013): 353–73.





for maintaining this order should in their opinion keep the transatlantic partnership afloat. Consequently, liberals/institutionalists abhor political differences among the constituents of the West. They never tire of pointing out the political bonds, cultural similarities, and welfare gains of free trade that keep TR going.<sup>20</sup>

Constructivists on the other hand focus on commonalities between transatlantic partners and put emphasis on shared values and collective identities through interaction. While a common identity may form in the context of dealing with outside threats by an opponent, it can persist without an adversary. Since shared identity is the foundation of transatlantic unity in the view of many constructivists, politicians pursue common interests because they share this identity, i.e. interests follow identity.<sup>21</sup>

From this overview of the literature, we have deduced that among TR pessimists, realist scholars are most outspoken about the possibility of transatlantic divisions. In a world inclined to return to traditional great power politics, realists see European governments having the options to either bandwagon with or balance (softly) against the USA.<sup>22</sup> While bandwagoning preserves transatlantic unity (offensive realist optimists), balancing leads to transatlantic discord (defensive realist pessimists).<sup>23</sup> Consequently, defensive realist pessimists tend to assume that TR will deteriorate, or the USA and Europe will go their separate ways in world politics, for example, if Europeans do not fulfil their 2 per cent GDP defence and rearmament commitments as agreed upon and confirmed at NATO summits in 2002 and 2014. A few defensive realists even harbour stereotypical assumptions about Europeans “being from Venus” and “US Americans from Mars”, going back to divisions about the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

Liberals/institutionalists are rarely present among pessimists, although they are concerned with political differences among transatlantic partners. When these differences surfaced during G.W. Bush’s and Trump’s presidencies, the proverbial

<sup>20</sup> G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Liberal International Order and its Discontents’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2010): 509–21; and G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order’, *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 80–90.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Serena Simoni, ‘Split or Cooperation? Contending Arguments on the Future of the Transatlantic Relations (1991–2001)’, Paper Presented at the 50th Annual Convention of the *International Studies Association* in New York, 2009; Simon Koschut, *Die Grenzen der Zusammenarbeit: Sicherheit und transatlantische Identität nach dem Ende des Ost-West-Konflikts* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010); Peterson, ‘All Roads’; as well as Rees and Davies, ‘The Anglo-American’. Also in this context, see Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); as well as Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Peter Rudolf, ‘Nicht allein Trump ist das Problem—Zum Umgang Deutschlands mit den USA’, *SWP-Aktuell* 57 (2018). For a critique of these alternatives, see Pohl, ‘Neither Bandwagoning’.

<sup>23</sup> In the USA, the difference between offensive and defensive realism plays an important role in contrast to Germany. Proponents of the first suggest a strategy of maximizing power through hegemony, proponents of the latter favour maximizing security through balancing. For a short comparison related to the USA, see Brian Schmidt, ‘Theories of US foreign policy’, in *US Foreign Policy*, eds. Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5–20).

<sup>24</sup> Robert Kagan, ‘Power and weakness: why the United States and Europe see the world differently’, *Policy Review* 113 (2002): 3–28.





liberal optimism assumed that divisions can be eventually overcome by deep bonds and common long-term interests to avoid the spectre of an end to the liberal international order.<sup>25</sup> In line with their focus on identity, constructivists readily agree to the possibility of shifts. Simoni, for example, concedes that “changing identities indeed modify the normative and social contexts” in which action takes place, which “can produce tensions”,<sup>26</sup> resulting in divisions. But constructivists also believe in remedies to counter threats to transatlantic political unity, be it the spread of Western or US values and identities, cultural diversity, multilateralism or common diplomacy.<sup>27</sup>

Based on our overview, Table 1 summarizes expected policy prescriptions of realists, liberals/institutionalists, and constructivists in correspondence with optimist/pessimist assessments of the prospect of TR. We compare the findings from the overview of the academic literature with empirical results derived from qualitative interviews with foreign policy experts - after a brief description of the samples, interview evaluation, and methods used in this study.

### **Qualitative expert samples, interview evaluation, and methodological approach**

Unlike quantitative surveys, which use pre-set categories and standardized questionnaires, the findings of this study were derived from open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The interviews offer not just the potential for a richer description of political processes, but also for more reliable and valid data for inferential purposes”.<sup>28</sup> While longitudinal panel interviews would have been preferable, field access, funding, and staffing did only allow for a cross-sectional research design. Given the goal of discerning long-term patterns of transatlantic stability and instability that outlast daily events, the design chosen here still provides empirically valid insights into how foreign policy experts viewed TR during a period encompassing crisis and cooperation between the NATO-led military intervention in the Libyan civil war (2011), Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2014), and Trump’s inauguration (2017).

The selection of the *Berlin 2011 sample* of 65 semi-structured interview participants was conducted with the help of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) during a US Fulbright funded research visit of Hermann Kurthen in Berlin in spring 2011. Out of an original sample of 164 foreign policy decision-makers and experts from the German government, parliament, think tanks, academia, and media, 71 persons were eventually interviewed. For this article, only the 65 German citizens of this group were included, with six non-German citizens omitted. The sample selection was not representative because the overall population of foreign policy actors cannot be clearly determined. Nevertheless, respondents’ occupational functions, party affiliation, age, and gender were considered

<sup>25</sup> Anderson et al., *The End*.

<sup>26</sup> Simoni, *Understanding*, 134.

<sup>27</sup> Koschut, *Die Grenzen*; Simoni, *Understanding*; as well as Rees and Davies, ‘The Anglo-American’.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn Beamer, ‘Elite Interviews and State Politics Research’, *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (2002): 87.



**Table 1** Policy Prescriptions for Transatlantic Relations according to Mainstream IR Schools of Thought derived from the Academic Literature

IR school of thought	Policy prescription for TR	
	Optimist stabilizing factors of unity	Pessimist destabilizing factors of division
Realism	Create an alliance against a common adversary or even enemy	Beware of European balancing against the USA
Liberalism/ institutionalism	Create and maintain a liberal international order with transatlantic partners at its core	Beware of political differences
Constructivism	Create and preserve a transatlantic identity	Beware of identity changes

sufficiently diverse to fulfil the saturation criteria and response variation recommended for qualitative sampling.<sup>29</sup>

In the German sample, eight respondents were members of the executive branch. Twenty-two were elected parliamentarians (MdB), most of them members of the Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. Seventeen were independent foreign policy experts from think tanks, academia, media, and research staffers from the parliament. Eighteen interviewees were older and retired diplomats and ex-politicians. Eighty-six per cent of the 65 respondents were males. The average age was 59 but ranged from 30 to 89 years. Almost half of the persons interviewed held a PhD, while the remainder had completed a specialized or university education. Forty-one per cent of the interviewees had no or an unknown party affiliation. Among the 38 party-affiliated interviewees, ten were members of the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), six of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). The other participants belonged to the opposition parties at the time: 11 were Social Democrats (SPD), seven Green, and four Left Party members. Regarding their political leaning, 40 per cent of the 65 German respondents were categorized as left/centre, 43 per cent centre/right, and 18 per cent were undetermined.

The selection of the *Washington, D.C., 2017 sample* of 31 interviews used funds and networks from Hermann Kurthen's home university. Out of 111 contacted foreign policy experts, 37 persons agreed to be interviewed. As in the case of the Berlin sample, six non-US citizens were omitted. The US sample also was not representative because the overall population of foreign policy experts cannot be clearly determined. Nevertheless, US respondents' characteristics and beliefs captured a diverse spectrum, thereby fulfilling the previously mentioned saturation criteria.

Most US respondents came from 13 well-known foreign policy think tanks, among them four conservative, five centrist, and four liberal or progressive

<sup>29</sup> Janice M. Morse, 'Designing funded qualitative research', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 220–35; and Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2013).



institutions. Eight of the overall 20 think tank interviewees were directors or presidents of their institutions. In addition, a diplomat, four Congressional staffers, a Library of Congress researcher, and five university academics affiliated with foreign policy research institutions were interviewed. Because of the prevalent “revolving door” job rotating mechanism and the tightly knit and overlapping networks that characterize the D.C. foreign policy expert elites, many US respondents previously held jobs in federal and state positions, the legislative branch, law, military, academia, think tanks, foundations, NGOs, investment firms or other private enterprises. Eighty-four per cent of the 31 respondents were white males, typical for the distribution of this characteristic among the D.C. expert community during the time of the interviews. The participants’ average age was 54 and ranged from 32 to 91 years. Fifty-five per cent of the interviewed persons held a PhD or a J.D., many from Ivy League or similar institutions, indicating the elite educational status of the sample. Sixteen experts were non-partisan, or their party affiliation was unknown. Among the 15 persons with a known party affiliation, nine were Republican Party members and six were Democrats. Among the 31 US experts, 32 per cent were found to lean towards the left/centre, 42 per cent to the centre/right, and 30 per cent were undetermined. From the variation of responses, it can be deduced that the samples reach across ideological and political boundaries from progressive left to liberal, centrist, and conservative or right nationalist positions.

To make both the Berlin and the Washington, D.C. samples comparable, the audiotaped interviews covered similar sets of questions about foreign policy lessons, challenges, and future priorities, including the status and prospect of TR. However, the questions were adapted to the context changes that had happened during the 2011–2017 period. The data evaluation took place in several steps using MAXQDA qualitative software. First, the “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute[s]”<sup>30</sup> of the transcriptions were coded. Then, in an iterative process, the expert beliefs were further condensed, compared, and thematically re-grouped to extract the respondents guiding “rules for action” that in their view either *stabilize* or *destabilize* TR. This final step then allowed to re-connect the expert views with the reviewed academic literature on TR in the last two decades in the context of the interviewee’s political beliefs and IR orientation.

As mentioned, this study builds on the reconstructive pragmatist method<sup>31</sup> to interpret beliefs of foreign policy experts. It allows researchers to distil through iterative processes of qualitative categorization and regrouping the often unstated or indirect assumptions and imperatives that guide the action by decision-makers and experts. In the context of international politics and foreign policy, pragmatists claim that these beliefs as rules for action can be considered core components of political strategies on various levels. The classification and comparison of beliefs

<sup>30</sup> Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (London: Sage, 2009), 7. See also Nicole M. Deterding and Mary C. Waters, ‘Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach’, *Sociological Methods & Research* 50, no. 2 (2021): 708–39.

<sup>31</sup> For the full application of a reconstructive approach based on grounded theory, see Ulrich Roos, *Deutsche Außenpolitik: Eine Rekonstruktion der grundlegenden Handlungsregeln* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010).



as imperative rules for action is valuable because it may allow observers to comprehend the present and—potentially—even the future mind-set and direction that underlies political action.

Pragmatism has played an increasingly visible role in theorizing foreign policy action since the 2000s.<sup>32</sup> It has added new perspectives about how to understand the causes and sources of foreign policy action and has strengthened the position of those approaches that reject Waltz' influential distinction between systemic theories of international politics and foreign policy analysis.<sup>33</sup> Instead, in order to bridge the *structure-agent* conundrum, pragmatist scholars agree with social constructivists in IR that beliefs or habits link the systemic and the unit level in form of rules for action.<sup>34</sup>

Pragmatists pay particular attention to the interaction between political structures and human agency, combining epistemological and methodological premises from reconstructive sociology<sup>35</sup> with the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's assumption that beliefs are typically based on condensed learning experiences, which then guide humans in their practice to continue to act and cope with the contingencies of life, so that beliefs become a "a rule for action".<sup>36</sup> The pragmatist approach does not imply that those who act always need to have an awareness of the rules they are following. And it does not mean that action itself should be merely understood as reactive, unconscious behaviour, reducing human agency to running a programme or acting out a scheme. Instead, individual action based on beliefs is made possible and restrained by social structures but not in a deterministic manner. Unlike the notion that humans are unconnected atoms, pragmatists assume that individual and collective action resulting from beliefs *are* a social creation. They are constantly appropriated, re-examined, and revised while providing guidance and legitimacy over time.

<sup>32</sup> Gunther Hellmann, 'Fatal attraction? German foreign policy and IR/foreign policy theory', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 12, no. 3 (2009): 257–92; Harry Bauer and Elisabetta Brighi, eds., *Pragmatism in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009); as well as Ulrich Franke and Gunther Hellmann, 'American Pragmatism in Foreign Policy Analysis', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 1: A–H, ed. Cameron Thies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 14–32. For pragmatism's practice-theoretical offspring, see Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Vincent Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality: A theory of practice of security communities', *International Organization* 62, no. 2 (2008): 257–88.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 79–82.

<sup>34</sup> Franke and Hellmann, 'American Pragmatism'.

<sup>35</sup> Ulrich Oevermann, "Die Methode der Fallrekonstruktion in der Grundlagenforschung sowie der klinischen und pädagogischen Praxis", in *Die Fallrekonstruktion: Sinnverstehen in der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung*, ed. Klaus Kraimer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 58–156; and Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> Charles S. Peirce, 'How to Make our Ideas clear (1878)', in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 1, 1867–1893, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press), 127–32. For pragmatism in IR, see also Ulrich Roos, "Beliefs and Loyalties in World Politics: A Pragmatist Framework for Analysis", in *Theorizing Foreign Policy in a Globalized World*, ed. Gunther Hellmann and Knud Erik Jørgensen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 176–98.



## Stabilizing optimist and destabilizing pessimist factors of TR according to foreign policy experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C.

In this section, we present the findings from expert interviews about the status and trajectory of TR, their inferred theoretical positions, and political leanings. Making use of the reconstructive pragmatist method described above, we distinguish political, economic, and cultural factors<sup>37</sup> that in the view of foreign policy experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C., either stabilize or destabilize TR.

### Stabilizing optimist factors in the view of experts in Berlin

Commenting on **political** factors that stabilize TR, many foreign policy experts in Berlin refer to goals, interests, values, and institutions. For example, they assume in broad and fundamental terms that the transatlantic partners share democratic traditions and institutions, like the rule of law, individual liberties, the separation of powers, democratic parties and elections, welfare solidarity, and open societies (B17, B44<sup>38</sup>). Although Realpolitik often ignores the ideals of democracy and individual freedom (B13), the foundation of the NATO alliance is the idea of world improvement through reason, justice, treaties, and the spread of democracy (B26). Other respondents point out as stabilizing factors common interests rather than common values (B13) as well as a peaceful and blackmail-free dialogue about divergent interests (B52). In addition, experts in Berlin stress consultation and compromise in addition to frequent direct contact between governments, parliamentary committees, parties, experts, and non-governmental organizations (B33, B34, B35, B36, B45).

Experts also mention the shared goals of maintaining and expanding the liberal international order through the promotion of Western values, democracy, rule of law, individual freedoms, and prosperity. Some Berlin experts consider the USA a liberal role model (B08); others accept its benign hegemony a better choice compared to alternatives (B73). The purpose of the transatlantic alliance is to protect and defend its members through combining their strength against other powers like Russia or China (B13, B40, B42). But they also stress the need to integrate developing countries (B15) as well as potential adversaries, like Russia and China (B09, B13), into the liberal order.

Berlin experts believe that when the transatlantic allies agree on their available means (B33), they can better deal with challenges and realize common security interests, such as countering terrorism, keeping Iran in check, or stabilizing conflict zones from the Balkans to North Africa and Afghanistan (B04, B30, B44). German experts trust that NATO as an institution (B03, B28, B34) will help to stabilize TR

<sup>37</sup> This tripartite division is loosely oriented on the organization of the social philosophy lectures given by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in China in 1919/20. See John Dewey, *Sozialphilosophie: Vorlesungen in China 1919/20* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).

<sup>38</sup> Parentheses with B respectively W followed by a number represent interviewee cases from Berlin (B) and Washington, D.C. (W). The political leanings of individual respondent cases and their affiliation with IR paradigms are not documented in this article because they have been already published. The affiliation of individual expert's beliefs with political leanings and IR paradigms is approximate.



in addition to improved EU unity and improved European military prowess (B69). A partnership with the EU on eye level is in the opinion of Berlin experts in the interest of the USA (B69) too because it improves consultations between US Presidents and their EU partners to collaborate on shared goals (B43).

For German experts, the following **economic** factors stabilize TR: free trade, mutual capital investment, common standards regarding energy, environment, trade, and financial stability but also joint business ventures and the creation of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic. In their view, transatlantic economic bonds will support political stability, not least because economic bonds are perceived as relatively independent from political interference (B03, B08, B11, B28, B34, B39, B45, B54).

Berlin experts also perceive **cultural** factors as being important, like common values about democracy and human rights as well as high levels of societal openness, interconnectedness, and mutual interest in each other. Berlin interviewees also stress the shared historical experiences and collective memories, such as German gratitude for and benefit from being liberated by the USA, US military assistance during the Cold War, the Marshall Plan and Berlin Airlift, and US support for the country's peaceful unification (B14, B17, B41, B42, B54). Dialogue mechanisms in resolving conflicts and disagreements, similar mind-sets, and close ties, such as personal friendships or common ethnic ancestral roots are important too as is the German public's admiration of and expectations from the US model of society and individual liberty (B04, B09, B11, B14, B23, B24, B27, B28, B32, B44, B47, B50, B53, B69). Some Berlin experts also argue that Europeans and Germans should support US Presidents in difficult situations like the support Germany received in the past (B23). One should not forget that the USA as a great power must deal with larger domestic and foreign challenges and acts based on historical experiences and global frames of reference that go beyond that of Germany (B27).

### **Stabilizing optimist factors in the view of experts in Washington, D.C.**

Comparing above beliefs of German experts with those of US Americans in D.C., we can see many commonalities but also country-specific differences. US experts also stress the importance of common goals, interests, values, and institutions for the **political** stability of TR. Some refer to a shared liberal democratic framework consisting of the rule of law, individual freedoms, human rights, and dignity as well as frequent contacts between leaders and mid-level diplomats to coordinate economic, environmental, intelligence, and anti-terror policies with their partners abroad (W31, W35). Other D.C. experts point out that a bipartisan majority in the US Congress supports TR in alignment with the State Department, the US military, intelligence agencies, think tanks, and interest groups (W02, W03, W17, W25, W28). Apart from unavoidable differences—among them differences in hard and soft power projection or domestic politics—the relationship works “80 per cent of the time” in the view of some US respondent, though the highs and lows have increased in frequency since the 1990s. Differences are manageable, and a long-term rupture of the alliance can be avoided through mutual tolerance, respect, and an intensive dialogue (W01, W02, W21, W22, W28, W30).



US experts recognize transatlantic disagreements on climate change, migration, nuclear energy, Iran, German military deployments, Chancellor Merkel's wiretapping in 2011, or differences of opinion about the role of international institutions, like UNESCO, but they still value the alliance as important (W01, W35). Some D.C. interviewees focus on areas where agreements are possible because of shared political interests, such as migration control, border protection, terrorism as well as the maintenance and expansion of the liberal international order through multilateral diplomacy and military strength (W05, W09). A D.C. respondent argued that the alliance of the USA and Europe represents the "core of any global coalition that gets anything done" (W10) because there are few other comparable dependable US partners in the world (W02, W29, W30, W34). In addition, the USA gains more from the relationship if it refrains from unilateralism and meddling in intra-European affairs (W18) and, instead, guarantees European stability (W10, W36). Other US experts point out that NATO is central for the USA as a tool to manage counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and regional conflicts. US threats to withdraw from NATO are seen as a smoke screen to have Germany and other Europeans share more of the global and regional military burden of the USA (W07, W09, W10, W12, W16, W18, W21, W23, W26, W31). The rise of Russia as a new threat is a blessing because it has given NATO's mission a new meaning and relevance, superseding transatlantic economic competition and other divisions (W21).

Regarding **economic** factors that help to stabilize TR, experts in D.C. argue that both sides benefit from each other. Interviewees do not only mention mutual investment, trade, and job creation but also a high level of interconnectedness and interdependence, like establishing common rules for the transatlantic marketplace, agreements about energy supply and environmental protection, and deepening trade frameworks, regardless of the cancelled Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (W01, W05, W07, W10, W18, W25, W30). In the view of D.C. experts, the USA is an attractive place for innovation and trade (W05, W18). Although US experts were not in support of Brexit, they believed it to be manageable (W02, W18), and that the USA will offer the United Kingdom free trade opportunities, if necessary (W35). D.C. experts generally expected transatlantic economies to grow despite political tensions among the allies (W21). Some in the USA also demanded that Germany and the EU decentralize energy supplies and import gas from the USA, instead of relying on the Russian Nord Stream pipeline, although this issue was not seen as a transatlantic deal breaker (W05, W35).

Finally, stabilizing **cultural** factors mentioned by US respondents include shared historical experiences and collective memories, such as personal friendships, civil society links, historical and cultural ties as well as common values and human rights (W23, W29). Although many US experts assume that Europeans have an anti-American streak, they also believe the Europeans love US culture and ideals, its innovative capacity and scientific prowess regardless of their distaste of US gun policies or capital punishment laws (W05, W18, W27). Coming "from the same Western background", Europe and the USA are viewed as being very similar "like two closest keys on the piano" (W01).





### Comparison of stabilizing optimist factors

Overall, foreign policy experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C., share many views on what is stabilizing TR. Formulated as imperative rules for action, they read:

- Draw on a common democratic framework of elections, the rule of law, and individual liberties.
- Draw on common interests, conduct a peace- and respectful dialogue about diverging interests, and cooperate regardless of disagreements.
- Draw on institutionalized contacts between decision-makers.
- Maintain and expand the liberal international order as well as integrate, *respectively*, push back hostile powers.
- Realize regional and global common security interests through NATO and the EU.
- Tighten economic bonds regardless of political interferences.
- Draw on historical experiences, collective memories, personal friendships, and mutual interest in each other.

These rules for action are very much in line with the beliefs of liberals/institutionalists (Create and maintain a liberal international order with transatlantic partners at its core) and constructivists (Create and preserve transatlantic identity). This finding is unsurprising since adherents of these two approaches usually are in support of promoting stable and close TR. However, there is one aspect where these beliefs differ noticeably from each other. When it comes to maintaining and expanding the liberal international order, experts in Berlin propose the integration of other large powers, such as Russia and China into that order, while experts in Washington, D.C. more likely interpret these powers as adversarial threats to US global primacy and demand their containment or roll back. Hence, in this regard, the view from D.C. resembles the realist rule for action on transatlantic unity (Build an alliance against common adversaries). Finally, it should not be overlooked that none of the beliefs of experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C. go beyond the spectrum outlined by realism, liberalism/institutionalism, and constructivism, except for a small minority of left dissenters who promote a pacifist and anti-hegemonic agenda.

### Destabilizing pessimist factors in the view of experts in Berlin

Experts in Berlin mention many **political** factors that destabilize TR, among them different political goals (B13, B33) and priorities (B04, B07, B09, B13, B26, B27, B47, B52, B60, B69, B72, B73), ideologies (B02, B09, B13, B36, B56, B61, B67), and grand strategies (B04, B07, B09, B13, B26, B27, B47, B49, B60, B62, B69, B72, B73) on both sides of the Atlantic parallel to a decline in institutional contacts (B50, B51) and cooperation (B13, B55, B69). Regarding US goals and priorities, German interviewees point to global supremacy (B47) as the new goal of the USA after the Cold War, nationalist unilateralism (B17, B41, B57, B64, B65), G.W. Bush's "mission" idea after 9/11 (B43, B45, B57, B64), and Obama's pivot to



Asia (B01, B16, B44, B64, B68). They also see increased polarization (B07, B19, B35, B43, B44, B64, B70) and a political stalemate developing in the USA (B52). Presidents and their advisors must react increasingly to US domestic pressure (B09, B14), while Congress is unwilling to make concessions, compromises, or sacrifices (B10, B13, B35, B64, B70).

At the same time, some experts in Berlin also diagnosed increased German recalcitrance, inconsistency (B10, B16, B62), or disagreements with the USA, regarding for instance its Iraq, Iran, and Libya policy (B19, B35, B36, B43, B50). But German decision-makers are at the same time aware of Germany's security dependency and limits to act independently (B03, B10, B17, B21). In this context, experts in Berlin also mention European inability to act in a unified fashion (B35, B40), which not only weakens Germany and the EU and makes them more prone to blackmail and division but also fosters US unilateralism to do only what is in its own national interest (B17). Other destabilizing factors of TR brought up in the interviews are the rise of right-wing populism (B19, B44, B52), the polarization of US domestic policy, and the divisiveness of US political culture (B64).

Overall, German respondents see a transatlantic rift (B04, B08, B22, B41, B47, B52, B60, B73) developing about political priorities, the lack of common goals (B13, B33), and different threat perceptions (B08, B45, B46). This leads to dissimilar views about risk management (B66) and a "muddling through" in transatlantic decision-making (B23). According to the German view, the USA is focused on military interventionism (B13, B17, B26, B32, B34, B49, B61, B69, B72), terrorism (B04, B13), cyberwar (B03, B68), the support of Israel in the Middle East (B08, B18), and using NATO as a global tool to push back Russia and China (B03, B55). In contrast, Berlin experts state that Germany and the EU are more in support of diplomatic, soft power solutions, and the integration of other (rising) powers into a multilateral framework (B01, B13, B33). Experts are also aware that different goals on both sides of the Atlantic lead to disagreements about financial burden sharing in NATO and "free rider" accusations by US Republicans and Democrats as well (B32, B61).

In terms of political ideas or ideologies, experts in Berlin scoff at the notion of American "exceptionalism" or "exemptionalism" (B08, B45, B57, B64, B68) and attempts by some US nationalist to whitewash US history (B67). They see in the moralistic, religious mission idea (B45, B57, B64) and concomitant self-righteousness a drift towards eschatological Christian right-wing thinking (B08) as well as trends towards populist fundamentalism (B52, B73) that inspires nationalism, jingoism, anti-immigrant xenophobia (B44), and a lack of willingness to understand or cultivate relationships with others (B09, B41). On the other hand, German experts self-critically comment on the destabilizing effect of "German guilt", which asserts a conflicted national identity, a German fear of a special path or "Sonderweg" (B09, B15, B49, B63), which then also nurtures foreign policy inconsistency (B16) or a reluctance to accept a "partnership in leadership" (B36).

Regarding grand strategies, experts in Berlin point to the following differences: US decision-makers are believed to strive for global leadership (B45) and supremacy (B47). The latter is often cloaked in hegemonic militarism (B57, B61), a superiority feeling (B45), and a "US first" attitude (B18, B51, B69), which then results



in the meddling into other nations' affairs for the sake of regime change (B13, B43, B72) or democracy promotion (B08) at cost of the violation of Western values (B26, B41, B44), the United Nations charter (B59, B64), and international law (B34, B41, B59). This contrasts with supposedly European and German strategic goals to promote supranationalist and multilateralist solutions, which represent a less interventionist and more consensual approach in line with the EU's regional focus (B18, B41, B49, B52, B69, B70, B72).

Beyond that, experts in Berlin identify declining transatlantic institutional links and cooperation, such as decreased personal relations, contacts, and exchange between members of parliament, diplomats, administrations, and experts. This leads to a reduction in transatlantic dialogue, consultation, cooperation, and increased chances of misunderstanding, for example within NATO (B04, B10, B32, B36, B39, B40, B41, B43, B45, B50, B51, B53, B56, B58, B60). Interviewees also observe that fewer US administrators have German connections, contacts, or expertise, which is exacerbated by US troop withdrawals from Germany (B13, B27). Other destabilizing factors mentioned that limit mutual transatlantic understanding are the nonexistence of a unified European voice (B69), the lack of a European "phone number" (B10, B33), a mediocre staff working at the German embassy in Washington, D.C., and an absence of German "political scouts" travelling in the country to understand how Americans think (B36).

Regarding **economic** factors, foreign policy experts in Berlin see trade competition as contributing to a destabilization of TR (B08, B74), particularly in the Asia–Pacific markets. In this context, some interviewees point out the negative impact of US market-distorting tools, such as US dollar currency devaluations, debt financing via rating agencies, protectionism, the instrumentalization of trade liberalization via the World Trade Organization, one-sided financial market regulations, and unilateral fiscal and monetary policies (B18, B23, B28, B45, B69). As to the latter, the de facto US Keynesianism is thought to be in opposition to the German version of neoliberalism (B08, B61). German experts also believe that the USA resents the strength of the European currency and German economic power, and distrusts Germany's stance in the US–China trade war (B18, B46). At the same time, Germany fears the unlimited printing power of the US currency as well as the permanent threat of a US fiscal and debt crisis looming over Congress, which casts a long shadow over Germany because of its economic dependency on the USA (B13, B29, B45).

Finally, in relation to **cultural** factors, experts in Berlin see different political cultures, mentalities, and value interpretations resulting in different policies. Derived from a society's history, traditions, experience, and memories, each country or region tends to have different value hierarchies and different interpretations, respectively, (mis-)understandings of the meaning and importance of shared values (B60, B69). They manifest themselves in the different understanding of the role of military force and foreign intervention, multilateralism, the UN, and international law, for instance (B09, B18, B64). Mentioned are disagreements about the International Criminal Court, the Geneva Convention contradicting treatment of Prisoners of War in Guantanamo, or the withdrawal from international treaties and accords (B26). Respondents in Berlin also critically comment on domestic US judicial policy,



ranging from the death penalty to lack of privacy protection as well as inconsistent application of human rights and anti-terrorism laws (B13, B65, B68, B71). Criticism is also directed at US environmental policies, the lack of support for renewable energy, recycling, and climate protection (B09, B13, B45, B52, B61, B65). Other issues mentioned are the state of US health care and welfare state provisions, and the growing social inequality gap (B70). All these differences are exacerbated by language differences and the entertainment-oriented US media, which do not explain but ignore European interpretations and actions on above contentious issues (B09, B44, B64).

### **Destabilizing pessimist factors in the view of experts in Washington, D.C.**

A lack of common goals and interests in line with different political strategies figure prominently among the **political** factors foreign policy experts in D.C. cite to illustrate what is destabilizing TR. They argue that the common ground of shared interests has significantly shrunk after the end of the Cold War, particularly under the presidencies of G.W. Bush and Trump (W20, W27, W33). Both sides blame each other for destabilizing TR, pointing either to US unilateralism and its Asian pivot (W12, W31), or to Berlin's lack of support or increasing resistance to blindly follow US foreign policy, as in the case of the Iraq war (W09, W21, W35).

Different political priorities and a lack of common interests have become manifest in the Russia policy under Obama and in the China policy under Trump (W02, W13, W25, W26, W33, W34). D.C. experts agree that TR suffer from different threat perceptions between some Western European countries versus the US and some East European NATO members who are concerned about a possible Russian incursion into their territory (W09, W16, W21, W23). Some interviewees fear Russian hybrid cyber- and disinformation warfare and the Russian use of shady think tanks and money to influence far left and far right fringes in Congress (W12, W21, W28). Others criticize Germany and the EU for its pro-environment and climate change focus, lack of migration control, and efforts to save the Iran Deal (W29, W35). German foreign policy is also criticized as being too preoccupied with multilateralism and conflict resolution, which in the view of US nationalists is politically and legally constraining the US options for action (W36).

Conservative experts but also some centrists resent Germany's allegedly aloof foreign policy stance (W03), its focus on strengthening the European currency, EU supranationalism (W01), and the allegedly shaming of the US hard power approach in international fora (W35). Some interviewees argue that Germans in comparison with their US counterparts have an exaggeratedly low confidence in their own liberal democracy (W13). Others predict that if Germany shirks its responsibilities and acts like a quasi-neutral country like Switzerland, its relevance for US policy will diminish (W09, W10, W27).

Regarding political strategies, a few D.C. respondents oppose Germany's and other Europeans' "free riding" on US security guarantees (W03, W21). They predict that this will result in the USA being unwilling to share and pool its superior military capabilities with the Europeans because it will limit US freedom of action and



sovereignty (W36). Friction will also happen if Europeans develop their military defence independent from or outside of NATO (W05). US experts reserve, however, most of their criticism for the perceived lack of European and German defence spending, burden sharing, preparedness, and military participation as well as their unwillingness to oppose Russia (W10, W13, W25, W37).

In terms of both goals and strategies, most US experts recognize the lasting damage and serious harm done by President Trump to the transatlantic partnership (W17, W20, W28, W29, W31, W33) and US-German relations in particular (W36). Quite a few US experts criticize Trump's "isolationist" withdrawal from global leadership (W05), from agreements on climate change and Iran (W09, W18, W24, W25, W32, W35), his aloofness about democracy and human rights promotion, and his neglect of TR as an important pillar of the international liberal order (W29).

Regarding **economic** factors, interviewees in Washington, D.C., point to the role of competition for destabilizing TR (W34). They mention German trade surpluses, protectionism, and failure to agree on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (W01, W10, W12, W24, W29, W32). But they also refer to different privacy protection standards, cybersecurity rules, and digital technology arrangements (W05, W10, W21, W26). A few US experts understand that Europeans are angry about the extraterritorial application of US legislation and threats of sanctions against European companies (W03, W18, W23, W24). On the other hand, they also point out US dissatisfaction about the EUs recognition of China's "market economy" status at the World Trade Organization (W10).

US experts are particularly passionate about the Nord Stream pipeline and describe it as an anti-US and anti-Western project (W02, W05, W09, W10, W16, W18, W23, W27). They also reject Germans' suspicion that the USA is making-up the threat of "Russian aggression" to export more expensive US liquefied gas to Europe. Some explain the German attitude towards Russia with World War II guilt or the lingering impact of East Germany's past as a former Soviet satellite. Experts in Washington, D.C. also express their fear that German-Russian economic and energy interdependence will make Europe more dependent on Russia through energy cut-offs (W16).

Finally, in terms of **cultural** factors destabilizing TR, US experts recognize the existence of different political cultures and value interpretations leading to different policies, ranging from privacy legislation, health care, judicial practices like the death penalty to different valuations of freedom, law, human rights, national security, and civil liberties (W05, W10, W18, W21, W26, W33, W35). Germans, due to their guilt-feeling and conflicted identity (W1), are viewed as too idealistic and lacking respect for the USA by criticizing negative aspects of the USA, like militarism, racism, and social inequality (W03).

According to the D.C. interviewees, long-term transatlantic alienation could lead to anti-Americanism by EU neo-nationalists and anti-Europeanism by populist Americans (W05). Right wingers in the EU and the USA oppose in their view TR and EU supranationalism (W21) and support anti-democratic, anti-global, anti-multilateral, and anti-environmental measures. Such nationalist and populist policies then will lead to exaggerated notions of sovereignty, exceptionalism, or exemptionalism (W14, W22, W31, W35).



Like their German colleagues, experts in Washington, D.C., also observe a lack of transatlantic interaction on government and civil society levels. They note that nowadays fewer US Americans speak German and fewer German students and young German politicians participate in American exchange programmes (W02). D.C. experts predict that TR will come under more stress as Cold War memories continue to fade with generational shifts (W05, W21). In that context, some US experts self-critically point out that Members of Congress not only lack memories of the Cold War, but a few even spread anti-German, anti-Muslim, and anti-free trade disinformation (W12, W23, W36).

### **Comparison of destabilizing pessimist factors**

Experts in Berlin believe that after the Cold War TR have become more problematic because the world has changed and the lessons learned, the trust and the shared memories developed in the past will fade. The reasons that may tear transatlantic partners apart have much to do with different interests and value interpretations as well as with deeply ingrained beliefs, traditions, collective memories, ideologies, and policies that promote centrifugal nationalist and inward-focused populist forces on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the USA, such as the Tea party, the Christian Right, and the Trumpists. Frequent breakdowns of transatlantic interactions and reduced contacts and cooperation will contribute to alienation, misunderstanding, contempt, if not mutual hostility in the form of anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism. Finally, the grand strategies on both sides are from time to time at odds. US great power interests clash with disjointed German and European attempts to get heard on eye level or become more independent. Economic competition and lingering trade spats further destabilize the relationship.

Experts in Washington, D.C., are more practically oriented and point at historical events and actions of Germany and Europe that caused or contributed to a process of estrangement. They are, however, aware of the role of different political cultures, value interpretations, ideologies, identities, perceptions of “responsibility”, grand strategies (or the lack of it), and the more recent advent of nationalism and populism on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly the anti-German/anti-European obsessions by Trump and his followers. Finally, besides economic, trade, and technological competition, the divergent or uncoordinated regional and global political priorities are also mentioned. Not surprisingly, both German and US experts find more hair in the soup of the other side. But otherwise, their assessment of destabilizing factors contains many similarities.

As in the case of optimist stability imperatives, the pessimist instability prevention rules for action fall squarely into IR paradigms represented by realists (Beware of European balancing against the USA), liberals/institutionalists (Beware of political differences), and constructivists (Beware of identity changes). The overarching imperative beliefs shared by US and German foreign policy experts to avoid a pessimist TR scenario can be summarized as follows:



- Avoid or overcome different political goals and priorities and develop shared means and ends, including (grand) strategies.
- Strive for a common agenda and re-establish common interests.
- Re-increase contact and exchange on all levels from high politics to broader society.
- Avoid or overcome differences in economic policies.
- Level cultural differences or prevent them from becoming enduring political differences.

Two further rules for action can be reconstructed exclusively from the responses of the experts in Washington, D.C. They are:

- Avoid different threat perceptions and fulfil your military responsibilities (within NATO).
- Avoid energy dependence on Russia.<sup>39</sup>

Again, it is experts in Washington, D.C. who often come up with beliefs taken from the realist toolbox and the grand strategy notion of maintaining a benign US dominance in world affairs. They argue that dependence on non-allied countries or adversaries is to be avoided. Instead, they assume that having clearly defined common enemies and threat perceptions are the basis to form alliances and keep them together. Experts in Berlin are more likely using liberal/institutionalist or constructivist beliefs grounded in moral historical lessons, multilateralism, alliance solidarity, EU supranationalism, and military restraint, which are part of Germany's post-war identity.

## Summary of expert interview findings

Optimist and pessimist voices shape the expert discourse on transatlantic relations. In Berlin and Washington, D.C., optimists believe that the transatlantic partnership is held together by a shared framework of democratic elections, rule of law, and individual liberties. Stability also results from common interests and regular institutionalized contacts between decision-makers and citizens who maintain a respectful dialogue about diverging interests. Both sides pursue regional and global common security interests through NATO and the EU, have a stake in maintaining and expanding the so-called rules-based liberal international order, and are economically deeply intertwined beyond political interference. Culturally, historical experiences and collective memories, personal friendships, and mutual interest in each other stabilize TR according to optimists, whose core belief turns out to be to cooperate regardless of disagreements. Most of the optimist arguments are in line with a

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<sup>39</sup> Note that the issue addressed here—the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—was much more prominent at the time of the interviews led in Washington, D.C. The warning contained in this rule for action could also be heard in Berlin after Russia's annexation of Crimea, so it would be wrong to infer that this imperative was exclusively shared in D.C. only.





centrist political leaning as well as the liberal/institutionalist and the constructivist paradigm of IR, stressing the maintenance of the liberal international order or a transatlantic identity. Even some moderate realists who are not over-emphasizing the role of common adversaries for transatlantic cohesion let these stabilizing factors stand.

Pessimist foreign policy experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C. believe the transatlantic partnership to be driven apart by different means and ends, be it political goals and priorities, agendas, interests or (grand) strategies. Lacking contact and exchange from high politics to broader society destabilize relations as do different economic policies or cultural differences that become or reinforce enduring political differences. Consequently, pessimists fear that differences cannot be overcome or that partners push their own agenda without considering those of other alliance members. As mirror image of the optimist line of reasoning, destabilizing factors are not only emphasized by realists but also mentioned by some liberals/institutionalists and constructivists who point at political differences or changing identities. Correspondingly, pessimists are less centrist in their political leaning. In the USA, they tend more often to the right, in Europe more to the left.

Beyond the reconstruction of these sets of stabilizing and destabilizing factors from the 96 interviews, another key finding from the analysis of interviews is that optimistic and pessimistic assessments, respectively, differ little in content on both sides of the North Atlantic. However, there is one crucial exception, which mostly concerns the question of how to deal with dissenting non-Western powers. Experts in Berlin favour their integration into the liberal international order; their counterparts in Washington, D.C. are more inclined to demand a containment or a roll back of those powers because they perceive them as adversarial threats to a supposedly benign US dominance in world affairs. While experts in Berlin are more likely using liberal/institutionalist or constructivist beliefs grounded in moral historical lessons, multilateralism, alliance solidarity, EU supranationalism, and military restraint, experts in Washington, D.C. more often come up with beliefs taken from the realist toolbox. Staunch, offensive realist optimists, who are more influential among foreign policy experts in D.C. believe in a less ambitious concept of transatlantic cohesion but harbour more demanding policy imperatives. Driven by the belief that alliances require clearly defined common adversaries and threat perceptions to persist and flourish, offensive US realist optimists think little of integrating Iran, Russia, or China into the liberal international order. Instead, they want Germans and Europeans to avoid dependence on non-allied countries or adversaries, to significantly increase armament efforts and to side with the USA to maintain its political, military, and economic dominance. Offensive realist optimists in Washington, D.C. are opposed to Germans who want to stay in contact or interconnected with governments considered adversaries by the USA, not least because this would allow Europeans and Germans to carve out a more independent position from or even balancing against US hegemonic interests. In contrast, German optimists interested in integrating adversaries into the liberal world order but also pessimist realists fond of European balancing against the USA have reservations about the rejection of their



position by US offensive realist optimists. Accordingly, the willingness to carry on without the other is likely to be strongest among right-leaning offensive realists in Washington, D.C., and defensive realists in Berlin left to the centre.

Another key finding of the study is that optimist and pessimist assessments of the status of the transatlantic relationship must be interpreted as two sides of a coin. Both describe in the grammatical form of “if...then”, possible conditions, factors, and eventually choices that experts and policymakers may face. *If* you want a flourishing partnership or avoid its deterioration, *then* “do this” and “don’t do that”. Whereas optimists focus on conditions and factors that promote a thriving transatlantic relationship, pessimists stress situations that lead to the disintegration of TR (most of them in the hope to prevent this to happen). For example, optimist constructivists want to advance the emergence of a transatlantic identity and avoid its reversal. But optimists can turn into pessimists when they believe the conditions for stable TR are no longer met. Conversely, pessimists can become optimists when their fear of unstable TR dissipates or lack any chance of realization. The difference is that optimists see much more of the stated conditions met.

The distinction between optimists and pessimists is thus not one between fixed but changeable assessments on what stabilizes and what destabilizes TR. To wit, every condition for stable relationships always refers to a condition for unstable relations and vice versa. Very much in line with this, individual experts articulate to a different degree both optimistic and pessimistic arguments in more than half of all cases. Fifty-one per cent of all 96 respondents mention stabilizing and destabilizing factors, 68 per cent of the 31 US experts, and 43 per cent of the 65 German experts. Only destabilizing factors are mentioned by 23 per cent of the USA, but 48 per cent are mentioned by German respondents, while about 10 per cent of US and German experts list only optimist factors.

The overall less pessimistic stance of US experts about TR is also visible when one relates above findings with their political leanings. Half of all left/centre German respondents mention both sets of factors, but only 41 per cent of the centre/right, and 33 per cent of the politically undetermined experts. In the USA, 80 per cent of the left/centre experts mention both sets as do 58 per cent of the centre/right and 67 per cent of the politically undetermined respondents. Only pessimist destabilizing factors are mentioned by 42 per cent of German left/centre, 48 per cent of centre/right, and 58 per cent of undetermined experts compared to 20 per cent of the US left/centre, 33 per cent of the US centre/right, and 11 per cent of the US undetermined respondents.

The fact that so many of the interviewees have both stabilizing and destabilizing factors in mind, while so few of them argue purely optimistically, suggests a certain scepticism regarding the prospect of the transatlantic relationship or at least a clear awareness of the existence of conditions and factors that can lead to a strengthening or deterioration of TR. On the other hand, scepticism does not imply that experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C. cast fundamental doubt on the foundations of the project of transatlanticism and the West. Quite the contrary, except for a few left-leaning voices, most respondents do *not* critically question their own stance. Instead,



they almost completely buy into the narrative of TR being politically, economically, and culturally dominant, a force for good. Alternative or visionary policy choices of global power sharing or a reorientation of the transatlantic project was rarely mentioned in the interviews.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusions

Based on open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 65 foreign policy experts in Berlin (in 2011) and 31 foreign policy experts in Washington, D.C. (in 2017), regarding the status of the transatlantic relationship, this study has several key findings.

*First*, comparing the recent literature on TR with beliefs of German and US foreign policy experts, we found a shared trend towards binary optimist and pessimist perceptions about TR in the academic discourse and among respondents. The difference is, however, that in contrast to the literature, half of the experts express some ambivalence or undecidedness by listing both optimist stabilizing and pessimist destabilizing political, economic, and cultural factors when characterizing this relationship.

*Second*, we found that in the literature and among experts only “mainstream” IR theoretical positions were prevalent at cost of other conceptualizations. In our interviews and in the literature, optimist beliefs typically align with the liberal/institutionalist or constructivist IR paradigms and centre/left leanings, whereas pessimist patterns of thought reflect variants of IR realism and conservative (centre/right) patterns, except for offensive realist optimists in the USA and very left-leaning defensive realists in Germany. That said, in the interviews it was often difficult to assign IR positions to experts because their thinking follows practical considerations, not sophisticated deliberations or IR undercurrents existing in the academic debate. Therefore, respondents’ theoretical positions had to be inferred by the researchers more often than not.

*Third*, German experts in general, and particularly left-leaning German respondents, articulate doubts about the prospect of TR. In contrast, doubts are more likely expressed in the USA by centre/right-leaning experts. Experts in Berlin are more inclined to integrate adversaries like Iran, North Korea, Russia, or China into the liberal international order, whereas experts in Washington, D.C. reject this notion, which reflects a discourse promoted particularly by right-leaning offensive realists in the USA. Also, German experts subscribe more to a liberal/institutionalist version of open transatlanticism, only a few defensive realist pessimists (often on the

<sup>40</sup> For these alternatives, see Amitav Acharya, ‘After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order’, *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85; Tausendfreund, ‘The West’; or Gunther Hellmann and Benjamin Herborth, eds. *Uses of the West: Security and the Politics of Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).



German left) consider balancing against the USA as an option. The latter position also has found tracking in the European academic discourse.<sup>41</sup>

*Fourth*, the interviews make palpable status differences between US and German respondents. For Germans, the USA is a very important military ally and trade partner, whereas for US experts Germany factors typically as a country of secondary importance as part of larger US global commitments and alliances. These differences are visible in diverging views on relations with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (see above) but also in a different emphasis on issues like unilateralism versus multilateralism, military intervention versus diplomacy, protectionism versus free trade, or energy sovereignty versus energy dependency.

*Fifth*, for US experts, TR are part of a larger puzzle from the viewpoint of a global power and self-appointed guardian of the international order. While some German experts take these status differences for granted and are willing to join the USA to uphold the Western-centric order, others are more circumspect or apply the rhetoric of an alliance of values and, consequently, demand being consulted on equal footing as a “partner in leadership”. German respondents focus on ideational value-driven or pragmatic, interest-oriented aspects of what they see as a transatlantic partnership based on shared democratic frameworks, eye-to-eye interactions, post-war collective memories, and joint cultural values. They also believe in “Western” global interests in the political and economic realm, with the USA as benevolent hegemon providing public goods serving the liberal international order.<sup>42</sup> US experts, while not denying the ideational qualities of TR, put more emphasis on specific political and economic aspects from which their country benefits. They more likely see Europe as a key strategic geopolitical region and aid against China and Russia. In particular, the Russian threat is used to remind Germany and other European allies of the need to strengthen NATO and keep the USA in Europe.

*Sixth*, even though events during the interview period (like Russia’s annexation of Crimea and China’s rise) have challenged the academic literature and long-term perceptions of the public and policy makers about the foundations, goals, and possible future trajectory of TR and the liberal international order, the literature and most of the German and US respondents do not question foundational political beliefs of Western historical, moral, political, or civilizational superiority upon which the

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<sup>41</sup> Calls to adapt, revitalize, or redesign TR and promote European sovereignty have grown louder and become more urgent since Trump’s Presidency. See Marianne Riddervold and Guri Rosén, ‘Unified in response to rising powers? China, Russia, and EU–US relations’, *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 5 (2018): 555–70; Howorth, ‘Strategic’; Kaufmann and Lohaus, ‘Ever closer’; and Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza, and Volker Perthes, ‘Strategische Autonomie Europas: Akteure, Handlungsfelder, Zielkonflikte’, *SWP-Studie* 2 (2019).

<sup>42</sup> German partnership scenarios resemble what the academic literature describes as “transatlantic crisis resilience”, “revised transatlantic bargain”, or “cooperation without hegemony”. See Gordon Friedrichs, Sebastian Harnisch, and Cameron G. Thies, eds., *The Politics of Resilience and Transatlantic Order: Enduring Crisis?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Ellen Hallams, *A transatlantic bargain for the twenty-first century: the United States, Europe, and the transatlantic alliance* (Carlisle, PA: USAWC Press, 2013); and Robert O. Keohane, ‘After hegemony: transatlantic economic relations in the next decade’, *The International Spectator* 19, no. 1 (1984): 3–9. Also, see Luis Simón, ‘Europe, the rise of Asia and the future of the transatlantic relationship’, *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): 969–89; Alcaro et al., *The West*; and Munich Security Conference, *Munich*, 17–22.



transatlantic project is based. Only a few left-leaning experts in Germany question this narrative. Now, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO's united response has buoyed optimistic expectations of stabilizing transatlantic relations. However, economic but also some political and cultural destabilizing long-term factors mentioned by experts remain relevant, even though they are currently pushed aside. Political changes in the USA, developments and conflicts in Europe and Asia, or the continuously pressing global issues such as climate change, inequality, migration, and authoritarianism could add further fracks and disruptions and end a precarious upswing in TR. For those reasons, we believe that many of this study's inventory of (de)stabilizing factors by experts in Berlin and Washington, D.C. are still relevant. It remains to be seen if TR indeed have arrived at a *Zeitenwende* (watershed) or if we only witness another twist in the trajectory of continuously fragile TR.

*Seventh*, in addition to the above findings about TR, the methods used in this study, despite the limits of the samples, research period, and resources, demonstrate the value of in-depth qualitative interviews and the reconstructivist method in describing stabilizing and destabilizing factors that characterize TR during a period of enormous shifts. The interviews provide rich insights for policy analysis about the alignment of expert beliefs with the academic literature and analytical assumptions of IR theories. Such studies deserve consideration in future empirical investigations for testing and refining the outcomes presented here to gain more detailed knowledge of the status and trajectory of TR in the eyes of elite actors in comparison with theoretical expectations and trends in the academic literature.

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**Ulrich Franke** is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Economics, Law, and Social Sciences at the University of Erfurt. He previously taught at the University of Bremen, Goethe University Frankfurt and Bielefeld University. Strongly inspired by classical pragmatism, his research and teaching interests focus on how relations among governments and other structures of corporate practice from politics, the economy, and culture contribute to world order. He recently co-authored with Matthias Hofferberth ‘Proclaiming a Prophecy empty of Substance? A Pragmatist reconsideration of Global Governance’. *Journal of International Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (August 2022): 312–335, see <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/en/international-politics/franke>.

**Hermann Kurthen** is Professor of Sociology at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. He previously taught at Stony Brook University in New York, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Freie Universität Berlin. His current research interests are transatlantic relations, education abroad, and sociological theory. Most recent publications are ‘Present at the Destruction? Grand Strategy Imperatives of US Foreign Policy Experts during the Trump Presidency’. *European Journal of International Security* 6, no.1 (February 2021): 1–24; ‘German Foreign Policy Rules for Action during the 2011 Libya Crisis’. *German Politics & Society* 38, no.4 (October 2020): 1–27; and ‘Max Weber’s Living Legacy’. *Contemporary Sociology* 50, no. 2 (May 2021): 118–123, see [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hermann\\_Kurthen](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hermann_Kurthen).

