



AMERICAN  
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## 2022 CONFERENCE REPORT

*“Die Kuh auf dem Eis:  
Building a Reliable Transatlantic Partnership”*

## 42nd AMERICAN-GERMAN YOUNG LEADERS CONFERENCE

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Report prepared by  
**Aileen Teague**  
(2022 Young Leader)

**American Council on Germany**  
14 East 60th Street, Suite 1000 | New York, NY 10022  
T: 212-826-3636 | F: 212-758-3445  
[acgusa.org](https://acgusa.org) | [info@acgusa.org](mailto:info@acgusa.org)

## Introduction

The 42nd American-German Young Leaders Conference consisted of approximately 15 American and 20 German mid-career professionals. The diverse group of participants represented a range of industries, fields, and personal backgrounds, from business, legal, and automotive sectors to government and media. In the runup to the conference in Berlin, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's "turn of the times" (*Zeitenwende*) speech shortly thereafter on February 27 shaped the conference theme and many of the Young Leaders' conversations about the future of transatlantic relations, NATO, and economic and energy security policies, as well as broader global security issues, such as China-Taiwan tensions.

After a welcome dinner, the U.S. delegation set forth on a walking tour of Berlin, led by Steering Committee member **Dr. Ronald Granieri**. Some of the American participants were visiting Germany (and/or Berlin) for the first time. Participants were struck by how much history was kept alive in the city, especially how Germany delicately balances prior histories of injustice with a very keenly felt desire today to seek justice, promote peace, and practice thoughtful policies. Walking through Berlin certainly highlighted how much Germany has become a global economic and technology powerhouse since World War II, supported by its relationship to America.

In addition to remnants and the site of the Berlin Wall, the walking tour included the Brandenburg Gate, a walk down Unter den Linden, and a visit to Checkpoint Charlie. The delegation also passed by the Holocaust Memorial, the Reichstag Building, Humboldt University, and the Topography of Terror Museum. The walking tour laid the groundwork for a scavenger hunt (*Schnitzeljagd*) later in the day, where U.S. Young Leaders were paired with German counterparts to visit important historical landmarks and answer related trivia questions provided by the ACG's President and CEO, **Dr. Steven E. Sokol**. The "treasure hunt" allowed for the U.S. delegation to get to know the city, as well as members of the German delegation. But the tour also contributed to a greater understanding of why history continues to influence policymaking and public sentiment in Germany.

The 42nd Young Leaders Conference was held in the shadow of war in Ukraine, with a renewed spirit of NATO, transatlantic, and multilateral cooperation and collaboration after a decade of tension. Emerging threats, the rise of China, and growing public support for populist politics make cooperation between the United States and Germany even more crucial. But with public trust in international institutions faltering and domestic divisions deepening, delegates from both sides of the Atlantic questioned how best to implement multilateral solutions. Other major themes discussed by delegates were climate change, the tensions between immediate needs and long-term planning in transatlantic relations, and government/policy imperatives versus business/economic ones.

Mutual recognition of the benefits of a strong U.S.-German relationship fueled much of the week's discussions and allowed participants to point to remaining challenges and unrealized

opportunities. While reasons for participating in the conference may have varied, there was a common desire to advance U.S.-German relations and make meaningful contributions to transatlantic dialogue.

## Day 1

### **Plenary Discussion I**

#### **The Principle of the Thing**

The first day of the 2022 Young Leaders Conference commenced with a discussion on the essence of transatlantic relations. Are they built on values? Principles? Is there a difference? The notion of interests also worked its way into the conversation, as national interests shift based on internal and external forces, making a values proposition much more workable than the intractable principles that for centuries have shaped the West's perspectives. These core questions segued into a larger discussion about what should guide transatlantic relations.

Domestic political circumstances never seemed far from the discussion, however, and several of the German delegates pointed to the fact that the United States sometimes sends mixed messages about its reliability and commitment to multilateral cooperation. While the U.S. talks much about cooperation, it frequently defaults to bilateral relations to steer international developments. The discussion veered then to the question of what democracy means in the United States, especially considering the events of January 6, 2021. Some of the American Young Leaders were struck by how much U.S. domestic political issues resonated outside of U.S. borders.

How delegates viewed the role of history in current policy discussions was also fascinating, leading to a consensus that nations need an "agreed upon" past. Several of the German delegates pointed to Germany's history during and after World War II with feelings of humility and guilt. Many of the Americans in the group were stunned to hear that their German counterparts still carried feelings of shame and responsibility over events that happened decades before their time. It was an eye-opening conversation for some of the Americans. Some American delegates also spoke about difficult, shameful times in American history, including slavery, human rights abuses, and immigration restrictions. The United States certainly has dark spots in its history as well, and Germans should not feel alone in that regard.

Delegates also explored the current state of transatlantic relations. All were challenged by the question of how to make meaningful connections and separations between U.S.-German relations and relations with the broader European Union. In this discussion, delegates developed a baseline on what professionals from different geographic and professional areas brought to the table. The tough but invigorating and insightful conversation launched a week's worth of friendships and conversations that truly impacted each of us in ways we did not know were possible.

## Plenary Discussion II

### What Is the Transatlantic Agenda Today?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine colored many of the discussions throughout the week, but perhaps none more than the group's exploration of transatlantic relations today. The discussion was anchored on the question of how U.S. and German political actors can capitalize on the conflict in Ukraine for the sake of unity in NATO/U.S.-European relations. After a period in which former U.S. President Donald Trump eschewed defense cooperation and questioned assistance to NATO allies, the war in Ukraine has reinvigorated U.S. commitments to European security. But why, some delegates reflected, did it take an existential crisis to unite the U.S. and NATO, and will the end of this crisis create problems in the future? A few of the German delegates pointed to the fact that, given its history, Germany wants to be liked in the international community. This desire for approval has at times guided their reluctance to act in military situations. Participants agreed that the future of transatlantic relations depends on a few things: capitalizing on shared existential issues on both sides of the Atlantic such as migration and COVID-19, as well as coming together around shared threats such as Russia, disinformation, domestic extremism, hate speech, and populism.

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Day 1 also included a presentation from **Dr. Franziska Brantner**, Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action. The threat of climate change is real, she assured the delegates, and there will be massive global repercussions if the world does not act quickly. Americans and Europeans are, however, clearly struggling with how to deal with their visions for energy in the future. Dr. Brantner focused on the impacts of the war in Ukraine on global food shortages, as well as the impacts of Nord Stream 2 on German energy and the need to reduce overdependence on single sourcing materials. One solution offered toward addressing conflicts between sustainability goals and competitiveness was to set standards for imports with the assumption that German/European standards and high product/process quality is a German/EU value proposition for trade partners. Dr. Brantner highlighted Germany's close coordination with the EU in all policy fields, which would override purely bilateral U.S.-German coordination. One area for improvement on both sides of the Atlantic, she concluded, is in rare earth recycling and the circular economy (also in view of reducing dependencies on China). The day concluded with a welcome reception and dinner where ACG President and CEO **Steve Sokol** addressed the delegates and spoke of major issues in transatlantic relations.

## Day 2

### Plenary Discussion III

#### The West and the Rest

The second day of discussions was held at Jakob-Kaiser-Haus, the home of offices of the Bundestag. The discussion leaders began the first plenary discussion by posing several provocative questions. In the so-called "New Cold War," is it possible to conduct successful bilateral and multilateral relations without a common enemy such as a Russia or a China? The

discussion leaders reflected on whether existential threats versus political threats are easily discernible in the polarized domestic political environments we live in, especially in the United States. Refreshingly, the discussion leaders also posed questions about “the rest,” meaning countries in the Global South, many of which were colonial outposts of both Germany and the United States. How can these countries and regions be effectively integrated into U.S. and German grand strategies without patronizing them?

Working Group A’s discussion centered on Russian aggression in Ukraine and the transatlantic unity it seems to have produced. The discussion then looked at potential challenges to that unity as China watches the situation closely, with the ultimate fear that an aggressive China could be “studying up,” as it develops its own plans for Taiwan based on NATO’s actions in Ukraine. Working Group A discussed how Western unity in the short term might come under pressure if the war in Ukraine drags on and the Western population increasingly feels the consequences of the conflict. Higher energy and gas prices, inflation, and unemployment are all potential costs if the conflict in Ukraine becomes a war of attrition. Nevertheless, the group was committed to continued NATO support for the war in Ukraine based on both political and humanitarian grounds. For Working Group A, the real concern seemed to be that China might decide to invade Taiwan. To foster deterrence, there was consensus that NATO allies should present a united front, strengthen their defense capabilities with assistance from all of its powerful members, and signal to China that an invasion of Taiwan would come with drastic consequences. Yet economic dependence on China could undermine these efforts and NATO partners need to be aware of this. German delegates wanted to underscore that from their perspective, the United States is extremely dependent on China and should strive to reduce this dependence. Germany also faces its own problems, as across the board the Western world is far more integrated into the Chinese economy than it was into the Soviet. Moreover, the American delegates questioned Europe’s willingness to be a strong partner in the face of Chinese aggression.

Meanwhile, Working Group B’s discussion also focused on external threats uniting the West and NATO using the current momentum of the Ukraine conflict to encourage a broader coalition against Russia. A German delegate proposed the feasibility of a European army, generating several responses, which suggested that this would not be the best outcome. The group also discussed sharing capabilities, whether through military or energy resources, to help strengthen the European Union, making it less prone to crisis. Finally, Working Group B discussed China and its expanding influence in the Global South, focusing on how Western countries’ strategies in the developing world need to be focused on helping those regions both within and outside the scope of superpower rivalries. The group concluded that sharing resources will help put the West in a better position to act in the future.

## **Plenary Discussion IV**

### **Mind the Gaps: Economic Development and Social Challenges**

The next topic kicked off with a discussion on what delegates perceived were the most pressing economic issues facing the United States and Germany. Common responses from U.S. and German delegates related to inflation and access to housing. The initial overview also raised

questions about the effect of modern countries' economic decline on their lesser-developed partners.

Working Group A's discussion explored the domestic issues that impact foreign policy. Delegates discussed their respective countries' willingness to continue aid to lesser-developed countries and how this has impacted America's position on the military defense of Europe. How can U.S. and German leaders help other countries without having their own "houses" in order, asked one U.S. Young Leader. And if the United States chooses to provide aid to other countries, how can Washington do so on terms that reflect American values while also meeting local priorities? Delegates from Working Group A agreed that immigration reform could positively impact issues of economic development. One U.S. delegate remarked: "we need skilled labor for our economy, and also need to mitigate and reverse population decline." Another delegate offered: "we need to increase economic mobility and opportunity for our citizens to curb extremism and antisocial behaviors."

The discussion also explored how the United States and Germany can develop true partnerships with other countries based on clear mutual interests that still ensure the survival of Western values — and the possible role for work at subnational levels when the national level proves too cumbersome. Relatedly, Germany and the United States are seeing a rise in domestic extremism fueled by a lack of economic mobility and opportunity for certain marginalized groups. This is an example of the type of issue U.S. and German counterparts can cooperate to overcome.

Working Group B's discussion examined economic division and social mobility in Germany and the United States. The discussion developed into a broader conversation on different approaches to social spending, but military spending also worked its way into the discussion. In the context of social justice, the group discussed the divisiveness of immigration on both sides of the Atlantic. One aspect the delegates explored was access to quality education, reflecting differences in social spending in both countries. The United States spends a lot on the military. European countries tend to tax more and spend on social welfare. Who has come out on top? Working Group B concluded that even though the situations in Germany and the United States are very different, the issue of social mobility should unite European and U.S. partners.

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Day 2 also included a presentation from **Dr. Klaus Deutsch**, Head of the Department of Research, Industrial, and Economic Policy at the BDI (Federation of German Industries), on "The Global Economic Implications of the War in Ukraine and the Pandemic." The talk focused on issues of German interdependence and vulnerability from an economic perspective. Germany's energy dependence with external powers grounded many of the questions delegates asked Dr. Deutsch. In stark terms, Dr. Deutsch outlined the effect of gas shortages on the German economy heading into winter, in some cases causing painful tradeoffs between business consumption and personal consumption. Now, several months later, we are seeing many of those difficult decisions being implemented.

Many of these questions were revisited in a later discussion with **Eckart von Klaeden** (1997 Young Leader), Vice President and Head of External Affairs at Mercedes-Benz Group AG. Dr. von Klaeden emphasized the need for industry to strengthen its resiliency through diversification of sourcing while not severing economic ties completely with existing supply lines and partners.

The day also included a strategic role-playing exercise called “Showdown in the Baltics.” Delegates were divided into six groups (Russia, Germany, Baltic States, the Nordic States, NATO, and the United States). The background of the exercise centered on an emboldened and desperate Russia – specifically through their deployment of missiles to their border near the Baltic states – seeking to exploit divisions within the Western alliance in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Western powers had to work together through NATO to come up with a solution that would result in Russia redeploying their missiles. It was a fun activity that encouraged bi- and tri-level negotiations between delegates, and it gave participants a different vantage point on various nations’ core interests.

The day ended with a tour of the Reichstag Building. After a short break, delegates convened for dinner and a fascinating discussion moderated by **Ambassador John B. Emerson**, Chairman of the ACG, Vice Chairman of Capital Group International, and former U.S. Ambassador to Germany. The conversation featured **H.E. Wolfgang Schmidt**, Federal Minister for Special Affairs at the Federal Chancellery, who spoke on “Time for a Revitalization of the Transatlantic Relationship.”

### Day 3

#### **Plenary Discussion V**

##### **Operating in the Gray Zone: China, Russia, and Cold War 2.0**

Day 3 began with a more focused discussion on the “New Cold War” between the United States, China, and Russia, beginning with a grounding question: Does the United States need to be economically aligned with its NATO partners in crafting its strategy for its New Cold War adversaries? During the conversation, the group determined that the Germany-China and U.S.-China relationship is quite complex. China is increasingly seeking a leadership role in the global economy, but at the same time, there are concerns when it comes to intellectual property theft and trade, and the country’s values. There is a mentality that both Germans and Americans agreed on when it came to China: “We can’t live with them, we can’t live without them.”

Working Group A’s discussion pointed to critical questions when it comes to China: How can the West compete, how can it protect itself and cooperate with China, and how can soft power investments turn the tide in favor of the West in the developing world? China is ahead of the power curve on AI and technology, also stealing data and expertise from Western countries. The working group spent a significant amount of time discussing how U.S. and European partners can work together to minimize Chinese influence. From the military perspective, the United States perceives China differently than it does Russia due to China’s technological development. Delegates concluded that the United States and NATO must respond jointly to

cybersecurity challenges. One delegate noted that China's negotiations with strategic partners is crucial in this context. The perceived lack of a real European China strategy posed a problem for some American delegates. Group A concluded that private business and government need to develop a common framework around investments to drive legal oversight and well-established pathways for funding, while better assessing and addressing U.S. dependence on China.

Working Group B's discussion explored what the New Cold War represents in various facets of politics and society. For these delegates, it represents an assault on the principle of sovereignty, a principle affirmed by modern international institutions such as the United Nations and instruments such as treaties. One delegate passionately denounced Russia's egregious violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. The group also discussed how Russia can be stopped. The United States has already rendered credit cards from its companies nonfunctional in Russia, offered one U.S. delegate, and a new banknote Russia has printed does not work on its ATM. In the long term, such inconveniences could lead to possible Russian dissent against the war in Ukraine, especially since Russia is uniquely reliant on Western technology. Russia's dependence on Western technology is not necessarily something China can easily replace. Additionally, delegates echoed comments made by some of the earlier speakers on sanctions. While Russia may use its gas as leverage, the Russian economy will eventually feel the sting of the Western response, especially when critical Western technology is not available to produce tanks, planes, and routine goods.

Delegates on both sides of the Atlantic focused on how morality is a hindrance in challenging an opponent that does not adhere to Western norms. Perhaps the United States could sow domestic discontent in Russia via social media as Russia has engaged in longstanding manipulation of U.S. social media and broader misinformation campaigns? This could distract Russians from supporting the war. The group also discussed possible endings to the war in Ukraine. The best-case scenario would be Russia's military defeat, but that may not be realistic.

Another scenario could be that Ukraine, after the death count rises high enough, concedes a portion of its land to broker peace. This outcome might be complicated, though, added a German delegate, because perhaps Ukraine would not accept this. A worst-case scenario is that the situation then becomes intractable like Israel/Palestine, continuing for decades with varying levels of volatility.

One question the group reflected on is whether the Russian people should be punished for complicity with Putin. Delegates were conflicted over how much access Russians have to free media, and how deep the support is for this war. What was seen as the most reliable source said that 80 percent of Russians support the war, suggesting complicity. Yet even the best source is of dubious credibility and support may be a product of Russian propaganda. Despite robust debate, delegates generally agreed that Putin enjoys strong support thanks largely to his disinformation campaign, even if it's impossible to discern the true numbers.

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The day also included several memorable guest speakers. In “Sustainable Housing and the Evolving Nature of Urban Living - Future of Cities,” **H.E. Klara Geywitz**, Federal Minister for Housing, Urban Development, and Building, spoke with participants about sustainable housing solutions in Germany.

At lunch, delegates spoke with **Finn Hänsel**, Founder and Managing Director of Sanity Group, about his efforts to legalize cannabis in Germany with an eye toward building a German industry around it. According to him, they could make Germany the largest legal cannabis market in the world (California has a population of just under 40 million people, while Germany would create a legal market of 84 million). Mr. Hänsel spoke on the unique challenges faced by German entrepreneurs in comparison to American counterparts, and how the startup world is generally received in each country. A central thesis was that American startups were generally able to receive liquidity easier, while German investors were much less willing to finance these ventures.

In the second half of the day, delegates traveled to the Federal Chancellery for multiple policy briefings. In “The War in Ukraine and EU Enlargement Policy,” **Edgar Lenski**, Deputy Director General for EU External Relations, spoke with delegates about EU relations and the general makeup of the EU. Mr. Lenski also discussed the efforts the Chancellery has taken against Russia following Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s “turn of the times” (*Zeitenwende*) speech in February. **Dr. Steffen Meyer**, Director General for Economic, Fiscal, and Climate Policy, then spoke on “The Current Economic Challenges of Germany and the Concerted Action of the German Government,” outlining how the Chancellery was working within Germany to effect changes. Both speakers stated Germany’s unwavering commitment to the European Union. They argued the enlargement of the EU toward the Western Balkans and Ukraine was in both the national and European interest. At the same time, however, they admitted the need for sustained reforms of the European Union’s decision-making.

**Alexander Eberl**, Head of the North America Unit at the Chancellery, explored the current bilateral relationship between the United States and Germany. He focused on Vladimir Putin’s role in uniting the West, concluding that U.S.-German relations are in the best place they have been in a long time. Mr. Eberl contended that military cooperation would continue to influence U.S.-German relations. It was less clear, however, how the bilateral relationship would be affected should China decide to invade Taiwan, a paramount concern in Washington.

**Dr. Markus Richter**, State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior, then joined the group for a discussion about “The Challenges of Cybersecurity in Germany and the United States.” He covered the possibilities and limits of U.S.-European cooperation in cybersecurity, emphasizing the need for resiliency and creativity within critical infrastructure.

The day culminated with dinner at the International Club in the Federal Foreign Office, where **Michael Baumann**, Deputy President of the Federal Intelligence Agency (BND), discussed “Transatlantic Intelligence Cooperation in Challenging Times.”

## Day 4

### **Plenary Discussion VII**

#### **Energy Security, Energy Politics**

Day 4 started with an intriguing discussion on energy politics. Discussion leaders highlighted the spikes in gas and oil prices across much of the Western world with the war in Ukraine. One German delegate said: “Although gas prices seem high in the United States, they are much higher here, which is why it’s not worth having a car.” Also present in the discussion was the growing fear that alternative power sources may not be a panacea, particularly for industrialized nations still highly dependent on fossil fuel and coal to maintain industrial productivity and economic growth. Delegates debated how Germany (and Europe in general) and the United States will manage the challenging intersections of energy transitions, economic growth, and energy security.

Working Group A’s discussion focused on the utility versus the risks of nuclear power. Though nuclear power is carbon-neutral, it is an emotive issue, considering potential safety risks, nuclear waste, and a history of high-profile accidents. While some delegates considered nuclear power generally safe, the risks could not be denied. Delegates then turned to the world’s complex history with nuclear power and the resulting accidents from Chernobyl to Fukushima, which was the final nail in the coffin solidifying Germany’s decision in 2011 to phase out nuclear power by 2022. Accompanying these complex debates on nuclear power are seemingly unenforceable climate commitments, not to mention clean-energy solutions that are themselves flawed. The West relies on subsidized Chinese solar panels, windmills, and other energy sources, for example, despite rising political conflict with the Chinese. Questions around energy justice in the developing world further complicate these issues.

Meanwhile, Working Group B focused its discussion on energy security and the China challenge. Delegates debated the effectiveness of public and private partnerships. As with the Group A, the need to reduce U.S. dependence on China for solar panels consumed a sizeable part of the discussion. Delegates concluded that the energy crisis has shown the limits of energy transition, revealing how Western economies remain very much dependent on fossil fuels. With respect to energy justice in the Global South, the group seemed to agree that developing countries pay the price for past Western sins in terms of climate change (e.g., desertification, sea levels rising, migration).

### **Plenary Discussion VIII**

#### **On the Frontline: NATO, the EU, and the Future**

Delegates then shifted into another plenary discussion focused on the war in Ukraine, the future of NATO, and the shape of future transatlantic military cooperation. Discussion leaders focused on the future of NATO and collective European defense at both the tactical and strategic levels. Important questions included: Will the end of this crisis see a return to earlier divisions? Is NATO no longer “brain-dead”? Should Europe seek “strategic autonomy” or focus on security through NATO?

Working Group A focused its conversation on NATO's strategy following Russia's attack on Ukraine. Delegates evaluated this issue in relation to the decline of U.S. power. Delegates debated whether there should be a European defense force, concluding the EU does not have the capabilities to protect its citizens and therefore remains dependent on NATO and the United States. This raised the issue of stronger military integration in Europe. However, the prospect of command structures in addition to NATO were deemed too complicated. Delegates also explored NATO and the EU's different roles and the joint contributions they can make to peace and stability.

Group B approached the question of NATO's role today and in the future from a European perspective. NATO's restricted response to the war in Ukraine revealed that NATO has limitations when it comes to European defense. Since not all European nations are members of NATO, delegates asked: What is Europe's security alternative? Should Europe seek out strategic autonomy? Could a European army replace NATO's engagement in Europe? The group quickly moved away from this concept, given the practicalities. The EU is a political union that requires consensus, which prevents it from acting quickly, as would be required in war. Given that the EU respects the sovereignty of member states and that national interests are not always EU interests, military integration becomes extremely difficult. Further, the group explored how the EU itself lacks the nuclear force required to defend itself. Is it then better, asked one delegate, to focus on the existing infrastructure in place and strengthen the EU's position within it?

In considering NATO's future, and the EU's role in the future of Western security, Working Group B framed the discussions around four models. First, a model of NATO called NATO Classic Plus, a collective defense system. Second was a Global NATO, which would tackle China. Third was a NATO Gen Z, which would also address "soft" issues, such as climate change and democratic backsliding. The final proposition was a hybrid model.

Working Group B concluded that the best way forward is for the EU to strengthen the European pillar in NATO and push for a reform within NATO to allow for more autonomy of member states to engage on smaller missions. By strengthening the European Union's presence within NATO through pooling of resources and a general commitment to the NATO project, the EU could exert more pressure in defining the priorities and allocation of resources. Increased engagement of EU member states also raised the specter of potential conflict with non-EU NATO members such as Turkey and the diverging interests of newer NATO members in an expanding alliance. Reforming NATO would allow for better collaboration. Delegates juxtaposed the EU's mission against NATO's mission, analyzing the structural differences between the two and how they could work together, ultimately agreeing that the EU should strengthen its commitment to NATO to best defend itself against threats.

## **Plenary Discussion VI**

### **Infection Points: Lessons from the Pandemic / Future of Work &**

## **Plenary Discussion IX**

### **Media, Social and Otherwise**

Due to time constraints, Plenary Discussions VI and IX were combined for a broader conversation about the impacts of COVID-19 on transatlantic relations, and later a discussion on how the political discourse is helped and hurt by the media. With respect to the pandemic, the conversation focused on how divergent approaches to COVID-19 over the past two years have shaped, even warped, every facet of our existence. Some examples included the pandemic's impact on global, national, and local economies; public health systems; urban vs. suburban/exurban development; civil liberties; employment; and work culture. The discussion focused on where we go from here collectively and the lessons that can be drawn from the pandemic, with other health emergencies such as monkeypox on the horizon.

Remote work also came up in the conversation, especially its impacts on mental and behavioral health. It was a reminder that issues created by the pandemic are going to be with us for a long time. But also, not everyone was able to work remotely, exacerbating wage and employment gaps. One German delegate mentioned the effect of loneliness and isolation on mental health and how we bring (or do not bring) people together through work, school, and housing. The conversation made participants pause: How can we ponder transatlantic cooperation when fundamental interpersonal relations were impacted to such an extent during the pandemic? Looking to the future, partners should create opportunities to change how we work and live through gains made in automation, but we must answer the question of how we revalue the time we gain.

The conversation then turned to the media. The last decade's explosion of new platforms has served an important purpose in broadening public access to information while raising new and complex questions. Such factors as social media and 24-hour news cycles (with little opportunity to correct misinformation), tribal or ideological self-selection and information-sharing, preferences for "truths" vs. facts, and new forms of influence all contribute to how people see the world. The discussion focused on how, if at all, the United States and Germany should develop common approaches to persistent questions of accountability and transparency, privacy, and data security.

Delegates agreed that it is important to distinguish between disinformation (intentional) and misinformation (not necessarily intentional, often also sharing for lack of better knowledge). One delegate offered that dis- and misinformation are commercial opportunities. While the public is increasingly aware of the threat of dis-/misinformation, technological advances facilitate the dissemination of false information that is hard, if not impossible, for the average citizen to detect (i.e., deepfakes). Not far from the discussion was the concept of privacy, specifically how it is understood and protected, which plays an important role in the discussion around the media today.

Delegates also discussed the media's role in protecting and upholding democracy. It is important to differentiate (especially in the United States) between "traditional" media, classified as publishers and therefore subject to much stricter legislation, and new forms of media, not classified as "publishers." The latter group is merely subject to applicable local laws and regulations, which means that what they can do differs greatly, depending on whether they operate in democratic or autocratic states.

From the conversation, it was clear that differences in societal values on each side of the Atlantic lead to different policy priorities. Personal data sovereignty is a fundamental right in the European Union, enshrined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as both privacy law and human rights law, in Article 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Consumer protection in the United States, on the other hand, is tied to economics. The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable search and seizure but makes no mention of privacy. U.S. lawmakers are exploring options to regulate social media on antitrust grounds and/or through the creation of an independent algorithm review board, but progress lags significantly behind in the United States compared to Germany.

Central to the discussion was the role of tech companies in democracies. Essentially, they are private arbiters of information essential to the functioning of our democracies (e.g., information during election season), yet they escape much of the blame when it comes to disinformation undermining democratic practice. What seems certain, according to more than one delegate, is that platforms decide what people see based on the platform's commercial interests. Even legitimate news outlets sharing information on a 24-hour cycle can lead to partial truths or misinformation, as developing stories can change rapidly. The pandemic fueled an overreliance on online information and making decisions based on false information. This happens more commonly in low-income households, which are more likely to use mobile phones as their main internet connection, with an increased reliance on information found through social media.

The conversation also incorporated issues of data, digitalization, and privacy. This part of the question seemed to be grounded in accountability. Specifically, who collects information? Who stores it? Who secures it? These problems can be addressed in several ways. Delegates suggested that increased cooperation and investment in expanding education about the role of the media is perhaps most important. It is also critical to create uniform standards regarding applicable laws and regulation.

## **Plenary Discussion X**

### **Deal With It: Economics of Friendship, Economics of Rivalry**

In the next plenary discussion, participants focused on the world economic order since World War II. After seven decades, the U.S.-led economic order faces domestic and international pressures, as efforts to create the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) have floundered, protectionist impulses have emerged, and transatlantic partners have differed over how to deal with the no-longer-just-emerging economic power of China. This discussion raised many provocative questions, including: Do

economic relations that once created the Atlantic community now pose a threat to destroy it? And how can the economies of North America and Europe continue to work together for mutual stability and prosperity?

The focus of the conversation was China, with the following observations. China is undermining global economic security, which is directly correlated to national security. This is especially apparent in requirements of technology transfers to gain market access; intellectual property theft; dumping measures (e.g., steel and aluminum); cyberattacks; and restrictions on free trade. However, Western nations remain dependent on China. Delegates also explored how China plays an outsized role in climate change. China is expanding its use of domestic coal plants, with significant CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. China also controls 90 percent of rare earth minerals, essential for electric vehicles and green technologies.

China also plays a key role in the production of solar panels and inputs needed for semiconductors and smart devices. Yet it displays a disregard for human rights as evidenced by LGBTQ oppression and the placement of the Uyghur population in labor camps. It should be noted that the German presenter placed more emphasis on climate change than she did on the China threat (emphasized by the U.S. presenter), which demonstrated that allies' priorities are not always entirely aligned. That divergence touched on a deeper theme of the conference: American concerns over China were not always equally shared, as German delegates focused more on climate and reliance on Russian energy. Questions of resources and priorities were debated among the group on these two issues. Delegates agreed that mutual understanding is critical in bilateral and multilateral relations, especially in understanding allies' perceptions of threat, and that even if there were debates among allies, there is far more that unites the two countries than divides them.

Many provocative policy solutions emerged from these discussions. For one, multilateral information-sharing is needed to better understand China's command of the global economy; Chinese policy on the Uyghurs; and supply-chain dependencies. One delegate suggested the United States should reconsider its protectionist policies. The United States should view other countries as equal partners, recognizing there is a new world order taking shape. Yet another delegate suggested that rather than focus on China as a geopolitical threat, the United States and EU should focus on unifying against existential threats such as climate change. Transatlantic coordination should focus on innovating climate technologies, showing thoughtful leadership, and making carbon emission commitments.

Delegates reached several interesting conclusions. The West cannot solve the climate crisis without breaking away from the "China Model." China needs to be held accountable for commitments on carbon emissions and Western powers need to ensure that access to rare earth minerals and inputs for clean technologies are not held hostage by China. And yet, changing Chinese behavior will require significant multilateral commitments, which will ultimately have economic consequences on respective economies. What can be done? To pursue climate solutions and address human rights violations, the United States and EU should

reduce their dependence on Chinese supply chains, and ensure that China abides by the rule of law.

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Also on day 4, the Young Leaders had a very special opportunity to meet with **H.E. Olaf Scholz**, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. He welcomed the Young Leaders back to the Chancellery and made brief remarks before having photos taken with the group.

A group of fascinating speakers also joined the conference on day 4. **Andreas Michaelis**, Federal State Secretary at the German Federal Foreign Office, then brought the conversation back to the China threat from Germany's perspective in a discussion about "Germany's Foreign Policy Priorities." Mr. Michaelis stated that "security policy is back" and hence German and European priorities need to be revisited (referring as well to the need for EU enlargement, including toward Ukraine). He emphasized the need for a coordinated, multilateral forward stance in the face of these growing challenges.

The day ended with a dinner where **Lt. General Kai Rohrschneider** (1998 Young Leader), Director General for Armed Forces Policy at the German Ministry of Defense (BMVg), offered his own thoughts about Germany military cooperation with NATO and the United States in a talk detailing "The Role of the Military Advisor to the Minister of Defense in Reference to the War in Ukraine."

#### Day 5

As the conference drew to a conclusion, it was clear how productive the week was for delegates on both sides of the Atlantic, and that the ACG's Young Leaders Conference would be the start of many friendships and professional connections.

#### **Plenary Discussion XI**

##### **A Grand Reset? Imagining a Transatlantic Strategy for the Next 75 Years**

In the final plenary discussion, delegates discussed whether there can be a "grand strategy" for transatlantic relations. Has the world become so small and interconnected that grand strategies have been rendered obsolete? If not, now what?

Tasked with crafting a mission statement and vision statement for the transatlantic relationship, the working groups brainstormed. One working group shared the following mission statement: "The transatlantic relationship is important, stable, well established, and something we hope will remain relevant and rooted in mutual respect for the shared goal of leveraging the Western alliance to navigate external influences and challenges." Their vision statement read as follows: "Rooted in mutual respect, the transatlantic relationship will continue to be based on friendship and common values endeavoring to ensure a livable planet and driving peace, prosperity, and social justice for all."

Working groups discussed the rules of the road set out at the beginning of the conference,

specifically how Young Leaders were instructed to talk about issues openly, to speak their minds but respect others' perspectives. A discussant drew a parallel to the wider transatlantic relationship; Germany and the United States could benefit from following these same rules of the road. Indeed, the group described an approach to transatlantic relations employing candor, remaining focused on important issues, and acting in a collaborative, symbiotic manner.

The groups were divided on some topics, but intentionally did not offer a call to promote democracy as an end in itself after having heard multiple speakers share the statistic that only 47 percent of the world currently lived in democratic societies and after questions were raised about the success of such efforts historically. Rather, the group emphasized joint transatlantic action to preserve the planet and to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in more general terms. Delegates also discussed the idea of highlighting meaningful transatlantic initiatives that effect change, including the EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council (TTC), and spelling out specific issues, including relations with China. Ultimately, the group decided to stay at the 30,000-foot level and spell out the mission and vision in broader brushstrokes.

While some delegates had a more positive view of the current state of transatlantic relations than others, discussants agreed that Germany and the United States are “aligned on the big issues at least” and we have shared values even if we don't share every value. One discussant said we have a “maturing reciprocal friendship,” and most expressed hope for the future. The transatlantic relationship remains a key conduit for helping to navigate economic and political upheaval, a friendship-based environment to tackle significant challenges with creative – and potentially disruptive – solutions. Group members emphasized the value of a West based on mutuality and reciprocity, a system that remains respectful of each other's national interests.

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The final day of the conference included unforgettable speakers to bring a productive and camaraderie-filled week to a close. Early in the day, delegates met with **Steffen Hebestreit**, State Secretary and Spokesperson of the German Federal Government, for a discussion on “Current German Government Policies and the Outcome of the G7 Summit.” Mr. Hebestreit's perspectives on multilateral cooperation and the future of the G7 Summit were in many ways the perfect juxtaposition to delegates meeting with **Ambassador Amy Gutmann**, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, who spoke with much optimism on the future of U.S.-German relations. This incredible week and experience were bookended by a closing dinner with a talk given by **Professor Dr. Luise Hölscher**, State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance, on “Implementing Financial and Trade Sanctions in Times of an International Conflict.”



The views expressed in this report are those of the speakers and are not meant to represent the views of the American Council on Germany, an independent, nonpartisan nonprofit organization.



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**Ronald J. Granieri**  
Associate Professor of  
History  
U.S. Army War College

**Sarmad Hussain**  
Director, Government  
Affairs, Biotechnology  
Sector  
Arcensus Diagnostics-  
Biotechnology

**Edward S. McFadden**  
(Committee Chairman and  
ACG Board Member)  
Senior Vice President,  
Communications  
American Financial Services  
Association (AFSA)