

US foreign policy

G20 allies learn to work with and around Donald Trump

President leaves Europeans impression of US in retreat from leadership role



© AFP

YESTERDAY by: Demetri Sevastopulo in Hamburg and Stefan Wagstyl in Berlin

As Donald Trump was leaving the [G20 in Hamburg](#), he declared that the event had been a “wonderful success”. But while the forum was less combative than the recent G7, divisions with the US over climate and trade left the impression that America was relinquishing its decades-old role as the leader on the international stage.

Mr Trump came to Hamburg from Poland where he pleased European allies by backing the Nato treaty article on collective defence — which he refused to do during a recent Nato summit. But he then sparked criticism by attacking the media in Warsaw and going further in Hamburg by laughing along when Russian president [Vladimir Putin](#) pointed at some reporters and quipped that they were “the ones” hurting Mr Trump.

“The most striking impression that comes from the G20 . . . is that not only is there is no central US leadership role, but there is profound questioning of western values, from democracy itself to

simple freedom of the press,” said James Stavridis, a former US commander of Nato. “What we see today is beginning to look like the world after the first world war about 100 years ago, in which none of the leading nations pulled together and we in the US rejected the idea of the League of Nations.”

While the G20 produced a unanimous declaration, an exception was carved out for the US because of its withdrawal from the Paris climate accord — leading some critics to rename the forum the G19+1. And while language about combatting protectionism and “unfair trade” suggested harmony, German chancellor Angela Merkel stressed that the discussions had been “very difficult”.

Ms Merkel welcomed efforts to resolve steel disputes, but conceded that she had no idea if Mr Trump would take punitive action on steel imports that he is mulling. Sean Spicer, White House spokesman, told the FT that “all options remain on the table”.

While the violent protests that struck Hamburg overshadowed the summit, Mrs Merkel was credited with containing the split between the US and the other 19, even as she said differences had not been “plastered over”. But German officials were relieved that the event did not end in a Trump-inspired debacle. Ms Merkel also diffused criticism about Ivanka Trump briefly replacing her father at the table by pointing out that other leaders sometimes did the same and that Ms Trump also served as a senior White House aide.

But while the splits were neatly bridged and Mr Trump was more comfortable among his peers than at the G7, there was still concern that Washington was receding from the front lines of internationalism.

Trump seems to regard Germany and other European countries more as economic competitors than as strategic allies. That is

a great mistake of judgment about our most important friends in the world

NICHOLAS BURNS, FORMER TOP STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL AND NATO AMBASSADOR

Nicholas Burns, a former top state department official and Nato ambassador, said the US was “more isolated at this G20 summit than at any other”, partly because of its disavowal of the Paris deal and [withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) trade pact, but also because of how Mr Trump criticises allies.

“The US can't lead effectively if we are constantly criticising our allies,” said Mr Burns. “Trump seems to regard Germany and other European countries more as economic competitors than as strategic allies. That is a great mistake of judgment about our most important friends in the world.”

Brendan Boyle, a US congressman who spent time with German lawmakers at the G20, said he was alarmed at what he heard. “Many of my meetings involved my European friends expressing dismay that the US under Trump is no longer the leader of the west. They are now openly looking for alternatives to US leadership.”

While critics lamented Mr Trump’s “America First” approach to foreign relations, his supporters said he was living up to his campaign pledges. Jason Miller, his former spokesman, said the Europe trip “highlighted his strengths as a leader and showed his grasp on the interpersonal nuances needed to advance his agenda”. Even Mrs Merkel, who is no fan of Mr Putin and lukewarm on Mr Trump, welcomed the fact that the two presidents had held substantive discussions in what was their first meeting.

Related article

Recriminations begin over G20 violence in Hamburg

Germany's reputation 'severely affected' by scenes of violence says foreign minister



Jeremy Shapiro, head of research at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said it was “quite extraordinary” how the US was more isolated at international forums than at any point since 1945. But he said Europeans were learning how to work with — and around — Mr Trump, partly because they recognised the new reality and because the global importance of the US meant it could not be ignored.

“They know how to have a good meeting with Trump so that you don't have nasty optics. You can stick to your principles, but flatter his ego, and there will be no fireworks,” said Mr Shapiro.

Ultimately, the fact that Mrs Merkel and Mr Trump both lauded the summit as a success underscored how other countries are slowly adjusting to the new America. “President Trump and the US came to Hamburg somewhat isolated and leave much the same way,” said Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Follow Demetri Sevastopulo on Twitter: [@dimi](https://twitter.com/dimi)

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't copy articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

