Countering 21st-century upheavals with innovation and dialogue

Discussing IoT and platform economy as well as the evolution of business models: Christine Mareen Rupp, Member of Consulting Exco at Deloitte Consulting Germany, and Sabine Bendiek, Chairperson of the Management Board of Microsoft Germany (left).
Under the motto “Building the power to compete in the 21st century,” representatives from business and think tanks as well as political leaders met in Berlin on November 6–7 to discuss the economic and political challenges of the 21st century in a transatlantic context.

It has been 30 years since the wall that divided this city came down. But tonight, there are new physical and metaphorical walls going up all around the world. And like 30 years ago, we need every citizen of the free world to help tear them down.” These were words that Eric Holder, former US Attorney General, used to open the conference and recall that the transatlantic partnership has formed the foundation for peace and prosperity.

The relationship between Germany and the US is global

Calling it “the issue at stake,” Frank Sportolari, President of AmCham Germany, took the transatlantic partnership to a new level: “We’re no longer dealing with a transatlantic issue — the relationship between Germany and the US is global.” Therefore it was essential that business representatives, politicians and academics from the US, Europe and Germany engage in a continuous dialogue to shape transatlantic relations and counter increasing fragmentation, Sportolari said.

In this context, Dieter Kempf, President of the BDI, warned against protectionist measures: “History has repeatedly shown that trade conflicts are expensive. It permanently damages the world economy if such trade negotiations are conducted as if it were a game of poker. For that the economic consequences are too serious.” On the contrary, one must remain in dialogue, Kempf added.
Uncertainty is hindering success

Thomas Bareiß, Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy, underlined Kempf’s statement: “In order to remain competitive in the future, we must work together and not against each other. Our companies on both sides of the Atlantic and our closely interwoven trade and investment relations are proof of the success of our partnership, and organizations like AmCham Germany play a crucial role in continuing to work together and find common solutions.”

Gordon Riske, Managing Director of the KION Group, outlined the advantages of competition while also condemning uncertainty, which, in the German-American partnership, has left its mark on companies and their competitiveness. Riske made clear how much this could harm the economy, warning: “Uncertainty prevents success at a time when we can least afford it.” In his remarks, Ralf Brinkmann, President and Chairman of the Board at Dow Germany, underlined that continued dialogue is of utmost importance, and the focus should be on global cooperation.
Curiosity, education and global thinking to remain competitive

This approach was also shared by Annette Green, Vice President of DACH at the SAS Institute. She proposed three concrete solutions to strengthen competitiveness in the 21st century: Cultivate curiosity and openness toward artificial intelligence, promote education about new technologies and engage in global thinking. “Competition for leadership in artificial intelligence is not a competition among nations, but a healthy competition among businesses to make sure they provide the best products,” Green said.

The panel on the internet of things and the platform economy with Sabine Bendiek of Microsoft, Christine Marleen Rupp of Deloitte, and Gordon Riske of the KION Group focused on technological change and the need to think globally.

The changes caused by new technologies required global thinking, Bendiek emphasized. She also indicated she believed national champions were an illusion and “one cannot serve customers all over the world from a closed garden.” Rupp agreed with Bendiek and said Germany should appear more determined in order not to lose the connection to developing new technologies.

The discussion on the Chinese-American trade dispute focused on its impact on Europe.

Thomas Hueck, Chief Economist at Robert Bosch, explained how the frictions between the US and China damaged companies and created uncertainty, but he also made clear that investment decisions depended on long-term forecasts. Mung Chiang, Dean of Purdue University College of Engineering, argued for cooperation while maintaining vigilance when dealing with China. He asserted it was less about which country we were against and more about what principles we were in favor of. As long as there was humility and respect on both sides of the ocean, then the human bridge would prevail, Chiang said in conclusion.

China and the US: that relationship’s impact on Europe

In the conference’s closing speech, former German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor Joschka Fischer called on the audience to take China seriously, but stick to our values. “The transatlantic partnership as we know it will not come back. Not even after the next election. Nevertheless, Americans and Europeans belong to the same family. We are dependent on each other,” Fischer said, concluding: “There is no positive future without the partnership between Europe and America.”

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