Report

British German Forum: working together at home and abroad post Covid

Monday 03 – Wednesday 05 July 2023 | WP3147

In association with:

Embassy
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London

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Berlin

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The British German Forum was established by Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher in 1985 and has been an annual event ever since. The aim of the Forum, throughout its 38-year history, has been to deepen bilateral relations between Britain and Germany, by inviting future leaders from both countries to engage in new dialogues and build partnerships. The Forum provides a space in which participants can connect and share ideas, and gain insight and inspiration from experienced professionals. Through dialogue, it aims to facilitate both increased shared understanding and the building of strong relationships between influential young Britons and Germans.

The 2023 British German Forum took place at a unique juncture characterised by geopolitical uncertainty and rising national economic challenges within both countries. Successive crises have created unprecedented uncertainty and political instability. Wilton Park convened young leaders from a range of sectors to discuss these challenges to define, outline and structure pathways for Britain and Germany's future collaboration. Taking Russia's unjust invasion of Ukraine as a starting point, the dialogue focussed on three key areas: (i) future security strategies, (ii) energy security, and (iii) information environments and challenges.

The 2023 Forum provided a space for participants to look at how to respond to these challenges and opportunities and explore the following critical questions:

1. How could Britain and Germany work together to respond to an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical arena in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and how can collaboration feed into each country's long-term security strategy?

2. What could Britain and Germany do to further cooperate around the present energy crisis, and how can strategies feed into wider climate goals?

3. What opportunities are there for Britain and Germany to work together to respond to current challenges within information environments, and what lessons and techniques can be shared to combat wider problems including rises in disinformation?

Executive summary

- The UK and Germany are leading supporters of Ukraine against Russia's unjust invasion. The war has illustrated the necessity of unified, coherent co-operation. As this year's state visit by His Majesty the King illustrated, the shared commitment to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and the liberal international order has drawn the two countries closer together. Future security co-operation must aim at creating synergies and scale in European defence.

- Russia's invasion has demonstrated the vulnerability of European energy supplies. Again, the challenge has drawn the United Kingdom, Germany, and Europe closer together. In order to successfully manage the energy transition, both countries can learn valuable lessons from each other. Bilateral co-operation could engender regional and global co-operation on Research and Development and technologies.

- In an era of systemic rivalries and increasing digital and technological advancement, the protection of democracy, the state and its citizens must crucially include the digital realm. Citizens' access to reliable information must be safeguarded. States' capacities to prevent and counter information-based attacks from hostile actors must be expanded in an international endeavour.

Security co-operation in an increasingly competitive world

"the shared challenges of the war in Ukraine and how to protect its sovereignty, and the wider defence of the liberal international order have strengthened European relations and the bilateral relationship between Britain and Germany"

1. The world stands at a crossroads: Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine has put an emphasis on territorial defence back atop the agenda of European military thinking and planning. In the wake of the invasion, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) have been at the forefront of endeavours to create a unified Western response, sharing a sense of urgency and threat perception. For example, both countries have co-operated against Russia; discussions of which have mainly been conducted through the G7 Foreign Ministers' Track. There is further scope for co-operation, particularly with regards to the protection of NATO's Eastern Flank where jointly-led endeavours could prioritise the sharing of capacity, capability, and experience on as large a scale as possible.

2. For both countries, NATO's status as the focus of national defence policies has been reinforced by the war in Ukraine. However, this commonality of views is lessened by different experiences and approaches in domestic strategic culture; especially the use of force where Germany has traditionally been reluctant to use hard power. Moreover, organisational and institutional differences such as the UK's permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, its status as a nuclear power, and the stronger role of the executive in the British institutional architecture suggest imbalances in the UK-Germany relationship.

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3. In the wake of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU), perceptions of predictability and reliability have suffered while overall co-operation has declined, not least owing to the reduction in formal bilateral interaction. Nevertheless, both the shared challenge of the war in Ukraine, the congruence of approaches in protection of its sovereignty and the wider defence of the liberal international order have strengthened relations. Both this year's state visit and January's inaugural Strategic Dialogue at foreign-minister level illustrate a British-German rapprochement, following on from the 2021 Joint Declaration of Intent.

4. Furthermore, the recent UK-EU Windsor Framework emphasised bilateral relations as an important confidence-building measure. Future British steps could be mindful the EU remains the cornerstone of Germany's actions in almost any political field; any strengthening of bilateral relations remains contingent on a further strengthening of post-Brexit UK-EU relations.

5. Both the recently published German National Security Strategy (NSS) and the UK's Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) share a broad definition of security, incorporating not just traditional notions of hard military power but issues such as energy security and information. This is a solid foundation for approaches to security in a globalised world. However, both countries face heavily restricted budgetary leeway for further investment, be it military or otherwise. Moreover, ensuring security based on the broad definition in both documents requires joined-up approaches which incorporate the whole of government and society.

6. So far, the German Zeitenwende (the 'Turning Point' of German foreign and security policy amid the war in Ukraine) has not resulted in wide-ranging resource-backed action. Nevertheless, it is noted as a monumental shift of the German approach particularly to its strategic communication whose broader implementation requires wider transformations and a recognition of changes in the international environment throughout society. It remains to be seen when and how Germany will reach its NATO commitment of spending 2% of its GDP on defence. Reaching this target in an age of strong budgetary pressures may prove difficult even if the global threat environment makes this necessary. The challenge is a shared one, Germany could learn from the UK and other allies in its attempts to create societal support for increased defence budgets and the Bundeswehr.

7. Co-operation could focus on military and technological procurement and exchange. The threat environment makes standardisation of technologies or co-ordination and national distinction for the alliance's benefit even more desirable than they have always been. Co-operation remains economically challenging and now has to combine both public and private-sector approaches. Co-operation is particularly necessary to counter asymmetric threats which cross national borders.

8. One of the most pressing challenges is the rise of China. While both countries' approaches in this regard have shifted towards an emphasis on China as a systemic rival, there is continuing ambiguity given the degree to which economies are interlinked, which is particularly the case for Germany. This results in an inability to calibrate between assimilation and distance, and differences of approach. A coherent bilateral understanding of China requires a shared strategic understanding of China on all levels of society as well as the sharing of expertise between countries.

9. An immediate priority is a more dedicated drive to harness European comparative advantages, especially in terms of Europe's trading relations. This requires a common strategy, the sharing of expertise, actual initiatives and capacity building. Specifically, this could take the form of financial support for countries which are at risk of being sanctioned by China, such as Lithuania, as well as for regional actors to evaluate their own exposure to China. Ultimately, a dedicated European China strategy which involves the building of capacity as well as actual initiatives will be a means of gaining global influence. It remains imperative to formulate and enhance a uniquely European platform.

Achieving energy security: short- and long-term policy considerations

10. The war in Ukraine has illustrated the vulnerabilities of European energy security. While Germany's energy supply has traditionally been much more dependent on Russian imports, both countries have been affected by the corresponding increase in the cost of energy and the need for contingency planning in the event of shortage. However, despite these differential starting points pre-2021, both countries can learn valuable lessons from each other to achieve the challenge of modernising national grids on the path to carbon neutrality.

11. First and foremost, British expertise on liquified natural gas (LNG) is particularly instructive for Germany as it seeks to expand its own capacity in this regard. The sharing of knowledge is vital to as uniform an approach as possible. Both countries can gather joint learnings: on heat pumps, skills development, and upscaling. Further areas of similar co-operation include hydrogen and North Sea grids. Germany and the UK are well placed, not least geographically, to lead joint initiatives and cross-functional teams to enable further co-operation.

12. The UK's recent re-accession to the North Seas Energy Co-operation forum is a welcome step. While energy security was not a factor during the Brexit negotiations, the invasion of Ukraine has shown the need for wide-ranging collaboration on transformation of the European energy economy. The UK's status as a net exporter of energy in the wake of the invasion shows the value of co-operation. Further initiatives on the creation, use and pooling of resources is needed to achieve scales on a European level.

13. Bilaterally, German-British co-operation could harness the network of town and city twinning as well as regional partnerships. Energy security is as a local issue as a national and international one. Co-operation in this regard could prioritise the generation of shared learnings and expertise, particularly on the facilitation of decentralised local micro-grids.

14. Their responses to the energy-related ramifications of the war in Ukraine have shown UK and German to have different approaches to managing the ecological transformation. The German legislation is often more demand-side in nature and mindful of energy efficiency, while the UK approaches tend to focus on supply. Successful policies towards carbon neutrality could be harmonised. Britain could follow Germany's example which shows that transformative, demand-side policies can be made politically palatable.

15. Globally, Germany and the UK could prioritise the issue of Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). Within the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), both countries could co-operate to prevent carbon leakage.

16. Future collaboration could harness both countries' scientific and technological expertise and prioritise R&D, the sharing of technologies, and preserving the access to critical raw materials. In order to think beyond the energy trilemma of affordability, availability, and sustainability, further innovation and international co-operation are vital, not least to ensure public support and avoid a securitisation of the already politicised energy debate. Work could include considerations of the likely impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on energy security.

Challenges and opportunities for cooperation in information environments

17. The advent of modern communications technology and global information flows has re-distributed power and altered the nature of the global system. This has made the control of information a prime means of influence and systemic power. For the nation state-centred international system, this poses a challenge, as user-generated content can emerge from any device whenever, wherever outside of the state's control. In this regard, states' modern, twenty-first century responsibility to protect their citizens must include cyber and the digital realm.

18. States face the challenge of protecting democracy from foreign interference and information warfare. For example, the Russian Federation's information wars and attempts to undermine the due process of Western democracy. Rather than an era of 'politics of force', ours is one in which the 'force of politics' is used by hostile actors to undermine Western unity and compromise democratic process.

19. In this regard, the UK has been at the international forefront of countering Russian disinformation since the invasion of Crimea in 2014. Crucially, the UK employs a holistic, whole-of-government approach which aims to achieve both stability of the immediate conflict and the wider defence of democracy at home and abroad. Germany, whose focus has traditionally been more domestic and focussed on countering extremism at home and data privacy, can learn from the UK's approach; especially as, on this matter, the recent German NSS remains aspirational and does not offer immediate changes to the country's strategy. In turn, the UK can draw lessons from Germany's expertise on counter-extremism and data privacy endeavours. It could aim to create synergy with EU policies in its own approaches.

20. While global interconnectedness and digital technologies provide many opportunities, nation states face multiple challenges: protecting freedom of speech; securing the integrity of democracy; protecting citizens from disinformation and harmful content; generating joined-up thinking and approaches to account for the global spread and cross-cutting nature of information in societies.

21. An area which requires prompt attention is Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT). The war in Ukraine and British and US-American de-classification of intelligence in its wake make this particularly pertinent. OSINT poses opportunities due to the transparency and access which it allows if the replicability, share-ability, and verifiability of intelligence is ascertained. Potential challenges around material and the analytical rigour which is applied need to be mitigated. While Germany can learn from the UK's experience, a joint initiative could lead the necessary international effort to introduce norms and a standards in using OSINT. This requires a joint international effort, as states face the shared challenge of having lost their status as the ultimate arbiters of citizens' access to intelligence cycles.

22. The rapid pace of development makes understanding the opportunities and risks of AI challenging. In the context of information environments, information reliability may be paramount. More practically, democratic processes, including electoral processes may need to be protected. As part of the UK proposal for an AI summit in the Autumn, areas of specific concern or potential shared by both nations could be identified.

23. Bilateral co-operation could focus on public broadcasting, where the UK's BBC and Germany's ARD and ZDF networks are often considered as leading journalistic standards. Both nations could consider leading efforts de-bunking and pre-bunking - debunking lies, tactics or sources before they strike - misinformation and enhancing citizens' media and information literacy to strengthen public broadcasting.

24. Broadcasters in both countries could engage in more formalised ways of co-operating, exchanging learnings, and ensuring citizens' trust in their work. This also suggests public-facing demonstrations of journalists' modus operandi to allow citizens to critically reflect on journalistic output.

Conclusion

This year's British-German Forum took place at a crucial geopolitical juncture. The war in Ukraine and resulting energy-related shocks have illustrated the congruence of bilateral priorities and values. While instincts and detailed perceptions can vary, both countries are united in their defence of Western values. In the aftermath of Brexit, future co-operation requires permanent, dedicated bilateral interaction to harmonise and streamline approaches and preferences.

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