



Report

## **British German Forum 2021**

### **Common challenges, common goals, how to shape British German relations?**

Wednesday 27 – Friday 29 October 2021| WP1975

With support from:

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**In association with the British Embassy in Berlin, with support from Bayer AG and Bridge International Dialogue.**

After a pandemic-induced hiatus in 2020, the British German Forum returned in 2021 amid an uncertain pandemic recovery, intensifying post-Brexit wrangling, and just before the pivotal UK-hosted COP26 climate summit. This fraught global picture provided the backdrop for some of the UK and Germany's brightest young minds, from academia, business, civil society, and government, to come together and consider how to shape the future of British German relations.

Established by Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher in 1985, the British German Forum provides a dynamic space to network and share ideas, insight, and inspiration, and aims to increase common understanding and build strong relationships between young and influential citizens of Germany and the UK. The points below summarise the conclusions and recommendations from the 2021 Forum.

#### **Executive Summary**

- The greatest shared challenge facing the UK and Germany is the climate transition; urgent action should be taken on subnational, bilateral, and multilateral bases, more public private partnerships should be established, and regulations should be enhanced to ensure private sector accountability.
- Both the UK and Germany should build more inclusive and resilient societies that can better withstand shocks, from climate disasters to pandemics. Because the world is more interconnected than ever, and since our societies are increasingly affected by far-off events, we should shift our focus to proactive policies that seek to mitigate future shocks.
- Broad agreement exists that the UK and Germany should identify common approaches to dealing with China, but there is less consensus over these approaches' precise nature; a key challenge is balancing economic interdependence with the desire to call out human rights abuses. Areas for increased cooperation between the UK, Germany, and the EU over China include sanctions, supply chain diversification, and more coordination over Indo-Pacific strategies.
- There are ways the UK and Germany can learn from each other and collaborate more closely; in particular, the UK's 'levelling up' agenda can take inspiration from Germany's integration of former East Germany.

- There are disagreements about the kinds of bilateral and multilateral structures that will underpin the UK's future relationships with Germany and the EU, and work should be done to find more common ground. Any impasses on a national level could be circumvented through subnational cooperation in areas like science and innovation, technology, and cultural exchange.

## **Managing the climate transition**

1. Concrete steps should be urgently taken by governments worldwide, including the UK's and Germany's, to avoid further exhausting the planet's resources - [Earth Overshoot Day](#) starkly reveals how humanity consumes far more than the planet can provide.
2. Public private partnerships, like [the Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest finance \(LEAF\) Coalition](#), which aims to mobilize at least \$1 billion in finance to protect tropical forests, are key to the climate transition. To improve the effectiveness of the climate transition, private sector dynamism should be stimulated by public funds, and coupled with government policies and regulation to steer the private sector in the right direction.
3. The UK and German governments should take measures to ensure private sector accountability. Every year, the UK government publishes a list of companies that pay below minimum wage - this effective naming and shaming strategy could be applied to companies which miss climate targets.
4. The UK and Germany can use bilateral dialogues as a springboard for multilateral action; areas to focus on include carbon pricing and electric vehicles. Both countries should make the climate transition a 'whole of government approach,' with climate 'the inspiration for everything we do.'
5. At the municipal level, city councils from Germany and the UK could share experiences and learn from each other about how to create sustainable, greener, more liveable cities. Cities and regions could increase collaboration on scientific research and development, for example German and UK steel producing regions could learn from each other on how to most effectively produce 'green steel.'
6. The climate transition could alienate parts of the electorate and fuel anti-green political movements. One risk is the uncertain consequences of carbon pricing, which could make some products more expensive. The UK and German governments should engage in dialogue on how carbon pricing can be effective at mitigating climate change, while not disadvantaging more vulnerable parts of the population.

## **Reacting to, and recovering from, shocks by building inclusive resilience**

7. The twin challenges of overcoming the pandemic and galvanising the green transition have exposed the limits of our capacity to prepare for, react to, and recover from shocks. The future is unpredictable – few of the significant events that shaped the previous 10 years were anticipated, and if they were (such as a pandemic), there was insufficient planning to mitigate their effects. Going forward, governments should focus on building societies that are both more inclusive, resilient, and better able to withstand inevitable future shocks.
8. In an interconnected world, far-off events affect us profoundly; a reality crystallised by the COVID-19 pandemic. Different experiences of the pandemic depending on socio-economic background also exposed deep social stratification, which stems in part from an acute lack of resilience and inclusivity.
9. Greater understanding around types of resilience and what resilience means to different groups is needed in order to successfully build more inclusive societies and ensure that approaches towards such are truly inclusive.

## **UK and German responses to geopolitical and foreign policy challenges, especially from China**

10. The UK and Germany generally agree on the problems dealing with China pose; there is consensus that China is becoming more assertive and aggressive, that its actions have destabilised the Indo-Pacific, and that the UK, Germany, and their allies should confront these challenges decisively, supporting national and European interests and securing wider stability.
11. However, questions linger over how to approach these challenges in the face of economic interdependence with China. There are areas for continued cooperation between Europe and China, particularly on trade and climate change, while certain sectors of both the UK and German economies depend on China, especially the former's university system and the latter's automotive industry.
12. Overall, the UK, Germany and their allies want a viable alternative to China's rise, but their 'triad of approaches' towards China, of 'competing,' 'contesting' and 'collaborating' – creates a lack of strategic clarity which a China increasingly allied with Russia can exploit. Closer collaboration between the UK and Germany, as well as the EU, the US, and other allies, over both China and the wider Indo-Pacific region, would make up for the limited resources of one party when it acts unilaterally.
13. One possible way to counter China's rise is to offer an alternative to its Belt and Road Initiative, such as the G7's so-called 'Build Back Better World' (B3W), which seeks to offer developing nations financing to build green infrastructure – Germany, the UK and their allies should enhance their cooperation to ensure this initiative's success.
14. To mitigate the risks China poses, UK and EU sanctions should be more coordinated, supply chains that depend on China, especially those related to Uighur forced labour, should be diversified, self-censorship by academics who fear repercussions if they speak out should be addressed, and sensitive research in western universities should be better protected from academics closely linked to the Chinese state.
15. Gaming is an area of soft power that the Chinese government increasingly exploits, evidenced by big companies such as Tencent buying shares in other gaming companies around the world to gain influence over how games are produced and deployed. UK and German policy makers should be more aware of gaming as a potential tool of foreign policy and as a rich pool of data gathering.
16. The UK and Germany face different challenges when it comes to Russia, and their geopolitics drive different strategies. Germany's strategy has been longer term and based on being a geographic near neighbour and energy customer. The City of London has an enduring relationship with Russian finance but recent events, such as the 2018 Novichok attack in Salisbury have influenced a tougher UK approach. Despite different strategic perspectives and approaches there is an ongoing willingness to cooperate on security matters, offering opportunities for closer collaboration between the UK and Germany over Russia.
17. Similar positions on several matters related to Africa could serve as inspiration for other areas of the UK's and Germany's foreign policy. These include a joint position on Sudan, and consensus over how to approach challenges in Mali and Somalia. Some specific colonial legacies that Germany has dealt with, such as paying reparations to Namibia, could serve as an example to the UK as it grapples with its own complicated colonial legacy.

### **Learning from each other**

18. Both the UK and Germany have former coal-producing regions which face similar challenges. The UK government's policy of 'levelling up' makes this particularly relevant, and the UK could take inspiration from Germany's efforts to integrate former East Germany.

19. To arrest the precipitous decline of local media in the UK, lessons could be learned from Germany's thriving local media scene, where the much higher number of local journalists makes them better connected to their audiences. The importance of understanding what is happening locally to build resilience and to facilitate the green transition makes supporting local media more important now than ever.
20. Germany's political foundations, which provide deep understanding of how Germany's parties work in its regions, are highly beneficial to the health of its democracy. The UK government, which by its intention to 'level up' is seeking to spread prosperity and influence more equitably around the country, should consider what it can learn from these foundations.
21. UK-German collaboration in science is second to none, but the complications of Brexit, as immigration and travel become harder to navigate, should not interfere with or undermine the continuation and deepening of these ties.

## **The future of British-German relations**

22. Germany is keen to create new structures and institutions through which UK-German relations can be deepened, improved, and made more predictable; the UK is more comfortable with less structured, more agile relations that can be 'surged' in an ad hoc way when the situation demands.
23. Notwithstanding the Joint Declaration on foreign and security policy, which Germany and the UK signed in June 2021, Germany and the EU are not satisfied with the current level of cooperation with the UK and feel the UK's Integrated Review placed too little emphasis on relations with the rest of Europe. While there is no desire from the UK government to create more formalised post-Brexit relations with Germany and the EU, there is an opportunity to develop relations outside traditional structures like the EU.
24. The UK is Germany's most important strategic partner outside the EU. As likeminded countries, the UK and Germany need each other as close partners, but closeness is challenged by disagreements over the Northern Ireland protocol and the European Court of Justice. Both countries need to work hard to maintain and deepen mutual trust to avoid a deterioration that would be harmful to both.
25. Subnational cooperation could circumvent disagreements at the national level, creating regional and municipal partnerships to drive innovation and development in areas like science, technology, and cultural exchange.

## **Conclusion**

In an increasingly turbulent world, this British German Forum reaffirmed that despite different approaches, the UK and Germany wish to cooperate closely in the face of common challenges, from the climate transition, to China, to making our societies more inclusive and resilient. In discussions full of optimism but tempered with realism, it was clear that post-Brexit both nations continue to value fostering a strong British German relationship into the future.

### **James Bolton-Jones**

Wilton Park | November 2021

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