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When Angela met Donald

Merkel and Trump couldn't be more different, but pragmatic chancellor knows Germany needs the US.

by [Matthew Karnitschnig](#)

BERLIN — Angela Merkel has never met Donald Trump. Yet she helped get him elected.

On the campaign trail, Merkel was a regular presence in Trump's barnstorming speeches. As with so much of the president-elect's rhetoric, his characterization of Merkel knew no boundaries. Describing the German leader's refugee policies as "insane" and a "catastrophe," Trump presented Merkel as a cautionary tale. "Hillary Clinton," Trump [warned](#) darkly in August as his audience jeered, "wants to be America's Angela Merkel."

As the world tries to understand the [implications](#) for the Western alliance of Trump's ascension to the presidency, more is now riding on his personal and political relationship with the German chancellor in the days and months ahead than with arguably any other foreign and certainly any European leader.

Under President Barack Obama, Germany became America's indispensable ally. While America's "special relationship" with Britain [remains](#) alive and well, it is now more cultural than strategic. With one foot out of the European Union, the U.K.'s usefulness to Washington has diminished. The U.S. can no longer turn to Britain to understand what's happening in Europe — a much larger trading partner than the U.K. — or to influence outcomes there.

Germany, already ascendant in recent years thanks to its growing economic and political influence, now stands alone. Whether the issue is terrorism or Russia, Berlin is Washington's key partner. Germany's new stature will be on display again this week when Obama visits Berlin for talks with Merkel, followed by a group meeting with other European leaders, including U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May.

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Even as Trump has called the U.S.'s [traditional alliances](#) into question, he may discover that America's engagement in Germany is worth the cost. In addition to hosting U.S. military bases that act as a staging ground for operations in the Middle East and elsewhere, the National

Security Agency's main listening posts in Europe are located in Germany and provide crucial intelligence.

From Silvio to the Donald

Even if Merkel has never met the future president, she knows him all too well.

Merkel's path from unknown East German physicist to Europe's preeminent leader is littered with bombastic men who have underestimated her. She outmaneuvered an entire generation of male rivals within her Christian Democratic party en route to the chancellorship, relying on her formidable analytical ability, instinct and even guile.

More recently, she has had to cope with some of the world's biggest egos, such as Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Silvio Berlusconi.

Merkel has confronted such men with a very un-German reaction: polite calm. The more outrageous they get, the more serene she becomes. When Putin tried to exploit Merkel's [fear of dogs](#) several years ago by introducing her to his black Labrador, Konni, she simply sat still, smiling awkwardly as the animal sat at her feet.



Russian President Vladimir Putin's dog with Merkel in Sochi, Russia, in January 2007 | Natalia Kolesnikova/AFP via Getty Images

When Berlusconi, upset at Merkel's refusal to help Southern Europe out of its economic malaise [referred to her](#) as a "*culona inchiavabile*" (an insult so obscene that some Italian politicians demanded his resignation), she simply pretended it didn't happen.

American reliance

The question is whether such tactics will succeed in defanging Trump. In Europe, Merkel always enjoys the advantage of being the most powerful person in the room, an unspoken but decisive aspect in any interaction. With Trump, that disappears. Germany is too dependent on the U.S. to simply ignore him, as she has often done with Putin. While the U.S.' military commitment in Germany is well known, the country's reliance on the U.S. as an export market is often underplayed. Last year, the U.S. surpassed France as Germany's largest trading partner. Whether cars or chemicals, German industry heavily depends on demand from the U.S.

That may help explain Merkel's caution in responding to Trump's taunts. During the campaign, despite a flurry of insults, Merkel refused to be provoked. Even as French President François Hollande said Trump made one "want to retch" and other leaders castigated him for his behavior, Merkel remained silent.

So far, their communication has been limited to a congratulatory phone call last week and a brief [statement](#) by Merkel in which she offered to work with Trump on the basis of shared values, including "respect for the law and dignity of every human being."

Though the message was primarily aimed at a domestic audience aghast at the election result, liberals around the world rejoiced over what they saw as Merkel's strong defense of the universal values they accuse Trump of betraying. Left-leaning media have even begun to hold up Merkel as "the liberal West's [last defender](#)."

Trump won't be the last populist Merkel will be welcoming into office in the coming months.

Despite her global popularity, the German leader (and her country) may be ill-suited to the role of bulwark. The last time she heeded the Left's siren call to take what she thought was a bold moral stand, it went badly wrong. Not only did swathes of her own party turn against her as Germany bore the brunt of the [refugee](#) influx, the issue thrust Europe into an existential crisis from which it has yet to recover and threatened her position. Much as Merkel's unwavering position on austerity drove a wedge through the eurozone in the debt crisis, her refugee policies have left the Continent deeply divided.



Anti-Trump protesters near the Brandenburg Gate on November 12, 2016 in Berlin, Germany / Carsten Koall/Getty Images

It also looks like Trump won't be the last populist Merkel will be welcoming into office in the [coming months](#). With the far Right leading polls in Austria, the Netherlands and France, all countries with elections in the near future, the likelihood that Europe's political landscape will be radically reshaped is great.

Given that outlook, Germany's reliance on the U.S. and Merkel's instinct to shy conflict, the German leader is more likely to try to find common ground with the new president than to distance herself from him.

With her austere public demeanor, Merkel couldn't be more different to the flamboyant president-elect.

With a balanced budget and strong economy, Germany could easily spend more on defense, for example. Berlin devotes just 1.2 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, well below the 2 percent minimum all NATO members have pledged to achieve. The U.S. spends 3.6 percent of GDP on defense.

Trump warms to Angie

Ultimately, it's in both countries' interest to forge a close working relationship. Trump, whose [grandfather](#) emigrated from Germany to the U.S., has appeared more conciliatory toward the German leader of late. A few weeks before the election, he toned down his anti-Merkel message, saying in a television [interview](#) he had always been “pro Merkel.” Though he said he disagreed with her refugee policies, he described her as a “great world leader.”

Just as Trump played down the video of him making lewd comments about women as “locker room talk,” he could dismiss his statements about Merkel as little more than “campaign talk.”

With her austere public demeanor, Merkel couldn't be more different than the flamboyant president-elect. Though she is said to possess a sharp sense of humor and biting wit in private, it seems unlikely that she and Trump will ever share a close personal relationship. But she and Obama were never that close either and still managed to forge close cooperation.

That said, even if Trump comes to recognize the strategic imperative of keeping Germany close to the U.S., he may never forgive Merkel for one particular humiliation — besting him in the contest to become Time magazine's person of the year.

After losing out to the German, Trump's issued an irate [response](#) on Twitter:

“I told you [@TIME](#) Magazine would never pick me as person of the year despite being the big favorite. They picked person who is ruining Germany.”

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