

Personal Impressions and Analysis of the 68th Königswinter Conference

By Dr Helene von Bismarck

The 68th Königswinter Conference convened at Keble College, Oxford, on 12-14 April 2018. Keble College, with its impressive Victorian architecture, is a rather unusual and modern building by Oxford standards. As such, it was a perfect setting for a discussion about the Anglo-German relationship, which currently finds itself in an anything but usual situation. On the one hand, Brexit will dramatically redefine the circumstances in which relations between our countries are being conducted. On the other hand, the Skripal affair and the Syrian crisis have demonstrated the value of our alliance and the importance of our friendship and mutual support. On the last morning of the conference, delegates woke up to news that the United Kingdom, together with France and the United States, had carried out airstrikes against Syria. This served as a powerful reminder that we do not live in a world where we can afford to neglect our friends.

The conference began with a welcome by Sir Michael Arthur, chairman of the UK Königswinter Steering Committee, as well as Henning Horstmann, chairman of Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft. Unfortunately, they had to start with bad news: UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was unable attend the scheduled panel discussion with his German counterpart, Heiko Maas, on account of a special cabinet meeting regarding Syria. Johnson's remarks had to be read out by Sir Simon MacDonald, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office. This made the presence of Heiko Maas, the first German foreign minister in years to attend the Königswinter Conference, all the more interesting, but it also led to a certain unbalance in the ensuing discussion. There were many questions directed at Maas, mainly by British delegates, while the German participants barely spoke up, as it seemed unfair to question Sir Simon on a speech he had not written himself. Both speeches were made under the Chatham House Rule, but Maas and Johnson had met personally, for the first time, earlier on the same day and publicly announced their plan for a new Anglo-German strategic partnership. The complexity of the current situation was borne out by the fact that Heiko Maas was on his way back from his first visit to Ireland. It is also worth remarking that Maas displayed the same awareness and sensitivity to German history in his conference speech that he had already demonstrated during his visit to Yad Vashem a few weeks earlier.

After the minister's departure, a brainstorming session ensued in the plenary about potential topics for the three working groups on politics, economics, and society. This had the advantage that everyone could contribute even to groups that he or she was not a member of. All three working groups were supposed to shift their focus away from the ongoing Brexit negotiations, and towards the long-term development of the Anglo-German relationship. There was a wide variety of views presented in the plenary, and the British participants in particular presented anything but a united front. Still, there was general agreement on three main points:

- 1) Britain and Germany continue to share important values and our post-Brexit relationship ought to be built on those.
- 2) Brexit will entail a significant decimation of organized collaboration and regular encounters between stakeholders. The question at hand is how to make up for this, and most delegates, especially on the German side, agreed that this would be far from easy, if not impossible.
- 3) Both Britain and Germany will in all likelihood experience dramatic economic and societal disruption in the years to come, with possibly considerable political repercussions. The transformative impact of digitization can be expected to be such as to make Brexit pale in

significance. It was agreed that the conference should try and devise ways how to deal with this challenge.

The day concluded with a dinner in the splendid Keble Hall and a speech by Greg Clark, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. His remarks remain strictly off the record.

On Day Two of the conference, participants split into the three working groups. The plenary reconvened in the late afternoon to share their respective conclusions.

- I. Group One, chaired by Dr. Claudia Major, discussed 'The West after Brexit: Responsibilities of Britain and Germany'. The group began with an effort to create more empathy between Britons and Germans by engaging the delegates in role play: the Britons pretended to be Germans and vice-versa during a discussion about Russia and Syria. This was of course a promising subject for such an exchange, as British and German positions on this have assimilated considerably since the Skripal affair. As one delegate put it, 'Putin has lost Germany', a remarkable shift in the German policy towards Russia. Afterwards, the two groups told each other whether they agreed with each other's perceptions. Both groups were quite content with the results of this experiment. Several delegates remarked on the calmness of the discussion, which stood in marked contrast to previous years, when Brexit had dominated the agenda. The willingness to see each other's point of view was definitely there, and one British delegate went as far as saying, 'Perhaps we are more European than we thought.'

Following this exercise, Group One tried to outline the long-term Anglo-German political and security relationship by concentrating on common ground in the worldview of both countries, areas for possible collaboration, as well as formats in which such collaboration could be organized. It was agreed that this was rendered difficult by the fact that the international system currently finds itself in an era of extreme flux. Since the election of President Trump and the promotion of America First-ideas in the USA, the future of the Western alliance is far from certain. A focus on Western European cooperation, and especially tripartite cooperation between Germany, Britain and France, seems sensible. The delegates agreed that the rise of populism and the challenges to the liberal world order would be the defining development in international affairs over the next five years. There was no consensus, however, about just how gloomy the outlook really was. While a German argued that the EU needed to reorganize itself completely, a British participant took on the role of the optimist by suggesting that, in five years time, the situation could be expected to have calmed down considerably, with the EU still intact, and the Anglo-German relationship restored 'after the poison of Brexit'.

As for the future of Anglo-German collaboration, Group One suggested that there was a very substantial list of policy areas, such as regulation, transatlantic relations, crisis prevention, migration, sanctions, China or the Balkans, where cooperation was very desirable, but that the more relevant question was how to organize this after Brexit. Informal dialogue and cooperation in particular policy fields was perceived as more promising than the organization of new structures and institutions. The trouble was that Britain was too big to join the discussion in existing international groups as a bystander, while the creation of new forums might be perceived as a challenge to existing ones, particularly the EU. A delegate warned that this uncertainty what to do with Britain could result in 'the British question' succeeding 'the German question' in Europe. The group welcomed the new 'strategic dialogue' between Germany and Britain that had been announced by ministers Maas and Johnson on the day before, but criticized that content and substance of this plan remain unclear. It was suggested that this dialogue should be

extended and form the basis of an Anglo-German treaty of friendship, modelled after the Elysée Treaty between Germany and France.

- II. Group Two, chaired by Andreas Krautscheid, had probably the hardest job of all with its discussion about 'The impact of Brexit in times of disruptive changes in the economy'. They had to deal with a lot of Hypotheses, since it is next to impossible to assess the economic consequences of Brexit, as long as the detailed terms of Britain's withdrawal from the EU remain unclear. The group agreed that the Anglo-German economic relationship would be defined by the interplay of the short-term issue of Brexit and the longer-term development of far-reaching digital disruption. The exponential growth of quantum computing especially could be expected to drastically precipitate change. The central question was what kind of trading power the United Kingdom would turn out to be after Brexit. A smaller Mexico floating on free trade agreements? It was pointed out that trade with rising giants like China and India might turn into a battlefield between Britain and the EU. Competition between London and Berlin as digital spaces could be expected to increase, a 'frenemy-relationship' in the making. Finally, the group got into a pretty heated discussion about the positive and negative economic effects of migration in both countries.

- III. Group Three, chaired by Dr. Heather Grabbe, focused on the changing relationship between citizens and the state in both Britain and Germany. The participants analyzed and compared disruptive factors in our democracies and their likely effects for institutions and the state, before devising a list of concrete measures to keep the British and German societies integrated after Brexit. The participants agreed that the rise of populism presented cause for concern in both countries, but found no consensus about the causes and the scale of this problem. While all acknowledged that the generational gap and the unequal distribution of wealth and power were factors contributing to the hollowing out of the middle class, several participants warned against overstating the role of economic and generational factors in the demise of liberal democracy. Remarkably, there was a generational and gender gap within in the group, in the sense that the younger and female participants were more optimistic about the scale of disruption within our societies, which they considered to be more limited, especially in Germany, than the majority of the older male participants. The group agreed that feelings of disconnect between the elites and the rest, a decline of trust in the state, and a widely felt need for belonging and identity all played in the hands of populists. If too many people thought that their voices were neither heard, nor represented, there was a risk of disengagement from the democratic process. The declining appeal of political parties was indicative of this. Such feelings could very possibly spread even further as a result of digitization, migration and the changing nature of gender relations.

Group Three agreed that a localized and informal approach was the best way to face up to the challenges of uncertain identities and declining political engagement. Societal responsibility could not remain the prerogative of the nation state. Other actors, such as large corporations and foundations, had to assume more of the burden. Corporate Social Responsibility ought to be more than a brochure. Several participants criticized governments, companies and also the press for concentrating too much on short-term problems and too little on adjusting to long-term trends. An issue on which no consensus was found within the group was the concept of direct democracy. While one participant suggested that elements of direct democracy, or even the regular use of plebiscites, could be a useful tool to make people feel engaged in the political process, several others disagreed entirely, warning that this would only open the door to even more populism.

Group Three concluded its discussion by outlining a list of suggestions for encounters and collaboration between the British and the German societies after Brexit. The participants agreed that the cultural sector would be crucial. Language learning, history syllabi, youth exchanges and the facilitation of travel for artists and scientists all had a constructive role to play. The work of the British Council and the Goethe Institute ought to be encouraged and generously financed, and regional links and city partnerships should be forged and strengthened. Several delegates pointed out that state support for such encounters between our societies left a lot to be desired at the moment. It was all very well to boast that the UK and German governments had doubled their funds spent on youth exchange between our countries, but when the 400,000 Euros that are now allotted for this are compared to the 28 million Euros spent on Franco-German collaboration in this field, they sound a lot less impressive. While all participants were fully on board with creating new room for Anglo-German encounters, there is no point denying that there was still quite a lot of pessimism in the room because of Brexit. One participant asked: 'What makes you so sure that particularly the German side will be so interested in fostering bilateral cultural cooperation, and spending a lot of money on it? The sad reality is that Anglo-German relations after Brexit are not Germany's first priority. It is desirable and important to get civil society more engaged in Anglo-German collaboration, but the question is how.' A representative of the Auswärtige Amt concluded: 'No matter how hard we try – our relationship can never be the same again.'

In the plenary, a participant summed up the presentations of the three working groups with a word of warning: Germany and the United Kingdom should be wary of transforming into a divorcing couple determined to remain close friends, but somehow still drifting apart once their marriage formally ends. He concluded with a few thoughts on the role of referenda in a democracy, arguing that, given their potential impact and more frequent use in recent years, the terms of such referenda should be very carefully considered. Was an absolute majority really enough to decide the fate of a nation?

The second day of the Königswinter Conference was interrupted (at lunch) and concluded with two more speeches by leading politicians. Dr. Norbert Röttgen, head of the foreign policy committee (*Auswärtige Ausschuss*) in the Deutsche Bundestag, declared – explicitly on the record – his full solidarity with the British Government regarding Russia, and called for more European cooperation in the field of foreign policy and security. Such cooperation was all the more pertinent in light of the fact that Donald Trump was a 'cause for institutionalized disruption' with 'no foreign policy concept' whatsoever. Trump's trade policy, the Skripal affair, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria all demonstrated the need to act together. Röttgen called French President Emmanuel Macron's readiness to consider a European security policy an encouraging sign. He also argued that Germany was currently undergoing a major process of transformation, in the sense that German readiness to embrace more responsibility in the realm of Western security and defence was increasing. As for Anglo-German cooperation, he suggested to concentrate on joint policies, instead of creating new institutions. Röttgen's language was strong and clear: 'Let us join forces.' At dinner, David Lidington, minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, concluded the formal part of the conference with a speech, which, regrettably, remains off the record. It is probably safe to say that he indicated, like every politician speaking at the conference, a strong desire to carry a close Anglo-German relationship over the historical threshold of Brexit. The question how precisely this can be achieved in the long term will provide ample material for future Königswinter Conferences.