



Top 10 — GAC Essay Competition 2025

Essay Question

Germany, the United States, and the wider alliance are at a crossroads. We are entering a new era of international relationships, affecting dimensions such as global trade, defense, and security. This moment calls for a Transatlantic Transformation – a rethinking of how we collaborate, communicate, and confront global challenges together.

What are your ideas for redefining the transatlantic partnership in light of this transformation? How would you reinvigorate it for the future?

Title of the Essay

What Time Is It in Berlin?

Presence in a Desynchronized Alliance

Author

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Essay

- October 3rd, 08:00 a.m. – Washington, D.C. -

Camera on. Notes open. I've even put on a blazer, the Zoom version of diplomatic readiness. It's our weekly call on sanctions coordination, and I'm eager to start.

- 08:05 a.m. -

Still alone in the call. No ding, no colleague. Let me check the calendar invite: 14:00 CET. That should be now... Or is it CEST?

- 08:12 a.m. -

I'll type a polite follow-up: "Just checking in, are we still meeting?" No reply.

- 08:30 a.m. -

The realization comes when I glance at my phone: German Unity Day. A national holiday. Of course.



That exchange, a minor misfire, a brief silence, a meeting that wasn't, could be brushed aside as nothing more than bad luck. But it left me wondering: if such small moments of being out of step happen over a meeting, what happens when the stakes are higher? It isn't just about the odd holiday or daylight-saving mix-up. Behind it lie different ways of moving through the world, different senses of when something matters enough to act, and how quickly to move once it does.

On one side of the Atlantic, policy is often set to the tempo of election cycles, rolling news, and the imperative to demonstrate resolve in real time. U.S. foreign policy can be impatient by design, capable of decisive military deployment within days, or of recalibrating a trade stance in response to a week's headlines. This stems from a belief that credibility rests on the ability to act swiftly and unilaterally if necessary.¹

On the other, German and European Union foreign policy tends toward deliberation. Decisions are filtered through coalition politics, EU consensus-building, and a deeply ingrained commitment to procedure. Germany's vaunted values-based approach often serves as a language of reassurance while the real engine is stability and caution.² In practice, that means more time spent building norms and frameworks, less on sudden shifts of course.

These are not simply different speeds; they are different clocks of diplomacy. One ticks toward action, the other toward agreement. And while neither is inherently superior, they measure the same events in different units. A crisis that feels immediate in Washington may still be in the pre-consultation stage in Berlin. More than just being logistical, that gap shapes how each side perceives the other's reliability. Can these diplomatic clocks ever be set in sync?

If the first step is to acknowledge that we keep different clocks, the second is to stop trying to reset one another's. Telling the U.S. to slow down or Europe to speed up only breeds frustration.

¹ (Wright, 2017: 37, 150)

² (Kundnani, 2015: 7-22)



Instead, the alliance could invest in temporal diplomacy, building the capacity to meet in the right moments, even when internal tempos diverge. This does not mean harmonizing every decision-making process. It means creating bridges between them.

One practical step could be the creation of Transatlantic Pace Maps, shared analytical tools that chart each side's decision-making rhythms, from election cycles and parliamentary recesses to budget deadlines and NATO planning horizons. Knowing not just *what* a partner thinks, but *when* they can act, could prevent missed opportunities for joint initiatives.³

Similarly, tempo-sensitive task forces could be embedded in existing institutions. Imagine a NATO–EU liaison team fluent in both Washington's crisis-response tempo and Brussels' consensus-building pace, able to anticipate lags and synchronize signals before public perception turns to doubt.

On a more symbolic level, the partners could introduce a Transatlantic Strategic Calendar, a curated annual sequence of joint exercises, commemorations, and declarations, intentionally placed to reaffirm presence at key moments. This could include a “Day of Simultaneity”, when both sides unveil coordinated commitments on security, climate, or technology, underscoring that showing up *together* can be as powerful as the substance itself.

The point is not to create a faster alliance, but a better-timed one. An alliance that understands its own temporal architecture and uses it to turn divergence into an advantage rather than a liability.

Sometimes, the temporal mismatch is not just about pace, but also about trust. The Trump presidency jarringly accelerated this misalignment. Some decisions, such as abrupt troop withdrawals, tariff ultimatums, and transactional demands for NATO financing arrived without warning or consultation, leaving European institutions struggling to keep up. Such tactics didn't merely violate norms; they reversed expectations. Micro-coordination became a liability.

³ (Wright, 2017: 214, 221)



As a Senate Report put it, “America’s foreign policy has been run like a wayward vessel”.⁴ Trump’s style forces European leaders into reactive mode, having to scramble statements, reset strategy, recalibrate partnerships in real time. It is not just the speed; it is the instability of timing itself, revealing what we have lost: a shared temporal framework. And as Wright warns, alliances last only as long as they’re predictable.⁵ When clocks stop meaning the same thing, strategic autonomy stops being an option, it becomes a necessity.

Across these pages, the argument has been simple: transatlantic cooperation is not only about what we do together, but when we do it. The friction is often less about diverging goals than about clocks that keep different time. From missed calls on German Unity Day to the tempo shocks of the Trump presidency, the alliance’s reliability has been as much a matter of timing as of trust.

Re-synchronizing does not mean erasing our differences. It means building the reflex and the mechanisms to arrive in the same moment when it matters. Shared tempo infrastructure could allow Berlin and Washington to move at their own pace without losing the rhythm of each other’s steps.

In the end, the transatlantic clock will never tick perfectly in unison. But if we can agree on the critical hours, the moments that define whether we stand together or apart, then perhaps we will find that the real measure of solidarity is not speed, but simultaneity.

References / Bibliography

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⁴ (Menendez, 2020: 12)

⁵ (Wright, 2017: 223-228)