

## **AfD leaders want to keep distance from unpopular Trump before key eastern elections**

*di Nette Nöstlinger e Pauline von Pezold*

BERLIN — Leaders of Germany’s far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) are quietly distancing themselves from U.S. President Donald Trump as backlash over the Iran war grows and important elections loom.

While rank-and-file members of the AfD continue to cultivate contacts with Trump administration officials and MAGA Republicans — and see it as in their long-term interest to do so — the party’s leaders are urging lawmakers to tamp down the overt, public embrace.

That dynamic is on ample display this week in Berlin. On Wednesday night, AfD foreign policy lawmakers were set to dine with U.S. State Department official David Goldman and a member of the political section of the U.S. embassy, Ian Campbell, according to an invitation seen by POLITICO that was confirmed by two invitees. The group was to have dined in a parliamentary club across from the Reichstag building after an event focused on German-U.S. relations amid a “changing world order.”

But two days before the dinner, AfD leader Alice Weidel told senior party lawmakers to reduce the number of high-profile trips party politicians are making to the U.S. to cultivate ties with MAGA Republicans, according to four people who were present at the meeting. The calculation is that its growing alignment with the U.S. administration is increasingly turning into a liability for the AfD.

“There have been a big many trips to the U.S. in quick succession, and there is a perception within the parliamentary group, the foreign policy working group, and certainly among the leadership that our goal has always been to maintain balanced and good relations with all international players,” said Torben Braga, an AfD lawmaker

from the eastern state of Thuringia. “In that we include — unlike other parties — Russia, but also, for example, China and India and countries in the Global South.”

Surveys show that most Germans are against this month’s strikes on Iran, and attitudes toward the U.S. are nearing record negatives, [with only 15 percent of Germans](#) saying they view the U.S. as a trustworthy partner in one recent poll. This helps explain [why the AfD’s leaders last month condemned the war with Iran](#), warning that “renewed destabilization of the Middle East” is “not in Germany’s interest.”

The effort to create some distance with Trump isn’t entirely new. AfD leaders [loosened their embrace of the Trump administration earlier this year](#) as public sentiment in Germany turned against the U.S. president over his talk of taking control of Greenland and his decision to seize Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

But the latest effort of AfD leaders to distance themselves from Trump reflects the new political realities in the far-right strongholds of the former East Germany ahead of two state elections in the region in September. In these areas, skepticism of American military interventions is more pervasive, as is sympathy with Vladimir Putin’s Russia. The AfD is leading comfortably in polls ahead of both state elections, and its leaders aim to harness that momentum to gain power for the first time since the party’s founding in 2013 in at least one of the two races.

“Right now, everything else is taking a back seat to the elections in the East,” said Gerald Otten, a foreign policy lawmaker of the AfD who only last week visited Washington as part of NATO’s parliamentary assembly.

### **Against the U.S. ‘empire’**

This doesn’t mean the AfD is abandoning its attempts to network with ideological allies in the U.S., at least behind the scenes.

“Together with guest speakers from the United States, we will analyze the opportunities, risks, and strategic options for cooperation based on shared cultural values and economic interdependence,” read an invitation to the event with U.S. officials and AfD lawmakers on Wednesday night in Berlin.

Christopher Butler, executive director of Americans for Tax Reform and Stefano Forte, president of the New York Young Republicans Club, were listed as speakers.

Goldman, who works in the office of policy planning in the U.S. State Department, did not immediately respond to a request for comment about his planned attendance at the event and planned dinner with AfD officials afterwards. The U.S. embassy in Berlin also did not respond to requests for comment on Campbell's scheduled attendance by the time of publication.

The reason AfD leaders want to maintain contact with MAGA Republicans is clear: They still [look to the Trump administration for support](#) to end their political ostracization at home. The party is pushing German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's conservatives to knock down the "firewall" that has kept mainstream parties in Germany from governing with the far right since the end of World War II.

Early in Trump's second term, the AfD [eagerly embraced endorsements](#) from Elon Musk, the tech entrepreneur and Trump supporter, and celebrated Vice President JD Vance's attack on European firewalls against the far right at last year's Munich Security Conference.

But that position had not been the default for the AfD, which is traditionally more sympathetic to Moscow. In fact, many AfD politicians have previously expressed resentment over American military interventions around the world and what they view as the U.S. postwar domination of Germany. In an [interview](#) last year with the American Conservative bimonthly magazine, AfD leader Weidel suggested Germany is a "slave" to the U.S. and said the country would not fight in foreign wars for an American "empire."

"Don't expect the unfree to take over this fight for you," Weidel said at the time. "There will be no such thing."

Against that backdrop, the party's cooling posture toward the U.S. — at least outwardly — marks a shift back toward the old normal.