

## **Merkel's Atlantic Crossing**

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Angela Merkel has passed the acid test: her first US visit as Chancellor proved her ability to please disparate audiences without causing offense. With amazing speed Merkel established her authority in Germany by forging a national consensus on economic policy, and in Europe by leading the way out of the EU budget impasse. Germany's economic policy may be deeply flawed, and the EU budget consensus may not hold; yet for now Merkel is seen as a surprising political success.

In Washington she broke new ground, or rather re-conquered ground abandoned by the blustery Gerhard Schröder. Surely but subtly Merkel is nudging Berlin's foreign policy a bit closer to the US-UK Atlantic Alliance, delicately relaxing links with the Franco-Russian entente that so entrances Herr Schröder. The question is, can she manage these power relations to strengthen US-German relations without weakening Germany's role in Europe. If history offers any guidance, the answer is yes.

Unlike her predecessor but much like her former mentor, Helmut Kohl, Merkel has a solid grasp of the role Germany has played in global affairs since Adenauer. Germany has succeeded by 'tipping the scales' at crucial moments ("Zünglein an der Waage"), as Kohl did in deftly paving the way for German reunification. The act of reunification, a pivotal moment for modern Europe whose impact is still underappreciated, opened the way for EU expansion eastward and southward while cementing Germany's importance as a balance wheel between east and west, north and south.

Schröder would have none of this. For him Germany had to assert independence from the US and dominance in Europe, bringing France in tow. Before the Iraq war Schröder preempted even the UN by announcing Germany would not participate in any military action to enforce Security Council resolutions. In domestic politics he prospered only by sacrificing Germany's most important postwar relationship. Also sacrificed were Germany's aspirations for a permanent Security Council seat and a voting advantage in EU decisionmaking. Schröder's "German Way" was a dead end.

Clearly Merkel knows better. She upheld German and European values by criticizing the Guantanamo Bay detention facility the US employs for suspected terrorists, while offering to boost German support for peacekeeping (technical

and financial aid, not military) in Iraq. At a critical juncture she agreed to join President Bush in taking to the Security Council the matter of Iran's defiance of its IAEA commitments in driving ahead with its nuclear program, launching a united European front on the challenge of Iran that, with luck, will extend to Russia and Asia as well.

So much for the easy part. Gestures of solidarity are important, but both the US and Germany will be sorely tested in putting their newly-rediscovered friendship to work. Iran has mastered the art of stalling, and moving its nuclear controversy to the UN is no guarantee of decisive action. Prosecuting the war on terror still requires that Europe and America 'agree to disagree' on some matters while cooperating closely on intelligence and the nuts-and-bolts of nation building, at least. Energy policy is increasingly a hot topic on both sides of the Atlantic, with both sides preaching energy independence while their mutual dependence on diversified energy sources grows by the day.

It cannot escape Germany or America that Russia's power-play in manipulating natural gas supplies to the Ukraine and Moldova raised a serious question whether market incentives or geopolitics will dominate Europe's energy future. In that regard Gerhard Schröder's new job with Gazprom is troubling not just on conflict-of-interest grounds but because it gives him a potential power-broker role between Germany and Putin's Russia.

Germany of course will succeed not as power-broker but as nuanced conciliator between East and West. To that end Angela Merkel is well advised to be the leader both Bush and Putin trust; the enthusiast for Europe but not its guardian; and facilitator of greater integration between New and Old Europe but champion of neither. This means talking up the cause of the European Constitution without expending a great deal of political capital on it. It also means proposing specific measures Europe can support for handling Guantanamo detainees without making demands the US cannot meet.

Following Merkel's visit with President Bush, former US Ambassador to Germany Dan Coats told Deutsche Welle that Bush saw the Chancellor's Guantanamo critique as "criticism of a friend and ally as opposed to someone that may be using it for political purposes or simply to gain political favor at home by making negative comments about the United States." This is a telling presumption of Merkel's good faith; in stark contrast to her predecessor. If she can establish Germany's credibility this way wherever she visits, Angela Merkel can occupy the position of quiet power that suits her nation best.

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