

Transatlantic relations enter an ice age

Peter Schwarz
6 April 2001

Although the new American president, George W. Bush, has been in office for less than one hundred days, transatlantic relations have visibly cooled. In the run-up to the elections, the European press repeatedly expressed its concern that in the event of a Republican victory, US foreign policy would shift to a more unilateral course, concentrating exclusively on American interests. Now many of the same commentators feel that their worst fears have been realised.

Nevertheless, there is agreement that the foreign policy priorities of the Bush administration have still not been firmly established. According to most analysts the government is split into opposing camps. The State Department, under Colin Powell, is interested in developing a harmonious collaboration with America's European partners, while the Defence Department, under Donald Rumsfeld, prefers a course that takes less account of the opinion of America's allies. Bush himself has not definitively decided where he stands.

European criticism of the United States has intensified. In particular, the German press has with increasing frequency published commentaries attacking Europe's closest ally in an aggressive tone that has little precedent.

On March 24 the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a short comment under the title "Bully Bush" that characterised the president's way of working as follows: "One bangs on the table, insults one's colleagues, snubs the enemy and then waits for a reaction." One week later the same paper subjected Bush's foreign policy to biting criticism following the visit by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to Washington.

Under the headline "America's Temptation", the commentary accused Bush of taking diplomacy to mean "the most strident definition of interests, preferably without speaking to friends or enemies about areas of agreement or difference.... On a daily basis he repulses friends and creates enemies."

The commentary continues in a similar tone: "America's oldest and most important allies feel snubbed by Bush's unilateral thunderclaps. Pigheadedness and disinterest have poisoned the atmosphere.... Bush pursues foreign policy along the lines of American domestic politics. He has transported the harshness of political exchange in domestic politics into the arena of foreign policy. Morality, ideology and even clichés are the leitmotifs."

In a lead article on the Schröder visit, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, traditionally a firm supporter of good transatlantic relations, came to similar conclusions: "With unmistakable clarity Schröder learnt there what Bush regards as the yardstick for his politics—American national interests."

European disquiet over American policy has been ignited on a variety of fronts. Bush is accused of boycotting the process of

reconciliation between North and South Korea, unnecessarily intensifying differences in relations with Russia and China and worsening the crisis in the Middle East by squeezing out the Palestinians. The US is also made partly responsible in press commentaries for the latest conflicts in the Balkans on account of its role in training, arming and silently tolerating the activities of the Albanian KLA militias that now threaten the territory of Macedonia.

More recently, the US decision to unilaterally opt out of the Kyoto Protocol governing the protection of the environment has become the focus of criticism. In 1997, in the Japanese city of Kyoto, the developed industrialised countries came to the first-ever binding agreement to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases. Such gases, arising from the combustion of raw materials like coal and oil, are regarded as the main causes of global warming and the potentially catastrophic climatic changes that come in its wake. The Kyoto Protocol, however, only takes effect when it is ratified by at least 55 countries responsible for at least 55 percent of the emissions of carbon dioxide worldwide.

Last week President Bush openly and clearly rejected the Kyoto Protocol. He declared that the agreement is not acceptable to his government because it harms the interests of the American economy and—in light of the energy crisis in California—the interests of the American consumer.

His stance unleashed a storm of protest from countries such as Japan, Australia and Canada that have themselves up until now shared some of America's reservations over Kyoto. French President Jacques Chirac characterised Bush's decision as "disquieting and unacceptable". Japanese Premier Yoshiro Mori declared himself "very concerned", and China denounced Bush's move as "irresponsible". Following his recent visit, German Chancellor Schröder also publicly expressed his irritation over Bush's stance.

The retreat by the US threatens the Kyoto Protocol as a whole. With 5 percent of the world's population, the US is responsible for 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide—over 6 billion tonnes per year. Per head of population, carbon dioxide emissions in America are double those of Germany and four times the world average.

Nevertheless, there is a large dose of hypocrisy in the anger expressed at Bush's withdrawal from the agreement. In the first place, no one seriously expected that the US Senate, which had already blocked the agreement by a large majority during the Clinton administration, would now agree to the terms of the Kyoto Protocol. Secondly, the issue of how European states will undertake in practice to implement the measures aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions as stipulated in the protocol remains

totally unclear. This applies particularly to Germany, which has agreed to reduce its dependence on atomic power and will, in future, be even more dependent on fossil fuels.

Thirdly, the Kyoto Protocol, even if fully realised, remains a mere drop in the ocean. The protocol calls for an average reduction of greenhouse gases of 5.2 percent on the part of industrialised countries by the 2012. According to the estimates of climate researchers, a four-fold higher reduction is necessary to prevent a climatic catastrophe that would threaten the lives of millions, or even billions, of people.

The Kyoto Protocol is the only concrete result of a total of seven international climate conferences, beginning with the 1992 conference in Rio. If the US, in the name of national economic interests, now demonstratively rejects the paltry stipulations laid down in Kyoto, this merely reveals the impotence of *all* governments confronted with the ever more evident prospect of a global catastrophe. It underlines the impossibility of resolving such problems within the framework of the existing economic and social order.

The fact that this issue is now being aggressively taken up by European governments has less to do with the environment than with mobilising support for their own national interests. Although the various governments are at odds in numerous other foreign policy areas, a firm front has been established against the US on this question, stretching from Toronto to Tokyo.

Bush's high-handed intervention, announcing his decision without consulting any of his international partners—apparently he kept his own environment minister in the dark—has isolated the US abroad and further roiled public opinion. The US is seen as a ruthless superpower exclusively concerned with its own interests, i.e., the interests of the major American energy companies, and prepared to trample on the concerns raised by the rest of the world.

German Chancellor Schröder has not failed to detect the possibility of exploiting such moods to pursue his own foreign policy ambitions. Following his first meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared: “It is not for us to criticise the Americans.” Now, however, following Schröder's visit with Bush, the chancellor has boasted to journalists that anyone who expected him to go to Washington and “just click my heels together” was proceeding from false assumptions.

The *Berliner Zeitung* gleefully reported: “For the first time, it appears, Schröder has departed from the decades-long practice on the part of the Germans to approach their alliance partner with a slightly bent back. The not very helpful motto ‘Whatever you do, don't rub them the wrong way’ no longer applies in German-American relations.” The article was headlined “The de-Americanisation of Europe”.

There is absolutely nothing positive about this sort of anti-Americanism. It serves simply to open the way for a new and aggressive foreign policy on the part of Germany and Europe, including the use of military measures.

Where this can lead was graphically demonstrated by the first independent foreign policy intervention on the part of Germany following reunification in 1990. The recognition of Slovenia and Croatia by the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and

Foreign Minister Dietrich Genscher led to the break-up of Yugoslavia, unleashing as a consequence an ethnic bloodbath and eventually paving the way for the first post-war military intervention by the German army in the 1999 war against Yugoslavia.

At that time the NATO bombardment of a largely defenceless country was justified by “peace” propaganda and allusions to the crimes of Auschwitz. Now the issue of the environment is playing the same role in intensifying the worsening of relations with the US. It will not take long before German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping is able to push through his long hoped for increase in defence spending—at the cost of expenditure on social and environmental needs.

The worsening of relations with the US has far-reaching consequences that seem to have escaped the limited scope of the pragmatic members of Germany's ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition.

Internal stability in Germany in the twentieth century was always bound up with American domination. This was the basis of the politics of social democracy, as well as that of the conservative Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union parties, in the period following the Second World War. In the 1920s it was the US-sponsored Dawes plan and Young plan that provided a degree of stability to the crisis-wracked Weimar Republic, until the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 plunged the country into chaos, leading three years later to the assumption of power by the Nazis. After the war the Marshall plan provided the basis for the “German economic miracle” and the policies of Germany's “social market economy”.

An open conflict with the US will inevitably undermine the basis of German domestic stability. Trade war and intensified economic rivalry and the expenditure involved in an aggressive foreign policy and military rearmament will destroy all that remains of past social gains, following 16 years of the Kohl government and two years of the SPD-Green Party coalition. It will open up a new epoch of profound social instability.



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