Europe reacts nervously to Bush's State of the Union speech

Peter Schwarz
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Much of the initial reaction in the European press to US President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech varies between ironical commentary and more open, although generally restrained, criticism. While direct attacks on Bush are rare, most commentaries acknowledge that influential political circles in Europe are deeply disturbed by the unilateral course made clear in his January 29 speech.

Under the headline "War as the father of all things," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* deals with the impending visit to Washington of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. "Poor Gerhard Schröder," the commentator remarks, "It will not be easy to be the first European sourpuss to appear before the throne of the freshly anointed American Caesar. George Bush has just revelled in the homage awarded him by Congress, and sunned himself in the high public ratings of the opinion polls—and now comes the German chancellor to recall grimy everyday matters: conflicts over steel, Russian debts, the status of prisoners. Oh, these burdensome Europeans."

Otherwise, the newspaper is of the opinion that Bush's latest martial appearance is largely in response to domestic problems: "The president needs this war to push ahead with his domestic agenda, which has been postponed somewhat by the attacks of September 11, but has not gone away. Bush needs this war as justification for his budget deficit, which he is bestowing upon the country for the first time in years. Bush needs this war as justification for the recession, as well as his answer to the struggle against the economic crisis. And Bush needs this war and the popularity it has brought him all the more urgently because congressional elections are due this year.... The president needs powerful images to prevent any dimming of recollections of the attacks that took place in September."

The French newspaper *Libération* sees things in a similar manner and quotes an American sociologist to underline the point. "For Glynn Wood, professor of politics at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (California), the alarmism expressed by Bush has basically the aim of dispelling thoughts of domestic concerns: the Enron scandal, the recession, the budget situation... 'In the political history of America it is a classical way of reacting—by constructing potential threat scenarios in order to divert attention from domestic problems,' he asserted."

The French newspaper *Le Monde* emphasises the dangers arising from the warlike posture of Bush. With barely disguised sarcasm, an editorial in the paper begins: "The US finds itself still at war.... It was the speech of a man who claims he must prepare his country for a test equivalent to the struggle against communism during the Cold War."

The newspaper stresses that the struggle against terrorism is a political task and goes on to ask: "Is the struggle against terrorism a task for the Pentagon budget, or collaboration between police and politicians?" Is it a question of purely "military factors?" Finally the paper warns that Bush's attack on North Korea, Iraq and Iran can unleash conflicts with China and Russia: "It is sufficient to point out that China and Russia are the most important exporters of weapons to Iraq, Iran and North Korea."

The British *Financial Times* issues an even clearer warning against the break-up of the fragile alliances struck in the course of the war against Afghanistan. In an editorial comment headlined "Tough talk," the newspaper states: "Yet it is essential that the US president and commander-in-chief should not abandon the moderation and careful diplomacy that have

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enabled the US-led campaign to unite such a broad international coalition behind it. There is a danger that his ringing rhetoric about defeating an ‘axis of evil’ will divide the alliance, rather than seal a common purpose.”

Regarding Bush’s threats against Iran, Iraq and North Korea, the newspaper comments: “Global terrorism and rogue states are very different targets. They all require different treatment. North Korea and Iran do not belong in the same breath as Iraq. To lump them together is simplistic and will alienate new allies in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.” The editorial ends with the words: “Mr Bush’s first year in office has left him hugely popular. But that should not be a signal to abandon moderation.”

The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* notes with concern that Bush demonstrates a “Reaganite sense of mission” and a turn away from his European allies. “Contrary to his speech of September 20, this time the president only made casual reference to the allies. At that time the British prime minister, Tony Blair, was sitting in the gallery; this time it was the Afghani interim president, Hamid Karsai, a man who needs more help from Washington than he can give.” The task of Europeans, according to the newspaper, is to exert a “moderating influence” on the US.

Hardly any comments on Bush’s address were available from European centres of government. Following expressions of hope by European leaders that the Americans would adopt a cooperative and moderate course, one has the impression that they now need some time to recover from the shock of this latest speech.

Diplomatic relations have been visibly stretched in recent days. At the start of the week, European Union foreign ministers distanced themselves from American policy in the Middle East in an almost unprecedented manner. At the same time that Bush demonstratively invited Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon to Washington and attacked Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, EU foreign ministers attacked Sharon and warned against any attempt to isolate Arafat.

These tensions herald increasingly harsh conflicts between the US and Europe, which, in the longer term, cannot and will not passively tolerate the high-handed attitude of Washington.

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