

Bush in Germany: smiles cannot mask US-European conflicts

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With each day of President George W. Bush's sojourn through Europe, it became clearer that the smiles for the cameras and declarations of mutual friendship could not hide the increasing transatlantic conflicts.

Media commentary made merry about the "summit of smiles" and the big talk of a new "transatlantic friendship." Europe had faced weeks of "the drumbeat of an American charm offensive," wrote the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, with the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* adding that the stock of pathos was exhausted.

"As though repeating a mantra, European and American politicians again and again intoned, 'style is substance,'" another article in the same newspaper commented. "However, this slogan, which is better suited as an advertising slogan for [fashion guru Karl] Lagerfeld than as a political motif, could not disguise the fact that the number of things in common in the daily business of politics is very small."

Parallels can be found in daily life. Before a personal relationship completely founders on the rocks and turns to outright hostility, a marriage guidance counsellor usually recommends a "goodwill offensive" by both sides. The uncomfortable niceties that follow are usually more embarrassing than useful, producing only a shake of the head from outsiders, who know that it is over.

Even more so in the world of politics, facts are stubborn things. The talks in Mainz were characterised by real conflicts and growing strategic differences.

For the first time, an American president had travelled to Europe under conditions where the dollar was losing its unchallenged supremacy in the world economy. The fragility of the dollar became visible again on Tuesday evening. When South Korea's Central Bank—which holds \$200 billion, the fourth-largest dollar reserves in the world—announced, it wanted to denominate part of these reserves in euros, the dollar lost 1.5 points against the euro; the Dow Jones also slumped by 1.6 percent. Behind

this weakness of the dollar stands the enormous US balance-of-payments deficit, which is rising to ever-new record heights.

Since the Iraq war, the Bush administration's previous attempts to compensate for this economic decline through expressions of military strength have been re-evaluated in Europe. "There is no mistaking what he wants," wrote the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. "Quickly reaching painful limits in Iraq, he is again seeking partners who can share a part of the burden." But if Bush tries to sweep aside past discord between the US and some European countries with the remark that there is no such thing as an American or European strategy, but only one of liberty, then he just makes clear "how little he understands," the paper wrote.

The fight for liberty and thus for "Western values" would no longer automatically include American supremacy. The times in which "the Europeans simply give way" were finally over. Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (Social Democratic Party-SPD) had already sounded this theme in an article in *Die Zeit*, which began and ended with the words: "Friendship is not servitude."

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) was the one who most clearly expressed European claims to operate on a par with the US in future. His after-dinner speech at Mainz castle on Wednesday called America and Germany "equal partners." Despite all the diplomatic niceties, he left no doubt about what he understood by this. Unilateral American actions—an obvious reference to the decision to go to war against Iraq, and the arrogant way in which Europe was confronted with a *fait accompli*—would no longer be accepted.

Schröder signalled the German government's readiness to participate in aiding security arrangements in Iraq, but between the lines the warning was clearly audible that in the future, his government was no longer prepared to pick up the tab when there had been no serious cooperation

beforehand.

Like his speech at the Munich Security Conference two weeks earlier, Schröder's criticism was not in principle directed against American actions in Iraq. He mentioned neither the lies nor the doctrine of preventive war that had been used to justify the war, nor the treatment of the prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo that contravenes all international laws. The only thing Schröder demanded was "equal rights." German and European interests would have to be given greater consideration in future.

The differences again became very clear regarding military action against Iran and Syria. Germany, France and Great Britain are seeking a diplomatic solution to the dispute with Teheran about its nuclear programme, and are demanding support for this from the US government as the means of ensuring the effectiveness of this initiative. Bush, on the other hand, not only rejects this approach but has also sought to torpedo it and openly declares that the option of military action is "on the table."

It is no different in relation to Syria. Even the much-touted "agreement" with the French president on this question fades when looked at more closely. The French delegation advanced the pro-US formula that there was "a new tone, a new style and also a new spirit" in transatlantic relations. But according to French daily *Le Figaro*, that is far from meaning that the "differences are exhausted." Although Chirac and Bush both demanded the departure of Syrian troops from the Lebanon before elections there on April 17, they are pursuing completely different aims. France wants to loosen Damascus's economic and political grip over Beirut. As the former colonial power, it is pursuing its economic and financial interests in Lebanon. For its part, the US wants to put Syria under pressure, to undermine its support for Hezbollah, which is a legal party in Lebanon.

"Paris wants to avoid a confrontation with Syria, say those near to Chirac, and rejects any connection with the Israel-Palestine question, which is not Washington's concern," writes *Le Figaro*. "France opposes Europe placing Hezbollah on the list of terrorist organisations, as is demanded by the United States and Israel."

During the NATO summit in Brussels, President Chirac followed Gerhard Schröder's lead in stressing the "development of European defence policy." Although both heads of government signed the summit communiqué, which calls NATO the "most successful alliance in history," this does not change the fact that they

are moving forward to establish a European military capability independent of NATO structures.

In November 2004, European Union defence ministers agreed to establish 13 rapid-reaction combat groups. Each will comprise some 1,500 to 2,000 soldiers and can be deployed within five to ten days. They should be in place by 2007. These units will give the EU a well-armed, highly mobile intervention force. They are to provide the military muscle of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

Ordinary people reacted quite differently than the political elite to Bush's visit. They were concerned not with various imperialist interests but with a fundamental rejection of war and militarism. Broad layers of the population regard Bush as a figure of hate, to an extent seen with no other politician since the 1930s. The bizarre security precautions during his visit were regarded not merely as an annoyance, but as an outright provocation. "If he doesn't trust anyone, he should stay at home or conduct his talks on a warship," said one pensioner in Mainz, giving voice to a widespread sentiment.

Any contact between Bush and ordinary people was excluded. Everything was artificially staged. One journalist reported how US security experts had searched in vain for people who could appear at a certain location at a particular time and wave as Bush passed by. However, they could not find anybody prepared to do this. Members of an American TV crew had a similar experience when they went to a shopping mall and tried to find people who had a good word to say about Bush. Seldom has a politician made himself so unpopular in so short a time.



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