

Schröder at the White House: cuddling up to Bush

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In the autumn of 2002, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens won an election in Germany that most had declared out of their reach. The turn-around was based on the fact that in the run-up to election day, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder expressed opposition to the Iraq war.

Although Schröder was primarily motivated by German interests in the Middle East, his stance was supported by voters who were fundamentally opposed to a war of aggression that they regarded as an imperialist crime. The German conservative opposition lost the election because it had identified itself with the war plans of US President Bush.

Three years later, in the middle of preparations for the next German election campaign, nothing remains of Schröder's anti-war stance. His recent—and very likely last—visit to the White House was characterized by his deference to a president whose reasons for going to war have been publicly exposed as lies, whose Iraq policy is in tatters, and who is rapidly losing support in the US.

The chancellor came to Washington to beg the president to agree to a permanent seat for Germany on the UN Security Council—a demand which has been energetically pursued for some time by Schröder and his Green Party foreign minister, Joschka Fischer. In arguing for a seat, Schröder emphasized the German contribution toward the stabilization of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans, and justified his claim for a place in the highest UN committee with the words: “From this we derive certain rights, the right to joint decision-making at the highest level.”

Bush shrugged off his guest with a diplomatic non-committal: “We do not reject the candidacy of any country”—a response that Schröder hailed as positive. In fact, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had personally expressed her opposition to a permanent seat for Germany in the Security Council three weeks

previously.

Bush saw little reason to snub Schröder openly, particularly since the submissiveness of this former opponent of the Iraq war was convenient for an American president confronted with growing anti-war sentiment in the US. In any event, Schröder is regarded in Washington as a “lame duck,” on his way out of office.

The newspaper *Neue Züricher Zeitung* commented: “If Schröder was someone to take seriously, then Bush would probably have expressed himself more clearly. In the first place, he would have made clear to the German chancellor in unambiguous terms that there was no chance of a permanent seat for Germany on the UN Security Council.”

The newspaper said German diplomacy had evinced a “colossal perceptual deficit” ever since “Schröder and his foreign minister Fischer began spanning the globe as heralds of an expanded Security Council.” They not only misjudge the true attitude of Washington, the newspaper wrote, but also “how unpopular a German UN seat would be to many countries in Europe.”

The US media used Schröder's visit and his attempts to curry favor with Bush to agitate for an aggressive policy against Iran. Thus, the *Washington Post* headlined its article on Schröder's White House visit: “Schröder Agrees with Bush on Iran.” The newspaper stated that following the unexpected election of the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iranian president, Bush and Schröder had “presented a common front on Iran.”

The *Post* quoted Bush as saying: “My message ... is that we continue working with Great Britain, France and Germany to send a focused, concerted, unified message that says the development of nuclear weapons is unacceptable. And a process which would enable Iran to develop nuclear weapons is unacceptable.”

Schröder replied, “I couldn't agree more with this message. We are going to continue being tough and firm

on all of that.”

In reality, the diplomatic clichés exchanged in the Oval Office cannot mask profound differences over the Iran question. While Bush warned that a civilian nuclear program puts Iran in a position where it could manufacture nuclear weapons, Schröder repeatedly stressed Iran’s right to possess civilian nuclear plants.

European powers regard the negotiations over nuclear power with Iran as a means to forestall military action by the US. Washington supports the negotiations as a means of increasing pressure on Iran and inventing pretexts for a more aggressive policy. For Germany, in particular, an open conflict with Iran, an important oil supplier and market for German goods, would have devastating economic consequences, not to mention the destabilizing effects on the entire region, including Turkey.

In the long run, these differences are of a tactical nature. Schröder does not challenge in principle the right of American imperialism to forcibly expand its interests across the globe. He merely wants to ensure that German and European imperialism have their share of the booty. He therefore prefers to cloak these issues behind a diplomatic screen.

If he had openly addressed his differences with Bush and confronted the US president with Washington’s lies, he would have evoked a positive response not only with voters in Germany, but also among Americans. Such a stance, however, would have awakened expectations that run contrary to the interests of the ruling elites in both the US and Germany.

As with economic and social policy, Schröder is a firm defender of bourgeois interests in the field of foreign policy. He would prefer to hand over power to his conservative opponents in Germany rather than budge from his unpopular program of social and welfare cuts known as Agenda 2010. And he prefers to accept defeat at the polls rather than risk a confrontation with the Bush administration that would anger and alienate German big business.



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