

German Chancellor Merkel in Washington

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Political circles in Berlin were somewhat taken aback by the considerable expectations and preparations in the US in connection with the current visit being made by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. It has been a long time since the red carpet has been rolled out at the White House so demonstratively as for the new head of the German government.

President George W. Bush revealed he had reserved three hours for personal discussion with Merkel. He had a great interest in developing a “good personal relationship” with the first female German chancellor, he declared. “I expect a new relationship with Germany,” Republican Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas remarked at a press conference in Washington on Tuesday.

The German press agency *dpa* quoted Senator Brownback: “There is the chance for a new start. We had some problems in German-American relations and I believe we can open up a new chapter with her (Merkel).” According to Senator Charles Schumer (Democrat, New York), “German-American relations” are becoming “better and better.”

Schumer added that, in view of international problems, the US was forced into international cooperation both with Germany and also with the United Nations. “We love Germany and hope that relations will be better than they were,” Republican Senator Orrin Hatch (Utah) commented to *dpa*.

Although Merkel has recently criticized the US prison camp in Guantánamo, saying that it should eventually close, she has indicated she does not intend to demand that during her visit. “She wants to be looked upon as a friend, not as a lackey,” commented John Hulsman, European expert of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative US think tank with close links to the Bush administration.

The announcement by the German chancellor that her government will examine the possibility of expanding

German assistance for the training of Iraqi policemen in the Gulf Emirates and for the building of political structures in Iraq was assessed to be an “important gesture.” German Development Minister Heidemarie Wiecek Zeul (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has already promised an additional \$10 million for the international reconstruction fund for Iraq.

The reasons for the gushing welcome for Merkel in the US are obvious. First of all, the Bush administration is wracked by crisis both at home and abroad. The Iraq war has turned into a military and political disaster. Not only has the Bush government failed to bring anything remotely resembling “democracy and liberty” to Iraq, the undemocratic and even criminal character of his own regime is becoming ever more evident to the American public.

“Lies and deception over the Iraq war, the debacle after the invasion, with all its victims, and violations of the law in the anti-terror struggle, have shaken the certainty of even those who once stood firmly on the side of Washington,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, adding, “Also with regard to domestic affairs the US government is currently experiencing a rapid decline. The displeasure in Europe—and in the US—over the Bush regime is continuing to increase.”

The second reason for the warm welcome in Washington is the attempt to rally fresh support in view of increasing international tensions and the preparation of further military adventures. According to press reports, the main theme to be discussed at Merkel’s meeting with Bush will be Iran. The American government wants to convince the German chancellor to support sanctions against Iran.

Merkel will give Bush a firsthand report on the meeting held between the foreign affairs ministers of France, Great Britain and Germany over further action with regard to Iran’s nuclear policies. The meeting of the foreign ministers took place on Thursday in Berlin.

These three countries have conducted discussions with the Iranian government in the name of the European Union. After Teheran admitted last week that it was planning to renew its research of nuclear fuels the three EU foreign ministers decided to activate the United Nations.

Past discussions of the “European Union troika” with Iran have reached “a dead end,” explained the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. His British colleague Jack Straw held Iran responsible for the “escalation of the nuclear controversy.” There was now no other alternative than a special meeting of the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) and the UN Security Council, he explained at a press conference following the meeting.

Russia plays a key role in the increasing conflict with Iran. Against the express will of Washington the Russian government concluded an agreement over the supply of nuclear fuel with the Teheran government in the spring of last year. The head of the Russian nuclear energy authority, Alexander Rumjanzev, traveled personally to the south Iranian city of Bushehr, where Russia is assisting Iran with the building of a nuclear reactor. After the signing of the agreement, Rumjanzev announced that the reactor would be operational next year.

The Bush administration would like to use Angela Merkel as mediator. Washington has noted that she spoke Russian with Vladimir Putin during her recent trip to Moscow. Immediately following her discussions in the US, Merkel will fly on Monday to the Russian capital and meet once again with the Russian president.

There are signs that the hectic diplomatic activities are part of the preparations for a US military strike against Iran. At the end of December, several German newspapers raised the question: “Is the US government preparing a military attack on nuclear premises in Iran?” Secret service worker Udo Ulfkotte told the *ddp* news service on Christmas Eve, “The government of US President George W. Bush ... is currently warning its most important allies in the Middle East in secret discussions of a possible air strike against targets in Iran in the coming year.”

A military strike against Iran, however, would not only disrupt relations between Washington and Moscow but also dramatically intensify conflicts between Europe and America. Iran is not only a more

important energy supplier of many European governments than Iraq, but also a more important trade partner. Siemens, Telekom and many other German companies are involved in large-scale industrial projects in Iran.

German-Russian relations are also not based on the personal friendship of leading politicians—such as former chancellor Helmut Kohl, who liked to spend time in the sauna with Boris Yeltsin, or former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has visited Putin’s family—but on hard economic facts. Russia is Germany’s most important energy supplier, with 34 percent of German oil imports, 43 percent of its natural gas and 16 percent of coal imports coming from Russian sources last year. German dependence on Russia will continue to increase with the building of the planned natural gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea.

Regardless of the warm welcome in Washington for the German chancellor, transatlantic relations could very quickly deteriorate.



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