

German chancellor Merkel snuggles up to Bush

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On January 4, the German chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) paid a short visit to Washington. Just days after the German government took over the presidency of the European Union at the beginning of the year, the chancellor wanted, in her own words, to discuss future European policy with her “most important transatlantic partner.”

The concrete results of the four-hour meeting were somewhat meager. Merkel’s main concern was to demonstratively stand alongside the American president and offer Bush increased co-operation and support in the Middle East. Her proposal for reviving the so-called Middle East quartet—consisting of the European Union, the US, Russia and the UN—was bound up with signaling clear support for US policy in the Middle East.

Merkel emphasized that she would use her new post as EU president to forge closer ties between European governments and Washington, and she articulated some central goals of European policy, such as a two-state solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Despite the fact that the worst fears of many Europeans have become reality in Iraq, with the war launched by Bush resulting in a social and political disaster, Angela Merkel did not utter a word of criticism of US policy. Instead, she resorted to thoroughly vague formulations, such as the following: “Although Germany is not militarily present in Iraq, we have every interest in seeing Iraq taking a turn for a more peaceful development, where people no longer need to be in fear for their lives.”

Only days before, Merkel had mouthed similarly nebulous proclamations in respect to the execution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq—although the execution resembled nothing less than a public lynching. According to a brief statement recorded on the official

Web site of the German chancellor, the former Iraqi ruler had been condemned by an Iraqi court, and the judgment was carried out. The statement then stressed, “We respect this judgment.”

After a statement that the “the German Government is against the death penalty,” the chancellor added two sentences: “On a day like this my thoughts go first of all to the many innocent victims of Saddam Hussein. I wish the Iraqi people a path in peace and free from violence.”

After three and a half years of war and military occupation by the US army, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, including many women and children, Merkel’s pious wishes can only be regarded as the height of cynicism.

Reacting to Merkel’s efforts to ingratiate herself, Bush remarked, “Madame Chancellor had a good idea to convene the quartet.” And at a joint press conference he issued his own praise: “I listen to Angela Merkel a lot. She has got a lot of wisdom.”

He then announced that the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would travel shortly to the Middle East. Merkel responded that, in her function as European Union president she looked forward to co-operating with Rice. According to Merkel, there would be “very close coordination.”

It is worth noting that the chancellor’s comments in Washington represented a rebuff to the German foreign minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) who has sought to include Syria and Lebanon alongside the quartet in any solution to the Middle East crisis. At the end of December, as the German government was preparing to take over leadership of the EU, Steinmeier had flown to Moscow for talks with the Russian president over a new Middle East initiative in co-operation with Syria.

It remains up to now unclear whether the positions defended by the German chancellor and her foreign minister represent real differences or merely a division of labor between the chancellorship and the foreign office, aimed at maintaining Germany's traditional policy of balancing between west and east.

In its online edition the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, "With pursed lips and a serious expression the chancellor in Washington contradicted considerations put forward by the foreign office in Berlin that an expansion of the quartet mandate to include Lebanon and Syria held out more prospects for a regional peace. 'I think that the quartet is really working to full capacity,' the chancellor retorted, Syria had been given many chances. These chances have unfortunately elapsed. President Bush gratefully acknowledged this hard line from the European side, which provides him with important cover domestically and assists him in the controversy over his future strategy in Iraq."

Instead of co-operation with Syria, Lebanon and Iran, as favored by Moscow, Washington is apparently aiming at closer collaboration with the regimes in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan in order to step up pressure on the Sunnis in Iraq.

Merkel's efforts to ingratiate herself with Washington are nothing new. She has held an uncritical position toward Bush's war policy from the outset. In this respect, the chancellor resembles members of the new ruling elites in Eastern Europe, who became politicized in the period of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and whose enthusiasm for capitalism is closely bound up with a fascination for the type of unbridled free market and world power politics embodied by the US. She has equal disdain for both the fundamental democratic rights of the population and international law.

The American president has reacted to his defeat at the polls in the November US Congressional elections and the broad opposition to the Iraq war by preparing to send in more troops and intensify the war. This has impressed and left its mark on Merkel.

The friendly embraces and the mutual exchange of praise and niceties between Bush and Merkel throw a sharp light on the German European Union presidency. Like Bush, Merkel and her "grand coalition" government (CDU, SPD and Christian Social Union) are confronted with increasing resistance on the part of

the German population. The proclaimed aim of both Merkel and Steinmeier to push ahead with implementing a European constitution against all resistance makes clear where they are headed.

To put it simply, the Iraq war and its expansion to the Palestinian territories, Lebanon—and soon perhaps Syria and Iran—mark the return of imperialist policy in its most aggressive and brutal form. This is not restricted to foreign policy. In postwar Europe, a less aggressive foreign policy was closely bound up with social compromise on the domestic front in the form of social reforms and attempts at class reconciliation. The return to imperialist despotic violence is bound up with a policy aimed at smashing up all that remains of the European social system.

Merkel's snuggling up to Bush makes clear that—irrespective of a few lone voices who warn against "predatory American capitalism"—the European political elite represents similar economic and social interests as the American ruling class and will resort to similar measures to advance their interests. This heralds a new stage of violent attacks on social and democratic rights on both sides of the Atlantic.



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