

Bush snubbed at NATO summit

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At this week's NATO summit in the Romanian capital of Bucharest, US President George W. Bush has faced concerted European opposition to his plans for a further eastward expansion of the alliance. Only a last minute compromise allowed the American president to save face. German politicians in particular were reported to be angry and disconcerted at the insistence by the American president on the speedy inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine into the ranks of the NATO.

During a summit dinner party held on Wednesday evening German and French opposition to Bush's plans received additional backing from Italy, Hungary and the Benelux countries. Even Bush's closest ally in Europe, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, stated it was too soon for NATO to accept the two former Soviet republics.

At the dinner, which ran for an extra two hours, Bush is reported to have finally acknowledged that he would be unable to push through his proposal. According to a senior US administration official: "The debate was mostly among Europeans," with several European allies balking at Bush's stance. Evidently attempting to put the dispute in a favourable light the same official declared: "It was quite split, but it was split in a good way."

Following intense deliberations on Wednesday night between German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice a compromise was finally struck. The formulation agreed to by the participants at the summit on Thursday pointedly failed to give any timetable for Georgian and Ukrainian membership. It was widely regarded as a face-saving deal for the US president and a victory for German diplomacy.

In their reports of the tensions between the US and its European allies at the Bucharest conference, German newspapers openly described the American president's behaviour at the summit as a provocation aimed at splitting the alliance.

Writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stefan Cornelius reported that German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) had made it clear to the US president a year ago that Germany was opposed to any NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine in the short term. In a series of video conferences with Washington held in the past months and weeks, Merkel reiterated Germany's unwillingness to budge on this issue. Up until last week, German officials were confident that a diplomatic formula would be found to resolve the issue without open conflict at the summit.

This scenario was then exploded by the appearance of the US president at a number of forums this week in which he insisted on a timetable of negotiations for the rapid admission of the two countries into the NATO alliance. On Tuesday Bush appeared alongside the Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko in Kiev to declare that the "United States strongly supports your request" for membership of NATO.

The immediate response to Bush's proposal came from Moscow.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin, reiterated that Ukrainian membership of NATO would lead to a profound crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations, while Russia's NATO envoy, Dmitry Rogozin, declared that if Ukraine and Georgia were given so-called Membership Action Plans, it would "mark a point of no return in his country's relations with the Alliance."

Sweeping aside criticism of his plans, Bush returned to the theme of NATO expansion on Wednesday in the Romanian capital of Bucharest, raising the same theme at a meeting of 500 political and business leaders as well as at a meeting of the German Marshall Fund.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov immediately denounced Bush's proposals, calling the proposed expansion "artificial and completely unnecessary" and in the State Duma in Moscow warned ominously "What's happening will not (go) unanswered, I assure you."

For his part, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD), in an interview with the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* Tuesday, declared that there was "broad scepticism" in Europe regarding US support for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Steinmeier declared that following the "difficult decision to recognise Kosovo, it is clear that with our foreign policy we have reached Russia's tolerance level."

Both Steinmeier and Merkel argue that neither Georgia, under its authoritarian president Mikhail Saakashvili, nor Ukraine, where a large majority of the population is opposed to NATO membership, is ready to join the alliance.

In its lead article on the opening day of the summit the *SZ* commented: "Bush's strategy of confrontation at the start of the summit was described by diplomats as unusual because it could have led to a loss of face either on the part of the president or his opponent, in this case the German chancellor.

During the period of the Cold War, the US-dominated NATO alliance was the cornerstone of western military policy in world politics. Now, nearly two decades after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and under conditions of a growing financial and political crisis in the US itself, a number of political commentators are stressing that the opening up of a series of profound differences between Europe and the US threatens the very existence of the alliance.

In an article for the British *Independent* titled: "Time to disband NATO now the Cold War is over?", Adrian Hamilton lists the points of contention at the summit: "The participants are at odds over expansion to the East, with the US, backed by the new entrants, urging Georgian and Ukrainian membership against the public doubts of Germany and the vehement opposition of Russia. The core members are at odds over their individual contributions to the war in Afghanistan. Even on what should be the relatively uncontentious issue of bringing Macedonia into the organisation, the Greeks are

threatening to veto the move unless the new member changes its name.”

Hamilton goes on: “If this were a family it would compete with the Royal Tenenbaums for disfunctionality.” And he concludes: “The fearful prospect at Bucharest is that, by allowing NATO to be driven in new directions without confronting the hard questions on its future, we are in danger of breaking the whole alliance on which it is founded.”

The future of the NATO alliance is also addressed by the former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who sees the growing conflict between Germany and America to be at the heart of the differences in Bucharest.

According to Fischer writing in *Die Zeit* on Monday: “The future of NATO as a global alliance for intervention and security is not on the official agenda of the NATO summit from Bucharest but this is precisely the issue at stake.”

Listing three central issues of contention at the summit—Afghanistan, NATO expansion, NATO-Russian relations—Fischer concludes: “It is notable that on all three decisive questions in Bucharest, the German government stands in opposition to the Bush government.”

It is worth examining Fischer’s comments more closely. Unlike her predecessor, SPD leader Gerhard Schröder, Angela Merkel declared her support for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Had she held power at that time, it is quite likely that German troops would have been involved in the Iraq quagmire. Since assuming power in 2004, she has sought to overcome the breach in relations which resulted from Schröder’s refusal to openly defend the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. There is not the slightest doubt about Merkel’s Atlanticist credentials. But now, according to Fischer, despite her best efforts, the German chancellor finds herself at odds with the American president on three vital areas of foreign policy.

While Germany is certainly keen to maintain good working relations with Russia—a country on which it is heavily dependent for energy supplies—the current attempts by Washington to revive the Cold War, with Russia playing the role of the former Soviet Union, are inadequate to account for the intensity of the conflicts between Germany and its closest post war ally. Following the Second World War, western European nations, and Germany in particular, looked to the US as a bastion of economic and political stability.

Able to rely on US economic support and its military power codified in the NATO alliance, Germany and other European countries were able to go about the business of rebuilding their economies after the devastation of the Second World War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America was regarded by leading political circles in both eastern and western Europe as a role model for economic and political development.

Now at the start of the twenty-first century, this scenario looks very different. The first major body blow to the NATO alliance in this century was delivered by the Bush administration with its construction of a “coalition of the willing” to help fight its war to secure oil resources in the Middle East. The assembling of a coalition of powers outside of the existing international structures which the US had pioneered after the Second World War was quite correctly seen by European powers as an attempt by Washington to compensate for its declining influence in the United Nations and NATO.

The debacle of the five-year-old war in Iraq is currently being matched by the mounting reverses for coalition troops in Afghanistan. Bush has gone to Bucharest intent on drumming up more troops to fight in that ravaged land, but European leaders are aware that the war

is fiercely unpopular with their electorates.

Only French president Nicholas Sarkozy has responded to Bush’s latest appeal and agreed, above the head of the French parliament, to send 700 French troops to the east of Afghanistan. To put this figure in proportion: the commanding general for Afghanistan Dan McNeill declared a week ago that in order to be able to effectively fight the Taliban the US-led alliance required more than 400,000 troops in the region. After seven years of war and amidst growing indications of increased Taliban activity, McNeill presently has less than 60,000 soldiers at his disposal.

Fischer, like Merkel, is well aware of the debt owed by post-war German capitalism to America, but concludes that the Bush government is too “weak” and “incompetent” to complete the job in Afghanistan. Germany must overcome its scruples over sending combat troops into dangerous war zones, Fischer argues, and help pull the US chestnuts out of the fire by dispatching soldiers to war-torn southern Afghanistan.

During Bush’s last months in office, the foreign policy of the American president is assuming an increasingly unpredictable and aggressive character. This has sounded the alarm bells in European political circles and at the same time forced European powers to take an increasingly independent stand on security and defence.

Already in the run up to the Bucharest summit, the influential German political magazine *IP* ran a debate on the future of NATO. Speaking against the continuation of the alliance, a Dutch defence expert, Peter van Ham, argued: “It seems to be just a matter of time before the EU replaces NATO as the guarantor of security and defence in Europe.” Ham accuses the US of debasing NATO: “For them NATO is nothing more than a sort of security saloon where the American sheriff rustles up his posse to go hunt down the bad guys. In drawing up its alliance the US is able to acquire the stamp of international legitimacy without having to make any major incursions on its foreign policy playing field.”

Arguing against this position, a more experienced security expert, Professor Karl Kaiser, recalled that the original notion behind the setting up of the NATO alliance was not to combat an external threat, but in fact to prevent war amongst its constituent members. In other words, the centrifugal pressures evident in Bucharest, which are now threatening to tear NATO apart, also create the conditions for renewed military confrontation between the major imperialist powers.



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