

Bush in Germany beats drum for war against Iran

Stefan Steinberg
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In his last visit to Germany as president of the United States, George W. Bush used a joint press conference Wednesday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) to reiterate his threat of war against Iran.

“As I said before, all options remained on the table” with regard to Iran, the US president told the assembled media. In other words, Washington maintains its “option” of launching an unprovoked military strike against Iran to prevent any further development of its uranium enrichment program.

Asked directly by one journalist if he would rule out military action against Iran, Bush repeated that “all options were on the table.” Pressed again by reporters on the issue, Bush spoke vaguely about the positive role of sanctions and the need for international collaboration, but refrained from withdrawing his threat of military action.

At the Wednesday press conference both Bush and Merkel gave a show of harmony, making vague remarks about the intention of both countries to tackle such issues as world trade and climate change. But as was the case with his first European stop in Slovenia, Bush used his visit to Germany to emphasise the alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons, urging European leaders to support tougher sanctions, up to and including military action against Tehran.

Bush’s comments come at a time when the European Union is actively seeking a diplomatic solution to the Iran crisis. European High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana is due to travel to Tehran this weekend to offer the government there a package of trade and economic incentives in return for an agreement to halt Iran’s enrichment activities.

Sweeping aside the label of “lame duck president” universally used to describe him in Germany, Bush stated ominously that his administration would conduct a “sprint to the finish.”

In a mealy-mouthed response to Bush, Merkel declared that Germany continued to support a strictly diplomatic solution to the conflict with Iran. Like other European leaders Bush has met during his tour, Merkel refused to make any open criticism of the US administration’s belligerent Iran policy. She declared that she enjoyed working with the US president on the basis of “calling a spade and spade” and then in a gushing tribute even went so far as to declare: “This cooperation is fun, I must say and, as the president said, it is going to be a sprint to his last day in office.”

Bush’s campaign for a military option against Iran eerily recalls the campaign conducted by his administration in 2002 for war against Iraq. At the time, most European leaders refused to challenge the propaganda campaign based on lies and deception organised by the White House to justify the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. By refusing to publicly air their objections, they share responsibility for the resulting carnage in Iraq.

Today the White House is propagating a similar campaign to justify a criminal military strike against Iran, and once again European leaders refuse to utter a public word of criticism.

Although well informed of the dangers of a confrontation with Iran—at the end of May former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer published an article predicting an Israeli attack on Iran backed by the US in the coming months—European heads of state fear that any public discussion of the dangers of a US-sponsored assault on Iran could provoke an enormous wave of public indignation and opposition.

In fact, the only figure in German politics to openly challenge Merkel on the issue of Iran was the leader of the right-wing Free Democratic Party, Guido Westerwelle, who remarked that it was “regrettable and false” that Merkel did not challenge Bush over his call for a military option.

Knowing that he was in the company of a consistent supporter of his government—Merkel had expressed her own support for the invasion of Iraq in an article in the *Washington Post* in 2003—Bush went on to use his press conference in Germany to justify his prosecution of the war against Iraq.

Repeating comments he made in an interview published Wednesday by the British daily newspaper the *Times*, Bush declared that while he regretted some of the language he used to justify the war, he stood fully behind the invasion and occupation. Once again this justification of an illegal war based on lies was left completely unchallenged by the German chancellor.

Well aware of the unpopularity of the American president, the German chancellery did its best to ensure that Bush’s last official visit would take place far from the public eye. Nevertheless, his presence in Germany has not gone without comment. Reactions from both the German media and public to his stopover have been overwhelming negative.

State visits by previous American presidents to Germany had been inevitably accompanied by tickertape parades and major speeches held in front of symbolic landmarks, such as Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate. In previous decades, US presidents such as John F. Kennedy, and more recently less popular presidents like Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, were assured a warm welcome from the German political elite during their trips to the republic. Enjoying a largely favourable coverage in the press, these American presidents were able to speak to large crowds of German citizens.

The contrast to this final state visit by George Bush could not be greater. The preparations for his short stay in Germany had more in common with the furtive movements of a thief in the night. For the length of his stay, Bush was kept at the Castle Meseberg, situated deep in the countryside of the state of Brandenburg. According to the *SZ* newspaper: “Meseberg has the big advantage that it is easy to insulate from the rest of the world, encircled by railings and full of police. It looks like a baroque castle but is in fact an attractive-looking, high-security wing...”

Press commentaries accompanying Bush’s visits were largely of the most unflattering variety. Typical is the commentary in the *SZ* on the day of his visit:

“For the great majority of Germans, Bush is the most disliked US president in two generations. His administration gave the American way

of politics a bad reputation—and not only in Germany. Much of the gratefulness, respect and understanding that had developed in Germany for America during past decades have been eroded by Bush's Guantánamo government. This does not apply to the elite, which continues to swear by the German-American relationship, which at one time represented the essence of the post-war identity of the German Republic. But it does apply to the average German, whom Bush will not set eyes on in the Meseberg Green Zone."

The legacy of the Bush administration, according to the same commentary, is a mixture of "antipathy, derision, anger, scepticism with regard to US politics, even against America in general." The commentary goes on to conclude that the negative consequences for America's image in the world will not end with the Bush presidency—even if the new president is named Barack Obama.

One day earlier the same newspaper had commented on the reluctance of leading European politicians to be associated with Bush: "Every European politician knew that the partner in Washington was quasi-radioactively contaminated. Whoever got involved with Bush would be abandoned by the voters."

According to recent opinion polls, over 80 percent of the population of Europe is opposed to the policies of the Bush administration.

Political leaders in Germany from across the political spectrum were also scathing in their criticisms of the Bush administration. According to the veteran Social Democratic Party politician Egon Bahr: "I do not know of any other president in American history who has done so much damage to his country." Former German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP) stated that Bush was largely responsible for the enormous loss of prestige suffered by the US worldwide.

Foreign policy expert Karl-Theodor von Guttenberg from the conservative Christian Social Union gave expression to the collective sigh of relief from European political and media circles that the presidency of Bush was coming to an end. "We are all looking forward to a new American president," he declared.

While representatives from all of the major political parties were prepared to make withering criticisms of the American president, none addressed the growing list of economic and social issues that are leading to a growing rift between the transatlantic partners.

In particular there appeared to be a tacit agreement that the global finance crisis which began with the US sub-prime mortgage crisis, and which has been dramatically exacerbated by the recent huge increase in oil prices, be struck from the agenda of talks in Germany. Instead, as was the case in Slovenia, Bush was allowed to dominate the discussions in Germany with his renewed threats of hostility towards Iran.

Since becoming chancellor in 2005, Angela Merkel has proven to be a staunch ally of the Bush government. Nevertheless, irrespective of her intentions, the growing international financial and accompanying political crisis is straining transatlantic relations to the breaking point.

Tensions between Europe and America surfaced earlier this year at the April NATO summit held in Romania. At the summit, the French and German governments worked together to block Bush's attempt to further isolate Russia and strengthen "new Europe," at the expense of "old Europe," through the speedy inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO's ranks.

In addition to growing political tensions, which include the aggressive stance taken by the Bush administration towards Iran, differences between the US and Europe over key economic and financial questions are rapidly coming to the surface.

Prior to coming to Europe, both President Bush and the head of the US Federal Reserve Board, Ben Bernanke, sought to talk up the dollar and indirectly criticised the policy adopted by the European Central Bank and its president Jean-Claude Trichet to maintain interest rates at a relatively higher level than those set in the US.

Financial Times editorialised "US Sees the Shadow

Bundesbank" points to the underlying conflict between the transatlantic partners over this issue, noting:

"In the late 1980s, the US (and most of Europe) was raging at Germany's Bundesbank for keeping interest rates high, consumption down, and the dollar unstable. Twenty years on and US determination to support growth is once again in conflict with European determination to crush inflation. The battleground, then as now, will be the exchange rate."

The huge slide in the value of the dollar against the euro in recent months has enormously increased the price of European exports into the US domestic market. At the same time, the comparative strength of the euro makes it an increasingly attractive haven for international investors and creditors—further threatening the role of the dollar as the world's most favoured reserve currency.

For her part, the German chancellor has now responded in an interview with the same paper by stating that Germany and Europe as a whole would increasingly seek to liberate themselves from the domination of US regulation of financial markets and "translate its economic power into greater influence over the rules and standards governing the world's financial markets." The interview was published on the same day as Merkel made her show of solidarity with Bush at their joint press conference.

Merkel told the *Financial Times*: "Europe has developed a certain independence thanks to the euro. But of course, in terms of the rules, the transparency guidelines and the entire standardisation of financial markets, we still have a strongly Anglo-Saxon-dominated system.... The robust currency system of the euro has not yet secured sufficient influence over the rules governing financial markets."

An international system of financial regulation, which reflects the economic power of the euro—this is the response by the German chancellor to the danger of German and European capitalist interests being sucked into the vortex of the developing recession, which has its eye in America. Merkel speaks for an entire layer of the European political elite which is prepared to accommodate the growing threat of a US military adventure against Iran, while vigorously pursuing a policy which allows the European bourgeoisie to increasingly de-couple its economic interests from a super-power which many fear is in freefall.

The international finance crisis and the drive for new forms of international financial regulation are items at the top of the agenda of the forthcoming summit of G8 countries. Despite the German chancellor's acquiescence to the US bullying of Iran, further conflicts and divisions between the Atlantic partners are inescapable.



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