

German chancellor at US Congress

# Merkel pledges support for Obama administration foreign policy

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The speech made by German chancellor, Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), to a joint meeting of US Congress on Tuesday stood out for the full and unqualified support she gave to the foreign policy of the Obama administration. It represents a clear shift on the part of the newly elected German government towards uncritical backing for US military adventurism in the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan.

Merkel is only the second German chancellor ever to address Congress, and the first to address both chambers of Congress. In 1957, the conservative chancellor Konrad Adenauer addressed the two chambers separately. Merkel's speech—peppered with pious and grovelling homilies to the “land of boundless opportunity”—was rewarded by those attending with half dozen standing ovations. The most resounding applause, however, came following Merkel's remarks on Iran.

Echoing the aggressive stance and language adopted towards Iran by the US State Department and Barack Obama himself, Merkel declared: “Zero tolerance needs to be shown when there is a risk of weapons of mass destruction falling, for example, into the hands of Iran and threatening our security.” She continued: “A nuclear bomb in the hands of an Iranian president who denies the Holocaust, threatens Israel and denies Israel the right to exist is not acceptable.”

Taking the lead from Democratic leader of the House Nancy Pelosi, who immediately took to her feet, virtually the entire Congress stood to applaud the German chancellor. Both Republicans and Democrats recognised that Merkel's comments amount to *carte blanche* support for any aggressive action taken by the US or its closest ally in the region, Israel, against Iran in the near future. The Obama administration has recently called on Germany to agree to stiffer economic sanctions against Iran if Tehran does not permit international restrictions on its nuclear activities. Merkel addressed this concern directly, agreeing that it was important “to meet this threat head on...if necessary, through tough economic sanctions.”

Her remarks on Iran were immediately greeted by leading US figures. Charles Kupchan, from the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that in the past, Germany “has to some extent taken a back seat on confronting Tehran on its nuclear programme.” Commenting on her Congress speech, however, Kupchan concluded, “I think it was notable that Merkel stepped up to the

plate, making clear that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable,” he said. “It seems that in the aftermath of her re-election, she is willing to take a firmer stand.”

Merkel went on to declare the unconditional support on the part of her government for the state of Israel, stating, “Security for the state of Israel is, for me, non-negotiable. Whoever threatens Israel also threatens us.” She also vowed Germany's continuing support for US policy in Afghanistan, stressing that Germany and the US would “travel this road together, every step of the way.”

In a comment that speaks volumes about the right-wing orientation of the Democrats in Congress, a spokesman for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted that the “consensus between a rather conservative German chancellor and rather liberal Democrats was remarkable.”

While failing to make any concrete commitment in her speech to send additional troops to the region, Merkel appealed for renewed consultation with the US over future policy. However, in the brief time since taking office the new government has been quick to strike a hawkish note on Afghanistan. The new German defence minister, Karl Theodor zu Guttenburg, has been quick to break with accepted protocol in Germany and shortly after taking over his new post, confirmed that Germany was indeed fighting “a war” in Afghanistan.

Flying in the face of mass public opposition to the intervention of German troops in Afghanistan, zu Guttenburg has declared that there is “no alternative to German involvement” in the beleaguered country. While Germany and other leading European countries are still waiting for a final decision by the White House over proposals for a massive increase in troops, Merkel made clear in her speech that Germany would follow the lead of the US on this issue and defend America's military policy inside the European Union.

Just last week, European Union foreign ministers meeting in Luxemburg promised more aid for Afghanistan and Pakistan in response to a report they commissioned, which warns that the political and security situation in the region is worsening. Making clear that the European governments have no intention of heeding overwhelming public sentiment for a swift exit from Afghanistan, the report states, “The situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on Europe. Many of the most serious global threats facing us today are present in the region.”

In her speech to Congress, Merkel also made clear that the new German government would side with the United States over the issue of regulation to prevent climate change to be discussed at the upcoming environmental conference taking place in the Danish capital of Copenhagen next month. The US is the biggest advanced industrial nation to repeatedly resist implementing climate change reform. Merkel held out her hand to the Obama administration to form a pact aimed at putting increased pressure on developing countries to introduce new environmental measures. “I’m convinced, once we in Europe and America show ourselves ready to adopt binding agreements, we will also be able to persuade China and India to join in.” In this respect, Merkel’s speech was also regarded as a boost for the passage of Obama’s climate proposals in the US Congress.

Using the opportunity of the imminent 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Merkel played upon her own roots in Stalinist East Germany to win over her audience. In the manner of a breathless provincial bumpkin, Merkel briefly referred to her origins in former East Germany and declared that 20 years ago she would never “in my wildest dreams” have expected to travel to America and address Congress.

In an embarrassing and gushing paean to the US as the home of freedom and the American dream, Merkel gave a brief and superficial resume of US-German postwar relations, beginning with the Berlin Airlift in 1948 and going on to mention presidents Kennedy, Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Merkel also took the opportunity to pay her thanks to the 13 million American troops who had “helped defend freedom” in postwar Germany.

In Biblical manner, Merkel then intimated that it was this spectral US quest for freedom embodied in successive American presidents that was responsible for breaking down the “dark wall” separating East and West Germany and finally bringing the “light.”

In relation to her own political biography, Merkel is typical of those social layers in East Germany and Eastern Europe as a whole who, 20 years ago, looked to the unfettered free-market system of the United States as a role model for their own political careers and social ambitions. By her own admission, Merkel had taken no interest in politics prior to 1989 and was sitting in the sauna when thousands of East Germans began dismantling the Berlin Wall. There is certainly no record of any opposition to the bureaucracy on her part as a member of the official FDJ Stalinist youth organisation.

Despite the fact that other members of her family had joined the Social Democratic Party or the Greens, Merkel chose to become politically active in the CDU because: “For me, three things were immediately clear after reunification: I wanted to get into the *Bundestag* [parliament], I favoured rapid German unity and I supported a free-market economy.”

Under conditions in which the CDU had little support amongst younger layers of the population in East Germany, Merkel was able to undertake a meteoric ascent into leading positions of power, taking over as CDU chairperson in 2000. From the start, Merkel had made no secret of her pro-US orientation and in the run-up to the Iraq war sided demonstratively with the aggressive policies of the Bush government.

Already in February 2003—with opinion polls recording more than 80 percent of the German population rejecting the impending war and when the world had just witnessed the largest-ever antiwar demonstrations—Merkel wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* attacking the German chancellor at that time, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), for refusing to send troops to Iraq.

The grand coalition of the Union parties (CDU, Christian Social Union) with the SPD (2004-2009) under Chancellor Merkel maintained a certain distance from the Bush administration, seeking to establish closer relations with Russia and build up the European Union as a counterweight to the diminishing economic influence and power of America. Former chancellor Schröder, who assumed a leading position in the Russian Gazprom energy company after being voted out of office in 2004, took the precaution of ensuring that his closest chancellery co-worker, Frank Walter Steinmeier, took over as foreign minister in the grand coalition.

Then, following the financial crisis of autumn 2008, transatlantic relations soured once again, strained when a number of leading German politicians called for more independence for German companies and banks from the domination of US finance institutions.

Merkel’s speech to the US Congress, however, indicates that the new German government coalition of the Union parties and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—including Karl Theodor zu Guttenburg (CSU) as defence minister and the pro-Atlanticist FDP leader Guido Westerwelle as foreign minister—is undertaking a new orientation in the country’s foreign policy. Uncritical support for US militarist adventurism in the Middle East and central Europe is now to be used to usher in a new phase of German Great Power politics increasingly aimed at ensuring its own economic and political interests based on its own military might.



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