

Obama visits Berlin amidst mounting US-German tensions

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19 June 2013

In keeping with the protocol of such occasions, the first official visit to Germany by US President Barack Obama is being used to evoke historical memories and proclaim mutual friendship. The fact that 50 years ago this month President John F. Kennedy gave his famous “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech in front of Schöneberg Town Hall is being exploited to this end.

Behind the carefully maintained facade, however, the German-American relationship is far from harmonious. Tensions in the spheres of economic and foreign policy have been aggravated by the recent revelations of US National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance.

Obama’s public image has changed dramatically since his last visit to Berlin, in the summer of 2008. At that time, 200,000 people gathered in Berlin’s Tiergarten to cheer the Democratic presidential candidate, who they hoped would end the policies of war and torture of his reviled predecessor, George W. Bush.

This time, Obama is due to speak before a hand-picked audience of just 4,000 in front of the hermetically sealed-off Brandenburg Gate.

After four-and-a-half years in office, Obama is no longer seen by broad layers of the population as a beacon of hope, but rather as the man responsible for massive spying and illegal and violent measures. The fact that Guantanamo still holds 166 prisoners without charge or trial while thousands of alleged terrorists and innocent civilians have been killed by American drones in contravention of international law is seared into the public consciousness.

Accordingly, the organizers of the Obama visit are treating the inhabitants of Berlin as if they were the population of a hostile country. The German capital has been under a virtual state of siege since the president’s family flew in on Tuesday night.

The entire airspace of Berlin and Tegel Airport were closed during Obama’s approach, as were the streets through which the presidential convoy traveled to the city centre. Parked cars and chained bicycles were removed by the police at the expense of the owners. Since the exact travel times of the president were kept secret for security reasons, these measures lasted for hours.

Sections of the German media and official political circles are openly treating the Obama visit with suspicion and skepticism, although their reaction is driven by considerations entirely different from those motivating ordinary people. While the population is outraged by the undemocratic and illegal behavior of the US government, the German ruling elite increasingly regards the US as an economic and geopolitical rival.

This can be seen very clearly in the attitude of the German government towards the Syria conflict. Berlin and Washington are collaborating closely to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and replace it with a puppet regime. Germany is playing a key role in organizing the exile Syrian opposition and enabling it to establish links with the armed militias inside the country.

At the same time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel opposes arming the Syrian opposition, as called for by Obama. She fears this will lead to a worsening of relations with Russia, which has close economic ties to Germany. Merkel also fears that a collapse of the Syrian state and an escalation of sectarian civil war will have broad repercussions in Germany, leading to a spread of terrorism and civil war to Europe.

It is noteworthy that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the main voices of the German ruling class, published a detailed and exclusive interview with

Assad just two days before Obama's visit. In the interview, the Syrian ruler appeared not as a bloodthirsty tyrant, but rather as a prudent bourgeois politician. He made clear he was ready to cooperate with the imperialist powers and strongly warned against the consequences of a policy that undermines existing borders and arms jihadist forces.

"Any playing around with the borders in the region means redrawing the map," Assad said. "This has a domino effect that no one can control. It may be that one of the major powers initiates this process, but at a certain point no one will be able to stop it."

He also warned of the danger of "exporting terrorism to Europe" should Europe arm terrorist forces in Syria.

The dispute over the NSA's eavesdropping Prism program makes clear that Germany regards the US first and foremost as an economic rival. Chancellor Merkel has stated she will raise the surveillance issue in her discussions with Obama, but her interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich, has defended the US spying program. In the *Welt am Sonntag*, Friedrich confirmed that the German secret services benefit from the spying and are regularly supplied with information by the US. According to *Der Spiegel*, the German Intelligence Service plans to invest €100 million and recruit up to 100 new employees to expand its own monitoring of the Internet.

German reactions to the NSA bugging have less to do with democratic rights and defending privacy than the fear of political and economic espionage. "Only the very naive believe that Prism is really about terrorism," the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* writes, "given the billions of data records selected every month. The fact is, there are not potential terrorists lurking behind every tree, but it is a good excuse to dress up good old industrial espionage."

Jakob Augstein sums up the anti-American sentiment in ruling circles when he writes in his regular column for *Spiegel Online*: "We are monitored. All the time and everywhere. And it is the Americans who watch us. On Tuesday, the head of the largest and most comprehensive control system ever invented by man is coming. If Barack Obama is our friend, then we really do not need to worry about our enemies."

Behind the disputes over Syria and Prism are fundamental geo-strategic issues. For some time there have been fierce differences over financial policy

between the US and Germany. Washington and American banks are exerting massive pressure on Berlin to abandon its commitment to austerity and pump large sums of money into the European financial system.

At the same time, Obama's turn to Asia cuts directly across the economic interests of Germany, which is heavily dependent on trade with China.

The 20th century provided many examples of how such tensions can rapidly escalate and lead to military conflict.



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