



**GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES  
ANATOMY OF A CRISIS**

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## **Germany and the United States - Anatomy of a Crisis**

The relations between Germany and the United States of America are facing one of the gravest crises in decades. What began as a number of foolish statements by Social Democratic politicians throughout the German election campaign in autumn last year, had swiftly escalated into an almost hostile climate where mutual allegations replaced trustful dialogue. Members of the Bush administration contributed their share to the exacerbation of the atmosphere. Both sides increasingly preferred to talk about each other instead of with each other. The fact that the German Chancellor Schroeder almost proudly admitted that he had no telephone conversation with U.S. president Bush for weeks, was a unique and distinct example for the level of deadlock in the bilateral relationship.

Decades of close cooperation are at stake. Today, it seems hard to imagine that a past US president once characterized Germany as America's desired "partner in leadership". Similarly, the pledge of "unconditional solidarity" made by a German chancellor less than two years ago appears already to be history.

What has happened to destroy one of the closest relationships in contemporary history so quickly and so thoroughly? And what needs to be done, to at least partly attenuate existing tensions and to provide fertile ground for the reestablishment of trust and confidence?

### **Anti-Americanism Wins the Elections**

The German-American relationship received its first major blow when a German minister and member of Schroeder's cabinet allegedly compared George W. Bush with Adolph Hitler and characterized the American legal system as lousy. These statements, however, were an indication of political imbecility rather than an act of malevolence. Even Chancellor Schroeder's dissenting views with regard to a military strike against Iraq could hardly trigger a German-American crisis of that magnitude, particularly since both sides were professional enough to understand that election campaigns are not the time for an overly balanced and refined phraseology.

Instead, the reasons for the Bush administration to hold Germany in contempt were different.

- First, the way Gerhard Schroeder presented his criticism of Washington's policy on Iraq not only played to concealed anti-American tendencies in the German public but also rendered America-bashing as socially and politically acceptable. In that sense, he has been the first German chancellor to cross that line.
- Second, tempted by the short-term domestic effect of gaining votes in the election, Gerhard Schroeder deliberately hazarded the consequences of disregarding the German national interest in maintaining close ties to the United States. What is more, this was not the mistake of a political newcomer but the premeditated strategy of a politician with four years of experience in international relations.
- Third, the same German government bristling with self-confidence in pushing a "German Way" in the security policy realm proves to be unable to meet its own commitments to increase the military capabilities of NATO and the European Union. Thus, it was the new German combination of arrogance and impotence that antagonized relations with the United States.

But anti-American tendencies were not limited to the left wing of the German political spectrum. Already after the catastrophe of September 11, the view that the United States bears a great deal of responsibility for being hated in large parts of the world could also be heard in conservative circles. Furthermore, any use of military force to oust the regime of Saddam Hussein was rejected not only by the Social Democratic and Green electorate but by supporters of the conservative parties as well. Thus, the Christian Democratic party faced a dilemma. For the first time in decades, foreign and security policy issues seemed to have had a significant impact on the outcome of a German national election. Torn between its traditional pro-American heritage and the fact that the vast majority objected to George W. Bush's policy vis a vis Iraq, the CDU/CSU could hardly agree on a common position. Particularly the conservative candidate for the chancellorship, Edmund Stoiber, remained indecisive in his statements on transatlantic issues. On the one hand, he and other leading figures of the conservative opposition sharply criticized Schroeder as irresponsible and disloyal; on the other hand, hardly anyone within the CDU/CSU publicly supported military action against Iraq. Apparently, in light of tens of thousands of Germans demonstrating in the streets and in face of a close race at the ballots even the conservatives interpreted the German plea of "unconditional solidarity" conditionally.

The outcome was bitter: the conservatives not only lost the elections but were also not fully esteemed as friends and reliable partners by the Bush administration.

## **The Impact on NATO**

The transatlantic crisis was by far not only confined to Germany and the United States alone. A few other European states, first and foremost France, were at odds with Washington as well. Furthermore, the crisis was also a European one, since a deep rift went through the continent dividing the opponents of Bush's intentions to go to war from those countries standing firmly beside the United States.

Germany was in a particularly difficult situation, since Chancellor Schroeder, notwithstanding his fierce criticism of possible military action in the Gulf region, had pledged to comply with Germany's obligations within the framework of NATO. This contributed significantly to further contaminating the German-American relationship, since it was self evident that these two contradicting approaches could not lead to a coherent and constructive German policy - particularly with respect to the North Atlantic Alliance.

It is worth noting, however, that the transatlantic tensions were not only the result of a misguided German (and French) policy. Instead, the United States also has to bear responsibility for the disaster. First and foremost, Washington failed to make its case against Iraq consistently, and, above all, comprehensible to the European public. For many Europeans, the lines between terrorism, terrorist states and weapons of mass destruction remained as blurred as the relationship between "disarmament" and "regime change" in Iraq. France added to the heady mixture its traditional NATO skepticism garnished with a note of disappointment at no longer being the locomotive of a European policy.

The result was one of the worst situations NATO had ever faced - namely a stalemate over the need to protect an ally from potential military threats stemming from a war in Iraq. Instead of sending a signal of support to Turkey and a sign of determination to Baghdad, a veto from Germany, France and Belgium prohibited mere contingency planning for measures to protect Turkey in case of an Iraqi military attack, let alone concrete military preparations. German representatives in NATO were well aware of the disastrous consequences of such a policy. When the German NATO-Ambassador - upon order from Berlin - had to issue the veto in the NATO-Council, he did it with the words "don't shoot the messenger".

Notably, the motive for the obstinacy of the Germany government had changed. No longer was the desire for reelection the reason for Schroeder's policy. Instead, the

German chancellor who had reasoned himself into a corner finally came to believe in his mission to stand up against the trigger-happy giant on the other side of the Atlantic - and in line with the public opinion in almost all European states

### **The Consequences of the Iraq war**

The breakout of the war in Iraq marked the peak of the anti-American atmosphere in Germany and other European countries. Paradoxically, the attack by American and British forces also indicated a turning point and a chance for at least slowly and carefully starting the transatlantic repair work. With the first air raids against targets in Baghdad the United States had confronted Germany and the other critics of military action in the Gulf with a *fait accompli*. Thus, further painful debates on "last chances" for Saddam Hussein and on how to get the UN inspectors back into the region had lost their justification. Furthermore, critics of U.S. military operations lost ground over the conduct of the war, since the predictions of European armchair strategists that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people would lose their lives proved as ridiculous as widespread misgivings about a global Islamic insurrection. Instead, the regime in Baghdad was overthrown within a few weeks and the Iraqi army proved to be as hollow as Saddam's special guards. The fact that no weapons of mass destruction have been found so far led to critical questions with regard to the reliability of American intelligence information and with respect to Washington's reasoning vis à vis the allies. However, this could not get president Bush into serious difficulties - at least not in the United States, where the war against Saddam was supported by an overwhelming and bipartisan majority.

The German government had to recognize that it had gambled away in a couple of weeks, what his predecessors took decades to build: a trusting relationship with America and a considerable influence on US policymaking. For years, the German diplomatic weight in Washington had rested on two pillars: First, on Germany's reliability and friendship and second, on its role in the European Union, which served as an amplifier of Germany's impact in the United States. This led almost automatically to Germany's well-proven function as a mediator between French concepts of European autonomy and the US interest in exerting influence on Europe. Both pillars collapsed abruptly. Washington has lost confidence in Berlin's dependability and Europe no longer automatically follows the directions adopted by the German

"locomotive" or by the Franco-German "axis". Instead, a considerable number of EU-partners continue to bank upon the approved concept of America as a European power and as the "benign hegemon by invitation", instead of on over-ambitious concepts of European emancipation. The famous "Letter of Eight" is a typical example for this trend.

The political losses for the government, however, did not automatically translate into gains for the opposition. On the one hand, the CDU/CSU managed to overcome the internal split on the party's position to the Iraq-question. A few weeks before the war broke out, the CDU chairperson Angela Merkel traveled to Washington to demonstrate her solidarity with the United States. In the following weeks, Merkel managed to bring almost the entire party in line with her pro-American stand. On the other hand, however, Merkel exposed herself to public accusations of transatlantic bootlicking. With 84 percent of the Germans still opposing U.S. policy in Iraq, the conservative support for Washington contained the risk of a severe estrangement between the party-leadership and the electorate.

But even critics of the Bush administration had to realize that there was no alternative to taking measures for a step-by-step reconstruction of the damaged transatlantic relationship. German ministers traveled to the United States and key members of the Bush administration came to visit Germany. Both sides were professional enough to realize that they had to get along with each other. But there are no longer the warm hugs and intense handshakes which accompanied mutual visits for decades. There is no doubt that the personal chemistry between Schroeder and Bush, who were hardly regarded as close friends anyway, is definitely ruined. For the foreseeable future, this will foreclose the option of tackling delicate or pressing issues by picking up the phone and dialing the highest level.

### **The Way Ahead**

The severity of the transatlantic crisis has raised serious questions of whether this was one of the fierce but occasionally occurring family disputes or whether it is the first sign of a fundamental transatlantic break.

Even if there is no chance to return to a pre-September-11 situation, a break of the German-American or the European-American Relations is not in the cards. Neither Europe nor the United States can really afford cutting the transatlantic links, simply

because both sides are too closely intertwined and mutually benefit from a viable partnership. Stabilizing the Balkans, completing the transformation in Eastern Europe, the inclusion of Russia, pacifying Africa or tackling ecological challenges are tasks which can only be mastered cooperatively. In fact the transatlantic model with its unique combination of freedom, democracy, pluralism and market economy is the only imaginable blueprint for a successful "global society".

However, just waiting for a self-healing process is not a viable option. Instead, both sides have to take active steps for reconciliation and for creating a new base for common action and common understanding. Just some examples:

*a) Obligations for Germany*

- European integration, which is one of the most important and most successful international developments in contemporary history, was only possible with the active engagement of the United States. Thus, Germany has to resume to an integration model that explicitly provides the US with a firm place in that process. Loose talk of "axes" or of a "German way" has to be eradicated from the political vocabulary.
- The same holds true for the trendy differentiation between a "unipolar" and a "multipolar" world. Multipolarity is not a value in itself and it is far from sure, whether a multipolar world would be a more stable one. Furthermore, multipolarity cannot be achieved simply by declaration or by arbitrarily defining potential "poles". To leave these unhelpful terms out of the agenda would avoid misperceptions and would adapt rhetoric to reality.
- Germany should refrain from European initiatives that could be misinterpreted as being directed against NATO. With "Summits of Four" or the intentional blocking of consensus, Germany undermines NATO as a key instrument of its own foreign and security policy. Political autism has nothing to do with steadfastness.
- There is a fundamental lack of understanding among the German public for the changed security policy requirements. September 11 has meanwhile disappeared from public perceptions and the entire German society appears to be engaged in "navel glazing" with respect to domestic problems. At the same time, national borders or geographical distance can no longer fence off upcoming risks and dangers. Therefore, Germany has to educate its public more about the serious threats to national and international security. This will be a precondition for building

up domestic support for swift and resolute action and for finding the necessary support for budgetary requirements.

*b) Obligations for the United States*

- The first demand to Washington would also be to carefully weigh rhetoric. The security challenges of a globalized world cannot be dealt with by a single country - not even by the only remaining superpower the United States. Even exceptional strength should not lead to a self-image of omnipotence. Statements like "its the mission that determines the alliance" are detrimental to the transatlantic partnership as the most successful alliance in recent history. This holds particularly true, since some of the imminent threats might require controversial strategies like military preemption. Such action will require even more, not less consultation with friends and allies. It will also require a comprehensive explanation and justification, without hidden agendas. Just alluding to an "axis of evil" is not enough.
- The United States should avoid the impression of having an interest in splitting or creating cleavages in Europe. European integration is an ongoing process that benefits US interests but at the same time requires Washington's attention to European concerns. A strategy that aims a "to put up or shut up" is not acceptable. Instead, a common European foreign and defense policy will not only provide synergistic effects to the Euro-Atlantic security, but it will also imply a greater say by the Europeans with regard to common projects and efforts.
- A concrete step to allay further European concerns with regard to American hegemony would be a strategic dialogue on the risks and dangers the transatlantic community is likely to face in the next decade. Washington should introduce its threat assessment to a common forum, where the Europeans present their judgements as well. The goal would be a common risk assessment that would then be the basis for the development of contingency plans for common action.
- America has played a pivotal role in building a stable world order by creating a network of international organizations. Bretton-Woods, GATT, IMF have paved the way for wealth and prosperity. These economic structures have been overarched by UN and NATO as elements of international order. Washington should refrain from policies which raise the suspicion that the US is eager to disrupt the self-created framework for the benefit of leeway and flexibility. The result of such a flawed policy could be international destabilization and the loss of America's international credit.

It took only a short time to get the German-American relations to an all time low in the post-World-War-II history. It will require significant efforts and patience to undo the mistakes on both sides and to return to a mutually profitable partnership.