



CENTER FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

EUROPA Magazine

Published by the Polish Institute of International Affairs

“A Perspective on American-German Relations”

By Esther Brimmer

Deputy Director

Center for Transatlantic Relations

*Appeared in “Europa” Magazine (Translated into Russian), Vol. 3, Nr. 3, 2003
(Russian version attached)*

One of the key tenets of late twentieth century German foreign policy has been to avoid a public break with the United States on issues important to the U.S. administration. However, in 2002 Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder made clear that he would not support the use of military force in Iraq, a policy ardently advocated by President George W. Bush. Official U.S.-German relations were strained for months afterward. National Security adviser Dr. Condoleezza Rice is reputed to have said that the new approach to European opponents of the war was to “punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia.” Whether or not she actually said it, the phrase has been widely cited as a catchy summary of Administration policy. Yet Germany is too closely linked to the U.S. to be “ignored.” After the political fight over Iraq policy, what is the outlook for U.S.-German relations?

The debate over Iraq comes at a time when the U.S. perspective on Germany is changing. Two factors should be noted. First, American policy-makers see Germany as a “normal” European country. The post World War II period really is over. The unification of Germany ended that phase. Germany is no longer divided or in tutelage to deepen democratic institutions. Therefore, officials may put less time into tending the structures that held the countries together.

During this the Cold War, Americans and (West) Germans supported many institutions to protect territory and to enfold the Federal Republic into the international community. Some were official organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Also important were the numerous institutes, conferences, exchanges, and meetings dedicated to creating generations of Germans and Americans who knew each other and helped forge the bonds of the Euro-Atlantic community and guarantee the

Federal Republic's Western orientation. In this period, Americans and Germans treated their relationship with extra care. Confirming America's commitment to the defense of West German territory was paramount. Military security kept the Allies together even though there were significant disagreements. For example, West Germans, like many Europeans and Americans, opposed the U.S. war in Vietnam. Conversely, American officials were initially skeptical of *ostpolitik*. Still American and German officials tended to use restrained rhetoric in public.

More than a decade after the end of the Cold War, Americans and German officials no longer treat their relationship as a fragile vessel of transatlantic affairs. They can disagree without imperiling military security. Neither the head of government believed that his political stature would be damaged significantly by public disagreement about Iraq. Indeed it could be enhanced. Chancellor Schroeder was focusing on his domestic constituency at election time and President Bush was thinking about domestic neo-conservatives. Neither expected the foundations of the transatlantic relationship to be a potential victim of their discord. On that point, they were probably right. Although the political tone was acrimonious, and the consequences for international affairs grave, the transatlantic relationship will survive. The connections between Americans and Europeans are to be ruptured by this disagreement. Moreover, opinions were not neatly divided by the Atlantic. Many Americans opposed the Administration's policy, while some Europeans supported it. Still, the strained situation could continue, because the U.S. administration and the German government see differently on many topics besides Iraq, such as the environment.

The second change in the basic U.S.-German relationship is the emergence of a more assertive European Union with active German support. Historically, American officials considered Germany in the context of NATO membership. NATO was the principle way for the U.S. to support the defense of Western Europe. The Federal Republic's crucial strategic role made its role in NATO important to U.S. security. Unified Germany remains key player in NATO, but it is also a key player in the European Union. As the EU's international role increases, Germany will have the opportunity to try to exert international influence as an EU member, as well as a member of NATO, and bilaterally. This is not a new situation, it has just become more important. For four decades the Franco-German engine has been the motor of European integration. As long as EU integration did not encroach on NATO's mission, most American officials were not concerned about the EU's international presence. Many American observers have become more concerned as the EU has sought a larger role in security and defense issues through the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Security and Defense Policy.

Economic affairs reinforce the point. The European Commission has competence to negotiate international trade issues on behalf of the EU member states. Therefore, in some fora Germany is represented by the EC. This strengthens the perception of Germany as part of the EU, and hence, as part of a trading block from which the U.S. is excluded.

Ironically, the changing nature of U.S.-German relations are a byproduct of the success of Chancellor Schroeder's efforts to make Germany a normal country, no longer beholden to its postwar image of a divided giant rebuilding its international credibility. Germany is a proud member of the EU. American policy has always been to support the development of the EU, even though the EU and the U.S. may disagree, especially in trade matters. Yet despite these changes American officials still believe that a strong EU and a strong German role in the EU are beneficial to transatlantic relations. Officials will have to accept the fact that managing U.S.-EU affairs will be a factor in bilateral relations as well.

These two basic trends, the reemergence of Germany as a normal country and the perception of Germany as an EU member, underlie the ebb and flow of current transatlantic issues. The U.S.-German relationship is shaped both by the tide of events within Europe and in the world at large. Within Europe the U.S. and Germany have to contend with at least five key issues:

- Enlargement of NATO and of the EU
- The Balkans and the EU
- Military transformation
- Defense expenditures and burden-sharing
- European economic reform and Germany's internal reform

Official American and German policies have long supported the enlargement of NATO and the EU. Enlargement is seen as part of a historic reuniting of Europe divided by the Cold War. Official support has been consistent even though the costs are high. Many German voters still have reservations about enlargement. The new EU countries qualify for accession financing and will benefit from EU structural funds and agricultural subsidies. For the old EU members accepting the new ones means not only paying the costs, but implicitly, raising the question of how far the EU should expand. It is already evident that there are different views within the Euro-Atlantic community about how far the EU should extend.

The most sensitive issue is Turkey. Both the U.S. and Germany have distinct perspectives on Turkey rooted in perceptions of domestic and national interests. This issue will persist. American policymakers see Turkey as a valued member of NATO and want to ensure that it maintains its Atlanticist orientation. This effort is seen as especially important given Turkey's proximity to the Middle East and symbolism as a modern Islamic country. Many American analysts are concerned that if Turkey does not become part of the EU, it would no longer support the objectives of the Euro-Atlantic community. For these Americans, eventual EU membership is an important way to maintain Turkey's modern, Atlanticist outlook.

One of the significant developments of the 1990s in regional policy is the agreement among American and European policymakers that the Balkans would have a European vocation. The notion is that eventually, albeit in twenty to twenty-five years, these countries would become part of the EU. This assumption is a change from the early

1990s. In the coming years, periodically the nature and pace of reform in the Balkans could be a subject of U.S.-German relations.

The ongoing conversation about defense and force structures is a perennial feature of U.S. German relations. As NATO partners it is natural the U.S. and Germany would talk about these issues. The debate about burden-sharing is an old one. In an alliance the partners have to work to maintain an acceptable balance of who bears the financial costs and who provides troops, territory and other benefits. For years the United States has pressed its allies to spend more on defense. NATO's transformation doctrine is the latest iteration. At the November 2002 Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government, the leaders agreed to adopt a program to reshape NATO forces. The process is called "transformation." In July 2003 NATO's old Atlantic Command based in Norfolk, Virginia, USA was replaced by Allied Command Transformation (ACT). ACT will manage the transition of NATO forces to a more flexible posture with a greater emphasis on combined and joint operations that bring together assets of many different military services (i.e., land, sea, and air) and which can deploy those assets quickly. This change reflects the view that the greatest threats to NATO members are no longer invasion by another state, but attacks by violent non-state actors, terrorists, and other rogue elements.

NATO allies the United States and Germany will have to address how to incorporate the transformation doctrine into national planning. As the instigator of the policy, the U.S. Department of Defense has already begun the process. For Germany, the transformation policy comes as an additional requirement just when Germany was trying to reduce and reshape the Bundeswehr.

Reducing force size has domestic effects. Most NATO countries have or will soon phase out conscription. The draft can no longer be used as a way to employ young men. This has implications for social and labor policy. Finance ministries play a role in foreign policy. American policymakers have long urged their German counterparts to spend more money more efficiently. Domestic pressures from the cost of enlargement to the problems of pension reform make it difficult for German politicians to spend significantly more. The transatlantic tensions over spending are not new and will persist.

In addition to the defense budget, economic matters play a role in overall U.S.-German relations. The two economies are closely interlinked. Not only are they major trade partners; their companies have significant direct investment in each other's countries. American businesses employ thousands of people in Germany and German businesses employ thousands of people in the U.S. Germany is grappling with politically sensitive reforms in its social welfare system. How well these reforms are implemented will affect the economic health of the country and its economic partners. Germany's economic condition will also affect its ability to meet its defense spending commitments in NATO. Therefore, German economic reform will continue to be a factor in U.S.-German strategic relations.

U.S. German relations are also affected by at least four key issues that concern the world beyond Europe:

- The use of force
- New German engagement out-of-area
- Anti-terrorism cooperation
- The Environment

Germany and the United States administration had a very public disagreement about whether to use force in Iraq. Underneath the acrimonious language is a real debate about how and when to use military force in international affairs. Traditional strategic analysis focuses on conflicts between sovereign states. The system has been challenged by at least two elements: non-state actors such as terrorists whose potential access to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) means that they could wreak massive damage, and rogue states that threaten to use WMD.

How to deal with these threats is a serious question for NATO and for many other countries. As NATO allies, it would make sense for the U.S. and Germany to discuss these questions. However, rather than sober discussions among experts, the debate was dominated by political concerns. Chancellor Schroeder's unwillingness to use force in Iraq changed the balance of discussions within the alliance. Europeans and Americans would prefer to have international military action taken with the support of the United Nations Security Council. Many of the American experts who opposed the Administration's policy of almost unilateral military action in Iraq, realize that WMD is a serious issue. NATO and even the EU are discussing it. In June 2003, the European Council issued High Representative Javier Solana's strategic concept of "A Secure Europe in a Better World." Based on HR Solana's work, the Council Secretariat and the Commission developed a list of "Basic Principles for an EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction."

Among some American policymakers, Germany's public reluctance to engage on these issues will make them less desirable partners for discussions about these threats. Thoughtful Americans can understand the reluctance to use military force in a certain circumstances; however, most Americans cannot accept the pacifist argument that there is never a role for force. Germany's history helps explain the existence of a vocal pacifist minority in parts of Germany. However, as most Americans view Germany as "normal," they will be less sympathetic to policies based on Germany's special history.

Increasingly American analysts are looking to Germany (and others) to help maintain international order. Ironically, the public disagreement about Iraq comes at time when Germany has made historic changes in its outlook. In the late 1990s Germans were engaged in a debate about using its forces "out-of-area," beyond NATO territory. The debate is over. Germans are not only in the Balkans, but also in Afghanistan. Germany and The Netherlands led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul in 2003. In August 2003, NATO assumed control of ISAF. Just a couple of years ago few analysts would have expected so many German troops to be abroad in multilateral operations. Some German leaders feel that American policymakers do not give them

enough credit for their new military commitment to multilateral operations outside NATO countries.

American policymakers have been very appreciative of Germany's contribution to the fight against terrorism. Amid the debates over military force, U.S.-German law enforcement cooperation against terrorism continued. Interior Minister Otto Schily was a welcome visitor in Washington symbolizing German and American commitment to the civilian aspects of fighting terrorism in the wake of September 11.

While strategic and economic issues predominate in the current U.S.-German relations, other issues will regain importance in the near term. Like many European countries, Germany objected to the Bush Administration's rejection of the Kyoto treaty on climate change. Although strategic disagreements steal the headlines, environmental issues will not go away. The pace of environmental change and the political pressure of concerned publics will keep climate change on the diplomatic agenda. Managing environmental issues is difficult; the political sensitivities add complexity. Both President Bush and Chancellor Schroeder think they reflect the views of their core political supporters; therefore, neither the government is likely to change its positions much. Environmental issues will remain politically salient and contentious.

Managing structural differences between the U.S. and Germany is complicated by the fact that the Bush administration and the Schroeder government disagree on global issues such as climate change. In years to come, elections will change incumbents, but the core themes in U.S.-German relations will remain. Americans and Germans will continue to work on the ever-evolving Atlantic Alliance. Meanwhile, their relations will be shaped by unified Germany's emergence as a "normal" nation, active in the EU and the Euro-Atlantic community.