

The Transatlantic Alliance as Reflected in New Relations (February 6, 2005)

Abstract

According to the author of this article, it was in the interest of both Germany and the U.S. to diffuse the tension that marred their relations in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq. The desired return to good transatlantic relations would have to take place under different circumstances, however. Germany wasn't a "no" country, but it wasn't automatically a "yes" country either. Another important item on the agenda was Germany's desire for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. German politicians were well aware that the United States would play a major role in the fulfillment of this wish.

Source

Germany is No Longer a "Yes" Country

The newly rediscovered friendliness in relations between Berlin and Washington cannot cover up old – and new – bones of contention.

When Gerhard Schröder is in a good mood, he speaks English in public. That is, he says a sentence in English, usually a short one. Not without reason is he economical in his use of English-language public speech as a stylistic device. After all, he's the German chancellor and not an interpreter. On Friday afternoon Schröder must have been in a great mood. The new U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stood next to him in the chancellery during her first official visit to Berlin. Without a moment's hesitation, she chose the next questioner from the throng of journalists. A breach of protocol; the moderation of press conferences is the responsibility of the host. "We are in Germany. But that is women power," the snubbed chancellor remarked with friendly laughter. Rice realized her faux pas and turned apologetically to Schröder, who generously dismissed the blunder.

A Symbolic Scene

The scene is significant for two reasons. First, lightness and joking have not been a given in German-American encounters since the discord over Iraq. Second, Schröder's friendly rebuke was a demonstration in miniature of the new German self-assuredness vis-à-vis the United States. As Rice had said only a few minutes earlier, it's time to start a new chapter in American-German relations.

The first climax in this chapter will come when President George W. Bush and his wife Laura visit Mainz on February 23. But even earlier, last Monday, the newly reelected Bush sought bilateral contact with Schröder. The president called the chancellor to tell him how pleased he was with Schröder's positive response to the elections in Iraq. Just another small scene, yet another symbol of the current state of German-American relations.

Long before election day in Iraq, the White House had used various diplomatic and political channels, including the United Nations, to let the European allies – especially the Iraq war critics – know that regardless of the course and outcome of the election Washington expected to hear positive responses. Since voter turnout was unexpectedly high and the election proceeded without any major hitches over all, it wasn't difficult for Schröder to speak of great progress for democracy in the region. But in retrospect, people in Berlin are saying that it would have been "deadly" for us to criticize the election.

Friendliness on Feet of Clay

The new German-American friendliness is standing on feet of clay. The dispute over the Iraq war was too severe for everything to be patched up in an instant. Political scientist Stephen Szabo, one of the most prominent American experts on relations between Washington and Berlin, reported in his most recent book that Bush in particular took the whole matter extremely personally. Even when Schröder started signaling to Washington that he was interested in repairing the relationship, Szabo wrote, Bush continued to forbid his staff from responding in any way for a long time.

A second reason for caution regarding the present rapprochement is the awareness on both sides of the Atlantic that it's not simply a matter of the two partners reverting to the same old relationship that has been in place for decades. Karsten Voigt, coordinator for German-American relations in the Foreign Office, said that the "geostrategic conditions" had changed. Germany is no longer an "importer" of security at the center of a global-political crisis scenario. Instead, Voigt said, Germany is now called upon as an "exporter." But before it participates in a security export of this sort, it has to be "convinced" each time anew. Germany is certainly not a "no" country, he said, "but it's not automatically a 'yes' country anymore either."

Surprising Personal Conversation

It's fitting that the Bush administration's efforts to embrace Germany again coincide with the elections in Iraq. If you dig through the layers underneath Schröder's and Foreign Minister [Joschka] Fischer's benevolent public response to the Iraqi elections, you quickly hit solid rock. Whereas Bush recently paid Interior Minister Otto Schily the honor of a surprise tête-à-tête in Washington, whereas the American secretary of state traveled to Berlin and the president at least waved across the Atlantic, the federal government's willingness to become more actively involved in Iraq remains both extremely limited and vague. Schröder and Schily are offering assistance in formulating a constitution and building up an administrative infrastructure. The chancellor is prepared to continue and even expand the training of Iraqi police or soldiers in the United Arab Emirates, if desired. But anyone in the government who asks how concrete these plans are, [who asks] whether sending German civil servants to Baghdad is also under consideration, is told that details have not yet been worked out and that everything depends on the question of security. Berlin's fundamental position on Iraq policy has not shifted a millimeter.

"Bush Means Business When It Comes to Democracy"

Karsten Voigt went the furthest when he said that those who have expressed serious reservations up to this point about the prospect for more democracy in Iraq will have to be "a bit more cautious" from now on. And anyone who has assumed up to this point that Bush is only interested in Iraq because of the oil, Voigt added, has to change his opinion at least now that the election has taken place: "Bush means business when it comes to democracy." Gernot Erler, the SPD faction's leading expert on foreign policy and someone who has Schröder's ear on the subject, is more reserved in his response. It should not be forgotten, Erler said, that the reason for the Iraq war was not the elections, but the American claim that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction represented a threat. Therefore, Erler continued, America could not demand that the Europeans "now finally admit that the war was justified."

As much as Berlin has resolved not to complain publicly about developments in Iraq, it is obvious that this is still happening behind the scenes. The high price for the liberation is terrorism, one hears, and as before there is still the danger that a fundamentalist Shiite regime could succeed Saddam Hussein. Even now one can sense that the harsh rhetoric of the not-too-distant past still remains. A negative turn of events in Iraq, a new dispute with Washington, or the desperation of a struggling political candidate could quickly bring it back into the public eye.

“Iran Will Be the Litmus Test”

The extent to which teamwork can be reestablished will soon be tested by dealings with Iran. Gary Smith, Director of the American Academy in Berlin, speaks of a “litmus test for German-American relations.” Berlin is on the lookout for even the slightest hint that Washington is seriously thinking about following a diplomatic course to get Tehran to desist from producing an atom bomb. The German federal government immediately regarded it as a very good sign when Rice said on Friday afternoon, after an hour-long conversation with Schröder – twenty minutes longer than planned – that there is a chance of resolving the crisis through diplomatic means. But off the record, no secret was made of the fact that no one would put it past the U.S. government to take non-diplomatic action against Iran.

Another topic will also be on the German-American agenda, presumably already this year: Berlin’s request for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. When Rice met with Schröder on Friday, the chancellor broached the topic with extreme reserve and spoke of it only very generally. Up to now, Washington has responded only vaguely to plans for reforming the Security Council and has said nothing at all about Germany’s wish. Rice stuck to general statements in her conversation with Schröder in Berlin as well, stressing only that America wants the United Nations to play an important role.

But Washington hasn’t failed to notice that a permanent seat has long since become a major foreign policy aim for Schröder, that German diplomats painstakingly record every comment made by a U.N. member state on the reform issue, keeping lists to determine the majority view. As voting procedures would have it, the American delegate will cast the deciding vote on the fulfillment of the German dream. The permanent seat – albeit less politically charged than Iran’s nuclear ambitions – will soon be another test for the renewed German-American friendship.

Source: Eckart Lohse, “Deutschland ist kein Ja-Land mehr,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 6, 2005, p. 3.

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