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President Bush in Germany American needs meet German ambitions

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FRANKFURT The symbolism of the place could not have escaped planners in Berlin and Washington when they decided that Mainz should be the venue for the first visit to Germany by President George W. Bush since the falling-out over Iraq.

Mainz is the place where his father, President George H.W. Bush, came to in the summer of 1989 when he invited Germany to become a "partner in leadership." The trouble is that although both Germans and Americans love to quote that, they not only emphasize different words, they attach a different meaning to each.

Faced with a protracted conflict in Iraq, a simmering crisis with Iran, an emerging rival in Asia and a mounting budget deficit at home, Washington is looking for "partners." Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, by contrast, seeks "leadership" - "at eye level," as he likes to add. From the vantage point of Berlin, the trans-Atlantic crisis over Iraq was first of all the result of insufficient consultation within NATO and Washington's lack of respect for its traditional allies. Schröder's recent calls for improved alliance consultations on a broad set of political questions are diplomatic expressions for this yearning of being treated as an equal partner in a leadership role.

The future of German-American relations, therefore, hinges to a large extent on the question of whether a new balance can be struck between Washington's desire for supportive partners and Germany's desire for co-equal leadership. Four factors caution against too much optimism.

First, the strategic outlook on the world has always differed in crucial ways between Washington and Berlin. In recent years it has even sharpened. Germans still cherish the thought of being a "civilian power." The belief that it is possible to settle most conflicts via negotiations is deeply ingrained; it currently guides Germany's approach to Iran. This is not to ignore that there have been far-reaching changes in the country's readiness to support military operations, for instance under a UN mandate. But it remains inconceivable for a German chancellor to support surgical

strikes at hidden nuclear installations without legal cover.

Second, the self-image of a "civilian power" no longer precludes hardcore power politics when Germany wants to secure a leadership role internationally. Italy has been given notice that it will be pushed aside if it stands in the way of Germany's ambition to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. What is more, rumors in Berlin have it that the Schröder government may even be willing to force an open conflict with the United States if it withheld its support. Nothing better describes the current state of German-American relations than the fact that Germany has secured the support of all permanent members except the United States.

Third, support for the United States in Germany is continuing to wane at the same time as Germany's ambition is rising. According to a recent poll by the German Marshall Fund, 57 percent of Germans believe that it is "somewhat undesirable" or "very undesirable" for the United States to "exert strong leadership in world affairs." More impressively, 83 percent believe that it is "very desirable" or "somewhat desirable" that Germany exert such leadership. Germans are also very confident that U.S. criticism of Germany's foreign policy is nothing to worry about. Seventy percent are either "fairly unworried" or "not at all worried" about this. Combining these two findings, the stage is set for any convenient bilateral conflict to escalate to crisis proportions.

Finally, the difficult personal chemistry between Bush and Schröder is further complicated by their domestic standings and their outlooks. Both currently enjoy popularity at home and both feel vindicated by recent events in the Middle East. This also has implications for the future of the relationship. It rather narrowly circumscribes how far Bush will be willing to go in order to reach out to a German "partner." And it extends the limits of how high Schröder may be aiming in order to secure the kind of leadership role he believes Germany deserves today.

As in 1989, the meeting in Mainz will once again provide a defining moment in German-American relations. Yet even under the best possible circumstances, it will be a more businesslike and less cordial relationship. If circumstances were to turn out more difficult, the fallout over Iraq may even look harmless in hindsight.

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