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## **A New Role in Europe – and in the World at Large**

*by Gunther Hellmann*

FRANKFURT For the first time in post-war German history, foreign policy may decide federal elections. What is more, if Chancellor Gerhard Schröder secures his job in the elections on Sunday he may owe it to a distinctly anti-American position. Just one year after promising "unconditional solidarity" with the United States in the war on terror, Schröder has declared that Germany would not participate in a military campaign against Iraq even if the Bush administration were to secure a UN mandate.

For a German chancellor to openly campaign on an anti-American platform is as unparalleled in post-war German history as is the resolve of the "internationalist" coalition of Social Democrats and Greens to rebuff the United Nations. Yet the "German path" that Schröder has sketched is only a new formula for a more fundamental reorientation in German foreign policy which has been in the making since the mid-1990s and which only accelerated with his ascent to power four years ago.

In outlining his vision of a "self-confident nation" in late 1998, Schröder presented his generation as uninhibited by the past. The "Berlin republic," he promised, would replace "checkbook diplomacy" with a clear focus on national interests.

Much of the current rhetoric is simply due to the upcoming elections. German opposition to effective action against Saddam will mute afterward. Even in Schröder's camp there is no evidence that Berlin would deny the Americans use of vital facilities on German soil for a military build-up in the Gulf.

The more important point is that whoever wins the elections and far beyond the issue of Iraq, German foreign policy is bound to reveal ever more distinctive traits in the years to come. Berlin is likely to play the great power game as Paris or London do. In large part this is because the two pillars on which post-war German foreign policy had been built are cracking or crumbling.

The trans-Atlantic link that secured the survival of the Federal Republic as well as German unification has steadily weakened during the 1990s, NATO expansion notwithstanding. Kosovo and Sept. 11 only accelerated this process. The Bush administration's single-minded pursuit of the war on terror and its emphasis on employing whatever means necessary, preemptive strikes included, has been received in Berlin as a clear signal to forget the "partnership in leadership" that President George H.W. Bush promised in the early 1990s.

In a recent meeting of the highest-ranking German and American generals, German participants openly expressed concern about a widening "strategic and conceptual gap." For a country which has regional ambitions at best and which generally emphasizes the international rule of law and multilateralism, a global NATO fighting America's war on terrorism in a subordinate role is not a vital interest. This basically eliminates one of two traditional pillars of German foreign policy.

That leaves the European Union. From Berlin's perspective the EU now has to carry the triple burden of coming up with an alternative to NATO, securing its own foundations and digesting the biggest round of expansion. Doubts linger on whether the EU is strong enough.

The German-French axis is cracking. Moreover, there are many signs in Germany that it is as tempting - and promising - these days to campaign against Brussels as against Washington. Receding generational inhibitions and increasing domestic problems almost ensure that the next government will ever more visibly assert German interests in the EU.

None of this means that Germany is breaking radically with its past. The EU will clearly remain the top priority for any German government - but as an instrument to govern the continent rather than a means to reassure Germany's neighbors about the benevolent intentions of Europe's leading power.

Keeping European-American relations from deteriorating will also remain an important objective. But given the confidence of a new leadership generation, Berlin is likely to engage rather than evade the differences between German and American views of what international order to aim for.

Just as Americans feel compelled to fight a war on terror which they did not want, so Germans are convinced that the U.S. pursuit of unilateralism has to be checked for the superior good of civilized international relations. Restraint and care on both sides will be needed in order to keep a minimum of cohesion.

The writer, a professor of political science at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.