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Germany: From 'nein' to 'let's talk'

By OTTO POHL
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BERLIN — At the Munich Security Conference in February, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer of Germany outlined his vision for an international coalition that could bring peace and security to Iraq and the Middle East.

The contrast to last year could not have been greater.



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In 2003, Fischer had taken the stage at the same conference to announce that Germany would not participate in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. "Excuse me, I am not convinced," Fischer had said, pointing a finger at U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was

trying to build the case for the Iraq invasion.

The change in tone this year was carefully calibrated, and its message was intended as much for Rumsfeld, who was in the front row of seats, as it was for the rest of the world: Germany will not allow Iraq to fail.

Fischer's remarks have set the tone for the German delegation headed to the Group of Eight summit at Sea Island off the Georgia coast.

Germany and the United States, split by America's decision to invade Iraq, are reuniting as Iraq threatens to disintegrate under post-invasion mismanagement and sectarian struggle.

"The worst-case scenarios are driving us together," said Bernhard May, the deputy director of trans-Atlantic relations at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is still convinced that it was right not to send troops to Iraq. That tough stance helped him win re-election 18 months ago, and the German public still believes that Iraq is only a dangerous diversion in the fight against terrorism.

But after a period of chilly relations with the United States, both countries say they are eager to look beyond their differences on the issue.

In fact, the G-8 summit could prove to be a turning point in the history of the meetings, said Eberhard Sandschneider, the director of research at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

He points to the terrorism threat as an issue that could galvanize the G-8. The recent terrorist attacks in Madrid, Spain, that killed more than 200 people have underscored the need for Western nations to pull together to fight a common enemy, he said.

Flags flew at half-staff at the Reichstag, the German parliament building in Berlin, after the Madrid attacks March 11. The threat became even more immediate when German President Johannes Rau hastily broke off his trip to Africa in March following concerns over a potential terrorist attack against him.

The partnership against threats to democracy will receive additional symbolic support two days before the G-8 conference, when Schroeder will join President Bush and French President Jacques Chirac at the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, France.

Other than terrorism and Iraq, Schroeder is also expected to voice his concerns about the global economy, in particular the slide in the value of the dollar against the euro. The rising euro has hurt Germany's hopes of economic recovery. The growing U.S. deficit, as well, is seen as a threat to the global economy by German officials.

When Schroeder met with Bush at the White House in February, their first meeting there in more than two years, both he and Bush took pains to highlight their common bonds. The two leaders announced a partnership called the German-American Alliance for the 21st Century.

In many ways, the partnership has never really been in question. Berlin's decision not to send troops to Iraq masked Germany's broad willingness to help out in the war against Islamic militants. Germany is one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid and peacekeepers to Afghanistan, and continues to play a critical role in Kosovo, where religious tensions also run high.



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At a G-8 meeting of officials in Stuttgart in December, German Labor Minister Wolfgang Clement emphasized that Germany, like other G-8 countries, was threatened by a shrinking and aging work force. He argued that the security of the West could not be guaranteed without including the increasing, and increasingly restless, population of the Middle East in the global labor market.

Sandschneider said that Europe was particularly well-qualified to help on another front in the Middle East: helping authoritarian and dictatorial states change to democracy.

"Everyone forgets that Europe had three autocratic dictatorships in southern Europe only 20 years ago," he said, referring to Spain, Italy and Portugal.

The expansion of the European Union, he contends, played a strong role in turning them into democracies with vibrant economies.

The EU's commissioner of external relations, Chris Patten, has referred to EU membership as its "most successful foreign policy instrument."

Adapting that foreign policy experience to the Middle East, analysts argue, could pave the way for economic improvements there that could reduce the social pressure that pushes people toward religious extremism.

Such hopes of cooperation between Europe and America on Middle East issues, however, face a key hurdle. Germany, together with other major European nations, is deeply concerned about what Berlin perceives as Bush's reluctance to pressure Israel to make peace with the Palestinians.

"You can't exclude the Israeli/Palestinian issue," says Christoph Bertram, director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. "You have to take action there."

Germany is dubious that the Bush administration or Congress will take any action on this, Bertram says, especially in an election year in the United States.

But the threat of the chaos in Iraq spreading throughout the Middle East is as grave for Europe as for the United States, both of which depend on the region for their oil.

"If Saudi Arabia collapses, all of our lights go out. Literally," said May of the German Council of Foreign Relations.



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