



APRIL 30, 2014

MERKEL IN WASHINGTON: WHAT DOES SHE WANT?

by Annette Heuser

Among the US's many allies, Germany has become one of the hardest for Americans to read. Washington sees the country under Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership as a power that is unwilling to fully execute its foreign-policy responsibilities by flexing its muscles and, when necessary, by considering military force. The US has long been discomfited by Berlin's relationship with Moscow, and Germany's perceived hesitance to respond quickly and forcefully to the Ukraine crisis has solidified the unease. Concerns about Berlin's predictability and commitment to trans-Atlantic unity have re-emerged.

At the same time, Washington has seen the chancellor navigate forcefully and diplomatically an unwieldy European Union through the euro crisis. Her reputation in this regard is as solid as the economy and export champion that she has governed for nine years. She has garnered respect for her steady leadership despite criticism of her emphasis on austerity and avoidance of stimulus.

When the chancellor, with this dichotomous profile, arrives in the US later this week, her constant companion will be the tension between Washington's distrust and suspicion on one hand and its admiration and respect on the other. She must deal with that as she aims for three achievements in her discussions with President Obama.

Maximize Coordination on Ukraine

Ukraine overshadows every other issue on the trans-Atlantic agenda. The chancellor will leave the White House in no doubt that she will continue to adhere to the Western line of halting Russian troublemaking in eastern Ukraine. Despite a new round of US and EU sanctions, Merkel will address further measures both sides can take to raise pressure on the Kremlin. But she will also make clear that maintaining EU unity while stifling opposition to sanctions from the German and European corporate sector is daunting. These challenges, she will emphasize, require her to take a slightly different approach to a shared objective.

Nevertheless, both leaders' views align on Ukraine more than on any other issue. They see the value of slow and deliberate policy- and decision-making. The real accomplishment will come

if the chancellor can use the crisis in Ukraine to inject a new purpose into the trans-Atlantic relationship that could also benefit the ongoing Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) talks.

Promote TTIP

Chancellor Merkel proposed a TTIP to boost growth and jobs across the Atlantic. But since negotiations started last summer, she has, in the face of a storm of domestic criticism, limited her public statements about a deal. At the same time, President Obama confronts Congressional opposition to obtaining much-needed Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). The Ukraine crisis provides both leaders with an opportunity to advance their agendas. But for the chancellor, rising concern about European energy dependence on Russia can reignite interest in a TTIP that anchors trans-Atlantic energy cooperation.

A Dialogue on NSA Activities in Germany

Alleged NSA actions in Germany have undermined the fundament of the German-American partnership: trust. Berlin now views relations through an NSA prism, but Washington stubbornly refuses to acknowledge this. Chancellor Merkel will therefore again push President Obama to address an issue that he would prefer to sweep under the rug. Since a no-spy agreement between the two countries is impossible, the chancellor will seek at a minimum a commitment to a serious, bilateral dialogue about the future scope of the US surveillance activities in Germany. To do this, she must get the president to understand that this issue will not disappear from the German agenda and will continue to prevent their relationship from reaching its full potential. If she is successful, the chancellor can show her domestic constituency that she has managed to get the Americans to listen to a discussion that they *should* hear.

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The German-American relationship may be frustrating and nerve-racking at times, but the Ukraine crisis gives the countries' two leaders an opportunity to send to Moscow a signal of strong trans-Atlantic unity. That alone will be more than could have been accomplished in recent years. But the chancellor will also use her visit to attempt to garner greater understanding for Europe's more complex and interdependent relationship with Russia, to provide a new impetus to the TTIP negotiations, and to reconfirm Germany's abhorrence of the NSA's apparently unbridled snooping. To achieve all three goals is a tall order.

Annette Heuser is executive director of the Washington,DC-based Bertelsmann Foundation.
annette.heuser@bfna.org

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1101 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 901 • Washington, DC 20005 USA • Tel: +1.202.384.1980
www.bfna.org