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German foreign policy lacks a commitment to freedom

By Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

Washington

George Bush has been ringing the freedom bell lately. Wherever the American President travels, he evokes the theme of his Second Inaugural Address: the universal right to freedom's blessings, whatever passport the individual may hold. In his speeches on foreign soil there is hardly a paragraph without freedom, liberty or some other synonym. Bush even declares the abolition of tyranny to be the ultimate goal of American foreign policy. It can't get much more idealistic.

In some quarters there has been puzzlement, even amusement about this sudden inflation of freedom rhetoric. But presidential speeches have consequences. They spawn policy. Since Bush first introduced his freedom agenda in January, he has called for an end to the Syrian occupation of eastern Lebanon, he demanded free elections in Moldova and Belorussia, he suggested democratic reforms to Saudi-Arabia and Egypt, he applauded democratic movements in Kyrgystan and Ukraine, and he criticized the authoritarian style of government in Vladimir Putin's Russia. His Secretary of State denounced the Iranian theocracy and called off a trip to Egypt upon hearing that a prominent leader of the democratic opposition had been imprisoned. Bush introduced his new policy of exporting democracy with a stinging critique of past American policy: "Decades of excusing and accommodating tyranny, in the pursuit of stability, have only led to injustice and tragedy."

By now Gerhard Schröder's government has had three months to study the latest tack of George Bush's foreign policy. It should not be hard to react to this one, since the pursuit of freedom is part of the self-image of each and every democratic nation. That freedom creates stability has been the underlying assumption of every round of NATO and EU enlargement. Liberals and Greens especially should be celebrating. For years and years they saw hypocrisy in American foreign policy. Across the Atlantic they shouted: Pinochet! Somoza! Mubarak! Shah Pahlevi! King Faisal! Now it seems as though an American president has finally heard their complaints. After all these years, the only issue with this White House is the means of promoting democracy, not the end.

But what is coming out of Germany? What do we hear? Nothing! Nothing but deafening silence! It seems as though the political class is speechless before an American president who has adopted the liberal triad of political freedom, human rights and economic development as

preventive medicine against all kinds of crises. Maybe the silence in Germany is personal. There were times when the word "freedom" sounded like a promise when uttered by an American president. But that was when a wall divided Berlin and the president's name was Kennedy. The current president has a credibility problem in Germany. There are those who choose not to believe a word, on grounds that Bush talked his country and the world into the Iraq war based on an exaggerated argument. And with a little ill will, the preparation for the next war can be read into the constant invocation of freedom. Given this backdrop, the German weariness with Bush and his F-word might even seem understandable. But only a bit. In the end, an attitude based on skepticism of a president, instead of his policy, is a sign of stubbornness rather than principle.

Then there are those who argue that George Bush is just voicing something that goes without saying. After all, everybody is for freedom. Europeans just lack Bush's theatrics and Messianic streak. But whatever this argument is worth, saying nothing has a price. A few weeks ago the Lithuanian Ambassador invited six leaders of the Belorussian opposition to Washington. Over dinner they told stories of life under Alexander Lukashenko, the last remaining dictator in Europe. And they showed slides. The first one was nothing but a quote from George Bush. The President had called for freedom in Belorussia. For the dissidents -- each of them had been imprisoned for their belief in democracy -- Bush's words sounded like redemption. They seemed to be proof that opposition pays off and resistance to authoritarianism will not be overlooked by the West. However, the slideshow contained no quote from the German Chancellor. The dissidents could not find one. They fear they are becoming victims of what they see as Germany's convergence with an increasingly authoritarian Russia.

That seemed to make sense to the Lithuanian hosts. They vividly remember the days when the Baltic states liberated themselves from Russia and applied for membership in NATO and the EU. Initially, their mentors were the Americans, not the Europeans, and least of all the Germans. Germans, at least in the beginning, were more concerned about instability in the Baltic. Postwar Germans in general have been quite reserved about other people's desire for liberty. The Poles can tell that story. When martial law greeted the Solidarity movement, German elites reassured themselves that there was no other way to avoid a Soviet occupation. They kept quiet in the face of authoritarianism. An echo of this history can be heard in Lebanon today. To the democratic opposition, the hero of liberation will not be the German chancellor, but the American president.

At the same time, Gerhard Schröder is pursuing his own foreign policy. He talks up a "strategic partnership" with Russia's Vladimir Putin, whom he calls a "flawless democrat". He travels to seven more or less autocratic Gulf nations to advertise German products, including weapons. He vehemently promotes the end of Europe's weapons embargo against China. He normalizes relations with a man that has been called housebroken only recently: Lybian strongman Moamar Ghadaffi. And he responds to America's freedom offensive in the Middle East by saying

democracy cannot be "forced upon these societies from the outside".

While Schröder surrenders to skepticism towards freedom, Bush seems giddy with freedom euphoria. To find the roots of this difference, one need only listen to their speeches. Here is Gerhard Schröder in Riyadh in front of the German Saudi Business Council: "Without peace there will be no prosperity. That is the important correlation." Here is George Bush at the National Defense University: "This status quo of despotism and anger cannot be ignored or appeased, kept in a box or bought off, because we have witnessed how the violence in that region can reach easily across borders and oceans." For Schröder, peace is the central value. For Bush, it is freedom. The core of the ongoing transatlantic dispute seems to change: from the question of war to the question of freedom.

Whether values have a role to play in foreign policy has been a matter of debate for almost a century. The realists argue the relationship between nations is only governed by power and interest. Idealism has no role to play. It was President Woodrow Wilson who first challenged this notion on the world stage. During his presidency the United States became the first big power to make its values the core of its foreign policy. Wilson's sunny vision of a world united by democracy and the League of Nations failed, and fueled a powerful backlash. On the other hand, hyper-realists like President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger set off counter-movements of their own. They were accused of pursuing immoral policies and neglecting American values. Their successors, especially Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, stressed the moral underpinnings of their policies. As Leslie Gelb and Justine Rosenthal have written in *Foreign Affairs*, these presidents created a consensus in Washington that values should be part of any policy that pursues the national interest.

Bush's freedom agenda ties into this debate. It attempts nothing less than to reconcile realism with idealism. Thus it opens itself up to criticism. Hypocrisy is the most obvious charge. The reality of American foreign policy will never live up to its promises if those promises are so far-reaching. It is hard to prod the Egyptians to live by the rule of law if Egypt is a prime destination for so-called "extraordinary renditions." George Bush may criticize Vladimir Putin for his authoritarianism, but he will have to cooperate with him if he wants the Russians to stop their nuclear exports to Iran. He may reprove the Chinese for their Gulag, but he will need them to pressure the nuclear adventurers in North Korea. For George Bush, these contradictions are a small price to pay, because the alternative would be worse.

As Joe Klein writes in *Time*, Bush "fled" into his freedom agenda. When no weapons of mass destruction and no major Al-Qaeda connections were found in Saddam's Iraq, the reasons to go to war got lost in the process. Save one, of course: liberation from tyranny. From this starting point, George Bush has developed his strategy. Traditional conservatism is hard to detect in this foreign policy, but traditional Americanism is easier to see. The appeal to

freedom enables him to leave the radicalism of his first term behind. Instead he invokes basic values of the American Republic. That a President should commit himself to the spread of democracy and freedom doesn't have to be explained to the American public. It is the *raison d'être* of the country.

The American Revolution not only gave birth to the new state. It also gave rise to America's self-image as an island of freedom in a sea of suppression. Thomas Jefferson coined the term "empire of freedom". The Civil War, the most formative period in American history, was fought over the question of the reach of liberty – as were the two world wars and the Cold War in which the "free world" was to be defended. In this succession of events, the Vietnam War is America's mark of Cain. Americans, writes Frenchman Pascal Bruckner, understand freedom as a "dream." They chose liberal democracy as the best of all systems, while many Europeans embraced liberalism because more exciting alternatives had disappointed them.

Especially in the German self-conception, freedom never reached the same importance. As Berlin historian Jürgen Kocka reminds us, other ideas were always more important: "people, nation and state, for a long time 'class', then 'race' for a fairly short period, lately 'peace'." In the beginning of the German nation state, there was no Declaration of Independence, no Bill of Rights and no revolution. The enemy of individual liberty has always been the "German Freedoms," a conglomeration of group, class and regional rights which the authorities granted to preserve the core of the authoritarian Emperor's rule. Most importantly, Germany never knew what Jürgen Kocka calls an "alliance of war and freedom". When German soldiers crossed borders they did not do it in the name of freedom. That changed only in 1999, when German soldiers entered Kosovo together with NATO forces. The same holds true in Afghanistan today. During the last century German soldiers had a history of defeat. In the end, historian Dan Diner notes, "humiliation came in the shape of freedom, and it spoke English". Earlier, from 1803 on, it spoke French, but the Germans did not like that either. That they should view themselves as "liberated" after World War II was a hard sell. And even in 1985, on the occasion of the commemorations of German capitulation, German President Richard von Weizsäcker had a hard time promoting the idea of "liberation". To this day, the image of an American soldier risking his life in a foreign land to guarantee someone else's right to vote is irritating to Germans, as could be seen during the Iraqi elections. For Americans, this picture symbolizes the core of their self-image.

In the older history of German parties, only fragments of a tradition of freedom can be found. Conservatives mostly supported the powers that be, whatever the nature of those powers. Following the failed revolution of 1848 classical European-style liberals betrayed freedom to gain national unity. And even in postwar Germany liberals and conservatives could hardly be seen as reliable allies of oppressed peoples.

Which leaves the Social Democrats as the party of freedom. Its theoreticians mostly ignored the problem of individual liberty. For

them freedom meant the emancipation of a class. But in practical politics Social Democrats inherited the democratic tradition of 1848. Nobody needed to teach persecuted children of the labor movement about the value of individual freedom. That's why the most worthy bearers of a freedom tradition within Social Democracy are former emigrants. In that respect Chancellor Willy Brandt is second to none. When he stepped down from the Party Chairmanship in 1987 he said: "If I were to say what is dearest to me next to peace, my unambiguous answer is: freedom. Freedom for the many, not only for the few. Freedom of conscience and opinion. Also freedom from misery and freedom from fear." Brandt's policy of detente initially aimed at the liberation of Eastern Europe, even if recognition and partial stabilization of these regimes was the price. It was only his successors in office who made a fetish of stability and forgot all about subversion. This breach with social democratic tradition continues to this day. It was Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine who saw nothing but a looming financial crisis for West Germany when a movement gained strength in East Germany that demanded freedom and national unity. And today it is Chancellor Gerhard Schröder who runs away from the American freedom agenda.

After World War II realism was the dominant school of German foreign policy. There were good reasons for this preference. With integration into the family of western nations and with detente towards Eastern Europe, the young republic caught up with reality. Now a third, more cynical phase of Realpolitik seems to be in the making: since the administration is unable to make a dent in unemployment, the sample case has become the preferred tool of foreign policy. Dictators are customers, too. Some are very good customers. At the same time, the administration denies a fundamental fact: that the tender spring of democracy in the Middle East might have anything to do with American pressure. By denying the obvious, Schröder is missing an opening. He could concede that Bush's freedom strategy is based on sound analysis whatever he thinks of the man or his other policies. It would make Schröder's critique of the war in Iraq look principled.

When Jürgen Kocka compares the role of liberty in German and American history he sees "dramatic differences, mostly before 1945, less so during the Cold War, a little bit more visible again lately." This quote dates from November 2003. At that point the de-westernization of German foreign policy had only started.