



A coalition it may be, but Merkel has won

(Published in [*The International Herald Tribune*](#), October 11, 2005)

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Colaboraciones n° 603

October 14, 2005

Angela Merkel becomes chancellor of Germany in the fog of a grand coalition's shared powers, but with an exceptional precedent in hand that should very likely allow her to carry out part of her platform for change.

She takes over the almost total control of German foreign policy by the chancellor's office that became routine under Gerhard Schröder. Since Willy Brandt in the 1970s, the chancellor's role as chief draftsman and actor in Germany's international relations has continuously strengthened, and under Schröder it became virtually presidential.

Now, with the likelihood of compromise limiting the extent of economic reform achievable between her Christian Democrats and their

Social Democratic time-share partners, the force of appearing on the international stage as Germany's sole face and voice brings Merkel her clearest path to authority.

This is essential leverage and an identity that she will not care to delegate or water down.

They become all the more important against the real possibility that a coalition government, with posts like the Labor Ministry apportioned to the Social Democrats, will not be able to dramatically reform a job-protection system that stops firms from hiring and solidifies Germany's double-digit unemployment. Even Merkel said during the campaign that any change in labor laws would exclude current full-time jobholders from risk.

But foreign policy is different. The chancellor is on the phone with presidents and prime ministers. With a speech, or even a word, she holds a near-total hand on public opinion concerning Germany abroad.

And at home, what a foreign minister from another party says, especially a Social Democrat with a potentially conflicting vision of the real world, can be praised away by a chancellor as fodder for future debate. If as rumored, Peter Struck, the current defense minister, moves to the Foreign Ministry, he'll be a compatible man who last year criticized Socialist Spain's sudden troop pull-out from Iraq as destabilizing.

One of the obscured truths of Schröder's chancellorship involved the diminution of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's zone of control. And this came in spite of Fischer's considerable personal popularity and skills.

Yet by the end of his seven years in power alongside Fischer's Greens, the chancellor left the foreign minister with the Israeli-Palestinian problem as the only issue where he made German policy. Schröder had effectively taken over relations with the United States, the European Union, France, Russia and China as his own.

It is exactly in these areas where Merkel, with the chancellor's unique foreign-policy levers, can be surest of embossing her own stamp on Germany's affairs.

It is no exaggeration to call her someone who sees the world differently than Schröder. And she made this clear throughout her campaign.

Example: Merkel's answer to a question about whether Schröder manipulated public opinion. "Very clearly," she said this year, "he served a latent and very present anti-Americanism." Another question, in a debate with Schröder, went to America's response to Hurricane Katrina. Merkel's came straight back with the answer that she was there to talk about Germany's problems, for example, she said, its one million children living in poverty.

Merkel is a woman who felt comfortable enough with the wisdom of Ronald Reagan's speechwriters to paraphrase him in her summing-up at the end of the TV debate. And to say in an interview with a German writer, while holding the line on not sending troops to Iraq, that "America has a whole lot of options. The more unpredictably parts of Europe behave, the more other options are going to be acceptable."

Before the election, Wolfgang Schäuble, who served as the foreign policy supremo on her campaign "competence" team, laid out some of the positions that Merkel expected to make her own. Except for differences on Turkey's admission to the EU, where Merkel has called for privileged partnership rather than membership, there really doesn't seem to be a Merkel conviction so contentious that she would have to neutralize or freeze it inside a grand coalition.

Schäuble's version of the new chancellor's basic goals and notions:

Merkel wants strong relations with France. But not in a manner so that other Europeans think the partnership goes over their heads. During the Schröder years, she feels, Germany and France attempted to dominate Europe while in fact dividing it. The European Union is not an alternative to the Atlantic Alliance.

Merkel considers Russia an important partner. But the United States is Germany's most vital ally. She makes a differentiation between the countries (unlike Schröder) in the quality of Berlin's relationships. The Atlantic Partnership is a matter of the heart.

A renewal of a Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis is inconceivable. The disconcertingly chummy and exclusive relationship between Schröder and Vladimir Putin has unnecessarily scared the Poles and others to Germany's east.

Schröder's effort, together with the French, to have the EU lift its arms embargo on China has flown in the face of the interests of many German allies. The arms issue should be a decision for the Atlantic Alliance. Its view takes precedence over the EU position.

A German seat on the UN Security Council is "plausible," but not in the manner of Schröder's self-aggrandizing quest for it.

Promoting the idea of an EU "hard core" of a few countries operating at

an accelerated speed has no currency.

Although Schäuble didn't mention it, it is no secret either that Merkel would be comfortable as an ally for Tony Blair in finding new impetus to create real action on Europe's need for economic and social reform.

"If you look at the foreign policy agenda, the striking thing is that there is a very different tonality, but nothing really that an SPD foreign minister is going to clash on," said Horst Teltschik, Helmut Kohl's former security adviser and one of the Christian Democrats Merkel talks to about foreign policy.

The fact is: a) there are more than a few SPD members who believe that German foreign policy had become a hostage of French notions of a world walled off into multipolar groups, with Europe standing in opposition to the United States; and b) a German Social Democratic Party delegation in the European Parliament voted against Schröder's desire to lift the China arms embargo, saying legitimate American concerns should be addressed.

Because what Merkel is proposing represents a refashioning of German foreign policy on terrain razed by Schröder, but one familiar and representative of the years of German postwar success, she'll likely find it her sharpest and most immediately rewarding political play inside the mists of the grand coalition.