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## **Merkel-Rumsfeld Mtg to Put Focus On Better Ties with US**

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BRUSSELS (AP)--German Chancellor Angela Merkel will be the star of the annual Munich international conference this weekend, where her meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is expected to underscore Germany's warming relations with Washington.

More than 40 foreign and defense ministers are to attend the gathering, where the main theme this year is "the renewal of trans-Atlantic relations." Other topics will include the West's relations with Russia, reform of NATO and Asian security concerns.

In the corridors of the venerable Hotel Bayerischer Hof, ministers can be expected to hold informal talks on Iran's nuclear program, the Hamas Palestinian election victory and regional tensions from Kosovo to Afghanistan. An Iranian delegation including Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and nuclear negotiator Javad Vaeidi is expected to attend.

Launched in the 1960s, the Munich conference is favored by top policy makers and experts as a chance to exchange ideas in a more relaxed setting than formal international meetings. But in recent years it's been the scene of tension between Rumsfeld and his German hosts.

In 2003, then German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer made an impassioned speech attacking U.S. preparations to invade Iraq. The following year, the Germans and French rejected a U.S. call for NATO troops in Iraq. Although the atmosphere had improved in 2005, Merkel's predecessor Gerhard Schroeder ruffled American feathers by stating that NATO "is no longer the primary venue where trans-Atlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies."

This year things should be more rosy. Since taking office in November, Merkel appears to have succeeded in thawing the diplomatic chill, winning lavish praise from U.S. President George W. Bush during a visit to the White House last month.

Merkel stressed her trans-Atlantic credentials Wednesday, telling diplomats in Berlin that "the strongest anchor of common security is and remains NATO."

Germany is expanding its role in NATO's peacekeeping force in Afghanistan this year and in contrast with the divisions over Iraq, Germany, France, the U.K. and the U.S. are closely coordinating their approach to Iran's nuclear program.

However, differences with the U.S. remain. Germany stands firm on its refusal to send troops to Iraq, and Merkel has repeatedly underlined opposition to the U.S. prison camp for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Merkel is expected to make her keynote speech to the conference Saturday morning.

Other speakers will include Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, and U.S. Senator John McCain.