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Merkel, Bush Try to Solidify Iran Approach

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WASHINGTON (AP) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel is visiting President Bush for the second time in four months, trying to prevent friction among the main Atlantic allies as they push for possible U.N. penalties against Iran over its nuclear program.

Wednesday's meeting at the White House comes as Merkel's approval ratings in opinion polls top 80 percent, in sharp contrast to Bush, who is languishing at the lowest level of his presidency, 32 percent.

With British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac both facing domestic political difficulties and a new government soon to take over in Italy, Merkel arguably is the most popular politician in Europe.

She already has helped resolved several disputes in the 25-nation European Union and seems destined to be the main European foreign policy voice for a while.

A rift on Iran could occur should Germany, Britain and France differ with the United States on pursuit of additional measures against Tehran, such as freezing its assets, should the U.N. Security Council not move quickly enough on sanctions.

The trans-Atlantic unity on the Iranian question so far contrasts with the run-up to the war in Iraq, when Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, became the most vigorous critic of the conflict, with Chirac on his side, and Blair was the main U.S. ally for the war effort.

Bush and Merkel had a friendly meeting during the chancellor's first trip in January, despite her criticism of the of the U.S. prison camp at **Guantanamo Bay**, Cuba. It was a sharp contrast to the chill that existed between Bush and Schroeder.

Merkel came away from a visit last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin insisting that the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog agency should continue to play a central role in the Iranian nuclear dispute despite Iran's rejection of a deadline to meet the Security Council's demand that it stop enriching uranium.

Russia and China, both veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council, oppose sanctions against Iran, while Britain, France and Germany -- and the United States -- say they will seek to make the demand on uranium enrichment compulsory.

"We are very interested for the world community, as it has been from the start, to work together and show Iran that we want to work by diplomatic methods," Merkel said after meeting Putin. "But it is necessary for Iran to keep to the agreements that it has committed itself to."

"We are not talking about banning Iran from using nuclear energy for civilian goals, but it must keep to its obligations," Merkel said.

Steve Szabo of the JohnsHopkinsUniversitySchool for Advanced International Studies said if Merkel and Bush fail to get a U.N. decision on Iran, they should promote a workable coalition

outside the world organization determined to exhaust all diplomatic options and stop public speculation about military options.

"The serious use of military force is politically and militarily unsustainable both in Europe and America, and the chancellor should make it clear to the president that saber rattling, especially nuclear saber rattling, will undermine German and European support for a unified approach," Szabo said.

Merkel's popularity at home has risen in part because of an improving outlook for the German economy, Europe's largest, after six years of sluggish growth and high unemployment.

In addition, as Germany's first female chancellor and its first leader to come from the former communist East Germany, she has created a climate of confidence by forming a stable government, the so-called grand coalition between her Christian Democrats and their usual rivals, the Social Democrats.

After seeing Bush at the White House and joining him and his wife, Laura, for dinner, Merkel goes to New York on Thursday for a meeting with business leaders. She returns to Washington that night to address the American Jewish Community's gala marking the organization's 100th anniversary. No other German chancellor has addressed the AJC.

Bush and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan will join her.

In her remarks, Merkel may touch on Iran, a subject of special immediate import to the Jewish community after Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent statement that Israel should be "wiped off the face of the map."