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Merkel Seeks Better U.S. Ties; Guantanamo Clouds Trip

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(Bloomberg) -- New German Chancellor Angela Merkel may face a balancing act between the better U.S. ties she wants and her nation's skepticism toward President George W. Bush's policies in Iraq.

Merkel, who holds her first meeting with Bush in Washington today, last week called for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp in Cuba. In her first comments on arrival last night, she stressed Europe and the U.S. are united in their condemnation of Iran's nuclear policy.

``She's saying: `I will be a friend to you but I will not be an uncritical friend,' Constanze Stelzenmueller, director of the German Marshall Fund's Berlin branch, said in a telephone interview.

Bilateral relations have recovered since reaching a post- World War II low under Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, who refused to back Bush's decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003. Still, German public opinion remains critical of the U.S. administration. Sixty-eight percent of 1,000 people polled by market researcher Emnid on Jan. 5 and 6 said they mistrust Bush's policies.

Merkel's support for Bush and the pro-American values she developed while growing up in communist East Germany have led to ``high expectations in the Bush administration" for better ties, Karsten Voigt, the German Foreign Ministry's adviser on U.S. relations, said in an interview Jan. 4.

Iran Condemnation

Merkel, 51, began her visit to Washington last night by stressing that Germany was at one with the U.S. in its opposition to Iran's resumption of research on uranium reprocessing.

The U.S., Germany, U.K. and France said yesterday talks to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear program have failed and the matter should be referred to the Security Council, where Iran could face censure or sanctions.

``What Iran has been doing is clearly not acceptable," Merkel said in a speech at a dinner in the German embassy in Washington last night. ``They crossed the red line, and it's obvious that we have to find a way to react to this."

Merkel said that ``it's a good sign that the U.S. and Europe are standing together here and they should continue to do so in the future."

Speaking about German-U.S. ties in general, the chancellor said that ``Germany should focus on the role of a mediator rather than the role of a polarizer."

When Schroeder's dismissal of the Iraq war as an ``adventure" helped his Social Democrats win re-election in 2002, Christian Democrat Merkel was more supportive of the U.S.

Attack on Schroeder

She argued that Schroeder's anti-war stance had reduced the pressure on the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, to comply with UN resolutions and made conflict more likely. In a column for the Washington Post newspaper published Feb. 22, 2003, Merkel said Schroeder ``doesn't speak for all Germans."

``She certainly doesn't view Europe as a counterweight to the U.S., a Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis doesn't fit her notion of politics," said Voigt, who is joining Merkel on today's visit.

Schroeder met regularly with both French President Jacques Chirac and Russian President Vladimir Putin, a personal friend, to discuss policy. Merkel will pay a six-hour visit to Moscow in three days' time to meet the president for the first time.

``I want to improve the quality and substance of the German-U.S. relationship," Merkel told Der Spiegel magazine in an interview Jan. 9. She said Europe and the U.S. should seek closer cooperation on economic matters and the fight against terrorism.

Merkel, who will meet Bush at the White House at 9:50 a.m., says she will raise the issue of Guantanamo during the talks.

Closure Call

``An institution like Guantanamo cannot and must not be allowed to exist permanently," Merkel told a news conference in the German city of Mainz Jan. 7.

``Merkel wants to signal particularly to German voters, German media and her critics that she's not a lapdog of the American president," said Jeff Gedmin, the director of the Aspen Institute in Berlin, in a telephone interview.

The U.S. Defense Department is holding about 500 people at the Guantanamo naval base, including many captured after the U.S. ousted Afghanistan's Taliban regime following the Sept. 11 attacks. Most are being held without charges. While detainees' lawyers have sought their trial or release, the U.S. says they are ``enemy combatants" whose detention is necessary in the war on terrorism.

``Guantanamo cannot be justified," Merkel's Interior Minister, Wolfgang Schaeuble, told yesterday's edition of the Handelsblatt newspaper. ``It doesn't correspond to my understanding of legality, human rights and American principles."

Greater Contribution

To meet the U.S. desire for a greater contribution from Germany toward Iraq's reconstruction, Merkel may offer to step up training of Iraqi police officers and increase financial aid to young people in the Middle Eastern country, Germany's Die Welt newspaper reported Jan. 11, citing no one.

Merkel, like Schroeder, has ruled out sending any German troops to help keep the peace there.

German officials have also expressed dismay about allegations that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency has flown terrorist suspects to secret prisons through German airspace.

Voigt said full clarification has yet to be given by U.S. authorities on circumstances that led the CIA to allegedly abduct a German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, in 2003. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia Dec. 6 accusing the CIA of illegally abducting el-Masri and subjecting him to torture in a secret overseas prison.

When U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Berlin on Dec. 6, Merkel said the U.S. had conceded it had made "a mistake" in seizing el-Masri. U.S. officials denied making any such acknowledgement.

"It's anything but a secret that Bush and Schroeder didn't get on well," Voigt said. "The problem with Merkel is expectations: They already are so high, she may not be able to meet all of them."