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Merkel Shines on World Stage

From Moscow to Gaza, the German chancellor's cool, pragmatic style wins praise.

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Christian Science Monitor
February 3, 2006

BERLIN - Nobody who's followed Angela Merkel's rapid rise in German politics can quite believe the chancellor's splash debut on the international stage.

"I'm surprised," says Josef Joffe, transatlantic expert and editor of the respected weekly Die Zeit. "She had no experience in foreign policy, nor has she shown much interest in it in the past."

Since she was sworn in last November, Ms. Merkel has shown herself to be an unfettered negotiator in Paris and Brussels, and an independent-minded partner of Russian president Vladimir Putin. She's talked freedom with President Bush in the White House and gotten chummy with Bono in Davos. And in Jerusalem this week, she talked tough for the European Union, demanding Hamas recognize Israel so that the Palestinian Authority might continue to receive EU aid.

For someone elected on promises to fix domestic problems like Germany's economy, Merkel has cut an impressive figure on the world stage. Editorialists, analysts, and even opposition politicians have lauded her cool, pragmatic approach.

"Angela Merkel seems to me to have changed since becoming chancellor," observes Karen Donfried, senior director for policy programs at the German Marshall Fund in Washington. "She is much more secure and self-confident."

No sleigh rides with Putin for this chancellor
Even more apparent, however, is the new direction Merkel has set for Germany's foreign policy. No more winter sleigh rides with Putin, as the former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder once favored, or emphatic bear hugs with French President Jacques Chirac.

"She is returning to the classical balances of German foreign policy. Hence closer to the US than Schröder, and more distance toward Russia and France," says Mr. Joffe. "She is restoring the continuities Schröder had abandoned."

As she does, she's making use of the political tools that have helped the impressive rise of this former physicist through German politics. Her flexibility and cool-headedness were on display in early December, as she helped bridge the gap between Britain and France in reaching an agreement on the EU's budget for 2007-2012.

Diplomats said Merkel worked behind the scenes to reach a resolution, which shook an extra 100 million euros free for Poland but meant Germany would have to contribute more to the EU budget than in the past. Merkel nevertheless won praise both among her European counterparts and at home.

"The Germans didn't come back from Brussels playing the victors," wrote Günther Nonnenmacher, one of the publishers of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper. "Rather, Ms. Merkel was herself praised for her negotiating talent - in seldom-seen European unanimity."

A delicate balance in US-German relations

A political student of Schröder's predecessor Helmut Kohl, who favored strong transatlantic ties, Merkel has said she wants to return Germany its role as a mediator both within Europe and across the Atlantic. While Merkel's recent visit with Mr. Bush in Washington was "a very public demonstration of a change of style and rhetoric from the Schröder era," says Ms. Donfried of the German Marshall Fund, she also cautions that the chancellor must tread carefully.

"As much as Angela Merkel wants to revitalize German-American relations," Donfried explains, "she knows that this American president and his policies are not popular with her public."

Merkel's approach has so far proved successful not only abroad, but among political opponents at home as well.

"She represents a new form of body language, of style, and you could see that in her Washington trip, in her trip to Moscow," says Gert Weisskirchen, foreign policy spokesman of the Social Democrat parliamentary group. "It's encouraging that she sought dialogue with NGOs in Russia, as well as her willingness to clearly state the European position on Guantánamo Bay."

Mr. Bush weathered the Guantánamo Bay criticism well, and praised Merkel as someone who "loves freedom" after their 45-minute chat in the White House. Her meetings with civil-rights spokesmen following her meeting in the Kremlin, and her criticisms about Chechnya don't appear to have gotten Merkel - who is fluent in Russian - off on the wrong foot with Putin either.

"I didn't think her criticisms of Russia were particularly sharp," says Yevgeny Bazhanov, vice rector of the Russian Diplomatic Academy. "She wasn't nervous or negative about it, she simply stated her concerns. We're used to having friendly differences, and it shouldn't get in the way."

How long will her 'honeymoon' last?

How long Merkel's honeymoon will last remains an open question. Analysts say Merkel's unabashed support of Eastern European EU members and NATO could strain Russian-German relations. London and Paris could grow frustrated at Merkel sticking up for smaller EU countries, as she did during the budget negotiations.

And US-German relations could hit a rough patch over continued criticism of Washington's tactics in fighting terrorism. Merkel did signal a tough approach on terrorism, however, telling diplomats in Berlin on Wednesday, "The struggle against terrorism demands the use of all political, economic and, as a last resort, also military means."

Stefan Fröhlich, a transatlantic specialist at the University of Erlangen in southern Germany, concludes, "I really had the impression she feels quite comfortable in the international arena. So this could be more than just a honeymoon."

" Fred Weir in Moscow and Peter Ford in Paris contributed to this report.