

OPINION

The Tehran-Berlin Axis

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Flipping last week through the online itinerary of the German Near and Middle East Association (honorary chairman: Gerhard Schröder), I found the following entry: "April 16, 2008, Meeting with the Iranian Vice Foreign Minister S.E. Mehdi Safari in Berlin." I couldn't find anything in the German press about this visit. I turned to Iranian media. It reported that Mr. Safari was in Berlin for three days at the invitation of the German government. He met with officials at the foreign, interior and economics ministries, as well as with lawmakers and businessmen.



David Klein

It is strange, to say the least, that neither the German government nor the media said a word about the visit. Along with the five veto-wielding U.N. Security Council members, Germany belongs to the Six-Power Group, which sets the course of international diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program. Tehran's quest for the bomb is perhaps the only international security issue where German foreign policy has real global relevance. And Mr. Safari is not some low-ranking official from a minor, peaceful power but a representative of a country that could soon trigger a

nuclear war. His visit should have sparked wide interest in Germany.

But perhaps it's not so surprising. The country's position toward Tehran seems to be at a crossroads. The "grand coalition" government looks at Iran through different prisms. While Chancellor Angela Merkel argues for tougher sanctions if necessary to stop the Iranian bomb, Germany's foreign policy establishment, including a key advisor to Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, preaches accommodation, even a "strategic partnership" with Iran.

The diplomatic dissonance is striking. In March, Ms. Merkel declared in what has been called a historic speech to the Israeli parliament that she won't shy away from "using additional, tougher sanctions to convince Iran to stop its nuclear program." If we Europeans were to shrink from tougher sanctions, said the Christian-Democratic chancellor, "we would have neither understood our historical responsibilities nor developed an awareness of the challenges of our time." This clear statement was welcomed in Israel and the U.S.

Not so in Germany itself. "Sanctions get us nowhere!" countered Christoph Bertram in the weekly *Der Spiegel* last month. "Chancellor Angela Merkel should not back every Israeli warning of catastrophe." Mr. Bertram's voice carries weight. He used to head the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and later the German Foundation for Science and Politics, a think tank that advises the government and parliament on foreign policy. According to Mr. Bertram, the West must recognize "the immense advantage of a close and cooperative relationship with this country [Iran]."

He continued in this vein, asking in a recent article published by the London-based Center for European Reform: "If Russia, China, or Saudi Arabia qualify as 'strategic partners,' why not Iran?" Mr. Bertram's book, "Partners, Not Foes: For a New Policy Toward Iran," will soon arrive in German bookstores.

The arguments in this book will strengthen the position of Volker Perthes, the current director of the Foundation for Science and Politics. As one of the principal advisers of Social-Democratic Foreign Minister Steinmeier, Mr. Perthes has been lobbying for more than two years for a "strategic partnership" with a Holocaust-denying regime that sponsors international terror and suppresses its own people.

The rationale behind the "partner, not foe" approach is apparent. Kinan Jaeger, who teaches political science at the University of Bonn, spelled it out last year in the publicly financed "Der Mittler-Brief," a quarterly newsletter widely read in the German foreign policy community. "Anyone who is capable of bringing Iran to its side," Mr. Jaeger argues, "is not only 'set for life' as far as energy logistics are concerned, but could also face the U.S. in a different way." Iran would through the "attainment of an atom bomb...become a hegemonic power in the Gulf and would be capable of confronting the U.S. in the Gulf region more or less 'as an equal.'"

Amid these politically uncertain times, business relations between the two countries are strong. After slowing between 2005-2007, German exports surged 13% in January. With €3.6 billion of goods going to Iran last year, backed by €500 million of export guarantees from Berlin, Germany is the world's second largest exporter to Iran, and its products crucial for Iran's economic survival.

As Berlin's Federal Agency for Foreign Trade pointed out in last September's brochure "Growth Markets in the Near and Middle East," Germany is Iran's No. 1 supplier of almost all types of machinery except for power systems and the building sector, where Italian manufacturers dominate the Iranian market.

According to the German-Iranian Chamber of Industry and Commerce, "75% of all small and medium-sized factories in Iran are equipped with German technology." As a result, "Iran is certainly dependent on German spare parts and suppliers," as Michael Tockuss, at that time the director of the Chamber, told German weekly Focus in 2006. This dependency means that a German-Italian economic embargo might be enough to paralyze the Iranian economy within a few months and to confront the theocratic regime with the question whether compliance with U.N. Security Council decisions to halt uranium enrichment might not be the better alternative.

Berlin can either follow Chancellor Merkel, who has made Israel's defense a German concern and who promises to use Germany's economic muscle in Iran toward this end. Or it can expand German influence into a "strategic partnership" with Tehran. But this means accepting the Iranian nuclear option and the existential threat it poses to Israel as well as the regime's terror against its own people and the rest of the world.

An unbridgeable gap lies between Ms. Merkel's promise and the geopolitical approach of her domestic opponents, primarily among Social Democrats but also in her own party. While the German proponents of tougher sanctions seek an alliance with the West in order to confront Islamist terror, the "partner" proposal implies a strategic alliance with Islamism and an estrangement -- to say the least -- from America and Israel. While Ms. Merkel emphasizes

Germany's historical responsibilities, particularly toward the Jewish state, Messrs. Perthes and Bertram unscrupulously reject such considerations. Economic and strategic interests trump all other concerns.

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It is against the backdrop of this foreign policy dispute that Mr. Safari came to Berlin last month. According to Iranian press agency PressTV, he discussed a broad range of issues, but apparently his German partners did not bring up the possibility of tougher sanctions. Instead, "the two sides discussed ways to expand economic cooperation and agreed that a German economic delegation would visit soon to follow up agreements already signed between Tehran and Berlin."

When pressed on the issue, the German foreign office confirmed holding discussions with Mr. Safari but refused to comment on the Iranian reports. So did Tehran and Berlin sign an economic agreement, and if so, what is its nature? Are German economic experts really planning a visit to Iran, now of all times?

The Iranian time bomb is ticking. The chancellor talked a good game in Israel's Knesset. Maybe Ms. Merkel could clear up her government's Iran policy where such decisions ought to be made -- in the German Bundestag.

Mr. Küntzel is author of "Jihad and Jew Hatred" (Telos Press, 2007). Belinda Cooper translated this essay from the German.

See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121080192012192979.html>