

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Germans squeezed by two superpowers

Struggling against blackmail from the U.S. and U.S.S.R., Bonn's pragmatism could "hoist it on its own petard."

On May 21, the overwhelming media line here on the talks Chancellor Helmut Kohl had just concluded in Washington was that they resulted in harmony and a new start for "partnership in leadership."

On May 22, German Economics Minister Jürgen Möllemann told the press in Munich that the weeks-long controversy over the housing program for Soviet officers returning from eastern Germany, was resolved to the "satisfaction of both sides."

It seemed, therefore, that two big problems the Germans had suffered from during the past months—U.S. charges of unreliability and lack of solidarity during the war against Iraq, and Soviet blockade of relations with Germany—had been overcome.

That evaluation would be superficial and wrong. The basic issue, namely that both superpowers accept united Germany as a sovereign state, a partner on equal terms rather than a pawn that can be used against the other superpower or at least be exploited for one's own games, is not dealt with.

There certainly is more that could be done by the Germans to underline their commitment to become a fully sovereign state, to turn the formal reunification of the two German states last Oct. 3 into a process befitting the weight a modern industrial nation of 78 million people like Germany should have.

The Germans could have better resisted Anglo-American attempts to undermine the motion for a genuine European defense, grouped around a reinvigorated Western European Union. German foreign policy could

have been much more active during the Gulf crisis in contrasting the Anglo-American war buildup. The German government should have used the mass ferment in the streets against the war, rather than applaud its collapse under an international media libel campaign. The Germans should not have let the defection of the French into the Anglo-American war party happen.

The Bonn government decided to take a "pragmatic" road, and it got squeezed by outside factors it could not control or influence sufficiently. What the German government did was to adapt to the "all-Western consensus" defined in London and Washington. At the same time, the Germans stored away their own plans and projects, waiting for a better world political environment to present them in public again. This is a form of appeasement, a "pragmatic cleverness," which may help to take away some of the outside pressure, but it doesn't eliminate the source of the trouble.

Membership in NATO is a cage for the Germans. The NATO treaty which also speaks of harmony of mutual economic values among alliance members, has always been interpreted by the Americans as an instrument to control the West German economy. The addition of eastern Germany has not changed the U.S. views on the matter. NATO is seen as one of the main instruments to keep the economic power of united Germany under control.

The domestic decline of the U.S. economy has added aggressiveness to the American approach to Germany. One can be sure that the interpretation

Bush has of the newly proclaimed U.S. "partnership in leadership" with the Germans, translates into "more German monetary support to the U.S. than ever before." This is also seen by many in German politics, but not admitted in public. There is little illusion here that the Bush administration will cease attacking German monetary and interest rate policies, or German state subsidies for the aerospace and telecommunications sectors, to shipbuilding, coal mining, and agricultural production.

It seemed, at least for some time, that there is more immediate potential for German progress with the other superpower, the Soviets—also to the advantage of the unstable Soviet Union.

Slow progress in implementation had already disillusioned many on the near-term prospects of German relations with the Soviets, but deep disappointment emerged here when both superpowers began actively preparing for another Bush-Gorbachov summit. The superpowers reestablished the special, exclusive relationship that is typical of pre-summit periods.

As already evident in the late phase of the Gulf crisis, shortly before war began, the Soviets adopted a utilitarian approach to relations with the Germans. Intense contacts to Washington developed at the expense of Moscow contacts to Bonn.

Moscow tolerated a decline in diplomatic contacts with Bonn and the collapse of its trade with eastern German firms, and let the conflict over the joint project to find housing for troops—although Germany is funding the project with DM 7.8 billion.

German concessions saved at least part of the contracts for construction firms in Germany, this time. But there is the impression in Germany, again, that the Soviets are incalculable as ever.