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**A new beginning in German foreign policy.
Merkel wants to be an honest broker**

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FRANKFURT When Chancellor Angela Merkel delivered her first major address to the German Parliament on Wednesday, one theme that had figured prominently in her predecessor's speeches was missing. Merkel did not waste time imitating Gerhard Schröder's incessant preoccupation with Germany's new-found "self-confidence" in international affairs. She knows that her predecessor's foreign policy legacy is meager at best.

Germany's traditional friendship with the United States has been shaken. Relations with its smaller allies to the east have suffered as a result of Schröder's penchant for cultivating German-Russian relations over their heads. Yet none of this has really paid off. It is highly symbolic that the end of Schröder's tenure coincided with the defeat of his most ambitious project, to secure a permanent seat for Germany on the United Nations Security Council.

The German public's verdict on Schröder's foreign policy record, unsurprisingly, is not very favorable. Fifty percent of Germans felt that Germany was successful in international affairs in 2002, but only 24 percent thought so in spring 2005.

For Merkel this legacy carries several opportunities. Her first moves underline that she is determined to seize them. As her key foreign policy adviser, Merkel chose a highly talented diplomat, Christoph Heusgen, who is known both for his opposition to Schröder's prestige-driven foreign policy agenda and his strong conviction that Germany has to rebalance its relations with its key allies in the West.

Both Merkel and Heusgen are known to believe strongly that European integration and trans-Atlantic partnership must not be construed as opposites. They also subscribe to the view that there is a fundamental difference between close allies that share key interests as well as values (such as the other European Union members and the United States) and crucial partners (such as Russia) with whom Germany may share major interests but with whom it differs on key values.

The central theme of Merkel's address on Wednesday, "to wage more freedom," has been interpreted almost exclusively as a reference to her personal background and as a pointer to the necessity of domestic reform. Yet her emphasis on fostering a "partnership of

common values" with the United States hints that there may also be a subtle foreign policy message of general support to the American president.

Merkel's team has taken care to arrange her first visits abroad in a highly symbolic sequence. Like most chancellors before her, Merkel paid her first tribute to the French president. Unlike the others, however, she traveled to Brussels the same day to meet key representatives of the EU and NATO. It is clear that Merkel is determined to act as an honest broker within the EU as well as between Europe and America.

Bilateral relations are likely to be judged on the basis of whether they will meet common purposes. Remarkably, German-French relations were not highlighted in Merkel's address, whereas Poland was singled out as an example of an area where the new government wants to "practice" its new role.

For German diplomacy, a return to a moderating and mediating role in European and trans-Atlantic politics is desperately needed. Given Germany's size, geopolitical position and historical legacy, no other country can play this role as well. In order to succeed, however, at least three conditions have to be met.

First, given the distribution of power between the foreign ministry, which is now headed by the Social Democrats, and the chancellery, it is essential that Merkel and the new foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, come to an agreement on questions of basic strategy. Given the fact that both are known for their pragmatic approach to politics this should be the least difficult hurdle.

Second, the political landscape has fundamentally changed since the pre-unification days when Germany used to act as a moderator between Europe and America. Reaching compromise has become more difficult in the EU, after the most recent round of enlargement, and in the trans-Atlantic arena, where both sides feel that they no longer depend as much on each other. To succeed, Germany will have to convince its allies that the Euro-Atlantic framework remains vital to both sides. Merkel's plea for mutual trust is an important change in atmospherics, but it can only be a first step.

Finally, Germany is no longer in a position to facilitate compromises by taking up a major share of the bill. In this regard Merkel has made it clear that she will stick to the line laid down by Schröder. So without a basic willingness on the part of Germany's partners to compromise, it will be difficult to break the impasses facing the EU and NATO.

These difficulties notwithstanding, Merkel's election provides a new opening that should be seized by decision makers in Europe and America.

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