

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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Obama-Merkel Meeting: Will the Third Time Be the Charm?

Heather A. Conley

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Q1: Why is Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany meeting with President Barack Obama again? Didn't they recently visit with one another?

A1: President Obama's meeting with Chancellor Merkel on June 26 is the third meeting between the two leaders in three short months, but it will be Merkel's first visit to Washington since the inauguration. The first meeting took place on the margins of the April 3 NATO Summit in Baden-Baden and Kehl, Germany, where events focused on the 60th anniversary of NATO. The second meeting was held on June 5 in Dresden, Germany, and was significantly overshadowed by President Obama's recent visit to the Middle East as well as the 65th anniversary of the beginning of the liberation of Europe by Allied Forces. It has been reported that Chancellor Merkel had been invited to the White House in March of this year but declined the meeting because the White House did not agree to a joint press conference.

Q2: Why are they meeting so often? Is there a problem?

A2: Following President Obama's most recent visit to Germany, there was great speculation and commentary concerning the lack of a personal relationship between Merkel and Obama, with less focus on the substantive outcome of their meeting. In fact, there are significant policy disagreements between Washington and Berlin, which have been publicly displayed in recent weeks.

There is deep disagreement between the two leaders over the merits of economic stimulus. Merkel is strongly opposed to Obama's stimulus package, and during the White House meeting, she will encourage the new administration to "return to a policy of common sense" and quickly bring to an end its current spending plans. Many German leaders blame the United States solely for the world's current economic woes.

Equally, Washington has grown increasingly disappointed in Germany's unwillingness to substantially increase its troop contributions to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, as well as its unwillingness to accept any Guantanamo detainees to date (two requests by the State Department have been declined). Germany's military involvement in Afghanistan remains unpopular in Germany.

Q3: What will the leaders discuss during their upcoming meeting?

A3: The timing of the June 26 visit is actually quite good for Chancellor Merkel as it is on the eve of President Obama's first trip to Moscow (July 6–8), the G-8 Summit in Italy (July 8–10), and three months before crucial German national elections (September 27). Iran will be a topic of discussion, and again, there is disagreement between the two leaders over how best to publicly address the situation. On June 21, Merkel was the first European leader to call for a vote recount, which stood in contrast to Obama's measured comments regarding the evolving crisis.

On the G-8 agenda, the chancellor will use her visit to Washington to lay out her thinking on the need for rigorous financial regulatory reform and to encourage Washington to be more forceful in dealing with the past "fast and loose policies" of Wall Street. Specifically on climate change, Merkel will seek forward-leaning U.S. statements regarding carbon emission reduction targets in the run-up to the December Copenhagen Conference. European officials have already announced a target of 20 percent reduction in CO₂ (30 percent if other developed countries join in) and are seeking specific targets from Washington as well. The two leaders will also have a full discussion of U.S.-Russia arms control talks.

Q4: What is the future prognosis for U.S.-German relations?

A4: Since his Berlin speech in August 2008, President Obama is one of the most popular figures in Germany, and his personal charisma and popularity have overcome past bilateral tensions. However, the fact remains that the president and the

chancellor do not see eye to eye on several critical areas: the global economic crisis, increasing NATO's military presence in Afghanistan, and Turkey's future membership in the European Union. As Germany and the other major European economies continue to struggle with a lingering recession and as they become more preoccupied with internal EU integration dynamics, the U.S.-German bilateral relationship may suffer as the policy gap widens—whether President Obama and Chancellor Merkel like each other or not.

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