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## Rift With Germany Is Next on Diplomatic Agenda

By [NICHOLAS KULISH](#)

DRESDEN, [Germany](#) — After mending fences with the Muslim world in [Cairo](#) on Thursday, [President Obama](#) might want to keep his diplomatic tools handy for his stopover here, to repair his increasingly strained relationship with Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#).

A rift has quietly opened up between Germany and the United States, marked by official statements of harmony and private grumbling. It is not an outright crisis in relations, but there are underlying tensions and disagreements on matters ranging from the global economic crisis to the future of inmates held at Guantánamo Bay.

On a more basic level, there is a sense that the Obama administration is ignoring the needs and counsel of longtime allies. Divided Germany was once at the center not only of the cold war, but of American foreign policy as well, which is no longer the case. Yet the United States can ill afford to alienate Europe's largest economy and its most important intermediary in the strained relationship with Russia. "They're not angry, they're not anti-Obama or anti-American," said John C. Kornblum, a former United States ambassador to Germany and now a business adviser in Berlin. "But they're confused by the wave of criticism which has been sent at them by the administration and people close to the administration.

"It's not that they don't like him," he said. "They just feel like things aren't working, like the levers of government are not being engaged to make issues run smoothly."

Mr. Obama arrived in Dresden, in the former East Germany, on Thursday night for a visit that will also take him to Buchenwald, the Nazi concentration camp, and the American military hospital in Landstuhl. The German news media have questioned why Mr. Obama was not going to Berlin, suggesting the omission might have been intended as a snub to Mrs. Merkel. Her advisers say it is no such thing and instead praise Mr. Obama's interest in the former East Germany, where Mrs. Merkel grew up.

While Mr. Obama enjoys tremendous personal popularity among the German people, relations with Mrs. Merkel have been bumpy from the beginning. In Germany much symbolic weight is attached to Mrs. Merkel's decision not to travel to Washington to meet with Mr. Obama in March, but to talk by video conference instead.

But signs of discord were evident even last summer, when Mrs. Merkel rejected Mr. Obama's request during the presidential campaign to speak in front of the Brandenburg Gate, saying it was not an appropriate location for a candidate's address. Mr. Obama drew more than 200,000 people to hear his speech at a nearby monument.

The president's high standing with the German public adds to the strain in his relationship with Mrs. Merkel, local analysts say. "Obama is so popular with the German people that you have a lot of comments like, 'Why don't we have a German Obama?'" said Dietmar Herz, director of the [Erfurt School of Public Policy](#). "Angela Merkel is seen as the exact opposite of a charismatic leader like Obama, and that is difficult to accept."

There is a sense in Germany, that the smooth Mr. Obama and the flashy President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France have a better connection with each other than either does with the serious-minded Mrs. Merkel. And Mr. Sarkozy's decision to reintegrate France into the command structure of [NATO](#), though it had little direct impact on the war in Afghanistan, stood in stark contrast to Germany's steadfast refusal to send troops to fight in the more violent south of the country.

At the same time, Mr. Obama's popularity with the left-wing Social Democrats, rivals to Mrs. Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union in parliamentary elections in September, also helps amplify his and Mrs. Merkel's differences. The Social Democrats, who are the junior party in an unhappy coalition under Mrs. Merkel, have embraced Mr. Obama as a natural ally.

"The Christian Democrats were closer to the Bush administration than they admitted," Mr. Herz said. "It was very difficult for conservatives like the chancellor to admit that she was close to a lot of his policies."

Relations were already frosty as the economic crisis deepened and the German government and Obama administration took sharply differing views on how far to push stimulus spending. Mrs. Merkel believed that the Americans were underestimating the threat of inflation. But American policy makers said she did not understand the depth and the significance of the crisis.

In the early stages of the Obama presidency, officials in the Merkel government were dismayed by the scarcity of staff in midlevel positions at the [Treasury Department](#). And Germans remain surprised that an ambassador to their country has not been named more than four months after Mr. Obama's inauguration. There is a sense that, with his focus split between domestic concerns and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the new president is taking his staunchest European allies for granted.

"There is definitely this disappointment in Europe, complaining that there's nobody home," said Stephen Flanagan, senior vice president of the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington.

German government officials were outraged that a low-ranking American official was sent for the [negotiations to find a way to keep the traditional automaker Opel going](#) despite the bankruptcy of its parent company, General Motors, in the United States. The potential failure of an important industrial employer before parliamentary elections is no laughing matter for German politicians, including Mrs. Merkel. Still, Karsten D. Voigt, who coordinates German-American relations in the German Foreign Ministry, disputed the contention that relations between the allies were under any strain, as did Merkel advisers, who rightly point out that this is Mr. Obama's third visit to Germany in less than a year.

"This takes time in the U.S.," Mr. Voigt said. "Transition is a long process. It's always a frustrating experience."

