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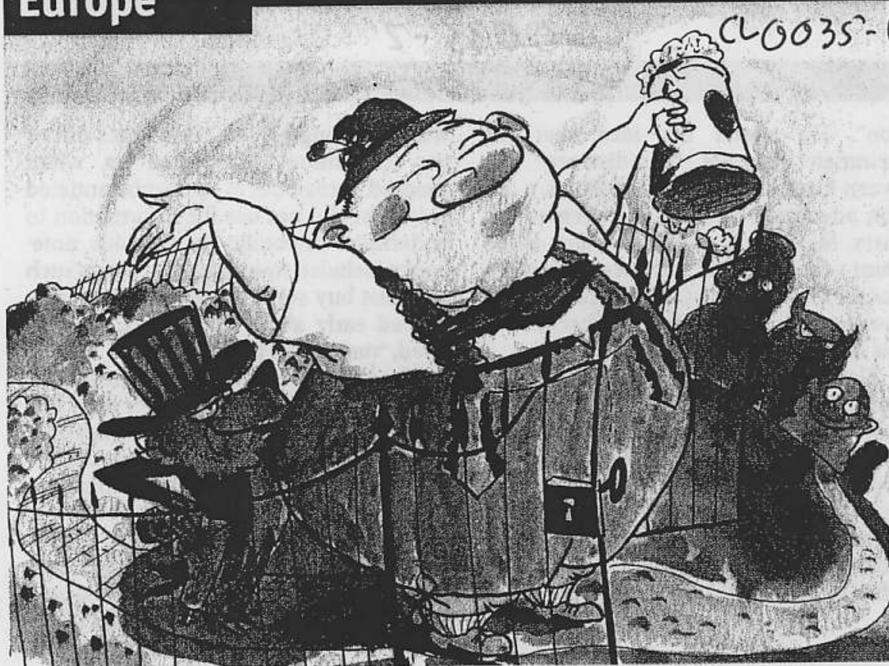

Also in this section

60 French espionage
61 The shelter of the euro
61 Organised crime in Croatia
62 Charlemagne: Europe's baleful bail-outs

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Germany's foreign policy

The Berlin stonewall

BERLIN

Has Germany replaced France as America's awkward ally?

SOON after Angela Merkel became Germany's chancellor in 2005, she met George Bush in Washington to open a "new chapter" in relations. Her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, had been so stridently against the Iraq war that he began to look anti-American. Ms Merkel, by contrast, had backed the war. Germany may belong to "old Europe", as America once dismissed opponents of the war, but Ms Merkel, a child of communist East Germany, had the instincts of a new European. The easing of tensions was helped, too, by President Bush's efforts to repair transatlantic relations in his second term.

Yet frustration is creeping back in. On Russia, Iran and Afghanistan—trouble-spots that matter to both countries—Germany's position is annoying Washington. At the NATO summit in Bucharest last April, Ms Merkel stood most visibly against American pressure to grant a Membership Action Plan—a road-map to join the alliance—to Ukraine and Georgia. This was a marked change from previous summits at which France habitually obstructed American proposals.

After Russian troops pushed into Georgia in August, America wanted to ostracise the Kremlin while Germany appeared eager to return to business as usual. Germany has been the leading Western sceptic in toughening economic sanctions on Iran to discourage its alarming uranium-enrichment programme. In Afghanistan, moreover, Germany's military commitment is hedged with "caveats" that keep its troops out of the fighting in the dangerous south of the country.

In a memorandum to the new American president, the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, a think-tank, gives warning that Germany and America may "clash" over Iran and that differences over Russia could harm the relationship "severely". In part, Germany's problem is that it can no longer hide behind France now that President Nicolas Sarkozy has moved closer to America. He plans to lead France back into NATO's integrated military structure next year.

"Berlin is the new Paris," says a senior American official; that is where the "tough conversations" now take place. The tone of opinion columns can be merciless. "Germany by itself has enough economic leverage with Iran" to stop it from enriching uranium, thundered a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal Europe*; but for mercenary reasons it is not using it.

Germany's inhibitions are the product of history, trade and tensions within the grand coalition government, which awkwardly yokes Ms Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union to the Social Democratic Party (SPD). It does not help that Frank-Walter Steinmeier, an SPD leader and her main political rival, is also the foreign minister. Still, both think Germany has a special role in oiling the wheels of international diplomacy, serving the interests of its allies even if they do not always appreciate it.

The second world war left Germany allergic to militarism and eager for friendships. First it bound itself firmly into the Western alliance. Then, with Ostpolitik, it also befriended the Soviet block. Its pacific style no doubt helped trade (Germany is the world's top exporter of goods), which in turn makes it more pacific.

Germany is the biggest Western exporter to Iran. Last year Russia was the second-fastest growing export market among Germany's main trading partners. Germany imports more than a third of its oil and gas from Russia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's policies diverged from those of its neighbours, which made it harder for Germany to please them all. Mr Schröder's government approved the Nord Stream gas pipeline from Russia under the Baltic Sea, bypassing, and enraging, Poland and the Baltic states. Mr Schröder now chairs the shareholders' committee of the consortium building it.

That said, Germany is reluctantly shedding its merchant pacifism. If Iran continues enriching uranium, Germany is edging towards approving sanctions that go beyond targeting goods related to nuclear proliferation. "Germany is playing a responsible role on Iran," says a senior Israeli official, whose country has more to fear from an Iranian bomb than any other; Germany's differences with its allies have been "tactical, not strategic".

On the use of force abroad, Germany has been changing "almost with the speed of light", says John Kornblum, a former American ambassador to Germany. Before 1992, German soldiers were deployed ▸▸

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abroad on strictly humanitarian missions. Now it has the third-largest contingent of troops in Afghanistan (rising from 3,500 to 4,500), including a "quick reaction force" ready for combat, mainly in the north. It has military missions in Lebanon, Bosnia and Sudan. The trouble is, says Mr Kornblum, that "the world is changing faster."

German officials insist that its comparative advantage will remain its knack for talking to almost everyone. Mr Steinmeier, who will challenge Ms Merkel for the chancellorship next year, is renowned, and often reviled, for not allowing a foreign government's shortcomings to spoil a fruitful relationship. A senior diplomat argues, for instance, that "rhetoric which excludes Russia pushes it in the wrong direction". He rejects the idea that Mr Steinmeier favours "equidistance" between Russia and the United States, a notion advocated by some members of his party. Ms Merkel, though readier to be blunt with autocrats, nurtures Germany's honest-broker role. Other leaders trust Germany, says her spokesman, because "it has no big-power ambitions".

Germany hopes that the next American administration will prove easier to deal with than Mr Bush's. But neither Barack Obama nor John McCain will be shy about making demands of American allies, especially when it comes to Iran and Afghanistan. With Germany about to enter its own election campaign, it may take a while to say yes to America. ■

Espionage

Snoop and scoop

PARIS

A spymaster's leaked notes reveal the depth of surveillance in France

FOR nearly 12 years as France's domestic spy chief, Yves Bertrand filled spiral-bound notebooks with every rumour that came his way about the goings-on of the political elite. They were supposed to be a private *aide-mémoire*, he says. But this month they became public when extracts were published by *Le Point* magazine, prompting an outburst of denials, red faces and legal action which has gripped the Paris establishment.

Your life in his notebooks

The disclosures so far are relatively coy, yet reveal the deeply pervasive culture of snooping in the country founded on the principle of *liberté*. Where British tabloids would have splashed intimate details across the front page, the French weekly merely hints at "the bisexuality of a certain minister" or the "tab kept by a former prime minister at a top Paris hotel". It names only a few figures. In 2000, for instance, it says that Mr Bertrand had pages of notes on the Trotskyite past of Lionel Jospin, then a Socialist prime minister whose history had yet to be exposed. In October 2003, according to *Le Point*, the spy chief noted that the then president, Jacques Chirac, "had a facelift in Canada." He also wrote copious notes about the marital life of Nicolas Sarkozy, then a government minister and now president, including details of a telephone conversation between his first wife and a friend of hers on the subject of his second wife.

Mr Bertrand left his job as head of the Renseignements Généraux (RG), one of France's domestic intelligence services, in 2004. But as part of an inquiry into the "Clearstream affair", an alleged smear campaign involving the presidency under Mr Chirac, investigating magistrates last January seized 23 of the notebooks, covering the period 1998-2003.

Their publication in *Le Point* has stirred an uproar. Mr Sarkozy, who suspected a plot at the time to destabilise him, has sued Mr Bertrand for false accusation, forgery and invasion of privacy. Arnaud Montebourg, a Socialist deputy, described the notes as evidence of "a little Stasi *à la française*". Mr Jospin, who said that Mr Chirac had protected Mr Bertrand over the years, called for an official inquiry.

For his part, Mr Bertrand insists that he was just doing his job. Nine times out of ten the rumours he picked up, when checked, turned out to be unsubstantiated gossip; he did not use the information to undermine anybody. He says his notebooks included mundane reminders such as "must buy some steak". Being well informed early about any affairs, he ventured, "meant that I was good."

The French seem extraordinarily tolerant about being spied on in their daily life. The tradition reaches back far, and not only to dark times under Nazi occupation. Recently published archive documents from the Paris police headquarters include a leather-bound volume of intelligence files on 415 prostitutes, and two registers containing files on 1,200 homosexuals—all collected by police spies under Napoleon III.

In terms of counter-terrorism, France's robust surveillance apparatus is widely respected. Years of snooping on mosques and in the heavily Muslim *banlieues* has helped to identify jihadists and thwart acts of terrorism. Today, France is merging the RG and another service, the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire, into a new super-spy agency known as the Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur. It has a combined staff of about 6,000 agents, next to 3,500 at Britain's MI5, for instance. The French seem to accept tight surveillance as the price of security.

French intelligence agents are authorised to snoop not only on those who pose a potential threat to security or public order. Under a 1991 decree they can also monitor more generally those who "play a significant political, economic, social or religious role", such that information about them could help the government to "appreciate the political, economic or social situation and anticipate its evolution".

According to the National Commission for Data Protection and Liberties, an official body, the RG alone holds files on a staggering 2.5m people; the real number, says one insider, is even higher. Those who have secured permission to look at their files are sometimes disappointed by the errors. "The problem with these files is not their existence but their quality," argues Alain Bauer, a security specialist.

Even the French, however, have their limits. A recent attempt by President Sarkozy's government to computerise all intelligence files into a new super-database, known by the acronym EDVIGE, is being rethought after an outcry by civil-liberties groups. It would have allowed agents to track individuals' health and sexual habits, as well as to monitor minors as young as 13 thought "susceptible" to disrupting public order. A new version, under review, would tighten the rules on who can be spied on, and what can be recorded. This would make an agent's job more professional, if less colourful. Either way, the surveillance culture will remain. ■