

Merkel signals support for tougher Iran sanctions

Judy Dempsey

As foreign powers weigh further efforts to rein in Iran's nuclear program, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, is sounding markedly more determined about imposing tougher sanctions on the government in Tehran.

The shift — a potentially fraught move given the strength of Germany's business dealings with Iran and the interest in preserving them during a recession — came about, diplomats and analysts say, after the Iranian authorities cracked down on protesters who charge that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stole the presidential election in Iran in June. Mrs. Merkel, who grew up in Communist East Germany, was the first foreign leader to demand a new vote and to condemn the violence, speaking out well ahead of others, including President Barack Obama.

Iran — with its nuclear program and its domestic political turmoil — looms large on the global diplomatic agenda as leaders gear up for the United Nations General Assembly later this month. On Wednesday, senior diplomats from the United States, Europe, Russia and China met in Frankfurt to weigh the next step in years of fruitless efforts to curb what Iran insists is a civilian nuclear effort.

Twice in the past week, Mrs. Merkel has called for a much tougher stance if the Islamic Republic does not comply with international agreements and halt its uranium enrichment program.

Her more assertive position emerged last week during talks with the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and again on Monday, when she discussed the issue with President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. Facing reporters with Mr. Netanyahu, she talked of stiffer sanctions against Iran "in the energy, financial and other important sectors."

She declined to elaborate after her talks with Mr. Sarkozy, but stressed: "We must try to set these sanctions on the widest possible basis."

Mr. Sarkozy, long a forceful voice on the Iranian nuclear program, said that "initiatives must be taken during the month of September which take account of Iran's will or otherwise to cooperate." With Mrs. Merkel at his side, he added: "Germany and France will be united in calling for a strengthening of sanctions."

Regardless of how difficult it may be to get Russia and China on board with sanctions that would strike at the energy sector, the heart of Iran's economy, diplomats and analysts said Mrs. Merkel seems determined to pursue this more robust line.

They trace the turning point to after the Iranian election on June 12, when hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets. A week later, a harsh crackdown was unfolding. Mrs. Merkel, who often emphasized freedom and human values when she first took office four years ago, was quick to react.

"Germany is on the side of the Iranian people, who want to exercise their rights of freedom of expression and free assembly," she said, standing alone in her Chancellery on a Sunday evening, June 21. "One could eliminate doubt, very well I believe, by simply repeating the count transparently and if needed also with international observers. And then trust could grow."

"What happened in Iran after the presidential elections influenced Mrs. Merkel's attitude towards the leadership," said Michael Lange, Middle East analyst at the Konrad Adenauer

Foundation, a conservative research organization affiliated to Mrs. Merkel's governing Christian Democrats. "She saw what it was doing to protesters."

"We did notice a change of tone when we were in Berlin last week," said Mark Regev, an Israeli government spokesman, reached by telephone. "The countries negotiating with Iran may now have fewer illusions. Germany and the other countries know that time is now of the essence. Diplomacy must be backed up."

Mrs. Merkel has followed the Iran dossier closely, partly because she recognizes the nuclear threat, but also because she has close ties to Israel. The denial of the Holocaust by Mr. Ahmadinejad and his threats against Israel have reinforced her interest.

The five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, as well as Germany and the E.U., acting in a group known in diplomatic parlance as E3+3, have been negotiating with Iran for several years without any breakthrough.

Diplomats said Wednesday that they expected little of substance to emerge from the Frankfurt meeting, in part because Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, announced Tuesday that Iran "has prepared a new nuclear proposal and is ready to resume talks on its nuclear program."

Neither the U.S. State Department, the E.U. nor Germany has received any details. "We have not received any proposal," said Ian Kelly, State Department spokesman. Javier Solana, the E.U.'s foreign policy chief, speaking during a trip to Egypt, said "I have not received it so I cannot judge it." Diplomats said this was an attempt by Iran to stave off talk of tougher sanctions.

Outside powers also wait to see if Iran will respond to the Obama administration's offer of talks, without preconditions, on the nuclear program and other issues. The deadline on that offer is Sept. 15.

The United States has had no diplomatic relations with Iran since 1979, when radical Iranian supporters of the ayatollahs who had swept the Shah from power earlier that year seized the American Embassy in Tehran and held dozens of diplomats hostage for 14 months.

Mr. Obama's offer was fully supported by the E3+3. The group later offered economic aid and technical assistance to Iran if it suspended uranium enrichment. It also made a "freeze for freeze" proposal whereby the international community would stop extending sanctions if Iran stopped expanding its enrichment facility in Natanz.

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