The Kosovo war and the rise of German militarism

Letter from a reader and a reply by WSWS editorial board member Peter Schwarz

8 October 1999

Dear Mr. Schwarz,

I very much enjoyed your commentary on the rightward turn of the SPD [German Social Democratic Party]. The events presently taking place in Germany—Schroeder's economic plans and the battle within his party—appear to me to have very important implications for struggles going on all over the world.

I have a question about your analysis of the Kosovo war. The conventional wisdom here in America is that Germany's participation in the bombing, under the leadership of the SPD, was a sign that the country's foreign policy is now irreversibly joined to that of the United States and NATO. The US's motivation in launching the war appears to have been precisely to subordinate Europe's foreign policies under its own—that is, to reaffirm the relevance of NATO, and to prevent the emergence of an independent European foreign policy. The US appears to have succeeded, at least partially.

But you see the war as a step toward the re-emergence of a German policy based on "national interests" and anti-Americanism. Do you see these two perspectives on the Kosovo war as mutually exclusive? How is it possible for Germany's participation in an American-led NATO war to signal a shift towards more German independence from the United States?

Yours,

SA

Dear SA,

Many thanks for your inquiry concerning my article on the Kosovo war and the SPD.

You pose the question: “How is it possible for Germany's participation in an American-led NATO war to signal a shift towards more German independence from the United States?” The contradiction raised in your question resolves itself once one considers the Kosovo war in a broader political and historical context.

Since the early 90s there have been intensive debates within NATO on the future role and strategy of the alliance. With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO lost its original purpose, i.e., an alliance for the defence of its own territory.

The common enemy no longer existed. Proposals for the gradual disbanding of NATO in favour of a purely European military alliance, as France would have preferred, did not materialise. The Rome conference of 1991 took the decision to restructure NATO into an instrument of intervention, capable of intervening beyond the borders of the member countries.

The German government supported this decision because it provided it with the opportunity to pursue its own international interests more aggressively. Only two months after the Rome resolution—in January of 1992—the government redefined the tasks of the German army (Bundeswehr) in a strategy paper. In the future, the task of the Bundeswehr would be to “encourage and secure world-wide political, military and ecological stability”, and ensure the “maintenance of free world trade and access to strategic raw materials”. Up to this point, all political parties had agreed that the German constitution permitted military action only in response to an external attack on the country.

The transformation of the German army into a force for intervention rather than defence raised a number of problems. The easiest to overcome were the legal objections. In 1994 the Constitutional Court re-interpreted the German constitution along the lines of the above-mentioned strategy paper, thus giving the green light for

international military interventions.

A much bigger problem proved to be the considerable misgivings of the population, in light of the experience of two world wars. In order to overcome this problem the government developed a tactic of gradual escalation. To begin with, units of medical orderlies were sent to regions in conflict (Cambodia). Then troops were sent to assist in logistical operations (Somalia), to help in the clearing of mines (the Persian Gulf region) and to secure a peace deal (Bosnia).

In the Kosovo war the German air force participated directly in combat activity for the first time since the Second World War. The basic prerequisite for such a move was to bring into government the SPD and the Greens, who, up until that point, had opposed militarism.

The biggest obstacle thus far standing in the way of international interventions by the German army is of a technical nature. The German army—in common with all European armies—lacks the up-to-date weaponry necessary for such interventions: transport capabilities, satellite intelligence and electronically guided weapons. The acquisition of such technology demands billions, which must be diverted from the social budget—a move which brings its own domestic problems.

In order to further their own military expansion, Germany and Europe as a whole are dependent at this point on NATO support and collaboration with the USA. For its part, Washington has no objections to the Europeans intensifying their military engagement, so long as it is not directed against the US.

German participation in the Kosovo conflict was mainly determined by such considerations. The decision to take part in an American-led NATO war was not “a sign that the country's foreign policy is now irreversibly joined to that of the United States and NATO”, as, according to your letter, it was interpreted in the US. Rather the decision arose out of concern that the political and military initiative not be left to America alone.

Had Germany not participated in the war, the transformation of the German army into a genuinely independent force along the lines of the 1992 strategy paper would have suffered a serious setback and, even more important, Germany would have lost its influence on the Balkans, where it has extensive economic and strategic interests.

In the course of the war differences between Germany and the US clearly came to the surface. According to an interview given by US Undersecretary of State Strobe Talbott to the BBC, tensions were so sharp that “there would have been increasing difficulty preserving the solidarity and resolve of the alliance if Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic had not given up.”

While representatives of the German government refrained from open criticism of the US, other politicians made their position clear. Highly significant was a lead article, published in the weekly *Die Zeit* by Helmut Schmidt, German chancellor from 1975 until 1982. The headline read: “NATO does not belong to America”. In the article Schmidt accused the Americans of lacking “a long-term, worked-out, overall strategy” and “just following their own interpretation of the country's future political and military role in the world”.

In specialised journals and other political literature discussions have been ongoing for some time to the effect that German foreign policy must seek to limit the hegemony of the US within NATO. For example, in a contribution on German foreign policy in the influential magazine *Außenpolitik* (*Foreign Policy*, February 1999), Werner Link, professor at the University of Cologne, said the striving “to limit American power”, “to establish an opposing power to a world hegemon, or against the negative consequences of hegemony on the part of the USA” was unmistakable.

I hope I have been able to clarify your question.

Yours, Peter Schwarz

PS: A more detailed analysis of this question can be found in the following articles and statements published on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

On the Balkan War:

After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of the Balkan War

On the tensions and conflicts inside NATO:

NATO fiftieth anniversary: Tensions increase between Europe and America
[24 April 1999]

Kosovo and the crisis in the Atlantic Alliance
[1 September 1999]

On German militarism:

German Armed Forces Federation to demonstrate against cuts in defence budget
[10 September 1999]

The German army lobbies for rearmament
[16 September 1999]