

European declarations of solidarity mask tensions with the US

Peter Schwarz
19 September 2001

For the first time in the 52-year history of NATO, the Atlantic Council decided September 12 to implement the mutual assistance provisions of the alliance's charter. The action came less than 48 hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, before any details had been released concerning the perpetrators. It signified that the 19 members of the NATO Alliance pledged to consider the attacks in the US as violations of their own countries.

The decision constitutes a *carte blanche* for the war preparations being made by the US. Without even knowing the identity of the enemy, NATO in effect issued a declaration of war and thereby assumed in advance responsibility for the military strikes being planned by the US government.

In practical terms, however, the decision has very little in the way of immediate consequences. Decisions regarding the type of support to be given the US, including the role of each country's military forces, remain to be resolved by the respective governments.

Since the events of last week these governments have continuously proclaimed their solidarity with the US. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has repeatedly expressed his "unlimited, I repeat, unlimited solidarity" and emphasised that he regards a German military contribution to US reprisals to be a possibility.

Schröder's position is supported not only by his own party, the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and his coalition partner, the Green Party, but also by the opposition parties. Vigorous debates that raged last week—concerning the behaviour of Defence Minister Rudolph Scharping, a new immigration law, and the economic situation—have been swept aside.

Friedrich Merz, the head of the conservative CDU (Christian Democratic Union) opposition faction in the parliament (*Bundestag*), offered the government a "national alliance of determination" and assured Schröder the "unlimited support" of his faction. CSU (Christian Social Union) head Edmund Stoiber declared that his party was "ready to assume political responsibility". CDU deputy leader Volker Rühe stressed the common ground between the "great people's parties, the SPD and the Union", and the vice-chairman of the CDU faction, Wolfgang Bosbach, even spoke of a "grand coalition of reason"—unleashing speculation that the CDU opposition might be bought into the government.

Gregor Gysi, a leading member of the PDS (Party of Democratic

Socialism—successor to the ruling Stalinist party of the former East Germany), the only party in the German parliament to oppose the NATO decision, declared in Monday's *Berliner Zeitung* that he was prepared to support "limited military action".

In a manner similar to Schröder, French President Jacques Chirac, in an interview with the US-based CNN network, also emphasised his country's "total solidarity".

What is one to make of these fulsome declarations of solidarity?

First, they reflect the fact that the European governments feel themselves threatened by the attacks carried out in the US. As reactionary and despicable as these attacks are, their political roots lay in decades of colonial repression and plundering of the Middle East, in which the European powers are deeply implicated, and over a longer period than the US—from the division of the Ottoman Empire between Great Britain and France after World War I to the war against Iraq at the end of the twentieth century.

Accordingly, many press commentaries continue to call for unconditional support for American military strikes.

In Monday's *Süddeutschen Zeitung* Peter Münch wrote that fundamentalist terror was aimed "at the whole of Western civilisation" and concluded: "This threat justifies and calls for a decisive response. *Appeasement* is no longer an option. No matter how militaristic it might sound, the time has come to take up the fight that has been forced upon us."

In the same newspaper Kurt Kister railed against the "smart alecks" who "judge international politics according to legal criteria". He declared, "They can endlessly debate when a war is really a war, and whether a president should not first secure a search warrant from the UN before setting the Special Forces into action. Unfortunately, the world is not governed by generally applicable regulations or a global law book, for the simple reason that no nation could impose such a legal system independently of its own interests. Most juridical purists always know exactly what should not be done. What they don't know, as, for example, in the aftermath of the Manhattan bloodbath, is what should be done."

The 1991 assault against Iraq was justified on the basis that Saddam Hussein had contravened international law. Today, however, most of the gentlemen of the press no longer bother with such legal prettexts.

There are, however, a growing number of voices warning against the consequences of a military counter-strike. Last Friday German President Johannes Rau spoke before 200,000 people assembled for a solidarity demonstration in front of Berlin's Brandenburg

Gate. The struggle against terrorism, he said, demands that everyone first take “a deep breath”. It was, he continued, only possible to undermine support for the “prophets of violence” by means of political action. One had to deal with the conditions of poverty, exploitation, wretchedness and lawlessness that drive people to desperation and lead some to violence and terror.

Two days later he warned in a radio interview that “we should not let ourselves be talked into a war now”. Instead of being punished through military action, he said, the culprits should be tracked down and put on trial before a court. Contrary to Schröder, Rau said he expected that the German army would not take part in military action launched by the US.

In a similar fashion, members of the French government made critical remarks. In a cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin emphasised that French solidarity with the US did not mean yielding up France’s own sovereignty or judgement. “Our humanitarian, political and functional solidarity,” he declared, “does not deprive us of our sovereignty and our freedom to make up our own minds.” He went on to say, “We should not start thinking in terms of a confrontation between the Western world and the Islamic world as such. We have friends and partners there. We must keep our heads.”

French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine stated in parliament: “Our solidarity does not exclude each side from deciding what sort of action, including military action, is necessary.” Defence Minister Alain Richard emphasised that decisions made within the framework of the NATO alliance were national decisions.

Health Minister Bernard Kouchner, former chairman of the organisation “Doctors Without Borders”, put the attacks down to a “series of errors” by America. He said, “America made a real mistake in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was to train the Taliban.... To think now that there is some kind of consensus of ‘honorable’ nations against the ‘bad’ terrorists is simply not true.”

Behind such criticisms lies the fear that American military strikes could end in a disaster that could destabilise the entire Middle East, with immense consequences for Europe.

Massive military action against states in the Middle East, such as Iraq, would mobilise social forces far more vast than the terrorist groups responsible for the attacks in the US. This fear haunts not only European governments, but also the thoroughly unstable regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and other Middle East countries upon which the US and Europe rely. The consequences, moreover, of a mass upsurge in the Middle East on the millions of Muslims and the growing number of refugees who live in Europe would create incalculable problems for the European governments.

Other considerations are also at work. The Middle East and Central Asia, with their large reserves of oil, have for some time been the focus of geopolitical and economic contention between the Great Powers. The strategically oriented members of European governments presume that the US will seek to secure its own domination in the region under the pretext of the struggle against terrorism. There is, therefore, a large element of tactical manoeuvring behind the public declarations of solidarity with the US. The thinking is that an open conflict in the current situation would not only deprive the Europeans of the possibility of

influencing and swaying the US, but also endanger European interests in the Middle East and the existence of the NATO alliance as a whole.

Writing in Monday’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* about the consequences for NATO of the present crisis, Lothar Rühl said, “If, however, the European allies hold back or introduce an element of delay in the crisis-action, the Euro-Atlantic alliance will for the first time confront the danger of the loosening of transatlantic ties.” Rühl is of the opinion that “the international crisis resulting from the terror attack on America accelerates the dissolution of the out-dated institutions of international politics arising from the East-West conflict”.

Over the past 10 years Europe, and, in particular, Germany and France, have been concerned with freeing themselves from the military domination of the US, so as to pursue their own imperialist interests more forcefully. Sharp tensions have emerged—on the attitude to the Kosovo Liberation Army in Kosovo and the National Liberation Army in Macedonia, on the planned nuclear missile defence, and on many other issues. But now European leaders fear that NATO could break apart before Europe is sufficiently prepared. “The European Union is neither strong enough nor prepared to realise ‘strategic autonomy’ in alliance with Washington,” Rühl comments.

At the same time, voices are already emerging that regard further collaboration with the US within the framework of NATO to be counterproductive.

An article in *Der Spiegel* magazine notes that after the decision invoking the mutual assistance pact, NATO finds itself “in a military escalation and a solidarity trap”. The article continues: “The US has been less bothered about collective interests when it comes to protecting its own. The new dimension of terror, which has been deemed an act of war, forces the NATO partners, correctly, to side with the Americans. But based on past experience it is clear they (the US) are acting according to their own yardstick.”

It is already clear that the current crisis will enormously accelerate the development of militarism in Europe as a whole, and in Germany in particular. The German government is already discussing a relaxation of its current course of budget cuts in favour of increased spending for the army. Many of those criticising US war preparations are at the same time calling for an intensified rearming of Europe.



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