Chancellor Schröder calls for an expanded military role for Germany

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In a government statement to the German parliament (Bundestag) on October 11, Chancellor Schröder announced a fundamental new orientation of German foreign policy.

"Following the end of the Cold War, the reestablishing of the national unity of Germany and the recovery of our complete sovereignty, we have to pose our international responsibility in a new way," he explained. "A responsibility which corresponds to our role as the most important partner in Europe and across the Atlantic, but also as a powerful democracy and economy in the heart of Europe."

The period whereby Germany merely took part in "international efforts to secure freedom, justice and stability" via "secondary means of assistance are irrevocably over", the chancellor emphasised. "We Germans in particular ... now have a duty to measure up fully to our new responsibility. This also expressly includes—and I say this to exclude even the slightest misunderstanding—participation in military operations for the defence of freedom and human rights, for the establishing of stability and security."

Since the reunification of Germany in 1990 there have been repeated rhetorical and practical efforts made to raise the political and military status of Germany on the world stage. Never, however, has a post-war German chancellor so openly and clearly spoken of the connections between economic interests and military power.

When one strips away the unctuous rhetoric—"freedom", "justice", "human rights"—then the essential message is that in future Germany's rank in terms of military and foreign policy must correspond to its status as "a powerful economy in the heart of Europe."

In this regard the *Berliner Zeitung* recalled a very similar speech, delivered at the same venue by a German foreign minister. In 1897 Bernhard von Bülow declared in the Reichstag: "The period is over where Germany allowed one of its neighbours to assume control of the earth, another control of the sea with the notion of reserving heaven for the Germans, where pure doctrine lives. We do not want anyone to stand in our shadow, but we demand our own place in the sun."

Bülow's speech marked the passage of the economically rapidly expanding *Kaiserreich* from the heart of Europe, where it had played first fiddle for some time, into the world arena, dominated by the colonial powers of Great Britain and France. The struggle for "a place in the sun" ended in a catastrophe 17 years later with the First World War.

It is by no means an exaggeration to compare the speeches of Schröder and Bülow. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the system of fixed borders and spheres of influence established in the course of the Cold War has begun to shift. States and boundaries disappear while new ones emerge, the world is being reapportioned and nobody, least of all the German government, is prepared to stay on the sidelines.

In the post-war period the West German Republic found itself in the unusual position of being able to expand economically without having to secure its position militarily. The fronts established in the cold war excluded major conflicts between the western allies. In the slipstream of the United States, Germany grew to become the second biggest export nation in the world.

This situation changed following German reunification and the break-up of the eastern block. Leading political circles were aware of this fact and pressed forward intensely with the unification of Europe as a counterweight to the only remaining world super power, the US. Already in 1992, the Inspector General of the German army, Klaus Naumann had drawn up guidelines establishing Germany's new military priorities: "the support and securing of world-wide political and economic, military and ecological stability" and the "maintenance of free world trade and access to strategic raw materials."

The events of September 11 have given this development unprecedented tempo. The American aggression against Afghanistan has lead to hectic diplomatic activity all around the world. Under the cover of a "global alliance against terror" powers, both great and small, are eager to strike their own alliances. In this respect the German government has displayed a remarkable aptitude.

Foreign Minister Joshka Fischer (Green Party) has jetted non-stop between central Asia, Islamabad, Delhi, Riad, Jerusalem, Gaza, Paris and Berlin, in order to exert and develop German influence. Last week Chancellor Schröder travelled to Pakistan, India and China accompanied by a large business delegation. At the same time he has repeatedly offered to put German troops at the disposal of America for use in Afghanistan.

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Contrary to the propaganda of the government, the issue is not the fight against terrorism, but rather the German government's eagerness to grab its share of the action fearful of being left out when the time comes to divide up the booty.

The central issue in the war against Afghanistan is control over the lubricant of modern economy—oil. Afghanistan provides access to the rich raw materials of central Asia and is in the immediate neighbourhood of the Gulf. Whoever controls the oil-taps possesses a powerful lever against his economic rivals. In a broader sense what is at stake are geostrategic aims. Whoever is able to establish a foothold in central Asia, the intersection of Asia and Europe, and lying between Russia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, controls a key strategic position.

For these reasons Schröder is not prepared to accept any criticism of his course. Even within the ranks of his own party, he deals ruthlessly with anyone who dares to question his course of action. The powerful IG Metall trade union was ticked off by the chancellor, and told to keep its nose out of things it did not understand, when the union sought to criticise the war. On Schröder's initiative the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor party to the east German Stalinist SED), which received nearly fifty percent of the vote in East Berlin in recent elections, was prevented from establishing a coalition with the SPD in Berlin after it had taken a critical position towards the war. When it comes to German economic and foreign policy interests then the chancellor takes matters deadly seriously.

The logic of this course leads inevitably to the escalation of international, political and, in the long term, military conflicts—including conflicts with Germany's former partners. Behind the current alliance in the war against Afghanistan future conflicts over the division of spoils are looming.

A substantial conflict has already broken out between the allies over the issue, which international body should exercise control over Afghanistan following a possible overthrow of the Taliban government. Germany has sent a number of representatives to Washington, including the country's former ambassador to Pakistan and Afghanistan, the specialist Hans-Joachim Daerr, in order to make clear Germany's interest in taking part in a solution. Most of the models which have been discussed so far involve participation only by countries which are members of the UN Security Council and the states neighbouring Afghanistan, bodies where Germany is not represented. For its part Germany favours a solution involving the G8 countries, whereby it could then play a role.

The latest round of events makes clear that politics is increasingly returning to the forms which characterised the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century—the heyday of classical imperialism. During that period joint actions between the Great Powers—such as the suppression of the Boxer rebellion in China—alternated with intense conflicts and rivalries until tensions eventually exploded in 1914.

The main victim of this development is the broad masses of working people. They must pay the bill for an extensive military build-up and the inevitable accompanying attacks on civil liberties at home. It is also the broad masses who will be the physical victims of future conflicts.

A broad sense of unease exists amongst the German working class over such developments. This is the reason for the hysterical arming up of the state being pursued by the German interior minister, Otto Schily, with the support of the SPD-Green party coalition. It reflects the fear of the masses by those in government who themselves feel more and more isolated.

At the moment, however, there is no political force able to articulate this uneasiness and provide it with a progressive political orientation. There is not even a public debate over the real aims of German foreign policy. The few, timid voices in the SPD and Green party raised against the Afghan war do not reject the foreign policy aims of Schröder. Rather they are of the opinion that participation in the current war is an inappropriate means of achieving such ends. An element of this opposition is fear that Schröder is leaning too heavily on the US and that German ambitions would be better served by more independence from its ally.

The rejection of the war by the PDS is also of a tactical character. The party is disturbed by the one-sided approach of the US and would be prepared to support military action under the auspices of the United Nations or another international institution, in which Germany has more influence.

An effective political movement against the war can only be constructed on the basis of rejecting both subordination to the aggressive actions of the US government as well as anti-Americanism, which calls for the political strengthening and rearming of Europe or Germany as the answer to the course being adopted by the US government. Both positions, and this is made clear by the policies of the German government, are two sides of the same coin.

A real opposition to the war must proceed from the principle that there are two Americas—the America of the Bush government, the rich and big business, and the America of the working class, which has as little political say as the working classes of Germany and Europe. A genuine opposition must set itself the aim of uniting the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme, opposing the warmongers on both sides of the Atlantic.

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