

International Security Conference in Munich exposes growing NATO tensions

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The annual International Security Conference serves the same function for the international military establishment that the Davos Economic Summit serves for the economic and political elite: an opportunity for high-ranking politicians and experts to come together on a semi-public basis and raise issues and problems that could not be discussed in such a direct manner at official government gatherings.

This year the two meetings took place simultaneously—the World Economic Forum being held in New York this time—and both were held under conditions of a growing rift between Europe and America. Following the events of September 11, European governments outdid each other in their expressions of solidarity with the US and, for the first time in its history, NATO agreed to mutual defence measures. At the latest meetings in New York and Munich, however, a growing gulf in transatlantic relations was apparent. The future of the NATO alliance itself is now being questioned.

Above all, it was the State of the Union address by US President George W. Bush on January 29 which set off alarm bells within ruling circles in Europe. The aggressive tone of the speech, its clear declaration of unilateralism, the fact that NATO was barely mentioned and the undisguised threat against an “axis of evil”—which no longer bore any direct relation to the attacks carried out on September 11—have been carefully noted in Europe.

In France, where open criticism of the US is more common than in any other European country, the daily newspaper *Libération*, in an article entitled “Bush’s bellicose speech alarms the world,” accused the US of seeking to play the role of “sole policeman of the planet.” In a commentary, the paper wrote: “With a rare brutality, George Bush has announced his self-appointment to the rank of judge and policeman for the universe.” A guest columnist for the paper spoke of an “imperial and unilateral frenzy” on the part of the US.

The British *Guardian* newspaper, which has long been critical of the pro-American line of Prime Minister Tony Blair, sharply attacked Bush’s speech. Under the headline “Hate of the Union,” the newspaper commented: “The ‘axis of evil’, as described by the president, may have little to do with September 11. It has a lot more to do with the Pentagon’s long term plans, and for a \$50bn increase in defence spending, the biggest leap in two decades.”

At the Munich conference there were substantial differences of opinion over three questions: the American war threat directed at Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the lack of consideration shown for the European allies, as well as the budgets for military spending.

European representatives at the conference made no secret of their rejection of military action against Iraq, not to speak of the other two targeted nations. One European diplomat warned that a US attack on Iraq would set off a chain reaction: “The anti-terror coalition would collapse, moderate Islamic governments in the Middle East would be destabilised and the Middle East conflict intensified. And the US also lacks any political plan for the time after Saddam Hussein.”

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov bluntly opposed any attack on Iraq or Iran, commenting that there was no evidence these countries had been involved in the September 11 attacks.

Of all the governments gathered at the conference, Germany enjoys the closest economic and political links with Iran and has set its sights on a gradual opening up of the country under the influence of the so-called reformers. German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping warned the US against going it alone. If the United Nations is ignored then the Europeans would no longer support the anti-terror struggle, he declared.

American Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz immediately rejected Scharping’s comments, declaring: “We do not need a UN Resolution for our self defence.”

Previously in his speech to the conference, Wolfowitz had cited his chief, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and stated that one of the most important lessons from the current war against terrorism was that “the mission must determine the coalition, the coalition must not determine the mission.” Otherwise the mission will be reduced to “the lowest common denominator,” he said. In other words, the US reserves the right to determine the mission and then seek out suitable and pliant allies. It is not prepared to discuss the mission with its partners.

Regarding Iraq, Wolfowitz played his cards close to his chest. “We are a long way away from a decision,” he said. For their parts, fellow American delegates, Republican Senator John McCain and his Democratic colleague Joseph Lieberman, spoke out openly in favour of a “preventive strike” against Iraq.

McCain said: “Dictators that harbour terrorists and build weapons of mass destruction are now on notice that such behaviour is, in itself, a *casus belli*. Nowhere is such an ultimatum more applicable than in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. ... His regime has been implicated in the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center. Terrorist training camps exist on Iraqi soil, and Iraqi officials are known to have had a number of contacts with Al Qaeda. ... Americans have internalised the mantra that Afghanistan represents only the first front in our global war on terror. The next front is apparent, and we should not shirk from acknowledging it. A terrorist resides in Baghdad. ... A day of reckoning is approaching.”

Lieberman also stressed: “We cannot claim victory in our war against terrorism until we decisively address the profound threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction.”

The clearest statement of all came from Richard Perle, security advisor to George W. Bush. He told the *Financial Times Deutschland* that the American government was determined to employ violence to drive Saddam Hussein out of office—if necessary, against the will of the Europeans.

Conflicts over Bush’s “axis of evil” also played a central role at the New York summit.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who in a personal meeting only shortly before had assured Bush of his complete solidarity, now warned the US of the consequences of striking out alone. In a speech to the World

Economic Forum he stated, “No country can guarantee its security without a growing measure of international co-operation.” In clear contrast to Bush’s State of the Union address, Schröder declared that security could only be achieved through more justice—material, ecological, social and legal. This calls for “a climate in which different cultures and identities can co-exist,” he said.

The French government decided to send several high-ranking members to the alternative social summit in Porto Alegre, Brazil instead of New York. Even the Gaullist party of French President Jacques Chirac decided to send the party’s general secretary to Brazil. The governments of Germany and France are apparently intent on proclaiming their support for global “justice” and thereby winning influence among governments in Latin America and Asia who are under pressure from aggressive US policies.

On the fringes of the Munich conference, British NATO General Secretary George Robertson also expressed his scepticism regarding Bush’s threats against Iraq. In a background discussion with journalists Robertson declared: “If the Americans have evidence, which points to the collusion of other states, then the NATO member states are very interested in seeing such evidence. ... Up to now we have seen nothing.”

In the course of the Munich Security Conference it quickly became clear that complaints from Europe over American unilateralism would remain ineffective from the former’s point of view so long as Europe is unable to overcome the enormous gulf that exists between its military spending and that of the US.

NATO General Secretary Robertson summed the issue up when he said: “American critics of Europe’s military incapability are right. So, if we are to ensure that the United States moves neither towards unilateralism nor isolationism, all European countries must show a new willingness to develop effective crisis management capabilities. I am therefore redoubling my clarion call of ‘capabilities, capabilities, capabilities’. This will not make me popular in some capitals. I hope it will, nonetheless, be listened to, especially by finance ministers.”

Previously, American representatives had mocked the Europeans over the latter’s contribution to the war in Afghanistan, accusing European governments of neglecting their military forces. Senator McCain declared that, “to be honest,” European NATO troops as a supplement to American special units were not really needed and, he added, “perhaps the Germans should invest more money to help us in the sort of high-tech war which will be carried out in the twenty-first century.”

Former US Defence Secretary William Cohen said that the readiness on the part of the US to involve Europe in military actions diminished in line with the growing technological gulf between the two continents. General Secretary Robertson warned that if Europe did not modernise its military forces then America would soon constitute the “cutting edge” and the Europeans the “bleeding edge”—one carries out war from the stratosphere, the other is left bleeding on the ground.

It is a matter of fact that an enormous gap exists between the American and European military. Even before the latest huge increases in its military spending, the US was financing around two-thirds of all NATO expenditures. America spends three times as much on weapons and munitions for its soldiers as European states, which expend most of their budgets on personnel costs. With the planned expansion of the American military budget by 30 percent by the year 2007, the gulf will yawn even wider. Planned American military expenditures of \$451 billion annually are roughly double the entire German domestic budget. Planned American spending of \$99 billion for new weapons systems alone is four times higher than the entire German military budget.

Europe is being placed under enormous pressure to increase military spending. There can be no doubt that the entire political elite is prepared to follow this course. Political parties, which in the past professed their adherence to non-violence and pacifism—the best example is the German

Green Party—have in the meantime embraced militarism.

The attempt to recoup the American military advantage, however, poses considerable problems for the European ruling class. The future of the common European currency is tied to strict stability criteria laid down at the Maastricht conference, which means that military budgets cannot be increased through new indebtedness, and must be drawn from other sources, e.g., drastic slashing of social spending. The pressure is on for Europe to achieve parity with the US in this respect. America invests just 30 percent of its GNP on state expenditure; the corresponding figure in Europe is 46 percent. Such a dramatic reversal of budget priorities cannot be achieved without violent social explosions.

No European government enjoys sufficient stability to be in a position to impose such radical cuts. Even the financing of a new Airbus military transport plane—involving the sum of 9 billion euros spread over a number of years, a pittance in comparison to US expenditure—was sufficient to provoke a minor government crisis in Germany.

Officially, the increase in the US military budget is justified as necessary for the war against terrorism. But undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the increase is to put pressure on Europe. After all, Europe is far and away America’s most important rival on world markets. Together America and Europe comprise 15 percent of the world’s population, while each contributes 30 percent of total world production.

Several commentators have drawn a parallel between this latest increase in US military spending and that undertaken by President Ronald Reagan at the beginning of the 1980s. The comparison goes deeper than some commentators perhaps realise. Reagan’s increased military budget was aimed at America’s main enemy in the Cold War—the Soviet Union. The attempt by the USSR to keep up with the US in the sphere of military spending went a long way towards accelerating the former’s economic decline and collapse. In similar manner, the new arms race puts Europe under pressure. Across the continent it will intensify social tensions and pressures for more authoritarian regimes better prepared to brutally impose the necessary cuts on the broad masses of the population.

In such a situation working people require their own independent political strategy. European workers cannot defend their social and democratic gains by placing any sort of trust in their own governments in a conflict with America. Instead they must reach out and establish an alliance with workers on the other side of the Atlantic, who are themselves increasingly suffering at the hands of the Bush administration.



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