

Behind German Chancellor Schröder's opposition to war on Iraq

Peter Schwarz
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National elections set for September 22 in Germany could well be decided on the question of war. Support for the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and the Greens has risen in the polls following the clear rejection by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) of any German participation in a US invasion of Iraq.

Broad sections of the German people reject the plans for war against Iraq. This popular opposition is rooted in both the traumatic experiences of two world wars and open scepticism towards the arguments of those who favour military action. In the case of Iraq, it is all too evident that the main objective is oil.

While this popular sentiment coincides with the rejection of war plans by Schröder and Fischer, the official position of the government has very different roots. Its criticism of Washington expresses the definite interests of German imperialism, which is pursuing its own aims in the Gulf region. Schröder and Fischer are continuing the foreign policy aims initiated by their predecessors, Chancellor Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and his foreign ministers, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel (both Free Democratic Party—FDP). Following German reunification in 1990 and the end of the Cold War they began intensive efforts to re-establish Germany's influence on the world stage.

Achieving this objective above all required Germany's ability to independently conduct international military interventions and wage war. A balance sheet of the foreign and security policies of the SPD-Green Party government shows that it has moved further towards securing these means during its four years in power than Kohl achieved during his 16-year rule. Under Schröder and Fischer military power has once again become an instrument of German foreign policy.

In an interview last year with the weekly magazine *Die Zeit*, Chancellor Schröder boasted that his government had "done away with taboos about the military". In a recent debate with Edmund Stoiber, the Christian Social Union's (CSU) candidate for chancellor, he bragged that under his leadership spending on international interventions by the German army had increased 10-fold and that today Germany has more soldiers serving abroad than any other country aside from the US.

Over the past four years, German soldiers have taken part in two wars—the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia and the 2001 the war in Afghanistan—and are presently deployed in 16 different countries or regions: Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Georgia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, Djibouti, Kenya, the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Sea, in the Mediterranean as well as Italy (NATO intervention headquarters) and the US (Tampa, Florida). Apart from Turkey and Italy all of these interventions are taking place in countries outside NATO territory.

The SPD and Greens have sharply accelerated the transformation of the German army that was begun in the early 1990s. A military force with the mission of defending the country's national territory from external attack has been turned into an international army of intervention capable of

operating worldwide.

Germany's new defence minister, Peter Struck (SPD), recently handed over the command of military forces participating in foreign interventions to the army's inspector general, who until now had functioned as an advisor to the defence minister. This move effectively restores the post of general chief of staff—a position that had been abolished with the downfall of the Third Reich in 1945. The Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* assessed the move as "a further step towards making the army more professional, the transformation of a static army based on defence of the homeland into a dynamic instrument for foreign and security policies."

The German Defence Ministry has also initiated a huge military spending programme involving an estimated 110 billion euros for the period between 2001 and 2015. It includes funds to produce a pan-European transport plane, the A400 M, capable of transporting military units and equipment over long distances, the development of cruise missiles (Taurus), guided missiles (Polyphem) and combat drones (Taifun), which will enable the German army to conduct precise long-distance attacks.

A major increase in the German defence budget is clearly in the cards following the election. Spending for the year 2003 already exceeds the military's budget by 2 billion euros.

The government of Schröder/Fischer has proven far more effective than its conservative predecessor in one respect—the ability to cloak its real aims in ostensibly noble motives. It has justified its military policy in the name of preventing massacres, imposing peace or the struggle against terrorism. It took a Green foreign minister to make the case for bombing Belgrade in the spring of 1999 on the basis of the historical obligation of Germans to oppose fascism. If a conservative government had made a similar argument it would have undoubtedly met enormous opposition.

The continuity of the foreign policy of the SPD-Green coalition with its conservative/liberal predecessor becomes clear when one considers the latest developments in a broader historical context.

After Germany's defeat in the Second World War, its foreign policy moved in a narrow predetermined framework between alliance with the US on one hand and European integration on the other. Occupying the key position on the front line of the Cold War, the German elite regarded the military umbrella of the US as indispensable and agreed to the latter's dominant role in the NATO alliance.

At the same time rapidly expanding German industry required free access to European markets. It was necessary therefore to avoid at all costs the sort of economic and political isolation that Germany suffered after its defeat in the First World War. On this basis all German political parties were agreed on encouraging Germany's integration into Europe.

Within this framework it was possible for Germany to re-establish itself as an important factor in world politics. The German chancellor and foreign minister travelled all over the world in the interest of German business. Always accompanied by a host of top business executives, they struck up trading partnerships and secured access to raw materials, export

markets and new bases for production in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Unlike other great powers, however, post-war Germany was unable to impose its interests through military force. It was limited to exerting economic power while seeking to convince, mediate, adapt and remain modest. It was manoeuvrable and flexible, maintaining close relations with right-wing dictatorships in Asia and Latin America as well as with the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe. It forged ties to Israel as well as to the Arab states, to the Shah of Persia as well as his successor Khomeini. In all of its manoeuvres Germany maintained its close relations with the US and tried not to rock the boat.

The term “Genscherismus”—named for the former foreign minister—became synonymous with this flexible style of foreign policy. It was good for German business, turning the country into the number one export nation in the world on a per capita basis.

German foreign policy took on a pacifist tinge. Even the most conservative circles accepted slogans like “no more war”. There was a general consensus that the constitution of 1949 restricted any action by the German army outside of NATO territory—until in 1994 the German constitutional court ruled that such interventions were permissible.

Reunification, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the dissolution of the Soviet Union abruptly transformed the objective foundations of German foreign policy. The German economy gained additional weight, while the country regained its full sovereignty and moved from a position on Europe’s western edge into its very centre. With the end of the Cold War, NATO lost its *raison d’être*. Intensified competition on the global markets aggravated tensions with the US.

The government of Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher reacted by reorienting international policy toward the fundamental aim of overcoming Washington’s economic, political and military predominance. At the same time, they carefully avoided an open confrontation with their far more powerful rival.

This caution was motivated by both domestic and international considerations. The Federal Republic—the longest-running political regime since the first unification of Germany and the founding of the Reich in 1871—owed much of its stability to the transatlantic alliance. An open conflict with the US would have threatened this stability. Furthermore, a reunified Germany was not strong enough to challenge the US either militarily or economically.

In its official statements, the government carefully avoided any reference to conflicts with the great power across the Atlantic. Instead, it raised the demand for equal rights all the more vociferously. The US was now regularly referred to as “hegemonic” or a “superpower”. Any announcement by Washington that seemed aimed at the consolidation of American superiority was carefully noted. For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski’s book *The Great Chessboard*, which candidly postulates American hegemony over Eurasia, was published under the German title *The Only World Power*, with a preface by Genscher.

Ruling circles agreed that Germany could not act alone in challenging the predominant position of America. It required the framework of the European Union. After German reunification, Chancellor Kohl announced that the unification of Europe was now to become his life’s work.

In 1992, the European heads of state signed the Maastricht treaty. Initiated by Germany and France, it challenged the US in all vital spheres. The introduction of a single European currency meant that the dollar, for the first time, faced serious competition. The development of a joint foreign policy and the creation of independent armed forces were designed to level the playing field with the US politically. In addition, the European Union was to be enlarged to incorporate all of Eastern Europe.

In that same year, the Kohl government adopted new “defence guidelines”. For the first time, the German army was candidly described as an instrument to secure economic and political interests. Its tasks were

to include the “promotion and protection of political, economic, military and ecological stability on a world scale”, the “defence of free world trade and the access to raw materials of strategic importance”. The author of these guidelines, Inspector General Klaus Naumann, spoke of military interventions as “a classical instrument of politics”.

Klaus Kinkel, who followed Genscher as foreign minister in 1992, wrote a column in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that articulated Germany’s new international ambitions. The old modesty had been superseded by the demand for influence and expansion. “In order to secure our future,” Kinkel proclaimed, “the dictates of the hour are great efforts to strengthen our position on the world market.” In the same breath, he made the claim for German hegemony in Eastern Europe: “Due to our central position, our size and our traditional relations with Central and Eastern Europe we are predestined to take the main advantage of the return of these states into Europe.”

In 1991 Genscher was to put Germany’s new freedom of action to the test in the Balkans, a traditional sphere of influence for German imperialism. Against considerable international opposition, he hastily pushed through the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia as independent states, a step that set off the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia.

This initiative, intended as a demonstration of strength, initially had quite the opposite effect. The French and British governments were offended by this great power diplomacy. The US, which had originally been quite critical of the recognition of Croatia, proceeded to collaborate closely with Zagreb and promoted the independence of Bosnia. The ensuing wars in Bosnia and Kosovo demonstrated the inability of the European governments to develop a common stance and proved their military dependence on the US.

From then on, German foreign policy was concentrated on participation in military interventions in order to bring its influence to bear in the future reorganization of the Balkans. While the involvement of the German army in offensive military operations remained small, it has been playing a major role in the so-called peace missions ever since. In practice, these amount to the establishment of protectorates. In Bosnia, in Kosovo and, to a certain extent, in Macedonia, all important political and economic decisions are taken by the UN and EU administrations. They are also the ones who decide which factions of the domestic elite get influential posts and which are excluded.

Chancellor Schröder and his Green Foreign Minister Fischer seamlessly continued the policies of their predecessors. Beginning with their 1998 election campaign, they stressed that there would be continuity in foreign policy. Even before they took office—just after the elections—the SPD and the Greens voted in parliament for the war against Yugoslavia. This decision, which provoked considerable popular opposition and dissension within their own party, was the price of admission for the Greens to enter government and the ministry of foreign affairs.

As soon as they had taken office, Fischer and Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD) worked to justify the war against Yugoslavia. Fischer, in close collaboration with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, played a key role at the Rambouillet conference, which created the immediate pretext for the war by posing an unacceptable ultimatum to Belgrade. The Albanian separatist UCK, formerly branded as “terrorist”, was elevated to the position of a NATO partner at Rambouillet. Meanwhile, Scharping spread unsubstantiated tales about massacres and plans for the expulsion of ethnic Albanians.

In the war that followed, the German army for the first time since World War II went beyond mere logistical support, participating with its own bombers in offensive operations.

Schröder and Fischer worked intensively to hasten the creation of independent European armed forces. The EU summit that was held under German auspices in 1999 in Cologne decided to create a Euro Corps of 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers by 2003. This corps was to be equipped with

weapons as advanced as those used by US troops.

Inspector General Harald Kujat, who had been nominated by Scharping, summed up the purpose of these measures in his inaugural speech in November 2000: “If, in Europe and beyond, Germany is to play the role which befits its geographical position and its interests, the weight of a people of 80 million in the centre of Europe, then its armed forces have to be developed accordingly in terms of their size, their scope, their equipment and their training.”

After the attacks of September 11, this military expansion acquired a new dimension. In line with the “unlimited solidarity” with the US promised by Schröder, for the first time large numbers of German soldiers were deployed in regions that nobody would have dared even contemplate just a year earlier—Afghanistan, northeast Africa, the Persian Gulf. Highly specialized units operating in secrecy have joined their American counterparts in chasing Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters without a word of protest in parliament.

Scharping himself explained the real aims of these operations in a speech to parliament: “We all know that, for example, world economic stability and world economic security can be influenced strongly by this region, which contains 70 percent of the oil resources and 40 percent of the gas resources of the globe.”

Solidarity with the US soon proved to be an illusion, if it was ever intended seriously at all. Washington’s inclination to act without regard for allies, international institutions like the UN or international law caused Berlin to fear for German interests. With the Bush administration’s threat to topple the Iraqi regime by a pre-emptive war, the conflicts have reached a level of intensity that can no longer be concealed.

The German government fears not only the loss of markets and access to important energy sources. A new oil crisis would be a massive blow to Europe’s economy, which is quite unstable, characterized by high unemployment and large budget deficits. A war would destabilize the entire region, creating new waves of refugees and other social crises.

Under growing pressure from the US, the common European foreign policy is dissolving and the EU is drifting apart. This was clearly visible at the recent foreign ministers’ meeting in Elsinore. While the British, the Spanish and the Italian governments leaned towards the Bush administration, the Germans put themselves at the head of their opponents.

Chancellor Schröder reacts to the centrifugal tendencies within the EU by emphasising the “German way”. While he has stressed the domestic significance of this election slogan—the supposed defence of welfare state traditions—both his opponents and his supporters interpret it in terms of international policies.

Instead of promoting European integration—as Kohl did—through persuasion, agreements with Paris and generous financial contributions, Schröder more and more uses Germany’s economic and political weight to pressure other EU members and to enforce Berlin’s interests.

This policy can only lead to a new round of international conflicts, including military confrontations. The price for this is to be paid by the people—in the form of soaring military spending, the growth of militarism (and with it the destruction of democratic rights and a strengthening of reactionary political forces) and soldiers sacrificed on the battlefield.

A balance sheet of the SPD-Green government’s foreign and military policies demonstrates that opposition to a war against Iraq cannot be based on these two parties. The same is true for the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formed by the remnants of the SED, the ex-ruling Stalinist party of East Germany) which has made opposition to such a war a central plank in its election platform.

The PDS, like the other bourgeois parties, reacts to the US war policy by demanding a strengthening of the EU’s political and military role. Two of its leading figures—Gregor Gysi and André Brie—recently wrote to former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine demanding a “real common European

foreign and defence policy” and the “emancipation of the EU in international policy and defence”. In plain language, this means building up European imperialism to counter US imperialism.

An effective struggle against the war danger can be waged only by uniting working people on both sides of the Atlantic. It must be based on a socialist program pledging irreconcilable struggle against all governments—social democratic or conservative—that want to make the working class pay for the international crisis and for increasing armaments.

The answer to growing US pressure is not the strengthening of the EU—which is an instrument of the financial and economic interests of the European ruling class—but the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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