

Historic resonances in German foreign minister's statements

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On his recent visit to Britain, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer described the proposed entry of Turkey into the European Union as an event that would be as important as D-Day—when Allied troops landed on the Normandy beaches of Nazi-occupied Europe in 1944.

Until this year, German ministers have kept away from D-Day celebrations, and, as his interviewer remarked, “a D-Day reference is extraordinary from a German foreign minister.”

Fischer went on, “To modernise an Islamic country based on the shared values of Europe would be almost a D-Day for Europe in the war against terror. It would be the greatest positive challenge for these totalitarian and terrorist ideas.”

Speaking to James Naughtie of BBC’s “Today” programme, Fischer stressed the importance of Turkey joining the EU. Turkey, Fischer pointed out, is “a heavyweight country.” The question was whether Europe was ready “to digest such a big country.”

He linked Europe’s ability to absorb Turkey to the question of the European constitution that is now under discussion. “This is the question to our British friends,” said Fischer, “and some others who are opposing or who are skeptical about the constitution.”

Naughtie scented a vital argument here and highlighted its significance, explaining, “We are talking about a Europe that would stretch to the very borders of Iraq. Are you saying,” he asked, “that Europe without a constitution would be incapable of making that work?”

Fischer was saying precisely that, and the reasons soon became clear. He pointed out the present plans for enlargement of the EU would “mean enlargement to the shores of the Black Sea and the borders of Turkey.”

Leaving Turkey out of the EU was simply unacceptable. Fischer’s interest in Turkey is to some extent conditioned by the large Turkish population in Germany, but as foreign minister he has other, more strategic, goals. Turkey, he said, would soon have a population of 80 million, making it larger than Germany by the time it enters the EU, and it exercises a “strategic bridge function” between East and West.

Turkey, he said, had wanted to belong to the West since the days of Kemal Atatürk. Then, as now, “Europeanisation means modernisation of an Islamic country based on the shared values of Europe.” Before 9/11, Fischer said that he had been skeptical about bringing Turkey into the EU and thus “having borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran,” but now “if you look to the strategic situation, our security will be defined for at least five decades in this region.”

The EU’s position in the Mediterranean would not be secure, he implied, unless Turkey became a member. The threat he cited was that of terrorism, but it is incredible that irregular groups of Islamic fundamentalists could offer any serious military threat to the EU’s Mediterranean borders.

The reference to 9/11 was more than a little disingenuous. Rather than the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a more realistic date for Fischer’s recognition that Turkish membership of the EU was vital would be when the United States invaded Iraq.

Expressed in Fischer’s determination to make Turkey a member of the EU against French opposition was one of the long-term objectives of German foreign policy. The German policy of binding Turkey to a European bloc dates back to the latter part of the nineteenth century.

As far back as the 1890s, Kaiser Wilhelm harboured the dream of creating an alliance with Turkey and revolutionising the Islamic world. Fischer is speaking in almost precisely the same terms today.

Invoking the record of Germany’s imperial past cannot have been done lightly, and Fischer was careful to make reassuring noises. For almost half a century, Germany’s relationship with the US has been, in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Germany’s “certificate of good behaviour.”

In his exchange with Naughtie, Fischer was waving that certificate for all it is worth. When Fischer made the reference to D-Day, Naughtie pointed out that this was, “a reference to the liberation of Europe and your own country....”

Fischer interrupted, “Of my own generation.”

Naughtie: “You were born in....”

Fischer: “1948. Oh, it would be a nightmare born into the Nazi dictatorship.”

The Soviet Union’s role in liberating Germany and the millions of Soviet citizens that died in the effort to defeat Nazism during the Second World War were conveniently forgotten. It was Soviet forces that liberated most of the concentration camps, and Allied forces only entered Berlin when it became clear that unless they did so they would have ceded control of the whole of Germany to the USSR.

Fischer made no criticism of the war in Iraq, despite the fact he was appearing on the programme that broke the David Kelly story and on which Kofi Annan had declared that the war was illegal. Had he wished to criticise the war, he would have found a receptive listener in Naughtie.

Fischer’s attitude towards the US was positively groveling.

“There cannot be world order without the US,” he told a meeting at the London School of Economics later that day. “It is the only country that can project global power.”

But he pleaded for “a strategic consensus” between Europe and the US. Rejecting the French concept of multi-polarity as out of date, he advocated “a second pillar” of Europe as a counter-balance to the US.

Underpinning this new strategic consensus, he suggested, would be a revitalised United Nations. Legitimacy, not brute power, he said, would be the hard currency of the new century, and only the UN could bestow legitimacy.

His next remarks belied his appeal to legitimacy, however, since he held up Afghanistan, where Germany has a significant military role, as an example of what could be achieved by working through the UN. From the recent rigged elections, to the US bombing of civilians and the illegal detentions in Guantanamo, this is not a pretty picture of Fischer’s new strategic consensus.

His call for a second pillar amounts to a bid for the status of junior partner to the US, as it carves out a global empire that dominates the

strategic axes of the world. Fischer does not intend Germany to be left out, particularly when the US infringes on Germany's historic global interests as it is doing in the Middle East.

His appeal for Turkish membership in the EU was fully supported by his party, the Greens, who recently sent a parliamentary delegation to Turkey. At a press conference there, the Greens Group President Daniel Cohn-Bendit poured scorn on the French government for demanding a referendum over Turkish membership.

He asked, "Are they going to have referendums on the memberships of Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia? The French will go crazy!

"This is ridiculous. Don't waste our time with what will happen in 10 years."

Cohn-Bendit admitted that in the past the Greens had criticised Turkey over "the situation of the Kurds and other minorities, women's rights, the Armenian massacres," but said that these matters could now be "openly discussed among friends."

Echoing Fischer's views about the significance of the size of Turkey, Cohn-Bendit said, "Turkey is not Malta, it is not Romania, it is not Bulgaria. It is a big country, it is a proud country, and its entry into the EU will be an important event."

There is a sense in which the Greens, who have very much led Germany's return to the scene of world politics, recognise that the accession of Turkey to the EU will be as much a turning point for Germany as a world power as it is for Turkey. The Christian Democrats, by contrast, oppose Turkish membership.

The Greens seem convinced that they are so free of the taint of Germany's imperial past that they can launch a more aggressive German foreign policy with impunity. But history shows it was not just Nazis and far-right Pan-Germanists that wanted to create a German empire. Liberals and academic socialists all agreed on the necessity of a German empire centred on a Mitteleuropa of Central and Eastern Europe, with France and the other Western European countries as dependencies and reaching out to Turkey. The ideas of a European customs union or even a United States of Europe were discussed in these circles at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Among the supporters of this idea was the sociologist Max Weber, whose inaugural lecture at Freiburg University has an uncanny resonance for today.

"We must appreciate," he said, "that the unification of Germany was a youthful prank indulged in by the nation in its old age and that because of its costliness it would have been better left undone if it was meant to be the end and not the starting point of a German policy of world power."

A conscious effort is required to remind ourselves that this was 1895 in the aftermath of the first German unification, not the present day in the aftermath of the second German unification. Reunification with East Germany has certainly proved costly, but the present government, of which Fischer's Greens are part, is taking steps to resolve that problem by attempting to make Germany into a world power once more and by means of a savage programme of attacks on welfare.

Here too, there are historic resonances, since the kind of assertive foreign policy that Fischer is advocating demands both material resources and a crushed and politically subservient working class. Making a direct link between foreign and domestic policy, the Kaiser wrote to Chancellor Bulow before the First World War, "Shoot down and eliminate the Socialists first, if need be, by a bloodbath, then war abroad, but not before, and not a tempo."

In dismantling a welfare system that has maintained relative social peace for more than half a century and has a claim to be the oldest in the world, the Schröder government is entering a new phase or, perhaps, returning to an older phase of Germany's history. If the circumstances are different—it is no longer Britain that is the hegemonic world power, as it was before the First World War—the issues, both at home and abroad, bear certain

similarities.

Then, as now, Germany was a powerful economy trapped in the centre of Europe that needed access to markets, raw materials and labour. While it has become customary in recent years to think of Germany as "the sick man of Europe" because its economy has stagnated, growing by only 1.4 percent on average over the last decade, less than half of the EU figure, this is only part of the story. Germany remains the largest exporter in the world, according to the *Economist*, and it cannot regard any of its markets as secure after the US invasion of Iraq.

Fischer is articulating the material economic interests of German capital and giving voice to historic drives that have previously led to two wars on the European continent. He cannot do that without an element of subterfuge and dissimulation. Even as he spoke about German ambitions in the Middle East, Fischer was at pains to emphasise that Germany had broken with its militaristic past. British television was responsible, he said, for preserving the image of the goose-stepping German. "If you want to learn how the traditional Prussian goose step works, you have to watch British television, because in Germany in the younger generation—even my generation—nobody knows how to perform it."

Fischer was playing on the embarrassment that British liberals and social democrats feel about referring to German imperialism, because they themselves come from a country that once ruled a quarter of the world. His tacit message was, Don't accuse us of militarism or you will look like a rabid Europhobe or a Basil Fawlty. If that was his intention, he was successful, to judge from the liberal papers the next day that all ran pieces to this effect.

In his book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski identified Germany as one of the five key geostrategic players. Turkey, in Brzezinski's estimation, is a geopolitical pivot because of its geographical position and to some extent a strategic player in its own right because of its interests in the Caucasus.

The strategic importance of Turkey for Brzezinski is that it is on the western edge of what he defines as an area between Europe and China that is likely to be a major battlefield in the struggle to dominate the Eurasian landmass. The war that Brzezinski outlined in his book is already underway, with the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and for the first time in history a non-Eurasian power is dominating this region. Germany's economic interests in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and the Far East are all threatened.

Fischer is clearly in awe of US military power, but he is attempting to take advantage of the Bush administration's current difficulties in Iraq to sneak under its guard and prosecute Germany's imperialist interests in this region.



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