

Munich Security Conference

Schröder demands role for Germany as world power

Peter Schwarz
18 February 2005

From a formal point of view, the 41st Munich Security Conference was characterised by conciliatory gestures, but increasing transatlantic tensions nevertheless made themselves felt at the assembly held last weekend in the Bavarian capital.

For military and defence officials and experts, the Munich Security Conference plays a role similar to that played by the Davos World Economic Forum for economists and politicians. It is a gathering at which high-ranking politicians and advisors engage in informal discussions, in the course of which the debate occasionally exceeds the strict framework dictated by diplomatic protocol. It was at the Security Conference two years ago, for example, that US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld made his provocative remarks about “old” and “new” Europe.

High-ranking delegations from both sides of the Atlantic were in attendance at this year’s conference. Speakers included United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Rumsfeld, US senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, European Union foreign policy head Javier Solana, and, from Germany, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and Defence Minister Peter Struck. The leader of the German opposition party CDU (Christian Democratic Union), Angela Merkel, also took part.

Two weeks before the planned trip to Europe by US President Bush, the American delegation strove to continue Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s recent “charm offensive”—adopting a friendly conversational tone and offering mutual consultation, but making no concessions in terms of actual US policy. “There was never so much superficial harmony at a security conference,” was the comment from the *Sddeutsche Zeitung*.

This was also expressed in the external form of the conference. The military and political top brass assembled under the slogan “peace through dialogue,” and the Bavarian prime minister, Edmund Stoiber, welcomed delegates as participants in the “Munich peace conference.”

German President Horst Köhler, who as a former head of the International Monetary Fund bears a major responsibility for worsening poverty in so-called developing countries, opened the conference by lecturing delegates about the benefits of development aid. Kofi Annan reacted to increasing pressure from Washington by advocating “zero tolerance against terrorism” and “the employment of force,” and was rewarded for his efforts with a “peace medal” created specifically for the occasion.

When questioned by a French journalist on his distinction between “old” and “new” Europe, Rumsfeld grinned amiably and declared: “That was old Rumsfeld.”

These attempts to create a harmonious atmosphere could not, however, disguise the fact that transatlantic and, in particular, German-American tensions, which emerged during the Iraq War, continue unabated. This became particularly clear in regard to two questions: continuing differences over Iran—the handling of Iran has become *the* transatlantic acid test,” Angela Merkel declared—and the open demand by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder that Germany be allowed to exercise increased power and influence in global affairs.

On the eve of the conference, Schröder’s speech was “leaked” to the *Sddeutsche Zeitung*, which made it the basis for its editorials on Saturday. As it turned out, Schröder was unable to personally deliver his speech due to illness, and it was read out by Defence Secretary Struck.

Schröder openly criticised the United States. The criticism was not directed, however, at US actions in Iraq. Schröder said nothing about the lies used as a basis for the war, nor did he mention the US doctrine of preventive war. He also refrained from raising the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, which contravenes international law. He praised the Iraqi elections, organised under the military repression of the occupation forces, as an “important step on the way to setting up democratic political structures.”

Schröder’s criticism, which was interpreted by many participants as reflecting doubts about the role of NATO, was exclusively aimed at Washington’s failure to sufficiently take into account German and European interests.

“The principle remains,” said Schröder, “that close transatlantic ties are in German, European and American interests. But the application of this principle in practical policy cannot use the past as a point of reference, as has so often been the case in transatlantic oaths of loyalty.... In recent years there have been misunderstandings, burdens, distrust, even tensions across the Atlantic.” These emerged, he said, because the “adjustment to a changed reality has not yet sufficiently been carried out.”

He described this changed reality as follows: Europe no longer needs to fear “a military attack on its borders.” Therefore, the military presence of American troops does not have the “priority for security of earlier times.” The strategic challenges lie “today beyond the old mutual assistance zone of the North Atlantic Treaty.” In the form of China and India, “two new world powers are developing, whose weight will shape not only their own regions, but world politics as a whole.” And the enemies are “no longer non-functioning states with a defined territory,” but “the new global risks.”

As a result, according to Schröder, the relationship between the

United States and Germany has changed. The role of America in the world has changed in recent years, but, in addition, “my country has also changed its understanding of its international role.” Germany regards itself “as jointly responsible for international stability and order” in the European Union, and demonstrates “this responsibility by active commitment in numerous crisis regions of the world.”

This was followed by the demand for a permanent seat for Germany on the UN Security Council—a demand that has been forcefully pursued by the government for some time. From joint responsibility follows the right to a share in decision-making, said Schröder. “Our desire to see Germany as a permanent member of the security council of the UN arises from the necessity to legitimise this connection.”

The transatlantic partnership, Schröder continued, has thus far inadequately considered such changes. NATO is no longer “the primary place where transatlantic partners consult and coordinate their strategic conceptions.” The dialogue between the European Union and the United States corresponds “in its current form neither to the increasing weight of the European Union, nor to the new requirements of transatlantic cooperation.” He called for the establishment of an independent commission to make suggestions for a fundamental reform of transatlantic ties.

Never in the post-war period has a German chancellor so forcefully demanded from the United States that Germany no longer be treated as a junior partner, but instead be accorded equal power. Schröder’s remark that the structure of transatlantic relations should “no longer consider the past as point of reference” is significant in this regard.

Past relations were shaped by the result of the Second World War. Emerging as the victorious power, the US played the dominant role in the transatlantic alliance—a role that was neither seriously questioned nor challenged. Schröder is no longer prepared to accept such a role. This is what he means by an “adjustment to a changed reality.”

Under conditions in which the US openly asserts itself as an imperial power, Schröder demands the right to sit as an equal at the table of the imperialists.

Schröder’s message was understood in Munich and provoked considerable opposition. In particular, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, a Dutchman, abruptly rejected Schröder’s demands for a reform of transatlantic institutions. “NATO grows, prospers and flourishes,” read his answer to Schröder’s criticism.

Rumsfeld stated a similar position. NATO, “the best alliance in the history of mankind,” is in excellent condition, he said. At the same time, he reiterated the American line that the tasks must determine the coalition, and not the coalition the tasks. Rumsfeld and Bush used this formula to justify the unilateral actions of a “coalition of the willing” against Iraq in the face of substantial reservations inside NATO and the UN.

On Sunday, the German government tried to dampen somewhat the hubbub caused by Schröder’s speech. Foreign Minister Fischer said Schröder’s remark that NATO was “no longer the primary place where transatlantic partners consult and coordinate their strategic conceptions” was not meant to suggest a break with NATO. It was, rather, a critical description of conditions that need to be changed.

Then Fischer enumerated the contentious points that had to be debated in relation to the future role of NATO before a “new strategic consensus” could be formed: the death penalty, the international criminal court, and the Kyoto protocol—all questions at which America and Europe are at loggerheads.

While Schröder’s initiative was met by many commentators with irritation and criticism, there was also open agreement. Thus, the

conservative French newspaper *Le Figaro* wrote: “The idea is good, interesting and deserved a better reception.... But the meeting in Munich will probably go down as a missed opportunity because US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld is still convinced of his favourite idea that the intervention determines the alliance, rather than the other way round. To put it another way: when necessary, Washington will bypass NATO and proceed as it did in Iraq with willing partners.”

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* also responded positively to Schröder’s speech. Martin Winter wrote: “Global conditions have radically changed for Europe and America since the end of the cold war.... Even if there is still much grinding of the teeth on the part of the community, Washington cannot ignore two facts: first of all, the time is past when the European Union could prosper only under the military protection of the US. Today, the European Union provides for its security through an increasing network of contractual connections with its large and small neighbours from Russia to Morocco. Secondly, collected together in the European Union is a political, economic and military force that is of increasing importance for overcoming problems all over the world.”

Winter identifies the key issue when he refers to economic power. Economic conflicts between American and European capitalism—access to oil, gas and other raw materials, the struggle for markets and cheap labour, the competition between the dollar and the euro—are the root source of transatlantic conflicts. They will inevitably continue to develop and fuel military conflicts around the world.

Despite the attempts to put on a show of harmony, these conflicts dominated the Munich conference. This was particularly clear in relation to the sharply contrasting positions on Iran. While US representatives, assisted by NATO Secretary-General Scheffer, continued to threaten the country in a manner that recalled the run-up to the Iraq war, Schröder pleaded for security guarantees for Iran.

Contrary to all legal principles, Scheffer said Iran had to prove it was not carrying out a nuclear weapons program. It is “not we who have to demonstrate that they are undertaking one,” he declared. “The burden of proof” rests with the accused. He cynically referred to Iraq, where Saddam Hussein had similarly been required to prove that he had no weapons of mass destruction.

Ex-CIA director James Woolsey went a step further. He maintained that there was not “the least doubt” that Iran was conducting a nuclear weapons program.

Schröder agreed with US representatives that Iran had to do without a nuclear weapons program, but argued for a diplomatic approach. “It is necessary to overcome the substantial isolation of Iran,” he said. “Iran will in the long term refrain from a nuclear option only if, along with its economic interests, its legitimate security interests are protected.”



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