

German parliamentary elections:

Chancellor Schröder poses as opponent of war

Ludwig Niethammer
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In similar fashion to the German parliamentary elections of 2002, Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is once again posing as an opponent of American war policy in order to win support for his Social Democratic Party (SPD).

At the SPD's opening meeting of its 2005 election campaign in the city of Hanover on August 5, Schröder spoke out clearly against any military intervention by the US in Iran. Addressing a crowd of about ten thousand, the chancellor ruled out any German participation in military action against Iran should he be re-elected. His comments were in reaction to recent threats by US president George Bush, who had openly spoken of a possible "military option."

To applause, Schröder addressed our "friends in Europe and the US" and made an appeal: "remove the military option from the table. We have learnt that it is utterly ineffective." He was obviously alluding to the disaster of the Iraq war but refrained from addressing the issue openly.

He took up this topic on a number of occasions at further meetings and in newspaper interviews, declaring that he regards "a military option as highly dangerous" and he repeated: "Therefore I can definitely exclude any participation by a government under my leadership."

Three years ago Schröder was able to make political capital from his opposition to the Iraq war and secure a last-minute election victory for the SPD-Green Party coalition, but this time his anti-war stance and attacks on US president Bush have had no effect. Opinion polls reveal that the SPD is still hovering under 30 percent in terms of public support.

This low level of support has nothing to do with any lessening of German public opposition to US military activities. If anything this anti-war tendency is growing stronger. The fact is that many voters now see Schröder's attempts to pose as a peace-loving chancellor as threadbare and cynical. Certainly his arguments are insufficient to quell widespread opposition to the social devastation and mass unemployment (five million) resulting from Schröder's policy of social cuts, Agenda 2010.

The foreign policy of Chancellor Schröder and his foreign affairs minister Joschka Fischer (the Greens) has been anything but pacifist, as both men have frequently stressed in the current

election campaign.

The German government has provided the US significant assistance for the Iraq war and openly supported the occupation of the country, which flies in the face of international law. If Schröder really wanted to oppose American militarism then he would support the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, close US bases in Germany and put an end to all German logistical assistance for the US occupation.

At present all important deliveries of war materiel and logistics for the Iraq war take place via military bases in Germany. At the same time, Germany supports the American military by the large-scale intervention of German troops for the so-called "war against terror" in other countries.

In particular a large contingent of German troops is active in Afghanistan, where the civil war has escalated recently. The army there is not just limited to policing activities. German special forces (KSK) trained in deliberate killing operations are also operating in the Hindu Kush region of the country. Federal Armed Forces Minister Struck has recently warned of the threat of terror attacks in Germany as a possible consequence of German military operations in Afghanistan.

A large German army contingent is also stationed in Kosovo in former Yugoslavia, the scene of the first ever military operation by a postwar German government—initiated by the SPD-Green coalition.

Even with regard to the controversy over the Iranian nuclear program, there are fewer differences between Bush and Schröder than the latter seeks to suggest in his election campaign. Only two months ago, the two men declared their full agreement over the Iran question. Schröder had traveled to Washington at that time in order to campaign for a permanent German seat at the United Nations Security Council and accordingly ingratiated himself with Bush. Since then, German UN ambitions have been frustrated following resistance from Washington and Schröder no longer sees any sense in practicing restraint.

However, on the fundamental questions Bush and Schröder are also in agreement. Both men are fundamentally opposed to Iran possessing any nuclear weapons. Germany, France and

Great Britain want to prevent such a development by diplomatic means and through negotiation with the Iranian government. Bush supports these negotiations in order to increase pressure on Teheran.

As a result the same scenario is emerging as did in the run-up to the Iraq war. At that time the European powers also supported measures employed by Washington to pressure the regime of Saddam Hussein: a trade embargo, the setting up of no-go zones for air travel, as well as a series of UN ultimatums aimed at finally supplying Bush with a pretext for war.

Schröder is not in principle opposed to the US's great-power politics. His main concern, however, is to protect German and European interests in this important region. Thus in one newspaper interview he warned that any escalation of conflicts in the area could threaten oil prices which have already risen by about 50 percent this year, with negative consequences for the German economy.

Characteristically, the chancellor candidate of the opposition Christian Democratic Union (CDU) also warned of the consequences of a military escalation. Angela Merkel, who has sharply criticized Schröder's Iraq war stance, stressed in *Der Stern* magazine that the conflict with Iran must be solved through diplomatic means. "The question of a military intervention does not even arise," she said, and promised to continue negotiations with Iran if she should become chancellor.

Merkel's attitude is primarily dictated by electoral tactical considerations. She is aware of the widespread opposition to Washington's belligerence in the German population. At the end of July she cancelled a visit to Washington after she had been confirmed as the opposition candidate for German elections scheduled in September. At the time she justified the decision by referring to difficulties in scheduling due to the brevity of the election campaign, an obvious pretext. Press photos showed she had sufficient time to visit the opera festivals in Bayreuth and Salzburg instead. She was obviously afraid of losing valuable votes if she was photographed together with Bush.

Her place was taken in Washington by the deputy of the Christian Democratic Union fraction, Wolfgang Schäuble, who had extensive talks with Bush.

Following Schröder's renewed attacks on the US president, Schäuble refrained from any criticism of the American government. A US president can never exclude military options in principle, he declared. Schröder was conducting a "fake debate." Based on his personal discussion with Bush, he declared that the issue of a military intervention in Iran was not on the agenda. In addition, Schäuble reproached Schröder for acting "against his better knowledge, as if the problem was not Teheran but Washington."

The chairman of the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) parliamentary fraction, Wolfgang Gerhardt, who is a possible candidate for the post of foreign minister in a future

coalition of the CDU and the FDP, went one step further than Schröder and declared that if necessary one must reconcile oneself to an Iranian atom bomb. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine, he said that in the event of a conservative coalition victory in September he wanted to obtain a written pledge that Germany would not take part in unilateral actions by individual powers.

He added: "The US has made peace with India and Pakistan which attained their status as nuclear powers by ignoring the nonproliferation treaty. If one accepts such cases then one cannot activate military options against another country which is still involved in negotiations."

There are obviously differences over the future course of foreign policy between the current government and the opposition parties of the CDU/CSU (Christian Social Union) and FDP. But these differences turn exclusively around the issue of how Germany's imperialist interests can best be protected in a time of intensified crisis. The different positions and conflicts are reflected throughout the political spectrum.

So far, the foreign policy of Schröder and Fischer has been based on strengthening the position of Germany against the US by close co-operation with France and Russia and a stabilization of the European Union. Germany's unsuccessful efforts toward a permanent seat in the UN Security Council were also aimed at avoiding any over-dependency on the US. This strategy has unraveled, however, with German foreign policy ambitions largely stalled or frustrated altogether.

The CDU/CSU opposition has criticized Schröder's policies by claiming these entailed too much dependence on Paris and endangered Germany's alliance with the US. But the opposition must also acknowledge that economic conflicts between Europe and the US are intensifying. An open conflict over Iran would have devastating effects on the German economy which relies heavily on countries such as Iran for its energy supplies.

Accordingly it is difficult to identify any uniform policy with regard to foreign affairs on the part of the CDU/CSU, which is likely to head the next government. Chancellor candidate Angela Merkel has, however, made clear that in one important area there will be changes: she opposes the type of strong German-Russian axis favored by Schröder. Instead Merkel favors closer links with Poland in order to increase pressure on Russia.



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