

Munich Security Conference: Imperialists close ranks

Peter Schwarz
8 February 2006

Against the background of the American military quagmire in Iraq and intensified conflicts with Iran, the US and the European powers are closing ranks. This was very apparent at this year's Munich Security Conference, held last weekend in the Bavarian capital.

For more than four decades, the conference has provided an annual forum for high-ranking military officers, cabinet members, politicians, military experts and journalists to discuss military and geo-strategic questions. The conference is dominated by delegates from NATO member-countries, but guests from other countries are also invited.

Just three years ago, the conference was the scene of public disputes between the US secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, and then-German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer of the Green Party over the imminent Iraq war. This time around, transatlantic harmony prevailed. The tone for the proceedings was set by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), who opened the conference.

Merkel avoided any reference to controversial issues, such as the origins of the Iraq war, illegal US “renderings” or the US detention camp in Guantánamo. Instead, she heaped praise on the transatlantic partnership.

In a speech that could have been dictated by the Bush administration, the chancellor declared that the “symmetrical threats of the Cold War have been superseded by a completely new kind of asymmetrical threat.” She went on to cite “the erosion of state structures, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction in the hands of unreliable regimes.”

Merkel continued: “This is a situation we must face up to.... Let me clearly state that in this regard united Germany is prepared to take on responsibility, indeed greater responsibility, beyond NATO's boundaries in the cause of safeguarding freedom, democracy, stability and peace in the world.”

NATO, she stressed to the obvious delight of her American listeners, assumes “a primacy” in this task. “The necessary political consultations” would have to be carried out and “the required measures” taken. In particular, she said, “the situation in the Middle East and Iran” had to be discussed. Saying the necessary “political will” had to be summoned up, she declared that “to be able to take action, we, of course, need the right military capabilities.”

Merkel made clear that her government—a grand coalition of the conservative CDU, the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the

Social Democratic Party (SPD)—had shifted from the stance of its predecessor, a coalition of the SPD and the Green Party, which had maintained that under international law only the United Nations was empowered to make decisions on military action.

She referred directly to the National Security Strategy of the US, which envisages preemptive strikes and has been used to justify the Iraq war. Together with the European Security Strategy and NATO's Strategic Concept, the US policy provides “a suitable foundation on which to conduct more intensive dialogue on the form of our common security agenda,” she said.

Merkel stressed the “remarkable degree” of agreement between the three strategies. It is “fascinating to see that things are moving in the same direction,” she declared.

Press commentaries unanimously assessed Merkel's speech as a shift towards the US. “The attending American politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, were enthusiastic about the German head of government, on whom they base their hopes for pragmatism and reliability,” wrote the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. “Munich 2006 could become the beginning of a new collaboration.”

The weekly *Die Zeit* commented: “Contrary to her predecessor, the chancellor leaves little doubt about where the Federal Republic belongs in the new world order. It is in the West.”

Merkel did not limit herself to general remarks about NATO. With pointed threats against Teheran, she assumed a prominent position in the current campaign of agitation against Iran.

By resuming its nuclear program, she said, Iran has “willfully...and knowingly overstepped the line.” She then indirectly drew a comparison with Germany's Nazi regime. “A president who questions Israel's right to exist, a president who denies the Holocaust cannot expect Germany to show any tolerance on this issue. We have learned the lessons of our past.”

The newspaper *Die Welt* assessed this remark as a qualified threat of war, and wrote: “The conclusion of this line of thinking, which rejects ‘appeasement,’ as Merkel said, would logically be a readiness to intervene militarily.” The newspaper added, “With respect to the Iranian nuclear program, whoever recalls the path followed by Adolf Hitler in the 1930s may be required to turn words into deeds.”

The newspaper concluded: “With Merkel's speech and reply it now appears that Germany has committed itself—close to the side of the US, whose defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, later expressly referred to and raised the military option.”

The *FAZ* came to a similar conclusion: “The clear words used by the chancellor in Munich with regard to Iran and the anti-Israeli outbursts of its president have strengthened the conviction of the Americans that this time round the Germans will be on their side with regard to a robust, not necessarily military action.”

Merkel also made the future German relationship with Russia dependent on the latter’s attitude towards Iran. While the previous government led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) had sought a close relationship with Moscow as a counterweight to Washington, Merkel now declared that Russia’s conduct on the issue of Iran would be the acid test for future relations. “The strategic partnership between Germany and Russia will therefore have to prove itself in the resolution of the conflicts with Iran,” she stressed.

American delegates exerted even more pressure on Russia. The US deputy secretary of state, Robert Zoellick, accused Moscow of seeking to control its neighbors and looking upon them “on basis of a standpoint from the 19th Century.” Republican Senator John McCain went so far as to raise the possibility of a boycott of the next G-8 summit, due to be held this summer in St. Petersburg.

The closing of ranks between the European powers and the US evident at the Munich Security Conference does nothing to lessen the contradictions that were at the heart of differences over the Iraq war three years ago.

Objections to the Iraq war raised, in particular, by Berlin and Paris were directed not at the neo-colonial objectives that lay behind the American invasion. Rather, Germany and France feared for their own imperialist interests in the Gulf region should the US establish a permanent military presence or destabilise the entire region in its haste to secure increasingly scarce energy resources and access to new markets.

Once the war had commenced, both countries acted to ensure the success of the US military. They rendered logistical support, relieved hard-pressed US forces in Afghanistan and—as recent reports make clear—maintained a close collaboration between their respective secret services.

With her shift towards Washington, Merkel is reacting to the US military debacle in Iraq and the increasing discontent of the broad masses throughout the Middle East. Her new course has won the unreserved support of the SPD, which holds the post of foreign minister in Germany’s grand coalition. The French president, Jacques Chirac, has also joined the front against Iran and recently threatened Teheran with nuclear attacks.

So far, it has been primarily reactionary Islamic forces—Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran and Hamas in the Palestinian regions—that have been able to profit from the rising mass discontent. These tendencies represent a wing of the native ruling elite and are neither prepared nor willing to conduct any serious struggle against imperialism. Nevertheless, the great powers regard increasing instability in the Middle East as a threat to their interests and are preparing violent counter-measures.

Their closing of ranks recalls the year 1900, when rival great powers united to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China. The influence of the British Empire had already peaked, and Britain was being pressed from all sides. Russia, Japan and Germany advanced into China in order to secure their own share of control

over this enormous territory. However, in response to a national movement that arose to repel colonial subjugation, the competing imperialists did not hesitate in joining forces to drown the resistance in blood.

It is within this context that one must consider the publication of caricatures of Muhammad by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, subsequently reprinted by newspapers in other European countries. The publication of this material is nothing less than a deliberate provocation aimed at creating the ideological basis for a new imperialist offensive against Iran and other Muslim countries.

After the claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were revealed to be blatant lies and the US-led introduction of “democracy” into the Middle East exposed as crude propaganda, a new military offensive is being planned in the name of the “clash of cultures.”

The right-wing *Jyllands-Posten* has a record of agitation against immigrants and has been instrumental in the political advance of the xenophobic Danish People’s Party. It played a large role in the election victory of the right-wing head of government, Fogh Rasmussen.

The newspaper deliberately published the caricatures in order to provoke a violent response. Reviling the prophet Muhammad is regarded as an offence by millions of Muslims all over the world and it was clear that such a provocation would meet with considerable opposition.

The demonstrations, including acts of violence, are now being used by the media, including a number of left-liberal newspapers, as proof of the intolerance of Islam and the incompatibility of Western and Islamic cultures. In the name of “freedom of speech,” the same media outlets that unreservedly supported the Iraq war and all of the associated attacks on fundamental democratic rights are now banging the war drum against Iran.

A comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* makes clear that this propaganda assisted in the closing of ranks between imperialist powers in Munich. “Islamic anger,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, “led to a demonstrative solidarising of the Western world, which quite rightly feels itself to be under attack. The Munich Security Conference offered the most obvious evidence of this new harmony. The transatlantic security network is busy not just with itself, but is confronted with a new threat and has adjusted its sights.... The threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism has accelerated the trend to a new unanimity.”



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