

“Green” politics and imperialism: The case of Joschka Fischer

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Political consciousness invariably lags far behind the objective development of social reality. This accounts for the persistence of political illusions among the masses in parties and their individual representatives for a considerable time after the basis for the confidence they once inspired has dissipated.

As an example of this gap between illusion and reality, let us consider the fate of the Green movement. In much of Europe and in North America, organizations that describe and define themselves as “Green” are generally believed to be principled opponents of imperialist militarism. The “success” of the Green Party in Germany, whose long-time leader Joschka Fischer rose to the exalted rank of foreign minister, is not infrequently invoked as an example of the potential for Green movements to create an anti-militarist alternative to traditional bourgeois parties that are capable of winning power.

Unfortunately, these international admirers of Green politics tend to be poorly informed about the policies of their German heroes. They would be well advised to pay more attention to the actual evolution of the Green Party in Germany, which has long since abandoned its pacifist rhetoric and become a reliable pillar of imperialist *macht-politik* (power politics).

The most recent example of this transformation—which is the culmination of a reactionary process that has been unfolding within the Green party for more than a decade—is the enthusiastic response of Fischer to the deployment of 7,000 soldiers by the European Union (EU) to Lebanon. His latest essay, which appeared last Friday in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* under the headline “Welcome to reality,” is remarkable both for its content and its tone.

Fischer declares his support for the EU’s largest-ever military deployment, asserting that it serves the strategic interests of Europe. There is not a trace to be found of the Greens’ former stance, which for a long time rejected in principle international military missions, later cloaking their agreement to such operations in altruistic rhetoric about “peace.”

“In Lebanon, Europe must show whether it has the strength to assert its political interests,” writes Fischer. And his contribution continues in the same tone. The Lebanon war “has served as a harsh reminder to the EU that it has ‘strategic interests,’” Fischer maintains, stating more specifically that as well as “energy and economic interests” this means “security interests first and foremost.”

In answer to his own question, “Can the EU emerge as a

stabilising political force in the most dangerous area of conflict within Europe’s immediate geopolitical neighbourhood?” Fischer responds that there is no alternative to a military operation.

The mission will have to “walk a thin and risky line in pursuit of its robust mandate to stabilise the country. Failure will be a constant danger and the military risk will be high.” Europe, Fischer concludes, in view of the risk to its troops, “will be compelled to influence and even proactively bring about strategic changes to the political environment in the entire Middle East.”

This is light-years away from the talk of “peace and democracy” with which the Greens cloaked their agreement to Bundeswehr (German armed forces) missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan, or more recently in the Congo. In these cases, it was a matter of “establishing peace,” “preventing genocide” or “securing democracy.” Now, Fischer speaks of strategic interests and bringing about “strategic changes to the political environment.”

In the current parlance of Washington this means “regime change”—since what else can be understood by “strategic changes to the political environment” if not the installation of a regime more acceptable to the European powers? From the sending of a military force with a “robust mandate,” which defends “European interests,” it is only a small step to the doctrine of preventive war with which the US justified the Iraq war.

Fischer’s description rather exactly matches the real character of the Lebanon operation, which is falsely called a “peace mission.” It is no coincidence that he says the decision to undertake the Lebanon mission means “the EU crossed a military Rubicon.”

If it really were a matter of securing peace, then the UN troops would have to protect the Lebanese population against the Israeli military, which has destroyed vast swathes of Lebanon’s infrastructure, killed over 1,000 civilians and infested the country with highly explosive cluster bombs. However, that is not their mission. Despite the entreaties of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the Israeli government was not even ready to lift the blockade of Lebanon’s air space and coastal waters, which is having devastating economic effects.

The real task of the UN force consists of keeping under control the widespread opposition to the US, Israel and the compliant Arab governments, which 34 days of Israeli bombing could neither intimidate nor smash. Their mission does not stretch to trying to disarm Hezbollah because that “would mean a war with Hezbollah” and according to Fischer that is “a task the UN forces cannot accomplish.” However, the robust mandate is meant to

enable the UN force to suppress any resistance in the population and to support a compliant puppet regime in Beirut.

In the past, such a policy would have been called imperialism. And the largest European military deployment since the establishment of the EU is indeed an expression of the reawakening of an aggressive imperialist foreign policy on the part of Europe.

It has not escaped the notice of those in charge in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Rome that the authority of the US in the Middle East has suffered considerably as a result of the debacle in Iraq and the failure of the Israeli offensive against Hezbollah. In Fischer's words, "The ongoing war in Iraq is gnawing at America's military capabilities and resulted in a crisis of moral and political legitimacy of the US across the Arab/Islamic world."

From this, EU politicians derive their task to secure "stability" and "security" in the Middle East by supplementing or replacing the US in the role of the world's policeman. On the other hand, they see an opportunity to seize the political initiative in the Middle East for the first time in 15 years. Since the first Gulf War in 1991, the US has set the tone in this region; the Europeans were only welcome as the providers of finance and troops.

In view of the crisis of the US policy, it is not only Fischer who sees the possibility of Europe strengthening its own interests in the Middle East. One week ago, the Italian foreign minister Massimo D'Alema spoke in similar terms to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. This former youth functionary of the Italian Communist Party called the military intervention in Lebanon "a great opportunity for Europe, which had never carried a great weight in the Middle East, above all picking up the bill, but being recognized less as a player" in the region.

In May 2000, Fischer, then German foreign minister, delivered a speech at Berlin's Humboldt University that gained much attention. In it, he evoked a European federation that was to be realised by means of the fastest possible extension of the EU, and which "above all for Germany, was of the highest national interest," as well as calling for a fundamental reform of the European institutions. But the attempt outlined by Fischer to unite Europe from above failed because of resistance to the undemocratic and neo-liberal European EU constitution that French and Dutch voters rejected in a referendum.

Fischer regards the present European military intervention in Lebanon as a lever to achieve European unity from above by employing external pressure. Just as in the nineteenth century, when Count Otto von Bismarck used war against Germany's neighbours to secure the rule of the most reactionary political forces over the German Reich, so a common military intervention in Lebanon is supposed to weld Europe together under the hegemony of the most powerful continental countries.

"War and chaos in the Middle East," writes Fischer, "directly affect and upset the security of the EU and all its member states. Therefore, Europe had to act, though that decision was obviously difficult." The crucial question of the next period will be "whether Europe actually has the military and political capabilities, the political staying power, and the common will to act in accordance with its core interests in the Middle East."

An imperialist foreign policy is always accompanied by

reactionary social and domestic policies. This was certainly clear to the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who fought untiringly against the imperialism of Kaiser Wilhelm, against the acquisition of German colonies and the building of a war fleet.

"An aggressive international policy goes hand in hand ... with a reactionary social policy in the state's internal life," she wrote in 1899. Between these exists "an unbreakable logical connection." "Under the regime of Bismarck, the German working class has already experienced to its own detriment this combination of the blood-and-iron politics of militarism ... and the socialist law." Luxemburg drew from this the conclusion: "Those who seek to carry out modern, progressive social policies must oppose with all their might militarism of the land and sea." [1]

This connection exists today. One cannot separate the constant attacks on democratic rights and social gains, which is taking place in all European countries, from an increasingly aggressive foreign policy. The military intervention in Lebanon must be rejected as part of the fundamental opposition to imperialist foreign policy. Moreover, it must also be rejected in order to defend social and political rights at home.

There are further parallels between today and the time of Kaiser Wilhelm on the eve of the First World War, which was characteristically marked by the transition of almost all parties into the imperialist camp. The SPD (Social Democratic Party) resisted the enthusiasm for Germany's new colonies, the growth of the fleet and militarism until it finally capitulated, joining the parliamentary majority and agreeing in August 1914 to the Kaiser's war credits for the First World War.

The transformation of the Greens into defenders of imperialist politics vindicates yet again the Marxist critique of this petty-bourgeois political organization. One hopes that those outside Germany who still harbour illusions in the "anti-imperialist" potential of Green movements reflect on the significance of the German experience and draw the appropriate political conclusions.

[1] Rosa Luxemburg, "The growth of the fleet and trade policy," in *Collected Works*, vol. 1/1, p. 614 (translated from the German).



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