European reaction to Bush's election defeat: increasing militarism

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Satisfaction and relief were the prevailing reactions in Europe to the defeat suffered by the Republicans in the November 7 midterm elections. The relief was felt not only by broad layers of society who despise president George W. Bush because of the Iraq war, but also by a considerable section of the ruling elite who now hope for a change in US foreign policy. After six years of unilateralism on the part of the Bush administration, European leaders now expect to find more readiness in Washington to hear what they have to say.

However, while the jubilation on the part of the population over Bush's rebuff is straightforward and honest, the ruing elite has mixed feelings. They had no affection for the US as the world's policeman, arrogantly ignoring international law and organisations and carrying out a war without their consent. But now that the same power has been weakened, the European ruling classes are also gripped by a sense of anxiety. Who will guarantee order in the future? Who will help repress those forces, who are considered not only by the great power America but also by the European powers as an obstacle to their interests?

In view of the weakening of the America's world position, which has been visible for some time in Iraq, European powers now feel compelled to jump into the breach. They regard this as both an opportunity and a burden. As opportunity insofar as they can intensify the pursuit of their own interests in the Middle East and on the world stage, as burden because they lack both the armies and the political support on the part of their own peoples to compete with the American military apparatus.

This conflicting stance of the European bourgeoisie is expressed in an October 27 comment in the conservative French daily *Le Figaro*, written shortly before the US elections. It deplores the "long list of destabilising viruses" and the "troublesome abscesses of political, religious and ethnic violence" that are spreading across the globe. The main reason for this development, writes *Le Figaro*, is "the United States' loss of deterrent power." The US is the only member of the Security Council with "a credible modern army, capable of being dispatched to any part of the world."

"The problem, the paper concludes, "is that this force no longer really inspires fear.... France cannot welcome the destruction of the United States' deterrent power. The United States is a difficult, sometimes even arrogant ally, but it is an ally, and the only one we have, in order to grant credibility to the resolutions that we jointly adopt in the Security Council."

The Catholic Paris daily *La Croix* arrives at a similar conclusion. It comments, "It is healthy that the American claim to lead the world on its own has received a rebuff. But can one really celebrate with a full heart? Naturally one could now contemplate a role for Europe, NATO, the African Union or the UN. Unfortunately these forces are not ready to meet the challenges."

The conservative German paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is also sceptical. On the one hand, the paper notes, Europe will be called upon to play a larger military role; at the same time, it doubts that there will be much change to US foreign policy.

In a comment on the US elections, the *FAZ* writes, "To a certain extent, the Republicans in the House and Senate have made life easy for the Europeans; because they ideologically and politically took the path of unilateralism, America's partners were left out of the equation. They now hope for a new moderate tone from Washington, but should be prepared for protectionism and new demands. To the extent that America's foreign and security policy assumes 'democratic'

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characteristics, then expectations of its partners also grow."

The content of these comments is unmistakable: In a paradoxical fashion, the recent shift by the American electorate against the Republicans will lead to increased militarism in Europe—i.e., precisely the opposite result to that expected by the European population, who welcomed the election result as a clear rejection of the Iraq war and the type of aggressive militarism embodied by Bush.

This development was already visible with the deployment of European troops to Lebanon. Governments that rejected the Iraq war—France, Germany and Italy (where the former opposition is now in government)—have provided the bulk of the UN force, which has the job of assisting in disarming the Hezbollah movement.

Now there are intensified calls for a stronger European commitment in Iraq. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*,German Federal President Horst Köhler called upon European nations (and also his own government) to intervene more powerfully to achieve stabilisation and reconstruction in Iraq.

In Afghanistan, European NATO units are increasingly replacing American forces in combat missions against insurgents. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* on Monday, NATO General Secretary Jaap de Hoop called for strengthening the troops involved in the fighting in Afghanistan. He was also indirectly calling on the German government to make German troops available for action in the war-torn south of the country. Up until now, German troops have been concentrated in the relatively calm north.

The trend towards increased militarism was confirmed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a keynote address on foreign policy given last Wednesday. She stated that foreign and security policy would become "a central focus of European activity over the coming years." Germany is scheduled to take over the presidency of the European Union next year.

She urgently called upon the divided members of the EU to unify on issues of foreign policy: "To speak with one voice makes Europe strong; to remain divided has the opposite effect." She pleaded for a "comprehensive definition of security" that combines "military crisis response operations" with "civilian efforts aimed at stability and reconstruction."

Merkel placed far more emphasis on the military factor than has been the case up to now. "It is not possible to achieve the stability of this country (Afghanistan) solely with a military presence." she said. But then she quickly added, "However, it is also impossible to achieve it without a military presence." From this, she concluded, arose the necessity for a "combination of development assistance, of the instruments for domestic security, of the building of institutions and of military intervention."

This sounds somehow familiar. The Bush administration and its neo-conservative think tanks also cloaked their campaigns in the Middle East with noble claims of spreading liberation and democracy. What emerged was a brutal war of conquest, which plunged Iraq into misery and chaos.

Now, through their efforts to assume more "responsibility" in the region, European powers are treading the same path as the US, a path that will inevitably drag European nations into the existing and new military conflicts. In her speech, Merkel went to some lengths to stress Germany's binding solidarity with the US. "We must never regard European security and defence policy as something directed against the transatlantic partnership," she said. "That is of extreme importance."

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