

Dispute over US missile plan

German foreign minister warns against return to the Cold War

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The plan by the US government to bypass NATO and establish a missile base in Poland with a related radar system in the Czech Republic, as part of its satellite-based anti-missile defence system NMD (National Missile Defence), has prompted angry responses in Europe. A number of prominent European politicians are now openly warning that the US proposal poses a threat to NATO's future and the danger of a split within the European Union as well.

In the last few days, leading European political figures have made clear that they regard the missile system as a flagrant attempt by the US to drive a wedge between Europe and Russia.

In bilateral discussions that completely bypassed NATO—the organisation that has coordinated security on the European continent since the end of the Second World War—both Poland and the Czech Republic have signalled their agreement with the US proposals for stationing the missile system.

The official US justification for the new missile project is an alleged threat to the US from long-range nuclear missiles fired from the Middle East—i.e., Iran—and/or from North Korea. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made clear that he regards Russia as the primary target for the new missile system. Russia fears being systematically encircled by a series of US military bases. At the same time, it has witnessed two of its former spheres of influence, Afghanistan and Iraq, being invaded by US-led military forces. Following the completion of the new missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, further extensions of the system are envisaged by US planners.

The Ukrainian government has already been approached about the possibility of maintaining a US station, and an additional base is also planned for the Caucasus, possibly in Georgia. Governments in both of these countries came to power with substantial US support—via the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine and the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia. Now these pro-US governments are being asked to pick up the tab and help house the new weapons system on their territory. Putin directly raised the planned missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic in the course of his outspoken criticism of US militarism and unilateralism made in his speech last month at the 43rd Munich Security Conference.

In a piece in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* newspaper last weekend headlined “No to a new arms race in Europe: NATO and the EU cannot allow themselves to be divided—the Cold War is over,” German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party—SPD) delivered a pointed rebuke to the US missile plans. “A missile defence system should be neither a cause of, nor a pretext for, a new arms race,” Steinmeier wrote, posing the question “Are we returning to the period of the confrontation between blocs and accumulation of US and Russian missiles?” He then went on to answer his own question with some vehemence: “I say: the Cold War is over once and for all!”

Steinmeier continued by advising the US to return to the traditional negotiating table at NATO, noting, “The only remaining super power, America, has learnt that military superiority alone can enforce neither peace nor friendship.” Steinmeier then declared that “Europe's security is indivisible” and refuted the claim, first made by former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, that there is an “old and new Europe.”

Steinmeier's comments were preceded on March 11 by even clearer words from former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), who while in power had maintained very close relations with the President Putin and now heads a joint German-Russian project to build a pipeline under the Baltic Sea.

Schröder told the press: “The missile defence system planned by the US and which is to be installed in Eastern Europe is politically extremely dangerous.... It is viewed rightly in Russia and not only there as an attempt to establish an absurd encirclement policy, a policy which is everything but in the interest of Europe.” Schröder continued: “What we need instead is the exact opposite. In our own interest we must align Russia as closely as possible to Europe and European structures.”

Just the day before, to Schröder's comments, French President Jacques Chirac had declared his own concern that the new US missile bases could split Europe. “We should be very careful about encouraging the creation of a new dividing line in Europe,” Chirac said, “or a return of the order of the past.”

Steinmeier's words of warning directed towards the US won support from other leading members of the SPD, as well as from other establishment parties. The chairman of the SPD, Kurt Beck, went even further. While Steinmeier had argued that discussions on any missile system on European territory should be carried out within the framework of NATO, Beck declared that he was opposed in principle to the stationing of any new missile systems in Europe. His stance was supported by the German development minister, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, who described the US plans as “irresponsible.”

Backing for Steinmeier also came from Germany's free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), which has consistently filled the post of foreign minister in postwar German governments. Former FDP foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher told the press, “Decisions of such significance cannot be made in bilateral discussions: they belong in NATO and the EU.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian-Democratic Union—CDU) had raised the issue of the planned US missile bases with the Polish head of government in the course of her two-day visit to Poland at the end of last week, but was unable to get anything more than a vague promise that the Polish government would consult NATO. Prior to the German-Polish summit, the Polish defence minister, Alexander Szczygło, had been explicit about Warsaw's priorities: “Poland's security is based on three

pillars,” he said. “The EU, NATO, and the US, and there is no doubt that the US is the strongest pillar of Poland’s security.”

Having failed to shift opinion in Warsaw, Merkel reacted to her foreign minister’s comments in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* with her own guarded statement about Germany’s transatlantic partner. In a speech to a conference on transatlantic economic cooperation in Berlin on Monday, she noted, “We should always make sure that we discuss everything in a spirit of trust to avoid rifts,” and in a clear reference to the US added, “No one can master the new challenges on their own.”

The differences in emphasis on this issue within the German government reflect long-standing differences on foreign policy between Germany’s conservative parties and the SPD—currently sharing power in a grand coalition. Throughout the postwar period, the CDU and its sister party, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), were the staunchest advocates of a strong transatlantic alliance based on isolating the Soviet Union. For its part, the SPD has always acknowledged the significance of good relations with the US as the basis for the economic and political stability of postwar Germany. At the same time, the party sought at a relatively early stage to establish good working relations with the Eastern Bloc countries as a counterweight to the US, and as the basis for establishing trade and political links with the Soviet Union and its satellites.

There is no doubt that SPD leader Kurt Beck’s tough stance on the US missile bases is partly aimed at appeasing growing opposition inside his own party. After all, having recently backed the dispatch of German Tornado aircraft to Afghanistan, Beck is clearly no pacifist. As chancellor in 2003, Schröder was able to pacify opposition in the SPD to his own government’s pro-business, anti-welfare policies by declaring his opposition to the Iraq war. Now, Beck is also no doubt banking on silencing criticism inside his party of the SPD’s current support for massive attacks on social rights and defence of big business by posing as an opponent of US militarism.

However, there is more at stake. Beck, Steinmeier and others leading German politicians are seriously concerned that aggressive US foreign policy in Europe, the loss of US prestige worldwide following the debacle in Iraq and threats of war directed at Iran (an important trading partner for Germany and a number of other European countries) could explode the relative equilibrium established for Germany between the US to the west and Russia to the east.

The final collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1990-1991 resulted in a sudden and dramatic shift of influence in favour of the US in terms of political and economic influence in Europe. At the same time, the reunification of Germany resulted in a huge boost to Germany’s status in Europe. The end of the Cold War also effectively removed the justification for the NATO alliance itself. In the decades since, Europe and in particular Germany have considerably extended their influence and trade into the eastern half of the continent.

Germany is currently a key trading partner with Russia. Trade between the two countries totalled around US\$40 billion in 2006, and German investments in the Russian economy totalled US\$2 billion in the first nine months of 2006, a 53 percent increase on the previous year. At the same time, Germany, along with many other European countries, is heavily dependent on Russian supplies of oil and gas, which amount to more than 25 percent of Europe’s total.

Most of this oil and gas is transported by pipelines through Belarus and Ukraine. However, in close collaboration with German companies, Russia is also leading a project—chaired by Gerhard Schröder—to build a pipeline under the Baltic Sea as a direct link to Germany.

The new Baltic Sea pipeline has already been a source of considerable conflict between Russia, Poland and Germany. The pipeline will circumvent Poland and deprives it of both transit fees and political influence in European energy policy. The pipeline project has already

been hysterically condemned by the Polish defence minister, who compared the plan to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact. Poland is now focussing on Kazakhstan as an alternative source of oil to bypass Russia and reduce its energy dependency on its much larger neighbour.

Merkel’s trip to Poland last weekend was aimed at building bridges to Germany’s neighbour and overcoming the tensions that have characterised German-Polish relations, in particular since the coming to power of the Kaczynski brothers. The Poland trip was also bound up with her preparations for a meeting with the Russian president this coming weekend at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The fact that this will be the sixth meeting between the two leaders since Merkel took office in November 2005 underscores the significance of German-Russian relations.

As president of both the EU and the leading industrialised nations of the G8, Merkel will have an extensive agenda to discuss with Putin. High on the list, however, will be the issue of guaranteeing Russian energy supplies to the EU and Germany.

At the same time, Putin has been active in pursuing his own foreign policy aimed at exploiting Russia’s natural resources. Following a recent visit to Prime Minister Prodi in Italy, Putin also met last week with Greek government leaders. Putin is seeking to finalise plans for an oil pipeline, which will eventually be able to transport oil from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The pipeline, bypassing the Bosphorous, will be able to directly compete with the US-backed Black Sea-Ceylan pipeline.

The scramble for natural resources—in a Great Game between Europe’s leading players and Russia aimed at increasing political influence and developing new alliances—is accelerating across the continent. The latest US missile plans aimed at dividing Europe and reinforcing American military influence in this strategically crucial and volatile region are reckless and threaten catastrophic consequences for the European population. Already striving to develop their own military capacities in competition with the US, the latest proposal for new weapons systems on European soil will only accelerate the process of militarisation by the European powers at the cost of living standards and social gains.



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