

Leading German politician issues alarm about threat of war with Iran

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With one notable exception, the German media and government circles have largely refrained from making any open comment about the growing threat of a US military attack against Iran.

Two weeks ago, US president George Bush stepped up his rhetoric against Iran and spoke eerily of the danger of a Third World War. A week later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that the administration in Washington had decided to declare Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a proliferator of weapons and its Quds Force a "supporter of terrorism," while Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson revealed new punitive economic sanctions against Tehran.

Both Bush's comments and the latest measures by Washington make a US military confrontation with Iran increasingly inevitable, yet there has been no official reaction from the German government. Reactions to the threat of war have been muted in the German press and have largely concentrated on repeating points drawn from an interview with one leading politician, Ruprecht Polenz, published in the Sunday edition of the *Tagesspiegel*.

Ruprecht Polenz is chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Bundestag, the German parliament, and a leading member of the ruling conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). While couched in the diplomatic tones of a politician with years of experience in foreign policy, Polenz's full-page interview in the Berlin-based *Tagesspiegel* was explicit in its criticism of the Bush government's policy toward Iran.

Polenz begins his interview by declaring, "The crisis regarding the Iranian nuclear programme is the conflict with the greatest potential for danger, not only for security and stability in the region of the Near and Middle East, but for the whole world."

When asked to comment on the American president's recent reference to "World War III" in connection with Iran, Polenz openly took Bush to task: "I take absolutely no stock of such rhetorical escalations. Responsible politicians should also indicate in their language that they are looking for a solution. With regard to the nuclear conflict with Iran, that can only take place through negotiations."

Polenz was asked his opinion about press reports indicating that Washington may plan to blame Iran for the deaths of American soldiers in Iraq to provide a concrete pretext for going to war. The CDU politician responded by warning the US against any attempt to conduct military operations on Iranian territory, even in "so-called surgical operations" against the Revolutionary Guards.

Polenz was then posed the question, "What would be the

consequences of US military strikes against Iran?" He replied, "That would lead to an uncontrollable chain reaction and dramatically escalate the violence. Therefore, one must energetically warn against such deliberations."

Polenz then went on to list some of the possible consequences of a military attack on Iran. According to Polenz, Iran could respond to an US attack with "asymmetrical retaliatory strikes," which, in addition to military resistance inside Iran, would include the mobilisation of supporters for acts of violence in other countries, particularly in Israel or in Iraq against American troops. In addition, "German soldiers and development aid could be directly threatened, if Iran co-operates with terrorists in Afghanistan."

Polenz then criticised US economic sanctions against Iran, which he said lacked the legitimacy of the United Nations. While German business and banking interests in Iran are increasingly jeopardised by such sanctions, the CDU leader pointed out that US brand names such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and Halliburton continue to conduct business with Tehran.

At the end of the interview, the *Tagesspiegel* reporter asked: "Mr. Polenz, it is unusual for a union [CDU] politician with such an important post to publicly take such a critical stance in regard to the US government. What do you hope to achieve?"

In response, Polenz made clear that his aim was to encourage politicians in the US to oppose Bush's plans for war. "I want to support politicians in the US who reject an escalation as I do. And I want to encourage more direct contacts between the Americans and Iranians."

Polenz's blunt interview represents the most outspoken criticism of the war plans of the Bush administration to be made by a leading German politician since the coming to power of the grand coalition government—CDU-Social Democratic Party (SDP)-Christian Social Union—in 2005.

It is extremely unlikely that a politician like Polenz, who has years of experience on foreign policy issues but no cabinet post, would give such an interview on his own initiative. He enjoys close relations with the German chancellor, Angela Merkel (also CDU), and it is likely, if not certain, that the interview was officially sanctioned by leading figures in the German government. His interview demonstrates that the government is conscious of the disastrous economic and political repercussions for its interests that would result from a US assault on Iran.

While Polenz was explicit in elaborating his fears of an international conflagration resulting from any military assault on

Iran, Chancellor Merkel herself has refrained from making any public pronouncement on the danger of war during the past few days.

The reticence on the part of the German government to criticise openly the Bush's administration's plans for Iran are mirrored by the lack of coverage of the theme in the German press and media. Taken together, Polenz's interview and the general lack of official response by the German government and media indicate that while differences are growing across the Atlantic, and German ruling circles are deeply alarmed at the prospect of a US assault on Iran, the grand coalition in Berlin is not prepared to jeopardise its long-standing relations with America.

How is this to be explained?

First, Germany is intent on pursuing its policy of maintaining an equilibrium between East and West in terms of its foreign policy.

Towards the West, it seeks to maintain good working relations with the US, which was a principal political prop throughout Germany's postwar history and continues to be an important trading partner. The Merkel government came to power in 2005 determined to close the gap with Washington that had opened up following the rejection of the Iraq war by her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder of the SPD.

Towards the East, Berlin accepts the need to retain satisfactory relations with Russia, which is an important supplier of energy. At the same time, the increasingly aggressive opposition to the US in recent months by Russia's Vladimir Putin, who a week ago described Bush's plans for Iran as similar to "running around like a madman with a razor blade," has created additional headaches for the German foreign ministry. Growing antagonisms between the US and Russia, including the provocative new American defence system situated in eastern European countries, and Russian withdrawal from international treaties, have immediate repercussions for Germany in its attempt to maintain a middle ground.

The second reason for the backhanded and extremely muted criticism of Washington by German government circles is the fear that any form of open debate on the issue of US military strategy could lead to a revival of a broad antiwar movement in Germany. German politicians from all political parties, including the Greens, are desperate to press ahead with the country's military mission in Afghanistan—a military intervention that is profoundly unpopular with the German public. In his *Tagesspiegel* interview, Ruprecht Polenz was also forced to concede that a large majority of the German population opposed such interventions.

A US attack on Iran would undoubtedly provoke massive antiwar sentiment in Germany. At the same time, it would have the potential to turn the Afghanistan conflict into a much larger conflagration across broad regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. This helps explain why the possibility of US strikes against Iran is currently being handled with kid gloves by the German government and press.

In his attempt to portray the SPD as an opponent of militarism, the issue of military force against Iran was also briefly raised by the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) at the party's national conference held in Hamburg last weekend.

Steinmeier's speech at the conference was notable for the veiled

criticism he made of Chancellor Merkel on a number of foreign policy issues, including criticism of her support for the US war against Iraq in 2003 and a call for her to make an official trip to Afghanistan to bolster the sagging effort of the German army there.

In his comments on Iran in Hamburg, however, Steinmeier closed ranks with the chancellor and put forward the official line of the German government. "Military adventures are no contribution to a solution," nuclear weapons must not end up "in the hands of people who deny the Holocaust," and Germany favours a diplomatic solution in collaboration with the US, China and Russia.

Germany also has material interests at stake in Iran and the surrounding region—interests that are under threat from US sanctions and would likely be wiped out by a war. Germany, Italy and France are Iran's top three trading partners, with total exports worth US\$9,802 million in 2006.

Much of Iran's state-controlled industry is dependent on German engineering exports, 65 percent of which in 2005 came with government-backed export credit guarantees, and Germany is actively engaged in bidding for an interest in the planned Nabucco pipeline, which would make Iran a key energy partner with the European Union and Germany.

Nevertheless, the spineless response in Berlin makes clear that the German government will either do nothing to oppose, or could even side with the US in the event of a military strike against Iran. If it comes to a war, it will continue to regard its alliance with Washington as the best guarantee for its own imperialist interests in the region—even if the end result is a major step towards the Third World War predicted by Bush.

The dilemma for the establishment in Germany is that it is placing its hopes for a change of course in Washington on Bush's political accomplices. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently commented: "Berlin should also be helping those forces in Washington's unpopular government who want to act tough but still peacefully. Those who don't support sanctions risk giving Vice President Dick Cheney the upper hand in the White House. If Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates...want to win George W. Bush's ear they now need help from afar."

In his *Tagesspiegel* interview, Polenz makes a similarly pathetic appeal to US politicians, although all the evidence from the Bush presidency is that appeals for moderation on the part of his cohorts and fellow war conspirators have fallen on deaf ears.



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