

Germany: Stunned silence following the war in Georgia

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The geopolitical situation in Europe has changed fundamentally over the past two weeks. The assault launched by Georgia on the breakaway province of South Ossetia has dramatically intensified the conflict between the two largest nuclear powers—the US and Russia. At the same time, the stationing of American missiles in Poland has set in motion a drive towards rearmament with no precedent since the end of the Cold War—with incalculable consequences.

Sixty-three years after the end of a world war that claimed 60 million victims, Europe has once again become the focus of a struggle between the great powers. The reaction of the German government, political parties and most of the media, however, is to act as if nothing has changed. Their efforts to play down what has taken place stand in stark contrast to the significance of these events.

When the US government, on the basis of a NATO resolution, stationed Pershing II missiles in West Germany 25 years ago, the Green Party and sections of the Social Democratic Party called for protests. Hundreds of thousands followed their call and took part in demonstrations and protests, including the blockading of US army bases.

The US military agreement with Poland is even more ominous. In a guest editorial for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a veteran of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and architect of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik (turn towards the Eastern Bloc countries), 86-year-old Egon Bahr, warned of a new arms race "which will not be limited to Poland, Russia and America." Bahr declared, "Every effort is justified to ensure that a policy of confrontation does not replace that of cooperation, to which we owe 18 years of stability."

But in the headquarters of German political parties, silence reigns. Nearly one week after the signing of the missile agreement in Warsaw, the federal office of the Green Party has still issued no statement. And on the war in Georgia, the two chairpersons of the Greens, Claudia Roth and Reinhard Bütikofer, published just 10 lines in which they sought to achieve a balance by condemning all sides.

"We call upon all sides to immediately terminate the intolerable violence," they wrote, "agree a ceasefire and seek a peaceful solution.... The forcible conquest of South Ossetia by Georgia is just as unacceptable as the invasion of Russian troops on the side of separatists in South Ossetia."

However, the connection between the two events is obvious. Moreover, negotiations over the stationing of the American anti-missile defence system in Poland had dragged on for over one-and-a-half years. Following the takeover of government by current Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in November 2007, a deal looked remote. Contrary to his predecessor, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Tusk sought to establish good relations with Germany and France, which have

opposed the missile system in order to avoid tensions with Russia. For the same reason, Germany and France opposed the demand by the US at the April NATO summit in Bucharest for the speedy admission of Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO.

After the war in Georgia, one event rapidly followed the other. On the basis of a wave of anti-Russian propaganda, Poland not only consented to the missile deal but also agreed to a bilateral defence pact with the US. The country will also receive Patriot missiles and additional funding for its armed forces. Pressure for the rapid admission of Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO has also increased considerably since the conflict in Georgia.

There is barely a German politician or journalist, however, who has dared to raise these issues. Instead, the vast majority prefer to follow the line of American propaganda and accuse Russia of being the principal aggressor, or simply treat the whole affair as a regrettable misunderstanding in need of a good mediator.

One of the few exceptions is the former chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), who gave an interview to the magazine *Der Spiegel* one week ago in which he clearly identified the role of the US in the outbreak of the war. When asked, "Do you believe that the American military advisors stationed in Tbilisi encouraged Georgia to launch its attack?," Schröder answered, "I wouldn't go that far. But everyone knows that these US military advisors in Georgia exist—a deployment that I've never considered particularly intelligent. And it would have been strange if these experts had not had any information. Either they were extremely unprofessional or they were truly fooled, which is hard to imagine."

Schröder's statements led to an immediate reply from German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (SPD), in which the latter demonstratively distanced himself from his longstanding party colleague.

The restrained reaction to the stationing of the US anti-missile defence system in Poland is particularly remarkable in light of the vigorous debate that took place over a year ago on precisely this issue. In March of last year, the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* ran a headline, "Missile Defence—Urgent Protest Needed." The article dealt with a statement by the chairman of the SPD, Kurt Beck, who clearly expressed his opposition to the stationing of the missile system.

Around the same time, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ran a guest column by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier under the heading: "US Missile System—Steinmeier Warns the US of a New Arms Race." In the commentary, published on the eve of a trip to the US, the foreign minister directly warned against establishing such a missile system, saying it threatened to split Europe. It is wrong "to fall back into the cold war way of thinking," Steinmeier admonished at the time.

Now, under conditions where the missile system has been agreed on and the American administration has been able to impose its line with remarkable speed in the face of European doubts, Berlin has nothing to say. Why? What is the source of this cowardice and refusal to oppose Washington's aggressive and provocative policy?

Only a few months ago, commemorative ceremonies were held to mark 75 years since the coming to power of the Nazis. Speaker after speaker declared the need, should Europe again confront such an arrogant and expansionist government, to "nip the danger in the bud!"

Why, then, is nobody in Berlin prepared to call things by their right name, reject the stationing of weapon systems clearly aimed against Russia, and make clear that Europe is not prepared to serve as the theatre for another world war?

In order to understand the silence, it is necessary to look more closely at recent events.

Since the reunification of Germany nearly 20 years ago, the nation's foreign policy has been aimed at shaking off US domination and asserting its own interests as an imperialist power—or, according to the official jargon, as a "European central power."

During the decades of the Cold War, Germany accepted the supremacy of Washington as inevitable and built up its international economic influence in the shadow of the US. However, after reunification, the federal government, under the leadership of Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), seized the initiative to complete the transformation of the European Economic Community into the European Union.

The European domestic market created in January 1993 was to be supplemented by a common currency and a common policy in numerous areas, including foreign and security policy. As the leading economic power in Europe, Germany believed it would be able to predominate in the affairs of the European Union.

Germany used the collapse of the Soviet Union to develop its economic and political influence in the Eastern Bloc and the former Soviet republics. The Eastern Bloc countries were integrated into the European Union, and economic relations were developed with the Caucasus region in close cooperation with the EU.

Germany pursued its own energy and geo-strategic interests, and sought to revive its previous traditions of great power politics in the region. The first drilling rigs in Azerbaijan had been established at the end of the nineteenth century by Siemens and other German companies, and Hitler's armies had tried to take over the oil reserves in the Caspian region.

In many regions, German interests largely overlap with those of the US: in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. In these areas, Germany has emerged as an ally—and sometimes rival—of the US.

But unlike the US, which is seeking to encircle and isolate Russia, Germany has striven to maintain good relations with Moscow. It has extensive economic relations with Russia and depends to a large degree on imports of Russian gas and oil.

Moreover, any conflict between the nuclear powers Russia and America would inevitably force Germany and Europe back into military dependence on the US. Great Britain and France are the only European powers with their own—relatively small—nuclear arsenals. Any conflict with Russia also threatens to split the EU, due to the intense anti-Russian attitude adopted by many former Eastern Bloc countries.

The German government therefore has carefully sought to maintain good relations with both Moscow and Washington. The American

encirclement of Russia has met with increasing opposition in Berlin. The German government tried to prevent the stationing of the American anti-missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, and has sought to delay NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

Now, within the space of a few days, the US, in cooperation with Georgia, Poland and Ukraine, has effectively torpedoed this critical area of German foreign policy. Egon Bahr speaks of a "setback for Europe."

"The aim, which has been proclaimed for 50 years, of speaking with one voice, has been postponed until some unknown date in the future," Bahr wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In the event of a conflict between the US and Russia, the German ruling class is unsure how it should align itself. A break with Moscow would have devastating economic and political consequences, as would any open conflict with Washington. Therefore, it reacts by playing down the consequences of the conflict and appealing for reconciliation.

Typical in this respect is an August 23 comment by the *Spiegel* editor, Hans Jürgen Schlamp, on German radio. It ends with the words: "Dangerous times. Particularly for Europe, which finds itself once again in the geopolitical centre of a dispute which is being fueled by others. For them it may be tolerable. They are far away, embedded in their own hemispheres. Europe lies between them, is a neighbour to both, needs both, politically, economically—and not just because of its almost complete dependence on energy imports from all parts of the world! Therefore, Europe must de-escalate, must restore links where they have been broken.... The calming down of the Amis, the Russians, one's own hotheads—lies, in my opinion, in the interest of the Europeans."

The surprise and shock perceptible in recent days in the German chancellery and party headquarters will not last long. Despite increasing transatlantic tensions, the initial reaction by leading politicians is to align with the most powerful imperialist power. It will not take long until the demand is raised for Germany to intensify its military rearmament in order to be able to intervene on behalf of its own imperialist interests.

The events of the past few days have made absolutely clear that the conflicts between the great powers cannot be solved peacefully. German policy, which had even occasionally swallowed its own propaganda about "overcoming imperialist politics" and a "peaceful organisation of international relations," has been suddenly brought up against reality. All of the unresolved problems that in the past century led to two world wars have re-emerged and are increasingly determining German policy.



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