Vice President Biden in Munich signals continuation of US aggression

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At the centre of this weekend's 45th Munich Security Conference was the speech given by the new US Vice President Joe Biden on Saturday. His speech had been keenly anticipated by the assembled audience of 300 leading politicians and state officials, including 13 heads of government and state and 50 ministers. They were eager to hear of the new content of US foreign policy under President Barack Obama and evinced a desire for the revival of transatlantic collaboration.

In his speech to the conference, Biden adopted a more conciliatory tone and spoke at length about the need for partnership and mutual trust. After eight years of unilateral action on the part of the Bush presidency, Biden knew this is what his audience wanted to hear.

In terms of content, however, there was little indication of any change from the core polices pursued by the Bush administration. Quite the opposite—his "charm offensive" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*)—was bound up with an appeal for the Europeans to ally themselves even more closely with the US, while at the same time, taking on more responsibility for supporting Washington's interventions abroad.

In the speech that he gave last summer in Berlin, the Democratic presidential candidate Obama had already called on European countries to throw aside their "pacifist misgivings" and send more troops to Afghanistan.

At the beginning of his speech in Munich, the US vice president announced a new era of collaboration between Washington and the world's other states. "I come to Europe on behalf of a new administration...that's determined to set a new tone not only in Washington but in America's relations around the world", he said. This new tone, he continued, is not a "luxury" but rather an "absolute necessity" in order to tackle joint challenges on the basis of a strong partnership.

In light of the huge problems confronting them, the world's states have a responsibility to their citizens to "put aside the petty and political notions—to reject the zero sum mentalities and rigid ideologies and to listen and to learn from one another".

While many European news outlets praised Biden's words, a number of more thoughtful commentaries pointed out that in fact the vice president offered little in the way of change in the content of US foreign policy. In its on-line edition on Saturday, for example, the *New York Times* noted that the American vice president stressed that his government does not recognize the conception of a "Russian sphere of influence". In other words, the government that declares it has the right to regard the entire planet as its sphere of influence and is prepared to pursue its interests through force of arms in the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Caspian Basin, is not prepared to countenance other countries having any "sphere of influence" at all.

Biden emphasized: "We will not agree with Russia in everything. For example the US will not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states". On this issue, Biden declared his support for Georgia. At the same time, when questioned by a journalist as to whether his government was keen to see Georgia enter NATO, Biden answered that that was an issue for the Georgian government itself to decide, thereby making clear that the Obama administration may be less insistent on granting NATO membership for the country, while still reserving its right to carry out such a provocative action.

With regard to the issue of the controversial missile system that the US wants to install in Eastern Europe, Biden remained vague but insisted his government wanted to continue to develop the system when it was technically feasible and not too expensive.

On the issue of Iran, Biden maintained a hard-line course. Unlike Bush, Biden stated that the Obama administration was prepared to negotiate with Teheran; however he linked such negotiations with America's well-known ultimatum. Those holding power in Iran have the following choice, he said: "Continue down the current course, and there will be continued pressure and isolation; abandon the illicit nuclear program and your support for terrorism, and there will be meaningful incentives". His comments were immediately condemned by members of the Iranian delegation at the conference, who could detect no change in the US stance.

In his remarks on the Middle East conflict, Biden made no reference to the Israeli massacre in the Gaza Strip and thereby continued the policy of tacit support for the mass murder expressed earlier by Obama himself. In light of the latest Israeli terror against the Palestinians, Biden's call for a two-state solution in the region was utterly cynical. At the same time,

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Biden stressed that any reconstruction effort in Gaza should be subordinated to an effort to strengthen the Palestinian Authority at the expense of Hamas.

Biden's repeated calls for collaboration were greeted almost euphorically by conference participants, who preferred to ignore the actions already taken by the Obama government on the international stage.

Without consulting any of its allies the new US government has undertaken vigorous attacks against China, linked its economic stimulus programme with protectionist measures and begun the process of doubling its troops in Afghanistan in preparation for a new military intervention in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, Biden arrogantly demanded that "the allies" not only contribute their own ideas, but also rethink their policies..."including your readiness to use violence when all other measures fail". A new concept for the war in Afghanistan demands an extensive strategy that draws together the civil and military capabilities of all partners to achieve solutions for which all bear responsibility. In order to prevent the border region of Pakistan from becoming a safe haven for extremists, Pakistan must be included in the strategic planning, Biden said.

At the conference, NATO General Secretary Jaap de Hoop Scheffer also demanded more involvement on the part of European powers in the alliance. The new US government expected not just good advice, but more equitable burden sharing. The transatlantic alliance was based on mutual collaboration and was not just a "two-track road".

The general secretary referred in particular to the intervention in Afghanistan, which is a top priority for NATO. He was concerned that the US was planning to increase its involvement in Afghanistan, while "other countries have already ruled out doing more". This was not good for the alliance, he said, and would inevitably lead to a reduction of Europe's influence in Washington. In talks held last Friday, the new US special advisor in Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, had already appealed to German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier for increased German involvement in Afghanistan.

Despite the diplomatic overtures employed by the new US vice president, this year's Munich Security Conference took place under conditions of growing tensions developing in various regions around the world.

Just a few days before the conference, the government in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan announced plans to close a strategic US military base in the country. The US base situated close to the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek is of crucial importance for supplying the US-led occupation in Afghanistan. According to media reports, Russia had applied pressure for the closure of the base, promising Kyrgyzstan in return credits and investments totalling more than two billion dollars.

Biden's comments that his government would never recognize and accept a "Russian sphere of influence" was a response to this development and contained a direct threat to Moscow. In light of the economic and financial crisis, together with a growing series of military setbacks in Afghanistan, the Obama government is under enormous pressure. However, weakened governments often respond with drastic and unexpected measures. In this respect, the current diplomatic offensive launched by Washington could soon be revealed as the cover for new and violent actions.

European governments are reacting to Washington's weakened position with a mixture of undisguised relief and fear. Leading European politicians are stressing that US dominance in world politics has ended, and Europe must now play a greater role.

In this connection, former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) published an article in the current edition of *Spiegel* headlined "On the future of the German deployment in Afghanistan". In the article, Schröder stresses that with its deployment in Afghanistan as part of NATO, Germany has not only carried out its obligations, but has also won rights. Schröder declares that the intervention by the German army in Afghanistan is an "expression of the complete sovereignty of Germany with regard to foreign and security policy". He points out that the security situation has clearly worsened in Afghanistan during the past three years and blames Washington's war policy.

The problems in Afghanistan, according to Schröder, can only be resolved in connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation in Iraq and the dispute over the Iranian nuclear programme. "None of the conflicts can be considered in isolation", he writes. In order to arrive at a solution, a regional dialogue is necessary, which would include countries like Syria and Iran.

In other words, in return for increased participation of the German army in Afghanistan, Schröder is demanding an increased role for German imperialism in the Middle East and Iran. As chairman of the pipeline consortium that plans to supply huge amounts of energy from Russia to Europe, Schröder has long appealed for a new improved relationship with Russia. On all of these issues Schröder is warning the ruling elite that any concessions to the US regarding increased deployments in Afghanistan can only be struck on the basis of demanding a "new deal" for Europe—and Germany in particular—on a host of other pressing international issues.

Behind the mutual backslapping and diplomatic niceties in Munich, conflicts between the major powers are growing rapidly.

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