The resignation of Guido Westerwelle as Free Democratic Party chairman and German vice chancellor

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On March 3, just one week after his party suffered a massive loss of votes in state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, Guido Westerwelle declared his resignation as chairman of the Free Democratic Party (FDP). One day later he also resigned his post as German vice chancellor.

The free-market Free Democratic Party is currently the junior partner in a federal coalition with the conservative Union parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU).

Westerwelle was responding to the massive pressure exerted on him in recent days. He has been blamed for the dramatic loss of votes for the FDP in the recent state elections, which lost half its vote in Saxony-Anhalt, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. Only in Baden-Württemberg was the party able to make it over the five percent hurdle and re-enter the state parliament.

At a very brief press conference on Sunday, Westerwelle declared that his choice to resign had been a hard step for him to take. It was “the right decision”, however, and allowed him to concentrate on his government post as foreign minister. At the same time there are many indications that his days as foreign minister may also be numbered. Westerwelle is under intense pressure, in particular due to his abstention in the UN Security Council vote for military action against Libya.

Both the loss of votes in the elections and the debate over Germany’s foreign policy require closer examination.

In the general election in autumn 2009, the FDP won 14.6 percent of the vote—its best result ever. The party received a considerable number of tactical votes from Union supporters who wanted to see an end to the grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and CDU, fearing that the latter coalition would not carry out what they regarded as necessary attacks on the working class in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and bank bailout.

Under Westerwelle, however, the FDP rapidly lost support, dropping under the five-percent marker. His blatant policy of political patronage, such as reducing VAT for hoteliers, and his attacks on Hartz IV welfare recipients—he arrogantly accused the latter of “late-Roman decadence”—provoked broad opposition to the government before it had begun with its attacks in earnest.

Westerwelle’s high-handed and arrogant manner is closely bound up with the radical free-market positions represented by the FDP. Known in the 1990s as the “party of the better-off”, the FDP has sought to represent the interests of the financial aristocracy, which has ruthlessly defended its privileges at the expense of the vast majority of the population.

Westerwelle began his political career in the early 1980s in a period when the FDP switched from a coalition with the Social Democrats to a coalition with the right-wing Union parties. FDP grandee Otto Graf Lambsdorff, at the time federal economics minister, called for a “spiritual and moral revolution” directed towards establishing a performance-oriented market economy with limits to be placed on the trade unions.

In the 1990s, Westerwelle expanded his sphere of influence and became the spokesman of a class of social climbers, whom he once described as a “modern, mobile, flexible layer of the young and successful”. In the booming “New Economy” at that time this layer were the beneficiaries of the stock market boom and demanded the reduction of state spending and welfare benefits in favour of the market economy and maximum profits. In its free-market program, the FDP called for tax cuts for the rich and professionals assumed mantra-like status.

Following more than a decade in opposition, the return of the FDP to government in the fall of 2009 was enthusiastically greeted by German business federations. In the company boardrooms, the Merkel-Westerwelle coalition was celebrated as the best type of government possible. The ruling elite was determined to use the crisis to dismantle all existing social programs and impose drastic cuts in social spending.

However, the glorification of the market economy and the constant demands for tax cuts for the rich, under conditions where welfare benefits were under continual attack, met with increasing resistance from the vast majority of working people. The FDP came under increasing pressure. While the financial aristocracy demanded the strict enforcement of their demands, the FDP suffered heavily at the polls.

Westerwelle’s attempt to retain his post as foreign minister by resigning as head of the FDP could quickly backfire. Demands for him to quit his post as foreign minister are growing louder—primarily due to the German abstention on the Libya-resolution in the UN Security Council, a policy for which Westerwelle bears responsibility.

Criticism of the German abstention has increase in recent days and has filled editorial comments in the media. Alongside the SPD and Greens, numerous representatives from the government camp have lined up to attack Westerwelle.

On Monday afternoon, former Interior Minister Gerhart Baum (FDP) called upon Westerwelle to resign as foreign minister. “A credible new start for the FDP is only possible without Westerwelle”, he told Spiegel Online. It is “difficult to explain to people that someone is resigning from party leadership because the party no longer wants him, but he continues to represent the country abroad”. Westerwelle had not been convincing in his role as foreign minister and, in particular, his abstention on the UN Security Council had been a serious mistake, Baum told Spiegel Online.

Initially Westerwelle received some support for his stance. In addition to Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière (both CDU) and former Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also publicly supported his decision to abstain. The military intervention in Libya was regarded by

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leading German business and foreign policy circles as a unilateral French initiative and an attack on Germany's extensive interests in the region.

Two years ago the pro-government think tank "Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik" (SWP) published a study entitled "German Policy in the Near and Middle East, and North Africa", dealing with the growth of German interests in the region. Given the country's dependence on Russian natural gas and rising demand, the German government is "explicitly" seeking to purchase greater quantities of natural gas from North Africa, the study reports. Oil and gas supplies from the Maghreb in particular, are of increasing importance for Germany's energy supply. "Libya today is Germany's fourth most important oil supplier. Algeria is in eighth place".

But Germany has met with fierce competition, notes the report. The author of the study, Isabelle Werenfels, writes that international competition for deals with the larger North African states has intensified, particularly in the energy and security sectors. Russia was once again "a key player" in the region and the Maghreb countries were also being courted "by new international players like China and India". The Russian energy giant Gazprom was striving to gain a virtual monopoly in the Libyan gas sector—a development regarded with concern by Germany.

Nevertheless, the report identifies France as the main rival of Germany. The proposal for a Mediterranean Union was launched by Paris to safeguard and expand French influence in the region and was to have "negative consequences, particularly for German economic policy".

The study concludes that Germany needs to build up its initiative in the region, while preserving "its distance from authoritarian regimes" and focusing on "political reform". In this regard, the report regards Germany to have advantages over France, which has close ties with the corrupt ruling cliques in the region. "So far the Libyan leader Gaddafi has not pitched his tent in front of the chancellery, and so far, Germany—unlike France—has not praised Tunisia for its (nonexistent) efforts at democratisation", the study concludes.

France's hasty recognition of the Libyan National Transitional Council and its insistence on military intervention were then interpreted in Berlin as an attempt by the French president to retake the initiative at Germany's expense. This is why Westerwelle abstained in the Security Council vote on the war resolution, together with Russia and China.

According to an online report by China Radio International (CRI), Westerwelle went even further. During a visit to China, Westerwelle appeared before the press last Friday together with his Chinese counterpart and spoke out against a military solution to the Libya crisis. According to CRI "the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle, spoke out on Friday for a political solution to the question of Libya. At their joint press conference in Beijing, Yang Jiechi declared that China was concerned about the civilian victims resulting from a military escalation. Westerwelle was also convinced that the Libya issue can only be resolved politically and not militarily".

In Berlin, however, political circles quickly concluded that Westerwelle's attempt to defy France, Great Britain and the United States in the Security Council was a major mistake. The danger of being isolated from its main Western allies and forced into an involuntary alliance with Russia weighed more powerfully for most foreign policy experts than Germany's tactical differences with France.

The initial criticism of Westerwelle was directed at Germany's failure to participate in a "humanitarian" war. This criticism came from the ranks of the Greens and sections of the SPD and the CDU, with former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) accusing Westerwelle of "ducking" at the decisive moment.

The issue of loyalty to the Western alliance soon assumed centre stage. Writing in Spiegel Online last week, Ralf Neukirch denounced the government's abstention in the UN Security Council which, he declared, rendered null and void a bipartisan consensus in foreign policy. "Until now, Germany had always lined up alongside America and France. It was not always easy. Sometimes, as was the case prior to the Iraq war, it was impossible. Then the Federal Republic had to choose between one of its two main partners. In no case, however, was the dominant credo that it could simultaneously oppose both. The government has now departed from this basic tenet of German policy".

Similar comments appeared in numerous other publications. Most took the view that consent on Germany's part in the Security Council would not automatically have meant its participation in the war. "Germany should have raised its quite understandable concerns while still siding with the West", Neukirch wrote.

Whether Foreign Minister Westerwelle remains or not is in fact very much a secondary question. The dilemma that led him to abstain in the Security Council and which has haunted German foreign policy since the founding of the country 140 years ago still remains. Boxed into the narrow European nation-state system, German capitalism has always sought access to raw materials, energy resources and markets. In so doing it has inevitably come into conflict with its neighbours.

Otto von Bismarck, still regarded as a role model by many German foreign policy experts, was, as chancellor of the Reich, the first to attempt to play off the great European powers against one another based on an elaborate system of alliances, thereby preventing the formation of a united front against Germany. Following the emergence of Germany as a colonial and world power between 1890-1914, however, the Bismarckian system of alliances collapsed. The resulting contradictions between rival imperialist powers finally erupted in the mass slaughter of the First and Second World Wars, with the initiative stemming from Germany in both wars.

In the post-war decades, the German economy revived. Ties to the West, the NATO alliance and the European Union became foundation stones of German foreign policy. Two decades after German reunification, however, the international economic crisis, the decline of the US and the rise of China, has reopened the Pandora's box of German foreign policy orientation. Germany's dependence on Russian energy as well as its increased trade with the so-called BRIC countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China] has rapidly developed its own momentum and undermined traditional relations in recent decades.

The tone of communications between Paris and Berlin is more and more aggressive. No one should confuse the German abstention in the Security Council with pacifism. The commencement of withdrawal from the Western alliance is the first step towards greater military autonomy. The current foreign policy crisis is a foretaste of the return of German nationalism and militarism.

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