

The return of the “German question”

Peter Schwarz
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“The German question is back,” the *New York Times* wrote early last week, meaning by this the question of how Germany can be kept under control and prevented from dominating Europe and destroying it as in World War II. Over the course of the week, numerous articles appeared in the French, Italian, British and American press accusing the German government of seeking to dominate Europe and subject it to Berlin’s discipline.

The conservative French newspaper *Le Figaro* wrote that an “anti-German zone of turbulence” is sweeping over France. It continued: “A part of the French political class, ranging from the sovereignists in the Left Front, through the Socialists, to members of the [Gaullist] Republican party, is attacking Germany for its attitude toward the European Union.”

Left and right were furiously attacking the “German diktat,” the newspaper wrote. *Le Figaro* itself accused the German government of imposing conditions “on a small member-state [that] would have previously required arms.”

In the Italian media, there was talk of state-organised torture and Germanic megalomania.

In London’s *Financial Times*, Wolfgang Münchau accused Greece’s creditors of having “destroyed the euro zone as we know it and demolished the idea of a monetary union as a step towards a democratic political union.” He added, “In doing so they reverted to the nationalist European power struggles of the 19th and early 20th century.”

In the *Telegraph*, London Mayor Boris Johnson spoke for the Tory right, accusing “the Germans” of tabling “a document that is breathtaking in its candour and brutality.” He added, “If Greece wants to stay in the single European currency, Athens must prostrate herself in an act of doglike self-abasement... These Schäuble proposals are tyrannical. They should be bitterly resisted.”

The sociologist Jürgen Habermas told the British *Guardian* that the German government had “gambled away in one night all the political capital that a better Germany had accumulated in half a century—and by ‘better’ I mean a Germany characterised by greater political sensitivity and a post-national mentality.”

Threat of Grexit

The reason for this onslaught is the humiliating conditions Germany forced upon the Greek government. Berlin was not prepared to accept an offer of drastic austerity measures worth more than 13 billion euros that Athens had drawn up in collaboration with Paris. The Merkel government demanded more, including the transfer of state assets worth 50 billion euros to a trust fund controlled from Germany, and threatened the temporary exclusion of Greece from the euro.

The current edition of the news weekly *Der Spiegel* reports that German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble had deliberately formulated the conditions so harshly that the Greek government could not accept them, making a Grexit inevitable. The German finance minister had not

reckoned with the fact that the head of the Greek government, Prime Minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras, would capitulate anyway.

The exclusion of Greece from the euro zone was a taboo that Paris and Rome could not tolerate. A Grexit would set a precedent that would completely change the character of the EU and the euro zone. A community of states, which, in form at least, is based upon unanimity or majority decisions, would become a loose alliance dominated by Germany.

Berlin could henceforth determine who belonged to the euro zone and who did not. And it would have increased pressure on the French, Italian and other governments with budgetary problems to submit to the German rules, removing any room for political manoeuvring in the face of growing social tensions.

For this reason, after the euro summit, French President Francois Hollande presented himself as the architect of a “compromise” that prevented a Grexit and preserved the unity of Europe, even though he, together with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Council President Donald Tusk, had worked on the Greek prime minister all night to accept Germany’s harsh austerity measures.

Germany’s return to great power politics

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party/PSG) have been warning that the German ruling class was returning to its aggressive and militaristic traditions.

In September 2014, a PSG conference resolution noted: “The country’s ruling elites, which have thrown the world into the abyss twice before, are once again calling for ‘German leadership’ (Führung) and preparing to realise their imperialist interests through military violence... Almost 70 years after the crimes of the Nazis and Germany’s defeat in World War II, the German ruling class is once again adopting the imperialist great power politics of the Kaiser’s Empire and Hitler.”

The PSG and its youth and student organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), were viciously attacked because they publicly criticized politicians, journalists and professors who advocate this policy and justify it ideologically. In recent weeks, the media has unleashed a veritable witch-hunt against the IYSSE and the “Münkler-Watch” blog because they have exposed Humboldt Professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski as the champions of German great power politics. This smear campaign is intended to intimidate anyone who dares oppose German great power politics and its ideological pioneers, dismissing all such criticism as fantasy and conspiracy theory devoid of any real foundations.

But now the return of the “German question” has become a central issue in the international media. After the events of recent days, it can no longer be denied that the country’s ruling elites are seeking supremacy over Europe so that German imperialism can play the role of world power as it did under Kaiser Wilhelm and Adolf Hitler.

Finance Minister Schäuble and the political scientist Münkler are among the leading proponents of this orientation, which has led to considerable tensions within the government and the political parties.

In the Bundestag (parliament) vote on the Greek bailout package as many as 65 Christian Democrats refused to follow the chancellor, the biggest rebellion ever. Their “no” vote was a vote for a Grexit, which Schäuble continues to advocate even though he officially backs Merkel, who for the time being rejects such a move.

According to well-informed journalists in the German capital, the majority of the Christian Democratic parliamentary group stands behind Schäuble. Many had voted “yes” only because they currently do not want to threaten Merkel’s chancellorship. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* considered the vote “the end of Merkel’s omnipotence,” saying she now has in Schäuble “a second chancellor at her side.”

Schäuble wants “a different, a more effective, a more disciplined Europe,” writes Heribert Prantl in the same newspaper. The purpose of the threat of Grexit was “to stabilize the euro zone, making an example of Greece and, at the same time, teaching a lesson to all the countries that did not want to keep to the existing rules, Italy for example.”

Noting that the finance minister has for some time advocated the establishment of “an EU budget commissioner who would strictly control national budgets,” Prantl describes the proposal as “a kind of democratic dictatorship.” There “would be less democracy in Europe, but it would bring more discipline to the EU.”

Schäuble and his supporters in politics and the media are thus striving for a Europe that is dominated and disciplined by Germany and serves as a platform for Berlin’s global power politics. Schäuble had already developed this concept in 1994 in the so-called Schäuble-Lamers paper, under the heading of “core Europe.” At that time, he suggested reducing the EU to a hard core anchored by Germany, around which the other EU countries would be loosely grouped.

Herfried Münkler also promotes this objective. In his recent book *Power in the Middle* he demands that Germany assume the role of “disciplinarian” in Europe—a term that coincides with Schäuble’s orientation and enjoys increasing popularity in media and political circles.

In numerous interviews, Münkler has argued more recently for a “core Europe” around which a second and third ring would be grouped, with “fewer rights, but also fewer obligations.” In the core, he includes Germany, the Benelux countries, France and—possibly—Italy.

The advocates of a Europe dominated by Germany consider the disciplining of Greece and Europe a precondition for Germany’s role as a world power. Jochen Bittner has clearly expressed this in the weekly *Die Zeit*. “Never again,” he writes, should the European Union invest “so much political energy in a relatively small problem” such as Greece. It has “more important things to do.” There should be “room and time for the bigger challenges.” Among these he includes “crumbling state structures around the Mediterranean, an influx of refugees of historic proportions, a revanchist Russian government... and a competitive race with Asia.”

Holger Steltzner argues in similar fashion in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. “The EU’s inability to solve the Greek crisis,” he writes, “stands contrary to a central argument of the bailout, the claim of Europe’s political power in the world.”

Conflict with the US

This “claim of political power in the world” brings Germany into conflict not only with other European powers, but also with the United States. President Obama and representatives of the US administration repeatedly criticised the German austerity measures and urged Berlin to

adopt a more accommodating attitude towards Greece. They did this primarily for geo-strategic reasons. They fear social unrest in Greece could destabilize the eastern flank of NATO and bring Greece under the influence of Russia or China.

However, tensions between Germany and the US have more fundamental causes. They confront each other as global economic rivals. The speed with which German Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel—less than a week after the conclusion of the nuclear agreement with Iran—rushed to Tehran at the head of a business delegation seeking to profit from an anticipated boom in orders, demonstrates vividly the aggressiveness with which Germany pursues its global economic interests.

Schäuble’s critics in Germany—the Green Party, the Left Party, sections of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a minority of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—have merely tactical differences with the finance minister. They fear that a sharp conflict with France, Italy, Britain and other European powers could isolate Germany in Europe and thus weaken it globally. They regard a functioning EU as a precondition for playing a great power role globally. Therefore, they argue for a return to the European policy of Helmut Kohl, who always tried to secure German dominance in Europe through political compromises or financial concessions.

However, the economic prerequisites for such a policy no longer exist. The common currency, which was originally meant to bind Germany to Europe, has had the opposite effect. It has strengthened Germany’s economic dominance. A current account surplus of 7.5 percent (and rising) of gross domestic product gives Berlin a superior weight that blows up the EU in its old form. This has become ever more clear since the global financial crisis of 2008.

Germany’s European rivals respond by rattling their sabres. Their criticism of the German government is largely reactionary. This applies not only to such right-wingers as Boris Johnson and Marine Le Pen, but also to pseudo-lefts such as the leader of the French Left Front, Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

These fake lefts do not call for the international solidarity of the working class. Instead, they stir up anti-German chauvinism. In this way, they defend the interests of their own imperialist bourgeoisie and exacerbate the national tensions that are inevitably plunging Europe into sharp clashes and wars, such as those that gripped the continent in the first half of the 20th century—a disaster that can be prevented only through the unification of the European working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist programme.



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