

German foreign minister distances himself from the United States

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German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has clearly distanced himself from the US while asserting Germany's right to be a global great power.

On June 13, *Foreign Affairs*, the leading American foreign policy journal, published an article by Steinmeier titled "Germany's New Global Role." In it, Steinmeier refers to Germany as "a major European power" that is forced "to reinterpret the principles that have guided its foreign policy for over half a century."

Steinmeier justifies Germany's aspiration to power by pointing to the disastrous results of US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. "Germany did not seek its new role on the international stage," he writes. "Rather, it emerged as a central player by remaining stable as the world around it changed. As the United States reeled from the effects of the Iraq war and the EU struggled through a series of crises, Germany held its ground."

Speaking of the Iraq war, he states, "Not only did the Bush administration fail to reorder the region through force, but the political, economic, and soft power costs of this adventure undermined the United States' overall position." He adds, "The illusion of a unipolar world faded." Further on, he stresses, "Our historical experience has destroyed any belief in national exceptionalism—for any nation."

There could not be a clearer rejection of the US claim, asserted since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, to be the "only world power."

Last weekend, Steinmeier made clear that his criticism of the United States is not limited to the Middle East. Rather, it centers on the attitude to Russia. In an interview with *Bild am Sonntag*, he sharply criticised the deployment of NATO forces against Russia, in which Germany itself is playing a major role.

"What we should not now do is inflame the situation by loud sabre-rattling and war cries," Steinmeier told the newspaper. "Anyone who thinks symbolic tank parades on the eastern border of the alliance create more security is fooling himself. We are well advised not to provide a pretext for a new confrontation..."

It would be "fatal now to narrow our gaze to the military and seek salvation in a policy of deterrence alone," warned the German foreign minister. History teaches that the mutual readiness to defend must always go along with the readiness for dialogue and offers of cooperation, Steinmeier said. There should be an interest in "engaging Russia in a partnership that takes international responsibility."

Steinmeier's interview, which was published in excerpts in advance, sparked fierce controversy in Germany that cut across partisan political lines. It was generally interpreted as a criticism of the current NATO maneuvers in Eastern Europe and the permanent stationing of NATO troops on the Russian border, which is to be agreed next month at the summit of the military alliance in Warsaw. Operation Anaconda, which took place from June 7 to June 17 in Poland, saw 31,000 soldiers participating from 24 nations.

Leading Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians, some representatives of the Green Party and the conservative press sharply attacked the Social Democratic foreign minister. They accused him of being a "Putin appeaser" (CDU presidium member Jens Spahn); of keeping quiet about the fact that the aggression in Ukraine had come from Russia (Rebecca Harms, chair of the Green faction in the European Parliament); of defending NATO territory only in theory but not in practice (Volker Bouffier, CDU state premier of Hesse); of strengthening "the Kremlin's belief that the West tends towards appeasement" (Berthold Kohler, co-editor of the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*); and of creating an image for himself within the Social Democratic Party (SPD), although he had supported the participation of the German Army in the manoeuvres (Norbert Röttgen, CDU chair of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee).

On the other hand, Steinmeier received support from sections of the SPD and the Greens, from the Left Party, and from Alexander Gauland, vice chair of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Former environment minister Jürgen Trittin (Greens), who is said to be interested in the post of foreign minister,

defended Steinmeier and declared that the Baltic states are not actually threatened by Russia, they only feel threatened. The course being followed by NATO was therefore questionable, he argued.

SPD foreign policy expert Rolf Mützenich said Steinmeier spoke for the SPD parliamentary group. He recommended that Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (both CDU) adopt Steinmeier's policy. The demands of Poland and the Baltic states, which had even brought the issue of nuclear armaments into play, were, he declared, exaggerated. Clear signals had to be given to them, and that is what Steinmeier had now done. There had to be a dialogue with Russia again.

Ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD)—Steinmeier was his closest collaborator for many years—spoke out at the weekend. In an interview on the 75th anniversary of the German attack on the Soviet Union, he recalled the “epochal crime” that had been committed by Nazi Germany when it invaded the Soviet Union with the aim of “wiping it out, enslaving its people and destroying them.”

Schröder said he considered Bundeswehr participation in the NATO manoeuvres “a great mistake, against the background of our history.” He supported the “attempt by Foreign Minister Steinmeier to progressively remove the sanctions (against Russia).” He explicitly defended his own friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying, “We're friends, it stays that way.”

The former chancellor pointed the finger at the US. It was “not only Russia that caused crises,” he said. The Iraq war of George W. Bush was “a decisive cause of the wars and civil wars in the Middle East, not least of the emergence of IS.” Nevertheless, Schröder said, “there are people in the federal government who regard America as the font of political wisdom.”

Steinmeier himself defended his remarks on Monday. He was concerned to stress the importance of dialogue with Russia because he had the impression that this was being completely forgotten at the moment, he said on the sidelines of a foreign ministers' meeting in Luxembourg. He did not question the decisions of the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, however. There, it had been decided to significantly beef up the eastern flank of NATO in response to the Ukraine crisis.

The leader of the Left Party, Sahra Wagenknecht, also supported Steinmeier and portrayed him as a champion of peace. “The provocative NATO war games near the Russian border are an irresponsible threat to peace in Europe,” she said.

Neither Steinmeier nor Schröder are concerned about peace. Schröder, whose chancellery Steinmeier headed, was the first German head of government since 1945 to send German soldiers into combat—first in Yugoslavia and then in

Afghanistan. And Steinmeier himself is a pioneer of German militarism, having announced at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 that Germany was “too big merely to comment on world affairs from the sidelines,” and that “Germany must be ready for earlier, more decisive and more substantive engagement in the foreign and security policy [i.e., military] sphere.”

Rather, Steinmeier's foray makes clear that the wars for the redivision of the Middle East and Africa, together with the encirclement of Russia and China, lead to conflicts between the imperialist powers themselves. Although allies, the US and Germany have competing economic and political interests. The disintegration of the European Union, which will accelerate if Britain leaves, and the rise of Donald Trump in the US will exacerbate these conflicts.

Steinmeier, who enjoys considerable support in German big-business circles, speaks for the wing of the German elites who want greater political and military independence for German imperialism—especially from the United States.

Two years ago, the International Committee of the Fourth International warned in the statement “Socialism and the struggle against imperialist war”: “At present, Washington is pursuing these objectives with the collaboration of the other major imperialist powers. However, there is no permanent coincidence of interests among them. German imperialism, which fought two wars with the US in the 20th century, is reviving its imperial ambitions. Having secured the dominant position in Western Europe, it is seeking to become a world power.”

This is now being confirmed.



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