

Germany's new president to accelerate militarist foreign policy agenda

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On Sunday, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) moved into Bellevue Palace in Berlin as Germany's new president. Germany's former foreign minister takes over from Joachim Gauck, who left his post on Friday night with an ostentatious military parade.

The atmosphere was eerie. Before the eyes of Berlin's political establishment, 400 soldiers wearing steel helmets and bearing torches marched in front of Bellevue Palace. Among the spectators were Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU); the general inspector of the Bundeswehr (armed forces), General Volker Wierer; Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU); and the mayor of Berlin, Michael Müller (SPD). Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) was represented by her vice-chancellor and foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel (SPD), since she was involved in crisis talks in the US.

The military parade, known in Germany as the Große Zapfenstreich, was an appropriate end for Gauck's five-year presidency. The Zapfenstreich is the supreme military ceremonial of the Bundeswehr and has its roots in Prussian militarism. In its present form it goes back to the military parade held in Berlin on May 12, 1838, in honour of the Russian tsar, Nicholas I. Afterwards, it was a mainstay ceremony of the Prussian army, the German imperial army and the Reichswehr of the Weimar Republic, prior to its use by the Wehrmacht of the Third Reich.

In office, Gauck has been a strident advocate of German militarism—more than virtually any other federal president. In his notorious speech on the Day of German Unification in 2013, the former pastor demanded an active, military-based, great power policy. “Our country is not an island. We should not indulge in the illusion we can be spared from political

and economic and military conflicts if we do not participate in their solution,” he warned.

At the Munich Security Conference in 2014, he announced, together with von der Leyen and his successor, then-Foreign Minister Steinmeier, a fundamental change in foreign policy. He spoke of “the role of Germany in the world” and declared: “We Germans are on the road to a form of responsibility we have exercised too little.” A threat, which was then put into practice in the form of the right-wing putsch in Ukraine, NATO rearmament against Russia, and military interventions in Mali, Syria and Iraq.

The process begun under Gauck is now to be continued and intensified under Steinmeier. In a previous commentary, we wrote: “The presidency, which has had a primarily ceremonial function after the experiences of the Weimar Republic, is to be transformed once again into a political planning and power centre in order to implement these new great power fantasies.”

Steinmeier epitomises the shift to the right in German politics during the past 20 years. As head of the federal chancellery under former SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder, he played a central role in the development of the Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws, which drove millions into bitter poverty. From 2005 to 2009, and again from 2013 to 2017, he was foreign minister in the Grand Coalition of conservative parties and the Social Democrats, and the pioneer, along with Gauck and von der Leyen, of a more aggressive foreign policy.

Under his direction, the Foreign Office launched its so-called review of German foreign policy in order to combat widespread opposition in the population to war and militarism. Steinmeier published strategy papers aimed at the militarisation of Europe under German domination, and, in innumerable speeches and articles,

stressed “Germany’s new global role.”

In a contribution to the document “Germany’s new foreign policy,” published by Wolfgang Ischinger at this year’s Munich Security Conference, Steinmeier reiterated his mantra that Germany must “intervene at an earlier stage, in a more decisive and substantial manner.” There was a “growing competition for the allegedly correct social order...and geopolitical spheres of influence. ... By changing track at the right moment...in shaping the future order,” Germany could “often do more than merely putting out the fire when it is too late.”

In other words, Germany must be ready to undertake preventive war in order to assert its geopolitical and economic interests against its rivals.

A further contribution in the anthology, titled “Foreign Policy as Moral Touchstone” by Jan Techau, underlines this. Techau, the director of the Richard C. Holbrooke Forum at the American Academy in Berlin, complains that in Germany the “neurotic striving to remain morally clean” permeates almost every domestic and foreign policy debate.

What was clear, he continued, is: “Whoever goes to war, usually has to be responsible for the death of humans, including the deaths of nonparticipants and innocents.” Particularly in “times of new strategic uncertainty,” it is necessary “to elevate the military, not only because societies demand such harsh trials, but rather because it is ultimately the most difficult, the most demanding and, undoubtedly, the crowning discipline of foreign policy.”

Techau’s final forecast is a threat: In the years to come Germany must “undertake much more politically and militarily” and will face “foreign and security policy issues” that “the country could not possibly imagine in its worst nightmares.”

While the vast majority of the population react with shock to such aggressive militarism, which recalls the darkest days of German history, the Left Party supports the new war policy. Stefan Liebich, the representative of the Left Party on the German Bundestag’s Foreign Affairs Committee, agreed: “Yes, Germany must take on its growing responsibility in the world.”

In the same manner as the Green Party in 1998, the Left Party is now ready to smooth the path for a revival of German militarism with talk of “humanitarian interventions” and thereby oppose anti-war sentiments

in the German population in a future governing coalition. “Germany, under red-red-green [SPD-Left Party-Green Party coalition] must engage vigorously in the area of civilian conflict prevention. The government draft of the federal budget for 2017 has initially failed to allocate medium-term growth for crisis and disaster relief, although the necessity has grown,” Liebich wrote.

He leaves no doubt that under “conflict prevention” and “crisis and disaster relief” the Left Party envisages the use of the military. “This does not mean Bundeswehr soldiers can no longer be deployed abroad. ... A commitment such as fighting Ebola or destroying chemical weapons such as two years ago in the Mediterranean is not excluded.”

Liebich also adds: “Personally, I believe that following a decision by the UN Security Council, for example in the case of an imminent genocide such as once took place in Rwanda, it should be decided in particular cases whether and how the Bundeswehr participate.”



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