

Foreign minister Gabriel promotes German big power politics

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In a keynote speech on foreign policy Tuesday, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel pleaded for a turn away from the US and for an interest-based German great power policy. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician was speaking to high-ranking experts at the Körber Foundation's Foreign Policy Forum in Berlin.

What Gabriel said was not completely new; he and other leading German politicians have been arguing along similar lines for four years. But never before has one of them articulated the return of Germany to an aggressive great power policy so openly and clearly.

"The implicit way with which we have regarded the US-American role as being protective—despite occasional disputes—is beginning to crumble," said Gabriel. Europe was perceived by the US administration only as "one region among many, as a competitor and sometimes even as an opponent."

He expressly emphasized that this will remain the case, even after Donald Trump leaves the White House: "The US withdrawal is not down to the policy of one single president. It will not change fundamentally even after the next election."

Germany must advocate its interests more confidently in the future, he concluded. It could "not afford to wait for decisions in Washington or merely respond to them." The German government would have to analyze more coolly where it "crossed swords" with Washington and develop a more independent policy towards the US.

Gabriel named the concrete points in which Germany was at "crossed swords" with the US as, US sanctions against Russia, which jeopardized "our own economic interests," the impending termination of the nuclear agreement with Iran and the possible recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital by the Trump administration.

The world had become "far more uncomfortable," said Gabriel. Now we realize that even with great economic

prosperity in our country there is no comfortable place on the side-lines of international politics for us anymore. Neither for us Germans nor for us Europeans."

Europe must play a much bigger role in the changing world order. "We must not watch as new spaces evolve over which we cannot exercise influence," said the foreign minister. "Only if the EU defines its own interests and projects its power can it survive."

Without such a European projection of power, wherever the US drew back, other states would advance—Russia in the Middle East, and China in Africa—Gabriel warned. These countries were "ready to pay a kind of 'great power tax' for their status." They put up with economic losses and diplomatic ostracism "to demonstrate regional leadership and national sovereignty."

In his remarks on the Middle East, the German foreign minister made clear that "power projection" meant a massive use of military force. Although the US has been at war there almost uninterruptedly since 1991, spending trillions, Gabriel complained about the lack of commitment by the "West" in this strategic region: "In the past seven years, the West has never established a reasonable relationship between its very ambitious demands and the resources used for this purpose." Instead of following Theodore Roosevelt's motto, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," "our Syria policy" was the opposite, "Speak loudly, but carry a small stick."

Again and again, Gabriel emphasized that Germany's great power politics should not be inhibited by moral values: "Values orientation, as we Germans like to claim for our foreign policy, will certainly not be enough to assert ourselves in this economic, political and militarily egoistical world."

He referred in detail to the recent book by the Berlin political scientist Herfried Münkler on the Thirty Years' War. In it, Münkler sharply "took to task the foreign policy class in Germany" and deplored "a German,

‘fixation on the law as a means of addressing political challenges,’ which almost equated to a rejection of reality.” Rather than “ruthlessly analyzing” and “thinking politically and strategically,” our “gaze is always moving to the ‘horizon of moral norms and imperatives.’”

“I think Münkler touches on a sore point here,” commented Gabriel.

He explicitly expressed his admiration for China’s foreign policy, which advances into spaces previously “exclusively determined by a US presence and policies.” The One Belt One Road Initiative was “a geostrategic concept in which China enforces its notions of order: trade policy, geographic, geopolitical, and possibly also military.” This was “not to blame China,” but elicited from him “respect and admiration.” We in the West, could be “accused of having no comparable strategy of our own.”

In his speech, Gabriel spoke in favour of working closely with France, which he sees as a driving force in Europe alongside Germany. He expressly praised President Emmanuel Macron’s European initiatives and “defence cooperation,” wishing that “France would become somewhat more German in financial matters and Germany somewhat more French on security issues.” On the other hand, he did not mention NATO at all in his speech.

Gabriel’s new course marks a break with the foreign policy of the last 70 years, the basis of which, along with the Berlin-Paris axis, was formed by the alliance with Washington. Germany is returning to pre-1945 politics. At that time, it sought to dominate the continent as the “power in the middle,” in order to take up a struggle against its international rivals—Britain, the US and Russia/Soviet Union—which twice lead to the catastrophe of a world war. With the return to the old foreign policy, all the other ghosts of the past also return.

At the party congress of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) last Friday, right-wing army officers, old aristocrats, nationalist conservatives and open neo-Nazis paraded in front of the television cameras, which broadcast the disgusting spectacle live, as if the crimes of German history had never happened. The leaders of the right-wing extremist party are invited for talks with the federal president at Schloss Bellevue (the German presidential palace) about the formation of the next government, and are also courted by all other parties. They are needed to move official politics as a whole to the right.

In the last four years, the grand coalition of the

Christian Democrats and Social Democrats massively upgraded German military capabilities, ordered the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) into new war missions, subjected all of Europe to a brutal policy of austerity and massively increased the extent of poverty and precarious employment in Germany itself. This is why these parties were severely punished in September’s general election. Now, once again, a grand coalition is to be formed to intensify the same policy.

In his speech, Gabriel formulated the programme of this government, in which he is expected to remain foreign minister. But this is not being discussed openly. Instead, the public is being distracted by bickering over civil insurance schemes, a cap on exhaust emissions and other issues that are likely to fall victim to the axe in any case.

Two weeks ago, when negotiations over a “Jamaica coalition” (named after the various party colours, which correspond to those of the Jamaican flag) failed, the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) noted that talks on the formation of a new government were taking place “behind the scenes” in “what increasingly amounts to a political conspiracy.”

“The ruling elites cannot be allowed to resolve the political crisis and establish a new government among themselves,” the SGP wrote at the time. “The result would be a right-wing, authoritarian regime beyond any democratic control and beholden to the interests of the capitalist state.”

This is now being confirmed, and is why the SGP calls for new elections. “Under present conditions, this is the only way in which the working class can intervene into political events, bring their interests to bear and combat the far right’s political offensive,” the November 23 statement reads. “The SGP would utilize the election campaign to fight for a programme that expresses the interests of the German and international working class, connecting the struggle against war with the fight against capitalism, and provide a socialist way out of the blind alley in which the current social order finds itself.”



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