

Josef Braml's *The Transatlantic Illusion*: Why Germany is rearming

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Last Friday, by a large majority, the German parliament agreed to the “Bundeswehr Special Fund” totalling 100 billion euros, which triples the arms budget in one fell swoop. The Bundeswehr will be “the largest conventional army in the European NATO system,” Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced.

What is the reason for this rearmaments offensive?

Officially, it is presented as a reaction to the Ukraine war. Russia has brought war back to Europe, Germany and NATO have to defend “democracy” and “Western values,” also by military means against “autocracies” like Russia, runs the justification, which is spread day and night via all available channels.

But this is propaganda. The Ukraine war serves as a welcome pretext, but it is not the reason why Germany is to become a major military power again after more than 75 years of enforced restraint. Plans to this effect have been under discussion for a long time and are now being dusted off.

This is particularly evident in the book *Die Transatlantische Illusion* (*The Transatlantic Illusion*) by Josef Braml, which was completed shortly before the Russian attack on Ukraine and published by C.H. Beck in mid-March.

Braml is a recognized and well-connected political scientist. He has worked for the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) since 2006, where he heads its Americas program. For the past two years, he has also been Secretary General of the German Group of the Trilateral Commission. Previously, he worked for the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the Brookings Institution, and as a legislative aide in the US House of Representatives, among others. So, he is not writing as an outsider.

In the media, his book has garnered nothing but praise. His “far-sighted recommendations for comprehensive ‘European sovereignty’” are “more topical than ever in view of the Ukraine war,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. And the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called his book “an anticipation of the 100-billion retrofit program now announced by the coalition government.”

Russia plays only a secondary role in Braml’s book. He does hungrily mention that the “largest country on earth in terms of area ... also possesses the world’s largest reserves of raw materials.” From a European perspective, however, the goal was to “integrate and contain Russia and not drive it completely to China’s side.” To this end, he proposes a policy that combines “change through diplomatic rapprochement” with “credible military deterrence.”

Braml candidly admits that Russia was driven to war by NATO. Western capitals also knew “that NATO’s eastward expansion to date and membership prospects for Georgia and Ukraine, as well as US and NATO military cooperation with post-Soviet states, are perceived as a threat in the Kremlin,” he writes. “Posing the question the other way around: Would Washington respect the free choice of alliances if Mexico formed a military pact with China?”

He concludes that Europe is currently not in a position to “pursue an

independent Russia policy at all.” Only Washington could provide the guarantees “that matter to the Kremlin,” he says. He also does not rule out the possibility that the US could ally itself with Russia in the future and thus present the Europeans with “completely different” problems.

The challenge of the US

Braml sees the greatest challenge to Germany’s future foreign policy not in Moscow or Beijing, but in Washington. Germany must once again pursue its economic and geopolitical interests on its own, is the core thesis of his book—not only against Russia and China, but also and above all against the United States.

“If the European Union is to be a ‘global player’ and not a plaything of other powers, Germany above all must decisively correct its foreign policy toward the US as well,” he demands. Germany’s interests were “not always identical or compatible with those of other states, not even with those of the supposed protective power, the United States.”

Germany and Europe—Braml likes to write “Europe” when he means German interests—should “no longer give in to the transatlantic illusion that the ‘protective power’ the US helps to ensure the security and prosperity of the Old World. Otherwise, they risk becoming collateral damage in the global conflict between the ailing world power, the US, and the rising China.”

And further, “The strategic and economic interests of their European allies now no longer coincide with those of the leading American power in a whole range of areas.”

“If it comes to serious conflicts of interest with the Western leading power, Europe will be left completely blank strategically,” was the disturbing realization from the Trump administration’s unilateral breach of the nuclear agreement with Iran, he said.

And so it goes on for pages. Under President Joe Biden, relations between Europe and the US had improved somewhat, Braml says, but “domestic political developments in the US” could propel Trump back into office. In addition, “the Democrats are also pursuing an ‘America First’ policy for domestic political reasons alone.”

In retrospect, Braml also comes down rather harshly on US foreign policy. Washington had “all too often merely invoked noble values to conceal an interest-driven power policy,” he writes. Nowhere, he says, had this been more evident in recent decades than in the Middle East. “The 2003 Iraq War was a war of aggression in violation of international law.” Time and again, he says, the US had created its own enemies, as in Iran, “which it subsequently had to fight at great expense.”

“The leading moral power, the United States,” had “not escaped unscathed,” he sums up. “During the George W. Bush administration, Washington lost its way and has not found it again to this day.” For other reasons, too, “Washington is currently failing as the guarantor of the liberal world order on which Germany and Europe depend.”

Braml does not leave it at the charge that the US will fail as Europe’s “protective power” in the future. He accuses Washington of trying to solve its problems at the expense of Europeans.

But that did not mean, he continues, “that the US will withdraw from the world. Rather, Washington will try even more to control geostrategically important regions such as Europe, the Middle East and Asia through *realpolitik* and conceal this approach with lofty values.” Therefore, he said, Europe must be put in a position to “solve its own problems.”

In view of the escalating conflict with China, he says, it can be assumed that “the United States will try harder than before to turn the military dependence of its allies into support for US geo-economic interests.” Germany and the Europeans would therefore “find it more difficult in the future to safeguard their economic, trade and monetary interests vis-à-vis their ‘protective power,’ especially when it comes to China.”

The US will “use any means to contain or even push back China’s rise. For Europe, this can have serious consequences, as our economy is strongly interconnected with China.” In the “new systemic competition between China and the US,” Europe risked becoming “the central loser” if it “does not quickly become capable of making decisions and taking action to defend its interests.”

According to Braml, the alliance with the US was attractive as long as the US “focuses on maintaining a liberal international order,” “guarantees free trade” and “takes care of security and stability”—in other words, as long as the German economy had unhindered access to global raw materials, sales markets and investment opportunities in the slipstream of American armies.

This was no longer the case, he said. “The strategic and economic interests of its European allies now no longer coincide with those of America’s leading power in a whole range of areas.” Braml explicitly warns against further indulging in the “transatlantic illusion that the United States would return to its old virtues and also look after Europe’s interests.”

“The opposite is more realistic,” he says. “For the US to regain either its former strength or dominance would be possible in a now multipolar world only at the price that others, especially Europe, would have to pay. To avert imminent collapse and preserve its dominant world power, US leaders will do everything they can to assert their interests even more ruthlessly and to pass them on to friend and foe.”

Rearming to become a nuclear power

Braml does not go so far as to call for the dissolution of NATO or withdrawal from the military alliance. In the current situation, he considers that to be “security policy hara-kiri.” What mattered, he says, was to “embark on the path toward a European defence capability that is independent of the United States, with the long-term goal of an alliance of equals.” Germany, he said, must “focus on a strong and capable Europe,” become stronger economically and technologically, and develop “the euro into a geo-economic tool of power.”

But throughout the book, it is clear that in the longer term, Braml sees not only a rupture but also an open military conflict with the United States as inevitable. That is why he urges Germany be upgraded not only to Europe’s greatest military power, but also to a nuclear power. He favours German participation in the French nuclear force, the “force de frappe.”

France’s nuclear deterrent was “from the very beginning also motivated by its ambition” to “maintain its great power status and free itself from military-strategic dependence on the United States,” he says, justifying his demand. Under international law, “it would be perfectly possible for Germany to co-finance France’s nuclear weapons in order to participate in the French shield.” President Emmanuel Macron had indicated his willingness to do so.

Braml also attaches great importance to “the closest possible collaboration between the defence industries,” especially the planned Franco-German Future Combat Air System (FCAS), with which “the Europeans would reduce not only their military but also their technological dependence on the United States and assert their own

sovereignty.”

Danger of a third world war

Braml’s book confirms the assessment of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) that the war in Ukraine—which has long been a NATO war against the nuclear power Russia—is a step toward a third world war.

Thirty years ago, when bourgeois propaganda celebrated the dissolution of the former East Germany and the end of the Soviet Union as the final triumph of capitalism, the ICFI had already warned that the same contradictions—“between social production and private property, between the international character of production and the nation-state system”—that had led to numerous “economic collapses and violent political eruptions” during the twentieth century were once again coming to a head.

In the statement “Oppose Imperialist War and Colonialism!” which it issued on May 1, 1991, a few weeks after the first Iraq War, the ICFI wrote: “Notwithstanding the many changes which have taken place in the form and structure of world capitalism since 1945, the same conflicts—over markets, sources of raw materials, and access to ‘cheap labor’—which led to the First and Second World Wars are leading relentlessly to the Third.”

Since then, the US, backed by its NATO allies, has waged war almost continuously for thirty years, destroying not only Iraq for a second time, but also Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and numerous other countries.

Germany has played a growing role in this. In 1999, German soldiers took part in an international war mission again for the first time, in Yugoslavia, after which the Bundeswehr fought in Afghanistan, Mali and numerous other countries. In 2014, the German government openly announced the return of German militarism, and since then, Germany’s arms budget has increased year after year. The 100-billion-euro special fund represents a quantum leap. And it will not be the last.

German imperialism is again confronted with the same contradictions that made it the most aggressive war party in the First and especially in the Second World War. Wedged in a tightly knit Europe and equipped with a dynamic export industry, it must dominate Europe and have access to large parts of the world to satisfy its hunger for raw materials, markets, and investment opportunities.

In both world wars, this had brought Germany into conflict with the United States. In World War I, the Kaiser sacrificed two million young men in the trenches to achieve these goals. In World War II, Hitler had 30 million Jews, Poles, Soviet citizens and prisoners of war brutally murdered. Large parts of Germany also lay in ruins at the end of the war. A third world war would leave nothing of Europe and large parts of the world.

Such a catastrophe must not be allowed to happen. The only social force that can prevent it is the international working class, which is forced to bear the cost of rearmament, militarism and war. A powerful anti-war movement must be built, linking the struggle against war with the struggle against its cause, capitalism. This requires the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country of the world.



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