

Joschka Fischer calls for European great power politics under German leadership

By Ulrich Rippert
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On March 16, the foreign minister in the previous German Social Democratic-Green Party government, Joschka Fischer, gave a speech at a conference of the European Greens held at Humboldt University in Berlin. Since leaving his post as foreign minister, Fischer has taken a position as guest professor at Princeton University in the US and given lectures on “international crisis diplomacy.” His lecture in Berlin was entitled “A Europe of Common Interests.”

Once one looks beyond the somewhat ridiculous and ill-fitting professorial garb assumed by Fischer, it becomes clear that his speech was essentially an appeal to the German government to show more leadership and readiness to reorganize Europe.

It is “shocking,” Fischer declared, that the “increasing loss of significance of Europe in the world” is not even noticed in European capitals. This applies in particular, he said, to Germany, which, because of its size and economic strength, must assume a leading role in the European Union.

Seven years ago, Fischer gave a speech at the same venue in which he laid down his principles for Europe. At that time, he referred to himself as a “convinced federalist” and spoke at length about “democratic structures.” He declared his support for a “European Federal State.”

Today he adopts a very different tone. Reality has taken a different course and the most that can be hoped for is a “Europe of common interests.”

However, behind the harmless-sounding formulation “Europe of common interests” lies Fischer’s demand for European great power politics under German leadership. The principal problem, according to the Green Party leader, is that mounting political pressure from the US is causing European interests to increasingly diverge. This antidote, according to Fischer, is nothing less than the imposition of the interests of the strongest European power, and this, in Fischer’s view, is Germany.

Such demands have repeatedly arisen in German history since the formation of the German Reich in 1871 and the subsequent industrial expansion of the nation. The dynamics of German capitalism are incompatible with the restricted European state system, and as a result Germany has sought to dominate Europe in order to achieve its purported destiny as a great power. The consequences of this policy—in the form carried out first by Bismarck, then Emperor Wilhelm, and finally Hitler—have been catastrophic for Germany and the rest of the world.

When one considers the career of Fischer, who began as a radical street fighter and squatter in Frankfurt, and now, having assumed the mantle of statesman and professor at an elite university, calls for German-European great power politics, one is tempted to conclude that the adage about history repeating itself as farce also applies to individuals.

But a farce can have dangerous consequences—particularly in the realm of politics. Ten years ago, Fischer and the Greens played a key role in sweeping aside traditional post-war restraints on German militarism and enabling the German army to intervene in international conflicts. In his Berlin speech, he called for military expansion and stressed that Europe

had to attain greater self-sufficiency as a military power.

Fischer directly criticized the current German government and the parliamentary fraction of his own Green Party, which had “deliberately ignored the pleas from NATO for rapid support in the south of Afghanistan” even though allied forces confront extreme problems there. The dispatch of German Tornado aircraft to the south of the country is correct, Fischer said, but by no means sufficient. Greater responsibility for foreign and security policy also requires increased efforts towards developing EU military power, he declared.

Fischer made jokes at the expense of the German military, which in Lebanon confronted the “highly dangerous Armada of the Hezbollah” while other allies were “saving the bacon in the interior of the country.”

The way in which Fischer openly promotes German militarism is an expression of the continuous turn to the right by the Green Party. His statement must be seen in connection with the recent declaration by party chief Reinhard Bütikofer of plans to establish working relations at all levels with Germany’s conservative parties.

Although it is not a pleasant task, it is necessary to consider carefully what Professor Dr. Fischer had to say.

At the heart of his remarks, Fischer posed the question: “Are we Europeans prepared to solve the problems which result from the self-imposed weakening of the United States through its policy of unilateralism and which led to the disaster of the Iraq war?”

His answer was a clear “no.” Europe is not prepared, he said, for the challenges of the changed world situation. Instead, the “new foreign and security responsibilities are being persistently avoided.” Two years after a majority of the electorate in France and Holland voted down the European Union constitution, the EU finds itself in a deep crisis.

The European conference of the Greens, at which Fischer spoke, was one of a number of activities surrounding the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Rome Pact, which set in motion the process towards European unification. Fischer began with a short review, noting that a perspective for the future could only be based on an assessment of the past.

According to Fischer, the unification of Europe over the last half-century was “the biggest historical success” of the post-war period. The emergence and development of the European Union could not be regarded, however, separately from the conditions prevailing during the Cold War.

Therefore, the reunification of the continent—“and I am expressly speaking here not only of the reunification of Germany, but of the overcoming of European divisions and the end of the Cold War”—had huge consequences for the internal development of Europe and the role of Europe in the world. “I would even choose to use the term political Big Bang in this connection,” Fischer said.

At the same time, he continued, the progress of globalized production had established completely new conditions for Europe, which is now seen in a new light by inhabitants of underdeveloped and developing countries,

as opposed to the industrial nations.

“Nearly seven billion people now dream the dream of progress,” Fischer said, “and that has not only great ecological, but also substantial economic consequences—involving the struggle for the distribution of raw materials and energy, issues which are easier to address in the lecture hall than at international conferences.”

He went on to say that the security situation of the Cold War—“as dangerous as it was”—has been replaced by a security situation which is “much less clear.” Anyone who thinks that the American government will represent the security interests of Europe in the future is making a big mistake, Fischer declared, adding that the limits of American power had become visible in Iraq.

“We are the geopolitical neighbours of the Middle East—let us not forget that,” he said, and then asked: “What would happen if the Americans withdrew—which they do not intend to do at present—and undertook a different line of action in the foreseeable future?” The crisis in the Middle East would still exist and have to be solved. The question is: “By whom and how?”

Europe must arise and be in a position to consistently defend its own security interests, Fischer declared. This requires, firstly, recognizing European interests; secondly, defining them; and thirdly, imposing them.

The monetary union had established new conditions and a new quality in terms of European unification and integration, which would have long-term consequences. But that alone was not enough. Definite and lasting changes had to be made in the sphere of foreign and security policy.

Europe could not allow everyone to do what they wanted. It was, he said, “really spooky” to observe the way in which the American government held bilateral negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic, “which are both the members of the European Union,” to obtain their agreement on the construction of anti-missile defence systems, independent of any discussion, not to speak of decision-making, in European capitals or committees of the EU.

To the applause of the assembled Green Party leadership, Fischer addressed a comment to German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union): “It is not enough in this affair merely to stress the role of NATO, Ms. Chancellor. Here a clear decision on the part of Europe is called for.”

Fischer then noted that Russia, which does not agree with these and other decisions, has acted with complete independence, conducting its own bilateral talks with the EU state of Greece and signing contracts for future oil and gas pipelines. On this basis, he said, it will never be possible to create a Europe of common interests. The relapse into national egoism, he warned, is very real and has catastrophic consequences.

The expansion of German imperialism has traditionally taken the form of an advance towards the east, and in this respect Fischer remains true to historical tradition. He appealed for an expansion of the EU up to the western border of Russia.

According to Fischer, White Russia and Ukraine—two former Soviet republics which for centuries maintained the closest ties to Russia and are still regarded by Moscow as part of its sphere of influence—belong in the EU.

In order to define common interests, there must also be clarity on the EU’s boundaries, he continued. “In the West that is quite clear. So long as America refrains from making an application for membership in the EU, the European Union ends somewhere in the Azores. The border to the south is the Mediterranean, and to the north the polar sea. But where does the European Union come to an end in the east?” he asked.

The formula used by the former French President General de Gaulle, “from the Atlantic to the Urals,” is not correct, Fischer said. The European Union must aim for close and good relations with Russia, but the eastern border of the EU constitutes the western border of Russia, he

declared. There must be clarity on this, he stressed.

This was the only way to make clear to countries like Ukraine and White Russia that they belonged in the European Union, and that their admission was hoped for. In this connection, Fischer recalled that the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine had been strongly supported by Berlin.

Fischer sought to avoid any direct reference to German dominance over Europe, but on several occasions he stressed “German responsibility for the formulation and realization of European interests.” This was not directed “against the smaller European states,” but, based on its size and economic resources, Germany had to assume greater leadership and provide “the locomotive for the accompanying European carriages.”

The former foreign minister is, in fact, speaking on behalf of the German ruling elite. Just two days after Fischer’s speech, German President Horst Köhler took up the same theme, and with an obvious nod towards the chancellery and the German presidency of the Council of Europe, called for increased European independence and self-assurance.

US supremacy of the Western Alliance was largely taken for granted in the period of the Cold War. For much of this time, Germany had been able to sail in the wake of Washington and enjoy an economic recovery.

For a number of years Germany has been describing itself as a world champion exporter. But the dynamic and globalized development of the productive forces has intensified the rivalries and conflicts between the great powers. The struggle for markets and raw materials—above all, energy supplies—is assuming increasingly violent forms. This has been exacerbated by the competition for power and influence over the rising Asian growth markets of China and India.

German capitalism cannot allow the US to control the most important energy resources in the Middle East, dictate the allocation and price of oil and gas, and deprive the German economy of its lucrative business interests in Iran. At the same time, it can tolerate neither a political and military disaster for the US and its allies in Iraq nor a military attack on Iran, both of which would have catastrophic consequences for the entire region. So far, however, the government in Berlin has dared not challenge the US in fear of the economic, political and military consequences.

Now a new approach is being encouraged, and Fischer is banging the drum in favour of German interests. In this regard, he depends on backing from the Greens, whose main base of support consists of privileged middle-class layers which have established themselves in the wealthier suburbs of the big cities, and whose former pacifism was directed almost exclusively against the US.

The working class must be on guard. Such great power politics and militarism are inevitably bound up with sharp attacks on social and democratic rights. In order to defeat the political perspective of the philistine from Princeton, it is necessary to fight for the unification of Europe by the working class on the basis of an international, socialist program.

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