

German Foreign Minister Steinmeier's great power speech to big business

By Johannes Stern
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In his opening speech at the SZ Economic Summit, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier appealed to business heads to support Germany's rise to be a world power.

The meeting did not take place in the Dusseldorf Parkhotel, but in Berlin's Hotel Adlon. Sitting in the audience was not Fritz Thyssen and Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, but Thyssen-Krupp CEO Heinrich Hiesinger and other current heavyweights of German big business. And of course, the Social Democratic Party Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier is not Adolf Hitler.

Nevertheless, Steinmeier's appearance recalled Hitler's speech to the Dusseldorf Industry Club on January 26, 1932. Like the soon to become Führer, Steinmeier made a direct appeal to German big business to support Germany's rise to be a world power. He explicitly called on big business to support him and the government in pushing through a militarist foreign policy turn against the will of the people.

Steinmeier's programme strongly recalls the German lust for power, once believed to be a thing of the past. "Germany should 'lead Europe to lead the world', 'Europeanise Russia' and 'multilateralise the US'", Steinmeier demanded, citing an essay that has been featured on an official web site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for months. He added, "No small task!"

The implications of these words are unmistakable. Germany's return to an aggressive foreign policy runs along similar channels as followed in the first half of the 20th century. The German elites once again see it as their "task" to dominate Europe in order to become a world power. Today, as before, this programme of German imperialism means conflict with Russia and the United States.

To "Europeanize Russia" means nothing other than to subordinate Russia to a Europe controlled by Germany. To "multilateralise the US" means to contest the role of the United States as the world hegemon. In other words, German foreign policy in the future will develop increasingly in opposition to the two powers against which it has already waged two world wars.

After the crimes of the Nazi regime, the German elites are, at least for now, still trying to present their programme of a third "grab for world power" as if it were being imposed on them

from the outside. Every day, "the expectation of German involvement" is encountered from our "partners abroad", Steinmeier protested at the Adlon. He had therefore "asked a large group of international experts to formulate their expectations of German foreign policy".

From the many responses he received to this request, Steinmeier highlighted just one, titled "Germany's destiny: leading Europe in order to lead the world". This comes from the pen of the Indian-born Professor Kishore Mahbubani of the National University of Singapore, located in an authoritarian, one-party state.

The text, together with other calls for a more aggressive German foreign policy, can be found on the web site "Review 2014" of the German Foreign Ministry. Of Mahbubani's key demands, Steinmeier said tersely, "And do you know who said that? Not a Frenchman, not an American, but an Indian professor wrote that for us."

Steinmeier's speech was remarkable not only for its call for German leadership in the world. It also expressed an openly imperialist programme. At its core was the conclusion that in a world that is increasingly dominated by national conflicts, Germany's global interests can no longer be pursued by purely economic means, but must rely on foreign policy and military force.

At the beginning of his remarks, Steinmeier said that it was no accident that "at the end of this turbulent year of 2014", he was opening this business congress with a "decidedly foreign policy speech". In his "entire political biography", he could "not remember a time in which international crises in such great number, in so many places in the world, of such different nature, are assailing us simultaneously as is the case today."

The German foreign minister drew a picture of a global situation that is strongly reminiscent of the world before the Second World War. A world in which "the struggle for influence and domination" prevails, "crisis is the new normal", clear "cracks and divides" come forward and "we stare at the differences between states, peoples and cultures". Even "in dealing with our closest partners, especially the United States", the "public debate is dominated by differences, not common ground."

Economically, a "return to stronger national borders" could

be seen following the financial and economic crisis of 2008. This development is a challenge for both economic and foreign policy, especially for Germany, he said. The “recession of globalization” threatened the “export-driven economy”, while the “peak of contradictions” undermined the “tools of the diplomats”.

Steinmeier drew the conclusion that it was in the interest of big business to support a more aggressive foreign policy, even if it brought short-term economic disadvantages.

The “first step to recovery” comes from “the consciousness of those who knew that for us Germans, we cannot stand aloof from the crisis of the global order! Where we can, we—politicians and business leaders—must rouse us Germans from any insular thinking and any feelings of comfort!” Those who recognize this must “also take the next step: As the most networked country, we depend on a peaceful and rule-based order in the world, and we must also intercede for this! Not only in Europe but worldwide...”

Steinmeier impressed upon the representatives of big business that the rise of Germany to a global power could not be achieved solely through the means of peaceful trade: “Economic globalization alone does not guarantee political convergence ... ! More BMWs on the streets of Moscow and more VW plants in China’s metropolitan areas do not necessarily lead to greater political common ground.”

Business must therefore take part in the sanctions imposed by the West against Russia. “Through the annexation of Crimea and its actions in eastern Ukraine”, Russia had placed in question “international law and rule-based order” and thus “violated the foundations of both our security and also our well-being”. The Western powers reacted with sanctions “that also cause ourselves economic costs”. The “costs to a permanently endangered Europe” were, however, “far greater”, and the sanctions were therefore “also in the long-term interests of business”, Steinmeier argued.

At the same time, he stressed that the goal of the sanctions should not be to “economically subjugate Russia”. That was extremely dangerous. “A destabilised, or even collapsing Russia is for themselves and others the much greater risk. Whoever talks like that does European security a disservice.”

Steinmeier added: “Those who say: ‘We are finished with them!’ might be able to win applause from some quarters - but in fact we will never be finished! I still remember, at the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, the Canadian Foreign Minister said at a meeting: ‘We have now to decide whether Russia is a friend or foe, partner or opponent’. I told him: ‘In Canada you can put the question this way perhaps. For Europe Russia will always remain a very large neighbor, and it will either have a good or a bad influence on our development.’”

This was a blatant jab at the United States. Steinmeier named Canada, but he was in fact criticizing Washington which has taken the most aggressive course in the conflict with Russia. As its smaller imperialist neighbor Canada supports US foreign

policy, which is prepared to risk an open military confrontation with Russia in order to bring about regime change in Moscow.

For its part Germany wants to put Russia on the defensive, but does not want the complete collapse of their bilateral economic relations. At the same time, it is not (yet) ready to openly confront the United States. But it is beginning to pursue its imperialist interests more independently and more self-assuredly against other powers. Steinmeier left no doubt that, as in the past, this includes the use of military force and war.

To combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, he said, “Of course the military solution is a part, and we do not shirk from this. In the summer, we decided to support the fight by sending arms to the Kurdish Peshmerga.” While the “principle not to send weapons into areas of crisis” still held, foreign policy consists of “considering many non-perfect options”, and “in such cases, one must have regard to whether one is upholding principles or rather hiding behind them.”

Steinmeier’s entire speech makes clear that the ruling elites in Germany are no longer willing to “hide” behind any “principles” or restrictions that they had to accept after defeat in World War II. They are preparing to impose the new foreign policy programme on the German people.

At the conclusion of his remarks, Steinmeier referred to a survey by the Körber Foundation, which asked Germans “whether Germany should engage more strongly than before internationally”. Only 38 percent answered “Yes”, 60 percent said “No, please continue to hold back.”

The foreign minister commented as follows: “This is the gap between external expectations and internal readiness, ladies and gentlemen, with which I have to deal. To be honest, if I were an engineer, I would, in good conscience, not build a bridge over such a gulf. As a politician, I have to! And I would be happy—and if I was not mistaken in my presentation, it is in your interests—if German business assists a little! Many thanks.”

What Steinmeier is proposing is an alliance of the state and big capital against the population that is overwhelmingly hostile to the new war course. Such an alliance, combining the rich and the powerful against the majority, is deeply undemocratic. After the terrible experiences of two world wars, opposition to war is deeply rooted, especially in Germany. Nevertheless, the ruling elites have decided to return to a policy of war, and impose this on the population.

When Steinmeier had finished, there was thunderous applause in the ballroom of Hotel Adlon.

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