

The danger of nuclear war in North Korea and the return of German militarism

By Peter Schwarz
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President Donald Trump's threats to destroy North Korea have brought the world closer to an atomic war than the Cuban missile crisis 55 years ago. But unlike then, the president sitting in the White House is not seeking to rein in the hotheads among his generals, but is continuing to inflame the conflict daily.

European politicians and media, especially in Germany and France, have responded to the escalating conflict mainly with calls for restraint, distancing themselves equally from their nominal ally in Washington and the regime in Pyongyang.

For example, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel accused the American president of using the same slogans and responding to North Korean threats with the same aggressive rhetoric as the North Korean leader. That "worried him and made him fearful," Gabriel said, "as in the First World War, we are sleepwalking into a war, but in this case, a war that will be conducted with nuclear weapons."

The official statements from Berlin hardly differ from those from Beijing, which likewise calls for both sides to exercise moderation and restraint. It would be naive to see this merely as an expression of concern over the devastating consequences of a nuclear war. For example, NATO also expressed its concern at the "incendiary and threatening rhetoric" then it urged North Korea alone to "refrain from further provocations and give up its nuclear and ballistic missile programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner", as a spokesman for the military alliance said.

The German media presentation of the conflict as being fuelled only by Trump, while "sensible" and "adult" US politicians like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urge moderation, does not hold up under closer scrutiny. For example, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who is usually counted among the "adults," has threatened North Korea with the "destruction of its people." Even newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which are close to the Democrats, regard a preemptive strike against North Korea as a legitimate option.

The distancing of the German government from Washington is to be explained by the fact that it increasingly regards the US as its most important imperialist rival and considers an open conflict with its previous ally inevitable in the long term. This applies not only to Europe and the surrounding regions, but also—and above all—to East Asia, whose importance for the global economy and thus also for Germany has increased massively over the last 25 years.

The US war threats against North Korea and the associated

pressure on China are understood in Berlin as an attack on German economic and geopolitical interests. This becomes very clear when one studies the major publications of the relevant foreign policy think tanks.

Even before the last Bundestag (federal) election four years ago, the German Science and Policy Foundation (SWP) published the paper "New Power. New Responsibility." More than 50 representatives from government, the media, universities, think tanks and all the parties represented in the Bundestag participated in preparing a change in course for Germany's foreign policy. After the election, the new government then put into practice the proposed return to German militarism and a German great-power policy.

Now, the German Foreign Policy Society (DGAP) has presented a 40-page dossier entitled "Foreign policy challenges for the next federal government," which will expand this course to entirely new dimensions. Twelve contributions deal with all important world regions, analyse the "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks" of German foreign policy and develop strategies for action.

The introduction, drafted by Daniela Schwarzer, the director, and Christian Mölling, the DGAP's research director, begins with the words: "The new federal government will have to make important decisions about the national and European framework by the autumn of 2017."

In what follows, the two authors leave no doubt that they regard the US as the most important "challenge" for German foreign policy. They refer to the previous international partner as a "political and economic risk factor," which jeopardizes the "rule-based regulatory structures" upon which Germany is dependent "in terms of security policy as well as well as financial and economic issues."

"Probably the most important change in the overall strategic position of Germany in 2017 is the policy of the United States under President Donald Trump," they write. Since Trump took office, "the US has become a decisive factor of uncertainty." The US president undoubtedly undermined the "consensus of Western-liberal values." Under Trump, the US "no longer stands for a state that wants to further develop and defend the liberal world order."

Around the world, US policy is viewed as a threat to German interests. "There is the danger that the US will leave the [world] order based on institutions and international law, and use its power

for short-term advantages,” write Schwarzer and Mölling. “The undermining of the internal unity of the EU, such as Trump’s closing ranks with countries like Poland, Hungary and the United Kingdom against the broad European consensus, has also become a real risk.”

The DGAP also warns against the “strengthening of protectionism,” the “destabilization of the world trade system,” the “danger of an escalation in the relationship between China and the USA” and “further destabilization in the Gulf region” because of US policy.

The DGAP dossier depicts China as the main arena of German-American antagonisms. Under the heading, “Security and Economic Interdependence: Germany Between the USA and China,” Josef Braml and Henning Riecke argue that in the conflict between the US and China, Germany should not take the side of its traditional American ally. For Germany, “as a trading nation with extensive economic ties to both states and other actors in the Asia-Pacific area,” to defend its interests, it should function as an “honest broker” and try to “de-escalate tensions.”

Braml and Riecke show how German and American business interests collide in the region in several areas. They warn, for example, that Trump might be able to make capital out of America’s role as a protective power in relation to Japan, South Korea and other allies by forcing them to make concessions on trade and monetary policy to the detriment of Germany. In monetary policy too, where the dollar will have to share its lead role with the euro and the Chinese Yuan for the foreseeable future, they see a smouldering conflict.

Of China’s most important international economic project, the “One Belt, One Road” silk road initiative, they write that “it is perceived in Washington as an economic and political counterweight to the economic and political order dominated by the US,” while international, i.e., German and European, companies are interested in China’s global infrastructure plans. For example, “Deutsche Bank and the China Development Bank plan to jointly fund Silk Road Initiative projects to the tune of three billion euros over the next five years.”

Similar assessments can be found in SWP publications. For example, a contribution that appeared in the latest issue of the SWP journal *International Politics*, under the title, “Plea for a new German foreign policy in uncertain times,” warns against any “misjudgement that the transatlantic crisis had begun with Trump and would end with his departure.” In fact, the problem had already begun under President Obama.

The “supposed moderates” in Trump’s team had made “the radical break with 70 years of American post-war policy their own,” writes the author of the article, *Time* journalist Jörg Lau. In a contribution for the *Wall Street Journal*, Trump’s national security adviser, General H.R. McMaster, and economic adviser Gary Cohn had praised the president’s “clarity,” that the world “is not a global community, but an arena where nations, non-governmental organizations and businesses struggle for advantage... Instead of denying this elementary nature of international relations, we welcome it.”

According to Lau, this text is “a shocking document” for the German government. It was a question of a “conflict of

principles” rather than “the usual differences between Willy Brandt and Richard Nixon, Helmut Schmidt and Jimmy Carter, Gerhard Schröder and George W. Bush.” This was “something else.” It concerned the “fundamental questions of the world order.”

The response of the SWP and the DGAP to this “fundamental conflict” is unambiguous: they advocate a return to the great power and militaristic traditions of Germany, which twice inflicted disaster upon the world. Under the pretence of defending “Western values” and “rule-based structures of order” against Trump, they are advocating German dominance over Europe, the formation of new international power blocks, and massive military rearmament.

The headlines alone of the DGAP dossier are indicative: “Germany’s leadership tasks in Europe;” “Use the scope for action in the Western Balkans now;” “A permanent commitment: Ukraine” and “Burden-sharing in NATO: German leadership remains in demand.” Other contributions deal with German interests in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Lau advocates that the Bundestag election should become a campaign for military rearmament. He warns against a “reflexive counter-course to the US president” for disarmament, and writes, “Instead of making the Bundestag election a referendum on a supposedly dangerous rearmament, the population should be enlightened about the new logic of German security: not because of, but in spite of Trump, not because he commands it, but because we want to oppose his irrational policy, we must spend much more on defence.” According to Lau, it is a matter of “Germany’s assertiveness in a crumbling West.”

These statements make clear that the danger of war in North Korea, even if it were temporarily defused, is only a prelude to further conflicts that will inevitably result in a Third World War if they are not stopped by a mass movement of the working class. As at the beginning of the 20th century, conflicts of interest between the imperialist powers have become so acute that they can no longer be resolved by peaceful means.

The return to militarism is supported in Germany by all the parties represented in the Bundestag. In particular, the Left Party is accusing the government of not opposing Washington aggressively enough.

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is the only party fighting in the election campaign to unite the international working class based on a socialist programme directed against war and capitalism.

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