

# The “paradigm shift” in German foreign policy

Stefan Steinberg  
3 April 2010

A number of recent commentaries in the German press have expressed alarm over the course adopted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel regarding the Greek debt crisis. At last week’s meeting of European Union heads of state in Brussels, Merkel dictated terms and made clear that any financial support from Europe for Greece would be linked to punitive conditions and would be forthcoming only as a last resort.

While Merkel’s stance has been hailed in a number of right-wing political commentaries and praised by Germany’s tabloid press, other commentators have noted that it represents a fundamental shift in German foreign policy with far-reaching and potentially dangerous consequences.

The latest edition of *Der Spiegel* magazine poses the issue with the headline: “How European is Angela Merkel? Chancellor Abandons Post-War EU policy.” Applauding the role of “Germany’s great pro-European chancellors”—the two conservatives Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl and the Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt—the magazine describes Merkel’s approach to the Greek debt crisis as a “paradigm shift” in German foreign policy, representing a fundamental break with the policies of her predecessors.

Previously, the magazine writes, the German chancellor’s approach was to “quietly and steadfastly pursue her interests in Brussels with the help of key partners or the European Commission”. Now, *Der Spiegel* remarks, Merkel has become “the first chancellor to have abandoned this principle on an important issue. She has made it clear that there are German interests and European interests, and that they are not necessarily the same”.

The same point is made by Joschka Fischer, Germany’s foreign minister and vice-chancellor from 1998 to 2005 and the leader of the German Green Party for almost 20 years, in a commentary published earlier this week in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In a piece entitled “Frau Germania”, Fischer asks, “What is the matter with Angela Merkel? Only a short while ago, the German chancellor was celebrated as ‘Ms. Europe’; now she increasingly gives the impression of being Frau Germania. Instead of providing resolute leadership in the global financial and economic crisis, the EU’s largest economy is withdrawing into its shell”.

Fischer points out that up to now Germany has been able to profit considerably from the process of European integration. He writes, “Germany has always been the motor of European integration, in accordance with its political and economic interests... The motto was simple: Germany gives and profits in turn. Should Germany spurn the first part of this formula, the European project would suffer serious damage—and so would German national interests. Yet this is the direction in which Chancellor Merkel seems to be heading”.

Fischer goes on to criticize Merkel’s call for the expulsion of Eurozone members that do not meet financial criteria, and asks, “Does she seriously believe that the euro and the EU would survive such punitive action?”

He also points out that Merkel’s insistence on harsh austerity measures on the part of Greece and other Eurozone countries will prove detrimental to German interests, leading to “deflation in these countries, which are the most important markets for German exports”.

The main responsibility for the current conflict within the EU, according to Fischer, rests with Germany and France. “Rather than lead, the Franco-German couple is constantly, and publicly, at each other’s throats. While this quarrel is about who should pay for restructuring Greece, the real issue is the latent distrust between the two partners, which carries the danger of a permanent estrangement”.

Fischer speaks on behalf of a layer of the German bourgeoisie that is eager to use the vacuum of power opened up by the decline of the US to increase German and European influence on the world stage. In a speech at Humboldt University in Berlin in 2007, Fischer had deplored “Europe’s growing insignificance in the world” under conditions of “the self-weakening of the United States due to its politics of unilateralism”.

One year later, Fischer called for the establishment of a “European avant-garde” to advance the interests of German and European capitalism under conditions of mounting trade conflicts with the US on one side and China and the Asian countries on the other. The motor for his “avant-garde” was to be a strong German-Franco axis.

Now Fischer is forced to acknowledge that his hopes of a harmonious union of European states have been dashed. In the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, naked national interests are increasingly dominating the political stage in Europe. There are powerful economic factors behind this development. The latest figures for labour costs provide an insight into the enormous economic gulf prevailing across the European continent.

With labour costs averaging €30.9 per hour, Germany ranks seventh among European countries. In Poland, a mere two hours drive eastwards from the German capital of Berlin, labour costs are nearly 80 percent cheaper at €6.9 per hour. EU member Bulgaria ranks last, with average hourly labour costs of €2.9.

At the same time, the financial crisis has led to a pronounced social polarization within individual countries.

These underlying economic differences are driving European nations apart and leading them to adopt increasingly nationalist policies.

The change in German policy towards Europe has profound political implications. For over four decades, peace in Europe was linked to the division of the continent’s leading industrial power, Germany, overseen by a powerful America on one side and the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow on the other. The collapse of the Stalinist states, the end of the cold war and the weakened position of the United States have created the conditions for a reunited Germany to once again assert its interests on the world stage.

Fischer writes that the stance taken by Merkel represents withdrawal by Germany into its national shell, but there can be no retreat from the world market by the biggest and most export-oriented economy in Europe. The powerful productive forces unleashed by a united Germany are forcing the German bourgeoisie to step out from behind the scenes and find a way to “organise Europe” more directly and nakedly in accordance with Germany’s financial interests.

Twice in the last century, German expansionism was a decisive factor in drawing Europe and the world into war. A renewed attempt at a forceful reorganisation of Europe by Germany will inevitably revive old antagonisms, with catastrophic consequences for the continent.

This underscores the necessity for the working class of Europe to advance its own independent perspective, based on the united struggle of European workers against the European bourgeoisie on the revolutionary program of the United Socialist States of Europe, in solidarity with the world working class.

Stefan Steinberg



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**