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German militarism and the US debacle in Iraq

By Johannes Stern

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The German bourgeoisie is responding to the debacle of US imperialism in Iraq by intensifying its campaign for militarism and war.

On Tuesday, during her first official visit to the US, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen spoke out in favour of a strong *Bundeswehr* (German armed forces) participation in an international military intervention. Germany had “key positions and capabilities, which other countries do not”, she said. The UN had asked her “that Germany one day also lead a United Nations military peace mission”, and the defence ministry was considering how the *Bundeswehr* could be more heavily involved.

Last weekend, federal President Joachim Gauck repeated his call for a more aggressive foreign policy and more military interventions. He had “the feeling that our country should perhaps put aside a reticence that was advisable in previous decades, in favour of a greater sense of responsibility”, the president told broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk*.

Gauck called several times for a greater use of the military. In the “battle for human rights or for the survival of innocent people”, he said, it was “sometimes necessary to use weapons”. A “last resort” could not exclude the “deployment of military means from the outset.”

It is increasingly clear that the war offensive of the German bourgeoisie is closely related to the historic crisis of US imperialism. The German media has commented on the US military debacle in Iraq with a mixture of fear, anger and shock.

Under the headline, “America's dangerous hesitation”, *Spiegel Online* writes that the US is completing “an historic change of course in foreign policy” under Obama. Washington no longer “wanted to be world policeman” and was adopting a more restrained position. Although Islamic fundamentalist groups were marching on Bagdad, America was staying in the background and was not sending ground troops, but only “a handful of soldiers”. And this, even though the “job” in Iraq is far from over, the magazine wrote.

Under the provocative headline “Iraq: Imagine there is a war, but no one intervenes”, Josef Joffe complains in the current issue of *Die Zeit* about the end of “America’s short-lived supremacy”. After “thirteen years of war in the Middle East, after 5,000 dead and four trillion dollars”, the US was “tired” and was exercising “self restraint”. In Europe too, America no longer has a “military option”; the 300,000 soldiers of former times have been “shrunk back to one-tenth”.

Joffe is a cynical war propagandist with close ties to the American neo-cons, who responds to each crisis with calls for a massive military intervention. He accuses Obama of “backing down” and “indecision”. Rogue states such as Russia, China and Iran would move into the vacuum and develop their “power politics”, he says. Noticeably desperate and angry about the widespread anti-war sentiment within Germany, he provocatively poses the question: “What happens if America no longer wants to be world policeman?”

The constant complaint about the alleged “inaction” of the US, which runs like a red thread through the German media commentary, is patently absurd. Obama has sent warships to the region, and following the NATO bombing of Libya has again been preparing a war that threatens to drown the entire Middle East in blood.

The German bourgeoisie accuses the US of “inaction” because it has come to the conclusion that the period in which it could pursue its geopolitical and economic interests in the shadow of the United States is over.

The return of German militarism raises historical questions. While the German bourgeoisie tries to hide its Great Power ambitions under the guise of peacekeeping, human rights and stability, history teaches that German imperialism is among the most unstable elements in world politics. In the 20th century, Germany twice tried to impose its imperialist interests against its rivals, and thereby laid the world to waste.

At the moment, the German bourgeoisie has neither the political will nor the military capacity to pursue its own imperialist objectives in an open confrontation with the US or the other Great Powers. Gauck, Foreign Minister Steinmeier and von der Leyen repeatedly emphasize that there can be no unilateral German action and that Germany is only seeking a greater role within the existing alliances. However, there are profound historical forces at work that follow their own logic.

The reason for the return of German militarism is the crisis of capitalism, which produced world wars twice in the 20th century. In his 1934 essay “War and the Fourth International”, Leon Trotsky wrote that German capitalism, “driven by its unbearable contradictions and the consequences of defeat”, had been “forced to tear off the straitjacket of democratic pacifism”. The terrible consequences are well known.

In the fight for spheres of influence today, the imperialist powers cannot be reconciled in the long term. It is an irony of history that the US is now calling on its main enemies in the Second World War—Germany and Japan—to rearm in order to support Washington’s encirclement of Russia and China. Washington and Berlin closely collaborated in fomenting the coup in Ukraine. But can there be any doubt that the further struggle for control of Eastern Europe and Eurasia will lead to conflicts between Germany and the United States?

The German ruling elite is already elaborating its plans for seizing control of raw materials, markets and cheap labour. On Wednesday, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called upon Germany to develop an “Africa Strategy” and for a “debate about German interests.” At issue were “raw materials, land, oil, gas and access to markets”. The official web site of the Foreign Ministry is once again raising the claim for “leadership”. A strategy paper bears the title: “Germany’s destiny: To lead Europe in order to lead the world.”

There is at least one good thing about the persistent calls for war and German “leadership”. They make clear that the ruling class has not changed its spots. No one should have any illusions. When the German bourgeoisie last sought to rule the world, it brought Hitler to power. It will employ no less brutal methods today to suppress the resistance of the population and to push through its rearmament.

The working class must not let things proceed that far. It must stop the warmongers before they are able to once again cast the world into the abyss. There is only one way forward. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) must be built as the centre of opposition to the return of German militarism. The struggle against war and its cause, capitalism, requires the mobilization of the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme.