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A US Missile Defence Shield in Europe?

Opinions and Arguments in the German Political Debate

The US plan to install a limited missile defence capability in Poland and the Czech Republic has made massive waves among European policy-makers and policy-analysts.¹ Despite the fact that the US has never made a secret of its European missile defence endeavours, it was only when the Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference in early February 2007, in which he sharply criticised the US administration for risking the destabilisation of the international system, that a publicly visible European debate on the issue unfolded. Within this debate, Germany as the largest EU Member State has played and will continue to play a rather important role. Yet the German position on the question of the deployment of a European missile defence shield seems to be difficult to define, which is to a large extent due to an ongoing internal political rift over the issue. Since November 2005, the German Government has been formed by a Grand Coalition comprised of the leading conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its smaller sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). While, since its formation, this Grand Coalition has been shattered by a variety of battles over issues of domestic politics, the possible deployment of a US missile defence shield in Central Europe has constituted the first issue in the realm of external affairs to put the Grand Coalition under considerable pressure.

As the shape and outcome of the internal debate will have a crucial impact on Germany's future stance *vis-à-vis* the deployment of a European missile defence shield and thus the development of a more unitary European position, the purpose of this rather concise paper is to provide a chronological overview of the key positions and arguments that have characterised the domestic political debate in Germany on this issue since mid-February 2007 up to the current state of play. This overview will be principally focussed on the three coalition partners, as well as on the two main opposition parties, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), rather than on the only very recently founded Left Party – a successor of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) – and the wider public debate.

I. The Initial Rift within the Grand Coalition

The first phase of the German political debate on the planned US missile defence system in Europe began immediately following the security conference in Munich when the German Minister of Foreign Affairs and leading party member of the SPD, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, expressed severe concerns about the way in which the US administration had conveyed its plans to its European partners and Russia. Steinmeier particularly criticised the US for not having consulted Russia prior to announcing its endeavours to deploy a new missile defence system in Central Europe – a criticism that was soon proven to be largely groundless, as the US had repeatedly informed Russia about its plans.² While leading SPD party members, such as the party's spokesman on foreign affairs, Gert Weissenkirch, and the spokesman for the left wing within the SPD, Niels Annen, defended Steinmeier's position *vis-à-vis* the US and its missile defence shield deployment plan, members of the CDU vigorously attacked him for his statement. Thus, the CDU spokesman on foreign affairs, Eckard von Klaeden, as well as his counterpart from the CSU, Theodor von Guttenberg, claimed that Steinmeier had made a "worrying contribution to drawing a misleading picture of the United States" and requested him to refrain from fostering "anti-American reflexes" within the German public.³

Largely responsible for the harsh criticism of Steinmeier by CDU/CSU officials has been a general deeply-rooted suspicion among CDU/CSU members that Steinmeier is following the largely uncritical stance towards Russia pursued by the former social-democratic Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, under whom Steinmeier was head of the

chancellery. However, the current Chancellor, Angela Merkel of the CDU, who has been quite eager to maintain coalition discipline since entering into office given the difficult government constellation, soon came to the defence of Steinmeier and supported his statement.⁴ A subsequent high-level meeting of the heads of the coalition parties in the office of the Chancellor in early March resulted in a temporary agreement among the coalition partners not to discuss the issue any longer in public. Yet, it also revealed that differences in opinion on whether the US missile defence shield plan should be put into practice remained, with the CDU largely in favour and the SPD largely against.⁵

II. The Stance of the Opposition Parties

A speech delivered by former Chancellor Schröder in mid-March marked the end of the rather short-lived agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD to no longer discuss the missile defence issue publicly. At the same time it heralded the beginning of a second phase in the debate on the US missile defence plans, which also began to increasingly involve the verbal contributions of the Green Party and the FDP. In his speech, Schröder criticised the political debate about the US proposal for fostering anti-Russian resentment, denounced the installation of US missile defence systems in the immediate neighbourhood of Russia as a “nonsense policy” and encouraged the German Government to make use of its transatlantic contacts in order to convince the US to abandon its missile defence plans.⁶ At the same time, another German political veteran, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, entered the arena on behalf of the Green Party and emphasized the need for a European debate on the issue of deploying a US missile defence system on European soil.⁷ Moreover, the leader of the parliamentary group of the Greens and former Minister of the Environment, Jürgen Trittin, strongly criticised support for the US missile defence plans, which he regarded as being anti-Russian and capable of reviving Cold War sentiments in Europe.⁸ The Greens, thus, nourished their image as a pacifist party with a rather anti-American orientation.

Germany's stance

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Articulating a position largely analogous to the Green party, the party leader of the FDP, Guido Westerwelle, requested Chancellor Merkel in her capacity as the President of the European Council to launch a debate on the US missile defence plans at an EU level and, more generally, to take a stand against the deployment of the US missile defence system in Europe.⁹ In the meantime, Chancellor Merkel cautiously advocated finding a solution regarding the missile defence issue within the framework of the NATO Council and the NATO-Russia Council, revealing Germany's post-World War II difficulties in addressing defence issues without prior consultation with its allies and the strong transatlantic ties of the CDU/CSU.¹⁰

III. Attempts to Reconstruct Social-democratic Pacifism

While the opposition parties increasingly joined the debate, largely opposing the US plans for the deployment of a missile defence shield in Europe, the discussion between the CDU/CSU and the SPD became even more polarised on 17 March when the party leader of the SPD, Kurt Beck, gave an interview to Germany's most popular daily newspaper, the *Bild Zeitung*, in which he bluntly declared that "we do not need any new missiles in Europe".¹¹ Somewhat more diplomatic in tone and thus trying to pour oil on the water, Steinmeier once again pointed out that although he disapproved of the US approach towards the missile defence issue, he still advocated an open debate on the issue within the framework of NATO.¹² Nevertheless, the CDU was deeply irritated by the statement made by Beck, which van Klæden simply denounced as being incomprehensible and an infringement of the coalition agreement's commitment to an effective multilateral approach of the German Government in international affairs.¹³ Indeed, within the CDU/CSU, but also within the German media, Beck's rhetoric was largely perceived as part of a wider strategy to re-establish the pacifist credentials of the SPD, largely lost during Schröder's chancellorship from 1998 to 2005, and thereby to regain the sympathy of certain segments of the German electorate, which the SPD had lost to the Greens and particularly the PDS in the months before.¹⁴

However, Beck did not only attract major criticism for his statement from the coalition partners, but also from within his own party where experts on issues of defence were demanding a more nuanced debate.¹⁵ Moreover, most of the German press attacked Beck for undermining Chancellor Merkel's attempts to find a diplomatic ap-

proach towards the US's plans and the Russian response, and military experts remarked that Beck had displayed "an almost unbelievable lack of knowledge" in the matter.¹⁶ However, Beck also received support. Thus, the SPD's Secretary General, Hubertus Heil, for example, rejected the US missile defence plans as the "potential trigger of a new arms race" and therefore suggested that the US should directly negotiate with Iran in order to render the deployment of a missile defence system in Europe obsolete.¹⁷ Again, this statement underlined the SPD's endeavours to revive the party's pacifist tradition and moreover aimed at appealing to the fear of a new US-Russian arms race among certain parts of the German electorate.

IV. Implications of the Iranian Nuclear Threat

The third and, so far, last phase of the German political debate on the planned US missile defence system was launched in mid-April by Iran's claim to be able to enrich uranium on an industrial scale, which prompted a couple of CDU/CSU politicians to demand the immediate installation of a pan-European missile defence system. Thus, the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the *Bundestag* and CDU member, Ruprecht Polenz, advocated the development of a NATO-wide missile defence system in the face of the Iranian threat.¹⁸ Similar demands were made by the vice chairman of the parliamentary group of the CDU, Andreas Schockenhoff, and by von Klæden. However, the most prominent if not necessarily whole-hearted advocate of the installation of a pan-European missile defence system in

Europe within the CDU has been the German Minister of Defence, Franz Josef Jung, who has pointed out that the developments in Iran tend to suggest that such a military device might be "sensible".¹⁹

The CDU/CSU proposals have provoked rather harsh criticism from the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, which all expressed serious concerns about the deployment of a NATO-wide missile defence shield.²⁰ Yet, none of these parties is entirely united over the issue and thus also the SPD transatlanticist, Hans-Ulrich Klose, for example, expressed strong support for the US missile defence plans in the face of a growing Ira-

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a minimal consensus in the coalition on the issue, namely that all future decisions should be made within the framework of NATO and that the US should thus refrain from taking any unilateral measures.

nian threat.²¹ Also, contrary to his party's position, the departing chairman of the CSU, Edmund Stoiber, recently announced at a joint press conference with the Russian President Vladimir Putin that he was against the US missile defence shield plans.²² Despite the news from Iran, the official government stance has remained the same and thus on 11 April a spokesman for the government merely reaffirmed that further decisions regarding the proposed US missile defence system should be taken within the framework of NATO in due course.²³

V. The Current State of Play

Over the last weeks, the debates on the planned US missile defence system within and among the parties of the Grand Coalition and the opposition have no longer featured prominently in the media. Yet, there is still only a minimal consensus in the coalition on the issue, namely that all future decisions should be made within the framework of NATO and that the US should thus refrain from taking any unilateral measures. Apart from this, the Grand Coalition remains deeply divided about the question of whether a US missile defence shield should be installed at all in Europe, with the majority of the CDU/CSU in favour and the majority of the SPD against. The SPD in particular seems to regard the missile defence debate as a valuable opportunity to win back some of the votes that it has lost not only to the Greens and the Left Party, but also to the CDU. However, disagreement about the future stance on the issue also persists within the coalition parties. In contrast to this, the two main opposition parties appear to be comparatively united, as both the Greens and the FDP have portrayed themselves as outspoken opponents of the establishment of a US missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Yet, in the face of a Grand Coalition government, the positions of the Green Party and the FDP, and the Left Party for that matter, play only a minor role.

Germany's stance *vis-à-vis* the US missile defence shield and its contributions towards formulating a more unitary European position will depend on the future debate within the CDU/CSU and the SPD as well as on the debate between them, always assuming of course that the coalition will last until 2009. Indeed, the outcome of further US-Russian talks might considerably alter the tone of these debates and put the Grand Coalition under even greater pressure in the future.

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¹ Interestingly, the fact that the US has also planned to deploy certain components of its missile defence shield in the United Kingdom has provoked comparatively little repercussions in European public political discourse.

² 'US-Raketenpläne: Steinmeier warnt vor Gefahr für Abrüstung', *Der Spiegel*, 22 February 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,468076,00.html>; 'Streit über Raketenschild –

Washington: Kein Nato-Projekt', *Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 March 2007.

<http://www.faz.net/s/RubDDBDABB9457A437BAA85A49C26FB23A0/Doc~ED82C16517CB342FD910EBF87499C165A~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>

³ 'US Raketenschild: Union wirft Steinmeier Antiamerikanismus vor – SPD empört', *Der Spiegel*, 23 February 2007. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,468257,00.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'Koalitionskrach: Showdown im Kanzleramt', *Der Spiegel*, 4 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,469784,00.html>

⁶ 'Hilfe für Putin: Schröder geißelt Bushs Raketenschild', *Der Spiegel*, 11 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/debatte/0,1518,471062,00.html>

⁷ 'Joschka Fischer: EU soll sich in Streit um Raketenschild einmischen', *Der Spiegel*, 16 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,472243,00.html>

⁸ 'US-Verteidigungspläne: Beck warnt vor neuen Raketen in Europa', *Der Spiegel*, 18 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,472351,00.html>

⁹ 'Streit um Raketenschild: Steinmeier warnt USA vor neuem Wettrüsten', *Der Spiegel*, 17 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,472289,00.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'US-Verteidigungspläne: Beck warnt vor neuen Raketen in Europa'

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 'Koalitionszoff: Beck's Anti-Raketen-Kurs bringt die Union in Wallung' *Der Spiegel*, 19 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,472523,00.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Raketenschild: Beck schrödert sich ins Herz der Partei', *Der Spiegel*, 20 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,472820,00.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 'Raketenschild in Osteuropa: Steinmeier plädiert für Nato-Debatte', *Der Spiegel*, 19 March 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,472632,00.html>

¹⁸ ‘Aufrüstung: Irans Atomprogramm heizt deutsche Debatte über Raketenschirm an’, *Der Spiegel*, 10 April 2007. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,476473,00.html>

¹⁹ ‘Irans Atompläne: Jung befürwortet US-Raketenabwehr für Europa’, *Der Spiegel*, 12 April 2007. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,476780,00.html>

²⁰ ‘Aufrüstung: Irans Atomprogramm heizt deutsche Debatte über Raketenschirm an’

²¹ ‘Raketenschirm: Beck schrödert sich ins Herz der Partei’

²² ‘Stoiber gegen US-System zur Raketenabwehr’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 6 July 2007.

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/International-Raketenschild;art123,2334206>

²³ ‘Unions-Debatte: Regierung meidet Festlegung zu US-Raketenabwehr’, *Der Spiegel*, 11 April 2007.

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,476667,00.html>