

Pipe Dreams

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When a famously hard-headed statesman starts believing fairy tales, it may be a sign that all is not right with the world. In late July, former German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble gave an interview to *Welt am Sonntag*, a centre-right Sunday paper. In it, Schäuble publicly renounced his life-long vision of a French-German *Kerneuropa*, or core Europe. Apparently, with the war in Ukraine, the possibility of even imagining a sovereign Europe with an independent foreign policy now required more than that. The vision he produced was, however, so unworldly as to suggest – coming from a figure known for his ruthless political realism – the opposite: a subversive admission that, with the war, all dreams – left or right – of a Europe with what Macron calls ‘strategic sovereignty’ are nothing but pipe dreams now.

So, in Schäuble’s view, what geo-strategic moves might convert Europe into a sovereign power, after the *Zeitenwende*? The French-German tandem has clearly failed to prevent the war, or even to have a say in it. Therefore, he proposes, Poland should be invited in – ‘as an equal and equally important member of the leadership for European unification’ – to make it a triumvirate, a directorate of three. The three would operate outside the European Union, since provisions for defence under the Lisbon Treaty ‘do not measure up to current challenges’. Berlin, Paris and Warsaw would invite other European states to join their ‘coalition of the willing’, as Schäuble agrees with the interviewer it will be. The same principle would also apply to issues like

immigration and asylum policy. The attentive reader notes that this would result in a 'Europe à la carte', replacing the EU's supra-national institutions with what in Brussels is called, with an obligatory shudder of disgust, inter-governmentalism. In the longer run, it might sideline the Brussels establishment as a whole in favour of a multinational strategic alliance, led by the three sovereign states. So far so good.

But this is only the beginning. The main task for the triumvirate would be to build up a European nuclear arsenal. If France has the bombs, Germany has the money. And since 'Putin's aides (!) threaten us every day with a nuclear strike', Schäuble argues, it is clear that, 'in return for a joint nuclear deterrence, we Germans must make a financial contribution to French military power' and 'engage in enhanced strategic planning with Paris'. Repeatedly, Schäuble insists that none of this must contradict the three states' commitment to NATO – in other words, to American military leadership. 'What France must deliver', in return for the German co-financing of its nuclear force, 'is that everything must fit in NATO.' In fact, one reason why Schäuble wants Poland coopted into his directorate is that Warsaw would guarantee that 'European defence would not be an alternative but complementary to NATO'. The general rule, *per* Schäuble, must always be: 'everything with NATO, nothing against it.'

Schäuble's proposal for a reorganization of Europe can only be understood as a product of despair: a last attempt to keep alive something like a minimally credible prospect of European strategic independence. For this, however, he must make gravity-defying leaps of faith. To accommodate the rise of the eastern states as a new European power centre, following the Russian attack on Ukraine, Schäuble invites Poland to join Germany and France as a European co-hegemon, apparently hoping that this will pull Warsaw out of its symbiotic relationship with Washington. (Remember that Poland's Law and Justice government has just presented Germany with a trillion-euro bill for World War Two reparations, confident that this will help it win next year's election.) Schäuble also expects that France will

not only accept a third country as co-governor of Europe but concede to Germany and Poland together what it has consistently since the 1960s refused to Germany alone – namely, a voice on the use of its nuclear arsenal.

One of the pillars of US power in Europe is the German signature to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, making Germany dependent for its defence during the Cold War on the American nuclear umbrella. Today such dependence takes the form of the presence of an unknown number of American nuclear bombs on German soil, together with a licence for the German Luftwaffe to carry American nuclear warheads at American command to American-picked targets, using fighter planes purchased from the United States, which is officially called ‘nuclear participation’. There is no reason to believe that the United States could be convinced, NATO or not, that Germany would need to get its hands on French nuclear warheads, too, even if only indirectly by paying for them. There is also no prospect whatever that France will allow Germany and Poland a say on when to put Paris at risk for the sake of Berlin or Warsaw; in the past, French attempts to get Germany to share in the costs of the *force de frappe* were repeatedly abandoned when in return Germany wanted to have a look, just a look, at the French nuclear target catalogue.

One also wonders how someone who has been around as long as Schäuble could seriously expect that a European security policy co-directed by Poland could be anything but an extension of the security policy of the United States. The two main objectives of Polish foreign policy are, after all, independence from Germany and a strong US presence in Europe to keep Russia in check, instead of the country’s unreliable European neighbours – who, unlike the US, might, when push came to shove, fear for their own security. Unfazed, Schäuble hopes for his triple nuclear alliance to seek a partnership with ‘a Russia that respects the basic rules of cooperation among partners’. Surely, he told *Welt am Sonntag* readers, the Poles too would agree that partnership with a Russia that is ‘committed to renunciation of the use of force, the inviolability of borders and the fundamental rules of

international law' would be politically desirable: 'With such a Russia we can and want to cooperate in good faith.' Of course, with Putin 'this will be difficult' – though not, according to Schäuble, impossible.

Upon closer inspection, Schäuble's Franco-German-Polish triumvirate looks like the *fata morgana* of a thirsty traveller in the desert. Someone like Schäuble cannot be in doubt that for Poland and its protector, the United States, a negotiated European security architecture that includes Russia has been ruled out since the 1990s. Their preferred outcome for the war in Ukraine is a defeated Russia, 'weakened' (Antony Blinken) and kept in check by superior military force. Europe, in this scenario, is led not by Germany or France but by the United States, and not just on the Eurasian continent but globally, particularly in relation to China (which Schäuble mentions only once in passing). In addition to situating his 'sovereign' triple alliance in NATO, Schäuble suggests that the UK, the self-nominated *subcomandante* of the US worldwide, should also have a role in it. That someone like him should be reduced to pious hopes that the United States will look the other way while European states conduct their own independent foreign policy may be taken to indicate how effectively the war in Ukraine has shifted Europe's centre of gravity both to the East and, with it, to the West, toward the United States.

Where Schäuble is, for a change, in line with the European *Zeitgeist* is that the EU as a really existing international organization plays no role at all in his project; actually, it is explicitly excluded from it. What he has in mind, without saying it, is what Macron in his more exuberant moments calls a *refondation* of Europe. In recent years von der Leyen's outfit and the supra-national 'Community method' it administers has lost reputation, rather dramatically, among European national leaders. Brussels' handling of the pandemic was widely considered a disaster, even though it was Merkel who had burdened it with the procurement of vaccines. The EU was also blamed for not having stored masks and protective clothing, for

being generally unprepared for a medical emergency like Covid and for trying, in vain, to make Schengen member states keep their borders open in times of rising infection rates.

A little later came a gradual realization that the EU's celebrated NGEU Corona Recovery Fund was far too small and too bureaucratically managed to do anything for the country for which it was primarily meant, Italy. This was evidenced by the downfall, after barely eighteen months in office, of the EU's financial white knight, Mario Draghi, as Prime Minister of his home country. Add to this the haggling with Poland and Hungary over 'rule of law' at a time when Eastern Europe was becoming geopolitically the Union's rising region, not to mention the EU's total absence when the Minsk Accords fell apart and the United States emerged openly as the chief power managing the conflict with Russia on Ukraine. As *Realpolitik* raised its ugly head, the EU turned into an auxiliary organization of NATO, charged among other things with devising sanctions against Russia which mostly backfired, and with putting together a common European energy policy, a mission impossible from the beginning.

The extent to which the leadership of Europe has migrated to the US - and the degree to which the EU has lost control over itself - is demonstrated by the politics of the accession of new EU member states, an increasingly messy battleground for the conflict over who runs Europe and for what purpose. In the 1990s, the US let it be known that as part of its New Order, the EU had to take in the former Warsaw Pact members, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, to beef them up economically and reorganize them institutionally, so as to anchor them firmly in 'the West'; later the Baltic states, former republics of the Soviet Union, followed suit, as did Bulgaria and Romania. At the time the EU was also expected to admit Turkey, its main merit being that it was a long-standing NATO member, which would have given 'Europe' joint borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran, plus an intra-EU military occupation in northern Cyprus and a potential war with an EU member state, Greece. This was prevented by France

together with Germany under Merkel, world champion in the art of passive resistance, although officially of course Turkey remains a candidate for accession.

Integrating new members places heavy demands on the EU bureaucracy, which must teach them the intricacies of the so-called *acquis communautaire*, the endless set of rules that states must implement as a precondition of entry. Moreover, to firm up their allegiance to capitalism, new members must be afforded economic support; the poorer they are, and the more there are of them, the bigger must become the Union's structural funds, funded out of national budgets. As so often elsewhere, moreover, money may fail to buy love and new member states in the East may have their own ideas on whether they should follow orders from Brussels or not. As a result, waiting periods have become longer in recent years, as negotiations are dragged out under pressure from member states. The last country to join was Croatia, admitted in 2013 after ten years of negotiations and with its institutional reforms concluded to the satisfaction of the EU, if not of its anti-corruption authorities. Still on the waiting list are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, the so-called West Balkan states, without however much prospect of admission in the foreseeable future, given the opposition of France.

Enter Ukraine – which, through its omnipresent president, demands full membership immediately, *tutto e subito*; hardly without encouragement from its American allies, who need someone to pay for the reconstruction once the war ends. Dressed as so often these days in blue and yellow, and never afraid of sounding kitschy, von der Leyen announced on Twitter on 18 June that 'Ukrainians are ready to die for the European perspective. We want them to live with us the European dream'. But what seemed to become a fast-track trip to Brussels was soon stopped dead. While clearly the West Balkans must have protested, existing member states seem to have realized that the accession of Ukraine would finally blow up the EU's budget; not to mention that Ukraine's oligarchic political system would have

made Poland and Hungary, the 'illiberal' arch-enemies of the EU-Parliament's majority, look like Scandinavian democracies.

In this situation, it was Olaf Scholz who, once more in true Merkelian spirit, pulled the stop by demanding that the EU, before letting in any new members, should itself undergo 'structural reforms' of a sort of which it is predictably incapable. One of his proposals concerned the composition of the Commission. Today, there is one commissioner for every member state, which adds up to a college of 27; already too big, as a Brussels adage has it, to meet in full without members using binoculars to look each other in the eyes. This, of course, is no reason for the smaller member states not to insist on one commission seat per country, given that the EU pays its commissioners significantly more than the smaller and poorer countries pay their prime ministers.

Reducing the number of commissioners will require an amendment of the Treaties to which each member state must agree. In a speech in late August at Charles University in Prague, a companion piece to Macron's Sorbonne address of 2017, Scholz demanded, on top of this, stronger rule-of-law provisions in the Treaties and more effective powers for the EU to sanction member states for infractions, knowing that this would be unacceptable to Poland and Hungary, and presumably to others as well. (Circumventing both the EU and NATO, Scholz also suggested a joint air-defence system for Europe, set up by Germany together with neighbouring member states. One will see what comes out of this.) Scholz furthermore insisted on majority voting of the Council on EU foreign policy, presumably with votes weighted by country size, to prevent the new *Ostblock* outvoting Germany and France on behalf of the US. Of course, in the EU ending unanimity requires unanimity, a roadblock that even Merkel had been unable to get around.

Meanwhile in Germany, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, one of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders, is letting the German public know that the war in Ukraine may last

many more years and that Zelensky will continue to need economic and military support, including 'heavy weapons'. With the exception of the Honourable Member from Rheinmetall, one of the world's leading arms producers, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, MP for the FDP and chair of the Bundestag defence committee, today's Greens are easily the most belligerent of German politicians, representing a generation that was spared from military service, unlike the despised peaceniks of yesteryear. This adds a peculiar flavour to their unending expressions of gratitude and admiration for the brave Ukrainians who 'defend our values' by risking their lives, under a strict compulsory draft.

It also explains their unqualified identification with the war aims of the now governing wing of Ukrainian nationalism. (Baerbock: 'Crimea belongs to Ukraine... Ukraine defends our freedom as well, our order of peace. And we support it financially and militarily, as long as needed. Full stop.') Sending arms, and seeing them in use from the safety of their living rooms – Twitter offers any number of jubilant German armchair accounts of Ukrainian artillery hitting Russian targets, much like video gamers reporting their exploits – comes with almost daily assurances, echoing Biden and his crew, that Germany will never send troops to the Ukrainian battlefields where Ukrainians 'fight and die for all of us'. Clearly this helps the new bellicists to root for the war being fought to the very *Endsieg*, without risk to themselves or their children, insisting that there can be no negotiations on ending the war before it will have ended with an unconditional Russian withdrawal.

So far, the Greening of what the Germans used to call *Friedenspolitik* has been remarkably successful. The space for legitimate public debate on peace and war has narrowed dramatically. The chief of Germany's domestic intelligence service, the Orwellian-named Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, publicly assured the government that he would keep a watchful eye on everyone claiming that the Russian attack on Ukraine might have been related to a previous American military build-up around Russia – in other words, on all

Putinversteh. The press, quality or not, recites as the ultimate wisdom of international relations the ancient Roman imperialist adage, forgotten by sentimental peacemongers like Willy Brandt: *si vis pacem para bellum* – if you want peace, prepare for war. This is to proscribe the more recent insight, which goes back in part to none other than Friedrich Engels, that with modern weaponry, preparing for war may unleash an arms race that precisely gets you the opposite of peace.

The unprecedented American military build-up over the past thirty years – including the arming of Ukraine after 2014, among the most impressive preparations for war in recent history – and the unilateral cancellation of all arms-control treaties from the Cold War era, must never be mentioned in this context. In fact, anything that refers to the prehistory of the invasion of Ukraine is anathema, especially the Minsk negotiations and the winter months of 2021, except for that mythical moment when ‘Putin’ discovered his genocidal hatred of everything Ukrainian. Another article of faith, which makes for an ideal *credo quia absurdum* loyalty test, is that Russia, which was unable to conquer Kyiv, less than a hundred miles from the Russian border, will, if allowed to survive the war in Ukraine, invade and conquer Finland, the Baltic states and Poland, to be followed by Germany and, why not, the rest of Western Europe, for no other reason than a general disdain for the West European way of life.

Seen this way, the fact that the special €100 billion defence budget announced by the German government three days into the war will have its first effects on the ground only in five years’ time does not mean that it is wasted; it only means that it has nothing to do with the Ukrainian war as such. What Germany is preparing for, following a request from its American friends that it could not refuse, is a world that is one big battlefield impatiently waiting for out-of-area NATO interventions for the propagation of democracy and as an opportunity for overfed post-heroic citizens to stand up for ‘Western values’.

Thus in mid-August, in yet another demonstration of its

unshaking loyalty, the German government sent six Eurofighter jets on a trip half around the globe to Australia, on their way passing by mainland China and Taiwan, for joint maneuvers with South Korea and New Zealand and to demonstrate German readiness for more. The German press sheepishly let it be known as background that 'the new strategic concept of NATO mentions China as a challenge'. One of the six war planes turned out to be defective and had to be brought back home, but the remaining five arrived safely, as far as one knows, at their far-away destination, refuelled in mid-air by an A330 flying tanker, which made the FAZ proud of the state of German martial prowess. The trip followed the outgoing Merkel government's sending a frigate, the Bayern, on a tour to the Indo-Pacific, formerly known as the South China Sea, to display both trans-Atlantic loyalty and East-Pacific resolve. So much for European strategic autonomy.