

THE SUICIDE OF THE ATLANTIC WEST

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JOSCHKA FISCHER
BY **THOMAS KLAU**

The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president is an event with deep implications for European security, the transatlantic relationship, and the global balance of power. An international system largely based on U.S. security commitments and expanding global trade is suddenly confronted with a fundamental challenge from the very nation that acted as its main guarantor since 1945. Europe must urgently face up to this new reality and build up its military capacity to defend itself.

THOMAS KLAU: How do you see the implications of the election of U.S. president Trump for European security?

JOSCHKA FISCHER: One key consequence for us Europeans is that we will have to pay far more attention and invest much more in our own security, both its external and internal dimensions. Trump's electoral victory means that Europe must try much harder to reach common positions and must build up the ability to defend itself in military terms – even if the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) will remain irreplaceable for as long as it exists, and even if we will continue to need the American nuclear guarantee should NATO come to an end. Boosting Europe's autonomous capacities is not just a question of spending more money. A lot can be achieved by pooling resources, by enabling the European Defence Agency to do its job so as to end wasteful spending duplications, and by working to narrow the deep-seated cultural and political differences between some EU Member States regarding defence policy, including highly sensitive topics such as arms exports. Take France and Germany, for instance: the degree of personal involvement of French presidents in the sale of French weapons systems abroad is something without real

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DER SUIZID DES ATLANTISCHEN WESTENS

Die Rückkehr des Nationalismus in die westliche Politik ist eine bedrohliche Zäsur. Europa braucht jetzt eigene militärische Handlungsfähigkeit.

equivalent in Germany. The underlying cause: Germany's economy is far less dependent on arms exports than France's.

Developing common practices and approaches will be anything but easy. But we must do it because there is simply no viable alternative. It is no good burying our heads in the sand. The plain fact is that wherever you look, Europe is faced with a very difficult neighbourhood where threats can suddenly materialise, as Ukraine has shown. It is essential for the safety of our citizens to prepare for a European future where we do not have to rely on U.S. defence guarantees and U.S. military spending in the way we have done until now. And that means having hard power, building up European air transport capacities, a European air defence system, European commando forces, cyber space capacities – the list goes on. Without enough hard power, you simply lack the material basis to discuss effective common policies in any meaningful way. If you don't have the capacity to act, why discuss whether taking action makes sense, meets a need, is the better option? It would just be a waste of time. It is a mistake to think – like many Germans do – that foreign policy can be effective without having hard power capacity somewhere in the mix.

A case in point is Eastern Europe. Putin has made it crystal clear that Russia aims for renewed dominance in the region. The chal-

lenge there for us is to be true to our treaty obligations and resist Russian ambitions to establish control – while never forgetting that Russia is our neighbour as well and must be treated accordingly. In all of this, we must be realistic and accept that dealing with Russia's ambitions in Europe is not something we can continue to delegate forever to the US.

It is not generally understood that for Moscow, it is the European Union that has now become the main threat, far more than NATO actually. To grasp what the Russian government is doing, you must understand that its most deep-seated and unspoken fear is to be faced with a Kiev Maidan-like situation on the Red Square. That is the reason why Moscow is offering finance to the political forces and parties that aim to destroy Europe's political integration and with it everything that has been achieved here since 1945. Of course, Moscow money for political movements that seek to undermine Western unity is nothing new. Think of the massive covert Soviet and East German financing and influencing of the German peace movement, the full extent of which became apparent only after the end of the Cold War.

Then there is what is happening on our southern borders. Here too we are faced with a dual obligation. We must win back control over our external sea and land boundaries. In a Europe of open internal borders, we owe it to our citizens to provide them with effective external

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protection. Building up an adequate navy capacity and a European Coast Guard, especially for the Mediterranean, must be part of that. If we fail, dangerous nationalism will continue to grow throughout Europe. The second obligation is to save the people who are trying to come to Europe from drowning on the way. And to be clear, this cannot just mean shipping all of them straight back to Africa as long as the situation there is what it is. We need a common European migration refugee policy that is more than a sham and that respects European values. The Dublin system no longer has any basis in the reality on the ground and everyone knows it.

As for Turkey, it is a country of absolutely essential importance to European security and too many people currently tend to forget it. However much we may disagree with what Erdogan is doing (and there is plenty to criticise), we must keep a cool head and think carefully about how we respond to it. It would be utter folly for us Europeans to push Turkey into Putin's arms. Of course it is a delicate balancing act – and one where we must succeed. We cannot afford the price of failure.

After his election, Trump and other senior U.S. administration members repeatedly stressed NATO's importance. American calls for more European military spending are nothing new. Is Trump's election really a turning point?

JOSCHKA FISCHER: What we are witnessing right now is the suicide of the Atlantic West, comparable with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989. Europe will have to find out what it means to be transatlantic on its own, meaning without the US. What is happening is an act of self-destruction that is not rooted in any rational thinking – Gorbachov at least was aiming to reform the Soviet Union even if it did not work out in the end. And he had good, powerful reasons on his side.

Brexit in the north, Trump in the west, Putin in the east: wherever you look, a deranged new kind of nationalism is gaining political traction.

In Germany, words like ‘völkisch’ have re-appeared in the political discourse. As for France: if Marine Le Pen wins the forthcoming presidential elections, it would mean the end of both the European Union and the euro. We must all hope that we will be spared this worst-case scenario.

One factor behind what is happening is the de-legitimation of traditional Western elites as a result of two major failures: the big financial crisis, the consequences of which are still unresolved, and the launch of unwinnable wars such as that in Iraq which has destabilised a whole region and destroyed or upended the lives of millions. Add to that an Anglo-American social model shaped by a winner-takes-all approach that leaves the majority of the population on the losing side, rapid societal change like the emancipation of women and sexual minorities, and contemporary liberal economic policies that created a world where many people no longer feel a sense of belonging. Then there is the rise of China and India – both still in their early stages, the related perception that the West is in decline, and the end of the Soviet threat that had helped to build a sense of common Western identity.

Take all of this together and you still do not have a good enough explanation for the collapse of the West. Maybe it is just that more than 70 years after the end of World War II, our societies are beginning to forget what nationalism really means.

You have mentioned the disaster that has hit the Middle East as a result of a catastrophic U.S.-led military intervention. What should Europe do to help stabilise the region?

JOSCHKA FISCHER: At this stage, I don’t believe any external intervention, whether European, American, or Russian, can solve the problems of the region. If the Russians think they can succeed where the Americans have failed, they are badly mistaken. The problems in the Middle East surfaced with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago. Since then, they have been suppressed by a succession of external hegemonies: first the European Christian powers after World War I, then after World War II the United States, which took over the role seamlessly. What the US has done with its disastrous intervention in Iraq is to destabilise the regional framework that had resulted from the Franco-British Sykes-Picot agreement a century ago. It was a war that was clearly unwinnable before it was even started – and George W. Bush launched it nevertheless.

One could add that serious Western policy mistakes have been made in the region since then. One of them was Libya: “intervene and forget!” isn’t working. Another was careless American talk of red lines that must not be crossed, relating to the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons. That Russia did what it did in Ukraine was partly a consequence of the fact that in Syria, an American president’s

warnings were followed by American inaction. Military intervention will always be the result of a difficult case-by-case decision – there is no sensible rulebook, no universal parameters that can be applied. One thing, though, is clear. Once a U.S. president has drawn a red line, they should not just walk away from it.

The humanitarian consequences of all these failures are appalling and the security implications deeply worrisome, including for us in Europe. In the Middle East, we are now faced with a situation where none of the main regional powers is strong enough to impose a new order as a triumphant new hegemon. The Iranians represent a minority religious sect in Islam – Shi'ism - and they are not part of the Arab world. For different reasons, Saudi Arabia is also too weak to emerge as a victor. It is a vicious conflict in which religion is largely used as a cover-up for other interests – in that sense, there is a parallel with Europe's own Thirty Years' War which ended in 1648 only after all the main powers involved were too exhausted to continue the fight.

What we are facing in the coming decades in the Middle East is an extremely dangerous situation with a serious risk that conventional military confrontation could escalate into a nuclear dimension. Another risk, the export of terror, has already materialised, as the last decade's string of attacks in Europe and the US has shown. Protecting European citi-

zens from terrorism is another reason why European governments must act together at home as well as abroad. If they are seen to fail in their duty to protect their citizens, they will lose public support and nationalist and xenophobic forces in Europe will grow even stronger. Of course they must do so while respecting the European values' framework and the rule of law.

Incidentally, this is an area where, even after Brexit, working together with the UK will be essential and in everyone's interest. All the talk of not rewarding the British for leaving the EU, or refraining from punishing them, creates the wrong alternatives: there will be a life after divorce. This is about mutual interests, not about punishment or reward. For the EU, it will be about determining what is in the best-collective advantage of all European citizens once the UK is no longer a EU Member State. Close cooperation in security matters will definitely be part of this relationship.

To fight terror, effective policing is important but far from sufficient. It is for instance a really bad idea to let hundreds of thousands of people lose hope in refugee camps, creating perfect





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breeding grounds for the radicalisation of the young. We did not focus on this particular prospect when we took the decision to intervene in Kosovo in 1998, and it is not why we intervened – but just imagine what might have happened if tens of thousands of young Albanians had been forced out of Kosovo into refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania as a result of a Serbian invasion.

The West has a long tradition of pursuing its interests and seeking better security by exporting its value system – first Christianity, later enlightenment values like human rights and democracy. Given our failures in the Middle East and the current rise of non-Western great powers, would it be safer to abandon the push for common global values?

JOSCHKA FISCHER: Look at the global fundamentals: intolerable global disparities between rich and poor, the beginning of climate change, a huge population explosion. We have gone from two billion humans a century ago to seven billion today, and we will pass the nine billion mark in my grandchildren's lifetime. If we fail to achieve a shared understanding about how to deal with this challenge, the living conditions of humanity as a whole will suffer a dramatic decline in the foreseeable future. How will it be possible for people to agree on how to tackle such a fundamental challenge if they do not coalesce around some shared global values? I cannot imagine how that could work. I have said in the past that there is no such thing as a specific Green foreign policy. What there is, and what must be developed further, is the ecological dimension of international policy. That is a task for the Greens as a political force: helping to put and keep the ecological imperative at the core of the global agenda. The Paris climate change agreement was a step in the right direction – a small one. More steps and bigger ones must follow.

You have mentioned the risk of nuclear conflict. Has Trump's election given new urgency to nuclear disarmament?

JOSCHKA FISCHER: I am for a world without nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons pose a constant threat. We have been extremely lucky so far: as recently opened state archives have revealed to us, there have been several occasions where nuclear confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War decades was avoided – but only just. But we have got to be realistic about getting there any time soon, given the political forces at play in the world. In practical political terms, I think the prospects are hopeless for now. Whether the Trump presidency means a generally increased risk of war is another matter. Let us remember that a significant percentage of the U.S. population has grown seriously tired of military intervention, which have come in recent decades at a huge cost to the US. The new president might well choose to take that into account.



JOSCHKA FISCHER

was German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor from 1998-2005. He entered electoral politics after participating in the anti-establishment protests of the 1960s and 1970s, and played a key role in founding the German Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), which he led for almost two decades. He is the author of the book *Is Europe Failing?* (2014).



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