German parliament votes to send troops to Macedonia

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In a special session Wednesday, the Bundestag voted to send German troops to participate in the NATO operation "Essential Harvest" in Macedonia.

On August 23 the Social Democratic-Green Party government had decided to send a total of 500 troops as part of a French-led battalion. In line with a 1994 ruling by the German Constitutional Court, such decisions must be ratified by parliament.

The measure passed by a wide margin, with 497 deputies voting in favour of German engagement, 130 voting against, and 8 abstaining. A majority for German involvement was regarded as assured, although a number of Social Democratic (SPD) and a handful of Green deputies had indicated they were prepared to vote against the government's resolution.

After initially expressing opposition to German involvement, the leadership of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) declared Tuesday they would support the government, following indications that a section of the party would defy the leadership and support the SPD-Green Party resolution.

Following deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo, this new intervention is the riskiest operation involving the German army in the Balkans. Officially, the entire operation is due to last just 30 days and is limited to collecting weapons voluntarily given up by the Albanian separatist National Liberation Army (NLA). However, few informed military or political observers seriously believe that the operation will stop at that. There are many indications that Essential Harvest will prove to be the first step in establishing—after Bosnia and Kosovo—a third NATO protectorate in the Balkans.

The peace plan jointly worked out by the head of foreign policy for the European Union (EU), Javier Solana, and NATO General Secretary George Robertson stipulates that as soon as the NLA has handed over a third of its weapons, the Macedonian parliament is to assemble in order to agree minority rights for the Albanian community. This arrangement is endangered, however, by the enormous discrepancy between the number of weapons to be turned in and the number actually in the hands of the NLA. The Macedonian government reckons the NLA has 85,000 weapons; the NLA says it has only 2,000. NATO has agreed a figure of 3,300, obviously much closer to the number claimed by the NLA.

Even leading NATO representatives have conceded that the figure of 3,300 is unrealistic, especially in light of the fact that the NLA is able without difficulty to obtain new weapons within a few days. In recent days, the NLA moved many of its weapons across the border to Kosovo, whence they originated.

The process of disarmament thus assumes a purely symbolic character. It is a "measure of trust" aimed at "supporting the political process in the country," according to NATO spokesman Yves Brodeur.

In reality, there is good reason to believe that the intervention by NATO will have a contrary effect and intensify the civil war in Macedonia.

The NLA is playing a double game. While the organisation officially supports the "peace plan", it has intensified its attacks on important cultural and economic targets. In the last few days explosions devastated an orthodox church in the cloister of Lesok, the main car licensing office in Tetovo, and the Brioni motel in the village of Celopek.

The culprits proceeded with particular brutality in their action against the motel. Two Macedonian waiters were tied to the motel's pillars, and bombs were attached to their bodies. They died in the explosion that wrecked the building.

Recently a split-off from the NLA has emerged—the mysterious Albanian National Army (ANA)—which officially rejects the peace plan. It remains unclear, however, whether the new group constitutes a genuine split-off, or merely reflects a division of labour within the NLA.

In either case, from the standpoint of the NLA there are advantages to continuing terror attacks while officially collaborating with NATO. From the very start the organisation's tactics were directed at using violence to inflame relations between the Slavic and Albanian communities and precipitating a NATO intervention in the country.

In Kosovo, the Albanian separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—the parent organisation of the NLA in Macedonia—was able to register successes with a similar tactic. Originally the KLA was denounced by Western governments as a terrorist group, but was subsequently promoted to the status of a negotiating partner, and then supplied arms by NATO. Since then, as a NATO protectorate, Kosovo has in practice severed its ties with the Serbian state, while the KLA has gained control of the levers of power in the former Serbian province. In other words, the KLA has been able largely to realise its aims with NATO help.

The situation in Macedonia has proceeded in a similar fashion. Originally, attacks were carried out by a few groups of guerrillas mainly operating from inside Kosovo. Since then Macedonia has been brought to the brink of civil war.

As in Kosovo, the KLA-sponsored NLA has been able to exploit legitimate grievances of the Albanian minority population, which faces various forms of discrimination at the hands of the bourgeois Macedonian state.

The terrorist activities of the NLA have polarised the situation and strengthened extreme nationalist elements on the Macedonian side. Should NATO find itself caught between the two sides, it could be drawn into a civil war. It would then face the alternative of a humiliating retreat or a large-scale military intervention. A likely result would be the division of the country into Macedonian and Albanian enclaves, a development that would coincide with the aims of the NLA.

The NLA is very much a product of NATO policies. With its support for and arming of the Albanian nationalists in Kosovo, NATO established the conditions for the KLA to extend its operations into Macedonia under the guise of the NLA. The US, in particular, has worked closely with the NLA.

Not without reason, therefore, is NATO regarded by considerable sections of the Macedonian population to be an accomplice of the Albanian nationalists, who are seeking to divide the country and strip it of

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its independence. These feelings were expressed in demonstrations and blockades set up at border crossings to protest the NATO intervention. The first victim of operation Essential Harvest, a British soldier, was killed on Monday when he was struck by a chunk of concrete thrown at his vehicle by a Macedonian youth.

When one considers the broader historical background to Essential Harvest, it becomes clear that NATO is pursuing aims that are quite different from its stated goal of preserving peace and promoting democracy in the region.

Since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Western powers have regularly intervened in the Balkans along definite lines. First, they have encouraged separatist and nationalist tensions. Then, after the inevitable eruption of bloody conflicts, they have intervened militarily. At the heart of these interventions has been their own economic and strategic interests.

In particular, Germany—a country that had close economic links to the former Yugoslavia—regards the Balkans as its own backyard. It is by no means accidental that the German deutsche mark is the most important second currency in most of the Balkan states.

In 1991, German insistence on the hasty recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, which had seceded from Yugoslavia with German support, led to the outbreak of the communal conflicts that have since devastated the region. Under the former Yugoslav state, ethnic minorities in the component republics had enjoyed a certain degree of legal protection. Once these republics seceded, however, the legal status of minorities, such as the Serbs in Croatia, was undermined.

There were sufficient warnings of the likely consequences of the German policy: the EU envoy to Yugoslavia, Lord Carrington, UN General Secretary Perez de Cuellar, and US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance all sent letters to German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, without success. Since then, Berlin has established the closest relations with the governments in Ljubljana and Zagreb.

Following the decisive first step by the German government, the US insisted on independence for Bosnia-Herzegovina. This led to a communal bloodbath in which hundreds of thousands were killed and many thousands more were expelled from their homes. The outcome of the Bosnian civil war is a division of the tiny country into ethnic enclaves, policed by Western occupation forces.

The next state that came to the attention of the Western powers was Serbia, which had been enlisted to help enforce the Dayton accords that ended the war in Bosnia. As a potential regional power, Serbia came to be regarded as an obstacle to the further division of the region.

Yugoslav President Milosevic was targeted as the West's main enemy, and support was given to Albanian nationalism in Kosovo. When Serbia refused to accept Western ultimatums, the country was subjected to a four-month bombardment that eventually made it possible to replace Milosevic with a more pliable government.

As in the cases of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, there were a host of warnings about the consequences of an escalation in Kosovo—above all, that the encouragement of Albanian nationalism would lead to a destabilisation of Macedonia, where independence in 1991 had ushered in an uneasy balance of forces between the Macedonian and Albanian communities.

Any escalation of the conflict in Macedonia now threatens to spread into Albania itself, as well as Bulgaria and the NATO states of Greece and Turkey.

A significant factor in the escalation of the Macedonian conflict has been the growth of tensions between the US and Europe as a whole, and Germany in particular. A clear indication of such tensions is the claim in the European press that the US has been secretly supporting the NLA.

Operation Essential Harvest primarily came about as an initiative by European NATO members, who urged action to prevent a further destabilisation of Macedonia. It is the first large-scale NATO operation in which the US is not playing a leading military role. By far, the biggest contingent of soldiers is being supplied by Great Britain, followed by France, Italy, Greece and Germany. The overall commander is a Dane, with the US limiting its support primarily to logistics.

The tensions between the US and Europe, the unrealistic nature of the official mandate, and the heated atmosphere in Macedonia are sufficient to ensure that Essential Harvest will be a highly explosive mission. The death of a British soldier in the first days of the intervention indicate that the risks for the personnel involved are far greater than have been officially conceded.

Such issues were barely mentioned in the Bundestag debate. The PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor party to the ruling Stalinist party of the former East Germany) was the only party to vote as a whole against the intervention. In line with its Stalinist tradition, the party has generally refused to support such engagements by the German army. Nevertheless, the PDS has indicated for some time that it is prepared to change its stance in exchange for a more influential role in German politics.

Otherwise, agreement exists amongst all the parties that German participation in the operation is a "national political necessity", or, to use the formulation favoured by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, "a vital aspect of German national interests."

Until German unification in 1990, military interventions by the German army outside NATO territory were generally regarded as taboo. Since then, however, the official standpoint has evolved to the insistence that Germany can secure its economic interests on a world scale only when it is able to support its foreign policy goals with military means.

First the CDU government of Helmut Kohl, and now the SPD-led government of Gerhard Schröder, have emphasised the necessity of strengthening Europe's military power as a counterweight to the US, while building up Germany's military authority inside Europe. In this respect German participation in NATO interventions in the Balkans are regarded as indispensable, which is why such decisions on past occasions have been approved by large majorities drawn from across the spectrum of German bourgeois politics.

Nevertheless, the risks involved in the latest intervention in Macedonia led to considerable tensions in the run-up to Wednesday's vote. Some deputies fear that a military reversal in Macedonia could undercut plans for a further build-up of the German army; others regard the army as under-financed and lacking the necessary equipment. Deputies are also concerned that significant numbers of German casualties could lead to a negative reaction by the German population, which has evinced markedly less enthusiasm for militarism than its parliamentarians.

It is noteworthy that the least resistance to this latest military intervention is offered by the Green Party, which in the past argued most vehemently against German military engagements. The Green Party central council decided by a vote of ten to one on Monday to recommend that its deputies in parliament support the mission. The party, which was shaken by considerable internal conflict over German participation in the Kosovo war, has now made its peace with Germany's new role as a military power.

Prior to the vote, a group of around 30 SPD deputies indicated it would vote "no". In a joint statement the deputies declared: "A renewed, massive military intervention by NATO in the Balkans, the course and results of which cannot be predicted, would contribute to a further destabilisation of the region." According to these deputies, it as an error to think one can resolve ethnic conflicts by military means.

Prior to the vote, CDU Chairperson Angela Merkel, the head of the CDU parliamentary fraction, Friedrich Merz, and former Defence Minister Volker Rühe attempted to bind the fraction to a vote against the intervention. They hoped to put pressure on Schröder, linking CDU agreement on the NATO operation to a demand that the SPD-Green

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government increase its budget for the army by half a billion marks.

This manoeuvre by the party leadership met with stiff opposition inside the party itself, where the party's expert on foreign policy, Karl Lamers, and the predecessor of Merz, Wolfgang Schäuble, opposed an attempt to subordinate such a fundamental decision to tactical party considerations. As the party leadership was appealing for a vote against NATO participation, Schäuble and Lamers went public with a proposal for doing away with parliamentary ratification of such military operations.

When it became clear that the parliamentary representatives of the liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) and many CDU deputies were prepared to provide Schröder with a majority, Merkel and Merz were forced to make an embarrassing retreat.

Initially, the FDP had indicated it would oppose the participation of German troops, but changed its position at the end of last week when it became clear that by taking sides with the SPD in the vote, the party could increase its chances of replacing the Greens as coalition partners of the SPD following new elections.

As expected, the Bundestag has voted by a large majority for the Macedonian intervention. Such a majority, however, does not correspond to the general mood in the country. The broad mass of the population is uneasy over Germany's military and foreign policy. Given the lack of any genuine opposition within the political establishment, however, it remains largely in the dark over the real motives and aims of the Macedonian mission.

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