

German parliament expands army mandate in Afghanistan

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6 November 2003

It was hardly a coincidence. On October 24, the Bundestag (parliament)—with the votes of the Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition government and sections of the Christian Democratic opposition—agreed to expand the mandate of the Bundeswehr (armed forces) in Afghanistan. Three days later, the UN had to withdraw its personnel in some southern provinces of the country due to constantly increasing attacks on Afghan government troops and US occupation forces.

UN deputy secretary-general Jean-Marie Guehenno, responsible for the UN mission, had to admit that the Taliban were back in control in at least four districts bordering Pakistan after being overthrown two years earlier. In the last weeks, battles between Taliban supporters and Al-Qaeda fighters against the government and occupation troops has increased to such an extent that Guehenno has classified the provinces as “highly risky,” ordering the suspension of all UN missions in the affected regions.

The expansion of the Bundeswehr mandate in the northern region of Kundus is directly linked with this escalating situation in the south of the country. The 230 German soldiers sent to Kundus, in addition to the 1,800 stationed in Kabul, are relieving an American force. They are freeing up US forces in the north so that these can strike back at the Taliban in the south, and relieve them for operations in the increasingly disastrous occupation of Iraq.

Officially, the dispatch of additional German troops is dubbed a “protective component” in the physical and political reconstruction of the region outside Kabul. But in fact, it serves to militarily suppress the increasing resistance to the occupation of the country as well as the political rapprochement with Washington (probably the most important motive).

The cabinet had decided to expand the mandate on September 2. Shortly afterwards, when President Bush publicly praised “the great work of the German army in Afghanistan,” this was seen in Berlin as a signal to improve German-American relations, which had been extremely strained since the Iraq war. Soon after, Chancellor Schröder

and Bush met briefly. The expansion of the Afghanistan mandate is also regarded as compensation for Germany’s not being strongly engaged in Iraq due to its limited military capacity and the widespread opposition of the population.

Since the cabinet gave the green light, the expansion of the Afghanistan mandate has been rapidly put into practice.

To avoid leaving a bad odour with the German public, the mission will not take place under the banner of operation “Enduring Freedom” conducted by US troops, but will become part of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). This required the UN Security Council to first extend the ISAF mandate beyond Kabul to all Afghanistan, which Germany’s ambassador to the UN, Guenter Pleuger, achieved on October 13. Two days later, the government tabled the motion to expand the Bundeswehr mission, and after brief negotiations with the Christian Democrats, parliament agreed to the new mandate on October 24, with only a few dissenting votes. Only the Liberal FDP and the two Party of Democratic Socialism deputies voted against.

Hardly had the votes been counted in the Bundestag, when a 27-strong Forward Commando Force boarded the plane for Kundus, to prepare for the 230 soldiers who are to arrive by spring 2004. The Bundeswehr are the first troops to occupy one of the eight regions designated in the new UN mandate for the ISAF.

Besides the 120,000 inhabitants in the town and province of Kundus, the operational area includes the regions of Badakshan, Baghlan and Tkhar, altogether an area equal to Bavaria and Hesse. Officially, the 230 German soldiers are to support the authority of the Kabul government under President Hamid Karzai in this large and inaccessible area, and provide protection for civilian relief organisations.

But that is not all. The Bundestag mandate permits the expansion of the operational area to the whole of Afghanistan and the dispatch of up to 220 additional soldiers, to ensure that elections take place, fixed for next summer. In the unstable conditions in Afghanistan, where the struggles between individual provincial barons and former warlords intensify almost every day, this is

practically a licence to deploy the Bundeswehr throughout the entire country. A new parliamentary vote is not envisaged. Defence Minister Peter Struck has merely agreed to inform the parliamentary group chairs of the competent committees.

But even limiting the assignment to the Kundus region, the operation resembles a suicide mission. It is a sham when Struck states that the Afghan population has more confidence in German soldiers than in those of other nations, or that the German troops are not regarded as “an army of occupation, but as helpers in uniform.” Struck talks as though the June attack on the German army convoy in Kabul had never happened, an attack in which four soldiers were killed and 29 injured, some seriously.

In reality, things are radically different. The civilian relief organisations in the region, including the Red Cross, reject Bundeswehr protection. They do not want the foreign military presence to turn them into a target. The American soldiers still stationed in the region experienced this in June, when a bomb was detonated directly outside their base. The Americans understood the clear warning and have limited their public presence to a minimum.

The view of the leading officer of the Forward Commando Force, Colonel Kurt Helmut Schiebold, that the situation in the region is “calm but not stable,” is nothing more than a hasty conclusion. For the general population, the war against the Taliban has not produced any improvement in the social situation. Most roads have been destroyed, there is no supply of potable water, and the electricity supply is limited to the city of Kundus, since the US army destroyed the hydroelectric plant with cluster bombs. Two of the four devices dropped in this raid did not explode. Bomblets are littered about, making the reconstruction of the power station a game of life and death.

The ruling powers in the region are the civilian governor, Hasi Abdul Latif, and the military commander, General Daud, who maintains a 30,000-strong private army and is a close friend of the Afghan defence minister Mohammad Qaseem Fahim. In the central government in Kabul, Fahim is seen as an opponent of Hamid Karzai.

Latif and Daud are said to be closely involved in the drug trade, which finances their private armies. The region around Kundus is one of the main areas for growing opium poppies. This year’s harvest is thought to have yielded a record result, with 7,000 tonnes of raw opium. Drugs are trafficked to Tajikistan from the city of Kundus, through which the most important north-south trade route runs.

There can be no doubt that the drug trade plays a key role in the region’s power politics. But the German troops are not supposed to interfere in the drug business. General Daud told *Spiegel online* that any interference in the security

patchwork surrounding the opium trade would “risk the life of Germans in uniform.” With some justification, the FDP foreign policy spokesman Werner Hoyer noted that German troops would be providing “international protection” for the drug trade. How Karzai’s authority is to be strengthened against the two powerful provincial barons remains unclear.

In control in neighbouring Mazar-i-Sharif is Abdul Rashid Dostum, who also profits from the drug trade and who is a longstanding opponent of General Daud. It only seems to be a matter of time before the hostility between Dostum and Daud becomes an open military struggle. Only recently, a fragile truce marked the temporary end to fighting between Dostum and another adversary, Atta. The Kundus region could soon prove to be a powder keg for the German troops.

Primarily, the expansion of the Bundeswehr mandate represents the pursuit of Germany’s own economic interests. Afghanistan already played an important role in Germany’s previous colonial policy; close economic relations were interrupted only by the Soviet invasion in 1979, relations that were taken up again under the Taliban in 1996.

For the German bourgeoisie, Afghanistan is regarded as the gateway to economic interests in the Caspian region, with its rich oil and gas deposits, and to the neighbouring states, above all China. After the Second World War, the Bundeswehr was founded as a purely defensive force. It is now being used as an instrument of foreign policy, in order to strengthen Berlin’s influence worldwide and to further German business relations.



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