

German government considers deploying air force in Afghanistan

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The German coalition government is currently preparing a major expansion of its military commitment to the war in Afghanistan. To this point the government has claimed that the only role of the German army in that country would be to help with reconstruction and assure the security of the Hamid Karzai puppet regime. To this end the German government limited the operations of its forces to the nation's capital and the relatively calm northern part of the country. The recent decision to send six Tornado aircraft to Afghanistan would thrust German forces into the violent fighting taking place in the south.

The request from NATO arrived in Berlin on December 11, but was only made public ten days later. No official decision has yet been announced. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* assumes, however, that “Chancellor [Angela] Merkel, Foreign Minister [Frank-Walter] Steinmeier and Defense Minister [Franz Josef] Jung have already decided that they cannot reject the request by NATO.” Official requests of this kind, the paper says are “only made when a positive answer has been given at a working level.”

The request calls for the deployment of so-called Recce Tornado airplanes, which conduct reconnaissance and can identify small objects from the air. The maintenance of the highly complicated and expensive machines requires approximately 250 soldiers, who are likely to be stationed in the south of the country.

Even if the German Tornados were merely sent on reconnaissance missions and did not drop bombs, their use nevertheless constitutes a combat mission. They would identify targets for the American and British NATO units, which are carrying out a bloody war against rebels in the south of Afghanistan in a war that has claimed the lives of many innocent civilians. The

Süddeutsche Zeitung commented, “Whoever conducts reconnaissance is assisting towards successful bombardment with all the consequences—up to and including the ominous collateral damage, which one experienced in the Kosovo war.” *Spiegel Online* noted, “The Germans are allowing themselves to get deeper and deeper involved in the Afghanistan conflict, and there is no end in sight.”

The current debate centers on whether such a deployment requires a new parliamentary mandate or is covered by the existing one. However, even if it comes to a debate and vote in the Bundestag (German parliament) the government is assured a majority, with support for such a mandate expected from all of the “grand coalition” parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Gernot Erler (SPD), a state minister in the Foreign Office, told the radio station Deutschlandfunk that in his opinion there existed “fundamental readiness to make forces available for such a reconnaissance function.” The CDU defense expert Bernd Siebert also signaled agreement from his side.

The opposition in the Bundestag will either do nothing to obstruct such a deployment or little to effectively stop it. The free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) promised a careful and impartial check of the request. The Green Party protested that the Bundestag was being bypassed but did not take a stance on the substantive issue. Only the Left Party has declared it is prepared to vote against such an expansion of the Afghanistan mandate.

At the NATO summit held in Riga at the end of November, German chancellor Merkel (together with leaders from Italy, Spain and France) resisted pressure from America and Britain to increase the German

contingent in Afghanistan and take part in the conflicts in the south. The Europeans intimated that the US government was itself responsible for the increase in violence because it had concentrated its efforts entirely on military actions, at the expense of political measures. This reproach was repeated many times in the European media. Now the German government is intent on military escalation.

What is behind this change of course? The principal reason lies with the US debacle in Iraq.

For some time the European elites hoped for a change of political course in America along the lines suggested by the Iraq Study Group. Various European governments and officials had some time before established close relations with the authors of the report—Republican James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton—and initially welcomed their study, which recommended a return to more traditional methods of diplomacy in order to concoct some sort of solution to the disastrous situation in Iraq. Among other proposals, the report called for closer co-operation with European governments and attempts to integrate the regional powers Iran and Syria into the diplomatic process.

It is now clear that the Bush administration has tossed aside the report and its recommendations and is intent on further military escalation—with what many European politicians think will be catastrophic consequences; the danger exists that the entire region, and not just Iraq, will sink into civil war and chaos. This would not only damage US, but also European oil and business interests in the region. This is behind European and above all German attempts to seize the initiative.

The German government has undertaken intensive diplomatic activity in preparation for taking over the presidency of the European Union on January 1. German Foreign Minister Steinmeier has been almost constantly on the move. He recently visited Syrian President Bashar Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin in an attempt to revive the so-called Middle East quartet, which comprises the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations. The aim is to put pressure on Washington to play a role in an international solution to the Palestine conflict.

The intensified role of the German army in Afghanistan is inseparably bound up with these political initiatives. Ultimately, Germany and Europe

can only realize their own interests in the Middle East through their own massive military intervention.

The role of the expanded German contingent in Afghanistan serves two purposes: to increase German influence in the region and to apply further pressure on Washington. Berlin, according to this calculation, accedes to Washington's request to relieve US forces in Afghanistan and in return expects to play a more prominent role in other Middle East issues.

Inexorably, Germany and Europe are being increasingly drawn into the bloody war in the Middle East, although millions of Europeans have taken to the streets to oppose the Iraq war.

Now the population at large must pay the price—in the form of increasing military budgets and the lives of young soldiers. The majority of the population rejects such military missions, but for the German government that plays no role. When it comes to the pursuit of its imperialist interests, the “grand coalition” government is prepared to ride roughshod over democratic principles. The fact that Bundestag deputies first learned of plans for the new military deployment *in the press* is symptomatic of the link between militarism and authoritarian forms of rule.



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