

German Social Democrats and Greens seek increase in Afghanistan troop levels

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Although two thirds of the German population are against the presence of German troops in Afghanistan, the German government is determined to extend its mandate, increase the number of soldiers involved and even possibly expand the deployment of troops to the violently contested region in the south of the country.

This campaign for the biggest single military intervention by the German army since the Second World War is being led by leading members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, and comes in the wake of a report of the killings of three German policemen in a suburb of Kabul.

The three German policemen were killed by a planned explosion that ripped apart their armoured vehicle as they travelled to conduct shooting practice at a firing range. The vehicle sported the colours of the German flag and was easily identifiable. The policemen killed were employed as bodyguards for resident ambassadors. A fourth German travelling in the vehicle was injured. Predictably, all the leaders of the German grand coalition government reacted to the deaths by calling for increased engagement in Afghanistan.

This autumn, the German Bundestag (parliament) must decide on the continuation of the three different German army mandates in Afghanistan: the deployment of approximately 3,000 soldiers as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the use of Tornado combat aircraft for air surveillance involving 500 troops, and the use of around 100 soldiers from the elite KSK special forces as part of the “anti-terror” mandate of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Apart from the parliamentary fraction of “The Left,” there is no opposition in the Bundestag to the extension of the mandates, which is unreservedly supported by leaders of all the grand coalition parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party. SPD Chairman Kurt Beck and SPD fraction head Peter Struck have both expressed their support for the extension of all three mandates.

SPD defence spokesman Rainer Arnold has called for an expansion of the German deployment to include southern Afghanistan, where particularly violent clashes have taken place with Afghan rebel forces and the Taliban involving civilian heavy losses. The existing ISAF mandate limits the involvement of the German army to the north. “I am in favour of waiving this general prohibition,” Arnold told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and the chairman of the Union parties’ Bundestag fraction, Volker Kauder (CDU), both expressed their support for an expansion of the German military deployment. “I argue in favour of expanding our training assistance and arming of the Afghan army,” Steinmeier told the *Bild* newspaper. Steinmeier was responding to the request by the ISAF commander, US General Dan McNeill, who in a radio interview had asked for an additional 500 to 1,000 soldiers—the majority to come from Germany.

At the same time, popular opposition to the German deployment is growing. According to several polls, around two thirds of the German population favour a withdrawal of troops. This figure is up 10 percent from two months ago. Opposition to the German deployment is 82 percent amongst supporters of the Left party, 66 percent in the SPD and 55 percent in the CDU. Opposition to the deployment is lowest amongst supporters of the Green Party, at 53 percent, and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), at 43 percent.

The growing attacks on troops stationed in Afghanistan with increasing numbers of German casualties, together with the high number of civilian victims and the increase in cases of hostage-taking, have shattered the government propaganda aimed at proclaiming the German Afghan deployment as a “peace mission.”

In addition to the deaths of the three German police on Tuesday, recent hostage dramas have unleashed a new discussion on the reason for German involvement. The fate of the 23 Korean hostages in the hands of Taliban rebels is being closely followed by the German public, as is the fate of two German victims. The two German engineers were taken hostage three weeks ago—one was apparently killed by his abductors, and the other, 62-year-old Rudolf B., is still in the hands of his captors.

According to the German Foreign Office, there are currently approximately 500 German civilians in Afghanistan working on reconstruction projects, providing charitable assistance, or working directly for Afghan companies.

Despite broad opposition to the war, the leadership of the SPD and the Greens are determined to press ahead with the continuation and even expansion of the German mandate.

The debate on renewal of the Afghanistan mandates by the Bundestag coincides with the SPD congress due to be held in Hamburg at the end of October. The ISAF and Tornado mandates must be decided upon before the congress, while Operation Enduring Freedom is due to be debated in the Bundestag in

November.

To quell opposition from within the SPD and establish the conditions for expanding the German mandate, leading politicians are once again evoking the myth of a “peace mission” being conducted by German soldiers. SPD deputy Jörg Thiessen declared, “Civilian projects can only be accomplished under military protection. Otherwise people do not go there. Civilian and military serve to reinforce one another.”

SPD fraction leader Peter Struck argued that German soldiers were obliged to assist in the building up of the Afghan state and its security forces. “A state without a military and without a police is not a state,” he stated bluntly. At the same time, a debate is taking place within the SPD on the establishment of a timeframe for the OEF mission.

Following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, Struck, as secretary of defence in the government of Gerhard Schröder, had promised the Bush administration “unconditional solidarity” in its military plans. Now, he is strictly opposed to any restrictions being placed on the OEF mandate. However, some elements within the SPD have made the OEF mission the centre of their criticism in order to campaign for acceptance of the ISAF mandate. The SPD critics declare that the OEF mission has been jeopardised by the tactics of US soldiers, who are disproportionately aggressive in their response. They also assert that US military actions have not only resulted in numerous civilian casualties, but have also served in the long run to strengthen the Taliban.

While these claims are entirely justified, they are being raised by layers in the SPD in order to facilitate a change of course by the German army, not out of any genuine opposition to the war.

The leadership of the Green Party also faces opposition within its ranks. Forty-four local Green organisations have called for an emergency congress on September 15 to discuss and vote on all three Afghanistan mandates. However, one of the initiators of the special congress, Robert Zion, explained: “Any resolution calling for an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan would not have a chance and would be irresponsible.” He merely wished for a “schedule for a peace process.”

Jürgen Trittin, Green Party parliamentary speaker on foreign policy, predicted: “At the end there will be a motion voted upon which also includes the Tornado mission.” According to *Spiegel online*, this represents a “compromise, which will enable Green parliamentarians to vote in favour of the Tornados without violating a congress resolution.”

Green Party Co-chairman Reinhard Bütikofer also assumes that the majority of his party will vote in favour of German involvement in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Bütikofer also joined those in the SPD calling for an expansion of the ISAF deployment, while at the same time calling for an end to participation in the Operation Enduring Freedom.

In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Green member Tom Koenigs argued for an expansion of German involvement in Afghanistan. “Most Afghans want more, not less Western troops in order to improve security,” he maintained. Koenigs did not elaborate on his reference to “most Afghans,” but was forced to concede in the interview that the deteriorating security situation in the country meant that he had no effective contact with the population. He

travels exclusively in heavily guarded armoured convoys.

The distinction drawn by members of the SPD and the Greens between a “good” ISAF deployment—which protects the civilian structure of the country and brings peace and democracy—as opposed to a “bad” OEF mandate—which brings death and civilian casualties—is thoroughly misleading. As UN speaker Dan McNorton explained recently: “The Afghan population does not differentiate with respect to who carries out these operations, as some of us from the international forces do.”

In fact, the ISAF and OEF mandates are closely coordinated. ISAF troops have been increasingly sent into combat missions, particularly in the south of Afghanistan. It is not uncommon for ISAF and OEF soldiers to be fighting alongside one another.

The data from German Tornados involved in reconnaissance are also passed on to the OEF command and used to direct bombing raids that have resulted in numerous civilian casualties. At the same time, the 100 KSK soldiers on duty in Afghanistan for the past two years have been effectively under the control of the ISAF command.

The lack of scruples with which the SPD, the Greens and the German government ride roughshod over public opinion in order to intensify the operations of the German army abroad increasingly recalls the contempt of the Bush administration for the US population.

The strategic significance of Afghanistan is obvious. To the west, the country borders on Iran with its large oil resources. In addition, it serves as a springboard to the Caspian Sea with its own enormous oil and gas reserves, and to China. The Afghanistan war provided the US with a unique opportunity to establish its presence in the central Asiatic regions formerly attached to the Soviet Union. As the biggest economic power in Europe, Germany is determined not to be left out.

There is, therefore, general agreement between the government coalition parties and Germany’s nominal opposition—the Greens and the FDP—that the current German military policy be continued and intensified. Three and a half years ago, Peter Struck (SPD), the defence secretary at the time, declared that German security would also be defended in the Hindu Kush (a mountain range in Afghanistan and Pakistan). CDU Chairman Kauder now declares: “The deployment of the German army [in Afghanistan] is very important for our security in Germany.” For his part, SPD chairman Beck expressed his hope that the German mission in Afghanistan would not last longer than an additional 10 years.

Behind all the talk of world peacemaking in the name “freedom” and “democracy,” German militarism is once again on the march and re-emerging—with the full support of the SPD and the Greens.



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