

Joschka Fischer demands German combat troops be sent to southern Afghanistan

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The former German foreign minister and leading member of the Green Party, Joschka Fischer, has used his weekly column in the newspaper *Die Zeit* to vehemently argue for the deployment of German troops (*Bundeswehr*) in southern Afghanistan.

The German government currently provides the third largest contingent of troops in Afghanistan—some 3,200 soldiers—as part of the 37-nation, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. German soldiers have been mainly involved in security operations and civilian support projects in the relatively peaceful north of Afghanistan where the *Bundeswehr* also acts as ISAF regional coordinator. The current parliamentary mandate only allows the *Bundeswehr* to intervene in southern Afghanistan to provide emergency aid to its allies in exceptional situations.

As foreign minister in the Social Democratic Party-Green coalition (1998-2005) Fischer was instrumental in implementing the first-ever foreign intervention by German troops since the Second World War as part of the NATO war against the former Yugoslavia. Now Fischer is going one step further and calling for the sending of *Bundeswehr* units to support US troops in the thick of the bloody fighting against insurgent Taliban forces in the south of Afghanistan.

Well aware that two thirds of the German population are opposed to the German military mission in Afghanistan, the grand coalition in Berlin (Social Democratic Party—Christian Democratic Union—Christian Social Union) has thus far resisted repeated demands by the US and Canadian governments that it to deploy troops to the war-torn south.

Fischer's latest appeal in *Die Zeit* is directly aimed at influencing the coalition to change its position and openly side with the US in its "war against terror" in southern Afghanistan. Fischer's stance places him in the front line together with two former *Bundeswehr* generals—Klaus Naumann and Harold Kujat—who have also argued in recent interviews that the German government has no alternative but to send combat troops to Afghanistan. At the same time Fischer's call puts him to the right of the vast majority of the SPD-CDU-CSU parliamentary groupings and the free-market Free Democratic Party, which all warn against the dangers of deploying German troops to the south.

Last week, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates used unusually blunt language to criticise the US's European allies for failing to send combat troops to the south. Addressed directly to German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung, Gates's letter requesting an additional 3,200 troops was seen as an attempt to emphasise

American displeasure with Germany.

At a hastily called press conference last Friday, the German defence minister rejected Gates's demand while justifying the continuing presence of German troops in Afghanistan: "We need to keep our point of focus in northern Afghanistan," he said. Jung's rejection of Gates's call for assistance was backed on the same day by the German foreign minister and vice chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD).

A spokesman for Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), Ulrich Wilhelm, declared there were currently "no thoughts" about making a change to the existing mandate for the *Bundeswehr*'s deployment in Afghanistan, and that the chancellor rejected Gates's demand. In all of her talks, Wilhelm continued, the chancellor has repeatedly made clear that the scope of the current mandate is "not up for discussion"—and that remains the government's "firm position."

Joschka Fischer has now responded to this concerted rejection of the US demand by the German government with his own personal appeal to Chancellor Merkel. Against a background of intensified fighting and a growing toll of casualties amongst US and Canadian troops in the south, Fischer argues in *Die Zeit* that what is at stake in Afghanistan is "victory or defeat on the ground," and therefore "the very future of NATO." He added, "Germany risks the danger of being seen as primarily responsible for a possible failure in Afghanistan in a conflict which has been brewing under the surface for some time."

Should the allied mission in Afghanistan fail, Fischer continues, the result for German foreign policy would be maximum damage—*Maximalschaden*. Fischer goes on to acknowledge that the German mission in Afghanistan is deeply unpopular at home and that a fresh mission by German combat troops in the south of the country would require a new mandate by the German parliament.

The job of securing such a parliamentary majority, Fischer argues, rests with the chancellor. Continued vacillation over this issue can no longer be tolerated. Through vigorous leadership and the demonstration of her convictions, he adds, the chancellor must confront popular opposition and the qualms of her parliamentary colleagues to ensure that German soldiers can participate in the bloody fighting in southern Afghanistan.

This is nothing less than the unsullied voice of German militarism. It echoes the concerted campaign by leading military experts and former generals for the central political leadership to overcome public hostility to the role of the German army as a

combat force. German troops must be bloodied in battle, and the German public must be prepared to accept the spectacle of body bags returning home.

The German government confronts massive opposition within Germany to the presence of its troops in Afghanistan. These concerns were summed up in a recent editorial in the *Financial Times Deutschland*:

“On the other hand, the popular support for a German role in Afghanistan is slipping away. Polls show that nearly two-thirds of citizens don’t support the idea of German troops in Afghanistan. And a former Social Democratic Party leader, Klaus Bölling, a former top aid to former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, has dismissed the fight there as pointless butchery and urged a withdrawal. The more it becomes obvious that the *Bundeswehr* can’t just act as a sort of technical assistance force in olive-drab, the harsher the critiques will get.”

In addition to widespread public opposition the reluctance by leaders of the German government to bow to US and Canadian pressure expresses growing tensions between European members of the NATO alliance and the US over the conduct of the war in Afghanistan, as well as broad misgivings over US policy throughout the Middle East.

At the same time, the opposition by the German government to the dispatch of German troops to southern Afghanistan has nothing to do with any reluctance on its part to utilise military force as part of its own imperialist policy. The grand coalition government is expanding its operations in Afghanistan, but is not prepared to blindly follow the dictates of its allies in the US and the NATO High Command.

While making clear that it rejected Gates’s latest request, which would effectively put German troops in the south under American command, the German Defence Ministry has indicated that Germany would respond to a call by NATO to reinforce the so-called Quick Response Force (QRF) in Afghanistan. The move means that Germany will provide a contingent of 250 rapid reaction troops who will be stationed at Mazar-e-Sharif, replacing the Norwegian force, which will withdraw this summer.

Until now, the German government has emphasized the role of the *Bundeswehr* as a force providing support for military training and civilian reconstruction, but it is already clear that taking over responsibility for the QRF mission represents a new dimension in Germany’s intervention. Included in the QRF mandate, for example, is the provision of emergency support to troops in the north hunting “terrorists” and dealing with kidnappings in the country.

Despite claims by government spokesmen and Defence Minister Jung to the contrary, it is evident that sending a highly trained rapid reaction force of elite soldiers to the north amounts to sending men into combat and therefore violates restrictions laid down by existing parliamentary mandates.

Nonetheless, for former foreign minister Fischer the cautious moves by the grand coalition to increase its military presence in Afghanistan are inadequate. In his *Die Zeit* article Fischer criticises “European reluctance” to get involved in Afghanistan and warns of the danger of division between the main European powers with regard to security policy.

According to Fischer, the three main European powers—Germany, France and Britain—have to act in unison to ensure the development of Europe’s own military forces. For some time now, Fischer has been emphasising the necessity of a coordinated European military and security policy—with Germany playing the leading role—as both a complement and potential future alternative to US military power.

Fischer’s repeated appeals for a coordinated European foreign policy and the development of a powerful European military force are drawn from his own experiences as German foreign minister. In addition to orchestrating Germany’s intervention in Yugoslavia in 1998, Fischer also played a leading role in sending German troops into Afghanistan. In 2001, he then chaired the Petersburg Conference, which tapped Hamid Karzai to head the Afghan Interim Authority as a lackey for the US government.

Fischer’s shift from pacifist-style politics as a long-time leader of the Greens into a mouthpiece for the interests of the German military and the most aggressive sections of the German bourgeoisie is symptomatic of the political evolution of an entire layer of former radicals and Green activists.

In 1999, Fischer justified German intervention in Yugoslavia based on the supposed necessity of preventing a new Holocaust. German involvement in Afghanistan and the Congo was then justified on the basis of spreading “peace and democracy.” Now, Fischer speaks out openly on behalf of the strategic interests of the German ruling elite and is wilfully prepared to risk the lives of German youth in a new imperialist military venture.

Aware of the extent of resistance to such a move Fischer expressly calls upon the conservative German chancellor to show “leadership” and oppose, not only the popular consensus against the war, but also those defending the existing parliamentary mandate for *Bundeswehr* operations. Fischer’s latest comments on the Afghan war reek of contempt for democratic process and the popular will. He now speaks on behalf of a layer of radicals who are prepared to support a “strong state” in order to ensure the pursuit of German imperialist interests.



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