German navy in operations off Somalia

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For more than two weeks, Germany has been conducting naval operations in the Gulf of Aden, in order to secure the international sea routes.

According to Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), this is "the most robust mandate" in Germany's post-war history. Jung had flown to Djibouti to see off the frigate Karlsruhe. No longer was it a matter of providing "aid, protection and mediation," as in earlier operations, Jung stressed, but the forces could expressly engage in combat. The mandate, passed by the Bundestag (federal parliament) in December by a large majority, sanctions German military personnel not only to attack hostile ships but also to sink them.

The despatch of the frigate Karlsruhe is only the beginning. When required, the frigate Mecklenburg Vorpommern can also be used directly for support. This ship is presently working in the region with a clearly weaker mandate within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom under US leadership. Under the new mandate, up to 1,400 German military personnel can now be deployed in the Gulf of Aden.

The deployment is part of the European Union operation Atlanta, which was passed on November 10, 2008 by the EU Council as an anti-piracy measure. Five to ten countries are participating in the operation, including France and Britain. Operational headquarters are in London, with a mobile command post alternating between Greece, Spain and the Netherlands.

In addition to the European armed forces, ships from Russia, the US, China and Iran are also deployed in the Gulf of Aden.

This massive concentration of foreign military in the region was made possible by UN resolution 1816, passed on June 2, 2008. This lifted Somali sovereignty over the country's own coastal waters and permits any military power in the world to deploy a mission against the alleged pirates, even inside the 12-mile area directly off the Somali coast. This also covers air space.

The number of pirates operating off the Somalia coast has increased considerably in recent years, after the US-supported invasion of the country by Ethiopian troops. Various sources put the figures between 100 and 300 pirate attacks, with 39 to 200 ships being captured, out of an estimated 16,000-30,000 ships passing through the region annually. Altogether about $50 million in ransom has been obtained by hijacking ships.

The enormous military operation, however, cannot be explained simply by the fight against piracy. In times of economic crisis, none of the world's great powers want to cede control of this important maritime route to their competitors, and through which the majority of the Asia-Europe trade runs. The geo-strategic significance of such commercial sea routes is comparable with aggressively contested oil and gas pipelines. Germany alone imports 56 percent of its crude oil by sea and a high percentage of Germany's foreign trade is also transported by sea.

Under the banner of the fight against piracy, international disputes are beginning over commercial routes and sea lanes that can result in violent military conflicts.

Already in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the "war on terror" has been used to justify imperialist politics. The German government is now fashioning a close link between the fight against "terrorism" and its anti-piracy operation.

The Atlanta deployment and the US' Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan are closely linked, as shown by the example of the frigate Mecklenburg Vorpommern. According to a security strategy paper of the Christian Democrats' parliamentary group from May 6 last year: "The spread of organized crime in weak states makes the threat of terrorism even more serious. War, extremism and terrorism are being financed out of the proceeds of criminal activities, particularly from the drugs trade, but also from the illegal trade in arms, human trafficking, money laundering or piracy."

Birgit Homburger of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) expressed this link even more clearly when she told the Bundestag: "Cross-border international terrorism can no longer be differentiated from piracy and organized crime." She demanded that operations Atlanta and Enduring Freedom be combined.

The economic interests that lie behind the deployment of the German navy were also openly enunciated in the Bundestag. Whereas humanitarian or at least security policy arguments were stressed during earlier debates about the deployment of Germany's armed forces, the emphasis in the current debate was about respecting "German interests."

For example, on December17, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) said, "Operation Atlanta should also improve the security of civilian navigation in the region, something in which we Germans also have an

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interest. The Gulf of Aden is the backbone for the flow of trade between Europe and Asia; 20,000 ships a year. Many of these belong to German shipping companies that transport goods to or from Germany."

Defence Minister Jung also invoked German interests when he implored the deputies to make "a contribution to restoring security on the seas and to guarantee free maritime trade," since "we are export world champions."

His party colleague Dorothee Bär concretized this point: "It is not only the Gulf of Aden that is threatened; the liberty of world trade is also threatened. The most important trade routes between Europe, the Arab peninsula and Asia pass through the sea lanes off Somalia. Numerous German export goods reach their destinations on ships passing through the waters round the Horn of Africa. As an export nation, we have a vital interest in preventing or limiting attacks on civilian shipping. That applies to us in Germany, but it also applies to all of Europe."

The FDP accused the government of inactivity. Piracy should have been opposed much sooner, Birgit Homburger insisted: "This behaviour has disgraced the German navy." She also advocated taking harsher action against the pirates. "It is not only necessary to chase away the pirates but also to hunt down the pirates," she said.

This militaristic language, and the openness with which the various parties have endorsed a substantial military mission in the interests of German big business, shows the advanced extent of the imperialist ambitions of Germany's ruling elite. It is no longer prepared to factor in the widespread opposition in Germany to militarism and war in the implementation of its interests.

The fact that the parties in the Bundestag can behave so shamelessly is also linked to the fact that none of them advocates a principled opposition to military combat missions. While the Left Party was the only parliamentary group to vote against the government motion, the party expressly endorses the use of force against piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Left Party deputy Norman Paech made this clear at the beginning of his speech. "In order to preclude any misunderstanding: The Left Party is for the security of the sea and trade routes and considers protection from piracy to be absolutely necessary and indispensable." Paech simply believes that a naval mission is the wrong way to proceed. He wants to send the Bundespolizei (German federal police) to Somalia.

This was also confirmed by his parliamentary colleague Paul Schäfer: "The Left Party endorses the rapid construction of an international coast guard under the leadership of the UN in close coordination with the African Union. Germany should participate by means of the Bundespolizei and render financial support."

While the Left Party proposes "better ways" to protect international sea and trade routes, the government is converting the armed forces into an international intervention army with ability to implement Germany's geo-strategic interests everywhere in the world against its rivals.

Among the official tasks of Germany's armed forces, the government's 1992 defence policy guidelines included the "Promotion and security of worldwide political, economic, military and ecological stability," as well as the "maintenance of free world trade and access to strategic raw materials."

The SPD-Green Party government then intensified this course and sent the armed forces on numerous military missions. This was then laid down in 2003 in a new version of the defence policy guidelines, which extended the potential operational area for Germany's armed forces to the entire globe and adopted the military doctrine of intimidation and preventive war developed by the US government as the guide for German defence policy.

In restructuring the German military into an aggressive intervention force, the development of the navy is a crucial factor. Ever since German reunification in 1990, the size of the navy has been systematically increased. Whereas in 1990 it represented 7.5 percent of the overall armed forces, it is now closer to 10 percent. In terms of defence expenditure, the proportion spent on the navy is rising even more rapidly.

In 1898, when the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm began to develop its own deep-sea fleet, this German-English arms race led directly to the First World War. The building of the first armoured ships in 1928 under SPD Chancellor Hermann Müller, finally heralded German rearmament and the rejection of the restrictions on the size of Germany's fleet contained in the Treaty of Versailles. The global military ambitions of a great power require a well-equipped navy.

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