German state uses piracy as pretext to amend the constitution

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Following a three-week delay, the German public has finally learned the details of plans for a major deployment of the elite GSG 9 police unit and the German army off the Somali coast. The plan, which had been developed and approved at the highest levels of the government, envisaged elite GSG 9 troops storming the German freighter "Hansa Stavanger," which had been hijacked on April 4 by Somali pirates. The operation was stopped at the last moment when the US government withdrew its offer to make a helicopter carrier available to the German forces.

The planned recapture of the German freighter was one of the biggest secret military operations in German postwar history. The German government began making plans for the operation directly after Somali pirates seized the "Hansa Stavanger" and its crew, which included five German sailors.

Leading architects of the adventurist mission, which could have easily turned into a bloodbath, were German Interior Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD). Based on inside information, the magazine *Der Spiegel* reported at length on the preparations for the action and the fierce disputes between the Interior, Defense and Foreign Ministries.

The three ministries assigned a small group of state secretaries and top officials to conduct the operation. They formed a crisis committee that began meeting daily in the Berlin Ministry of Defense a day after the hijacking.

Reinhard Silberberg, a state secretary in Steinmeier's Foreign Office, a man close to the SPD, headed the crisis committee and is someone considered to be a keen advocate of a more aggressive military role for Germany.

Interior Minister Schäuble sent his state secretary, August Hanning, to join the crisis committee. Until 2005, Hanning headed the German Intelligence Service (BND). For years he has backed Schäuble's course of beefing up the state apparatus while undermining basic democratic rights. During the G8 summit held in Germany in 2007, Hanning was responsible for the police operation that ended with the arrest of over 1,000 protesters.

Because there were legal obstacles to a deployment of the KSK German Special Forces unit, the crisis committee decided to activate the GSG 9 anti-terror unit. The unit is a special-purpose force of the federal police and is under the control of Schäuble's Interior Ministry-unlike the KSK whose deployment has to be approved by the German parliament.

First, the Defense Ministry sent the Navy frigates "Rheinland-Pfalz" and "Mecklenburg-Vorpommern," stationed in the Indian Ocean, to chase the fleeing pirates. Secretary of state Silberberg declared bluntly at the time: "As long as only five pirates are on board, we can strike home and end the thing quickly." However, the pirates were able to flee and obtain reinforcements.

According to *Der Spiegel*, Schäuble and his secretary of state complained that the military was being too "hesitant". Schäuble demanded that help be sought from the US and asserted his position against that of the Foreign Office, which warned against putting too much reliance on the "Amis". The Pentagon then declared its willingness to support the German mission and made the helicopter carrier the USS Boxer available to the GSG 9.

Der Spiegel describes the extent of the commando operation: "On Good Friday, the federal government can finally act. Two Antonov An-124, three Ilyushin Il-76, a Transall and an Airbus fly on Easter Sunday, transporting weapons, explosives and six Puma and Bell helicopters to Mombasa. The technical aid organization organizes the logistics, with the GSG 9, following the advance commando unit, providing the remainder of the troops,

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more than 200 men." As additional support, four German warships with 800 men on board were deployed to escort the USS Boxer.

Despite doubts about the feasibility of the operation—the GSG 9 center in Potsdam warned of a bloodbath in a shootout with 30 well-armed pirates—state secretaries Hanning and Silberberg remained determined to carry out the operation, which they had planned for the night of May 1.

The *Der Spiegel* report also makes clear how closely Foreign Minister Steinmeier was involved in the military operation. In the crucial hours of its planning, he was on a trip to Afghanistan, but was constantly informed of its progress via a secret telephone line.

In the event, the deployment did not take place after the Obama administration pulled the brake on April 29. Obama's security adviser James Jones told German Chancellor Angela Merkel by telephone that the US military regarded the operation as too dangerous, and was no longer prepared to make the USS Boxer available.

Der Spiegel, which has for some time raised its own demand for a more powerful German army, commented on the failed operation as follows: "The refusal is a harsh blow for Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD). They wanted to end this hostage crisis militarily, if at all possible; they had the agreement of the federal Chancellor, who was informed regularly. Schäuble and Steinmeier are fed up with the dollar diplomacy of the past few years and wanted to set up a precedent with international charisma: Look here, the Germans no longer pay out to gangsters or terrorists, the Germans can do things differently."

The magazine then concludes: "In Berlin the issue is what went wrong. The operation lasted three weeks, it cost the treasury more millions than all the ransom payments made in recent years put together. The GSG 9, as was clear from the attempt, cannot respond quickly enough abroad without better logistics, airplanes and ships. It would appear obvious to concentrate everything in the hands of the German army."

This is precisely the course followed for a long time by the CDU and its sister party, the Christian Social Union, as well as sections within the SPD. Only last week, Schäuble once again demanded a change of the Basic Law and received support from Chancellor Merkel. Schäuble's aim is essentially to do away with the separation of the army and the police stipulated by the German constitution. The Interior Minister wants the power to deploy German soldiers both at home and abroad at any time.

The journalist Heribert Prantl draws the same conclusion in a commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* : "Schäuble is using piracy as a grappling hook to get what he always wanted: the extensive deployment of the army as a general security force."

Interior Minister Schäuble has already used a demonstration by Kurds who blocked a highway as an excuse to call in the army, and during the recent football World Championship in Germany, he sought to stir up hysteria in order to implement military protection of football grounds. Now he is using piracy as a further pretext to realize his goal.

This is despite the fact that the mandate agreed by the Bundestag on December 19 permits German soldiers to not only attack, but also sink hostile ships. Such deployments have been merged into Operation Atalanta, adopted in November 2008 by the European Union as an anti-piracy measure.

A majority in the SPD currently rejects any amendment to the Basic Law, allowing the army to take over policing operations-at least until the federal election scheduled this autumn. Afterwards, things could change. The SPD defense expert Rainer Arnold is demanding the fusion of the two elite troops—the GSG 9 and the KSK—at least to enable them "to practice and operate together".

SPD faction leader Peter Struck commented: "Germany can obviously not solve hostage crises like these on its own, but is dependant on outside assistance ... We must seriously ask ourselves whether we should develop the capabilities to arm ourselves for similar cases."

Schäuble's unwavering campaign for the deployment of the army as a "general security force" at home and abroad at any time, free from parliamentary restrictions, corresponds to the increasing intent of the country's ruling elite to impose their interests with force when necessary.

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