

German Left Party retreats from its demand for a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan

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Just one week before the German federal election, the Left Party has shifted significantly from its demand for an immediate withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan. In carefully worked-out formulations, a number of leading members of the party have signaled their support for an alternative war strategy. Such a strategy is aimed at shifting the main burden of the war onto the Afghan allies of the NATO forces and undermining the considerable opposition to the war in the German population—without giving up the original cause for going to war: the control of a geo-strategically vital region.

The chairman of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, made clear to the *Sächsischen Zeitung* on Wednesday that the demand for an “immediate withdrawal” of the German army from Afghanistan should not be taken literally. “Immediate does not mean head over heels,” he said. “Parliament must negotiate with its partners over the procedure for a withdrawal.”

Similar comments were made by Left Party manager Dietmar Bartsch to the *Tagesspiegel*. When it advanced slogans like “Out of Afghanistan,” the party did not mean “leaving Afghanistan the next day,” he stressed. It would be “a major step” if the SPD were to officially agree to the “quickest possible” withdrawal from Afghanistan, even if it did not specify a date.

The speaker on defence affairs for the Left Party, Paul Schäfer, told *SpiegelOnline*: “Of course it cannot be just done in a head over heels fashion. A withdrawal can be determined for within a period of one year. It should in any case not take any longer.” What is necessary is at least a signal to the government in Kabul to take on more responsibility.

In an interview given to the *Junge Welt* 10 days ago, the head of the Left Party parliamentary faction, Dagmar Enkelmann, had already spoken in favour of a

“broad public discussion about an exit strategy.”

“Exit-Strategy” means nothing other than pursuing the war by other means. At the moment, both NATO and the German government are discussing such a strategy and are planning an Afghanistan conference for the start of next year—an initiative that Enkelmann expressly welcomed.

The case of Iraq makes clear what can be expected from an “Exit-Strategy.” Within the framework of the “Exit-Strategy” conducted by US President Obama, Iraqi clan leaders were bribed, given arms and set against one another, while over more than 100,000 US soldiers remained in heavily armed bases. The result is bloody civil war and the continuing occupation of the country.

The occupying powers have similar plans for Afghanistan. The German foreign minister and Social Democratic Party (SPD) candidate for chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, recently put forward a plan that was praised in the highest tones by the head of the Left Party, Lafontaine. “Apparently there is a growing sense in the other parties that the German army deployment in Afghanistan has to be ended” was Lafontaine’s comment on Steinmeier’s 10-point plan.

Steinmeier wants to step up the training of the Afghan army and police and concentrate occupation troops in “regions with a critical security situation”—just as the US has done in Iraq. His paper deliberately refrains from making any specific reference for a withdrawal of troops. Instead, his proposals are aimed at creating “the foundations” for a withdrawal at a later point.

By shifting away from its demand for an immediate withdrawal of troops and by its support for the Steinmeier plan, the Left Party is declaring its readiness to take up responsibility for the military deployment in

Afghanistan and defend it against growing public opposition. A number of commentators have noted the party's change of course.

The newspaper *Tagesspiegel* posed the question: "The demand of the Left Party for an 'immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan' has become a withdrawal 'as quickly as possible.' Is the party moving in the direction of taking up governmental responsibility?"

SpiegelOnline commented that the carefully orchestrated turn allows one "to conclude a certain readiness for dialogue with regard to foreign policy along the lines of: look here, it is quite possible to talk with us about Afghanistan." Lafontaine's feeler is a signal to the social democrats "that also with regard to Afghanistan, the supposed major obstacle to a collaboration between the SPD, Left Party and the Greens at a federal level, compromises are possible."

It is no accident that the Left Party's change of course is taking place just days before the parliamentary election. It is already evident that the next government will be very unstable. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has gone on record as favouring a coalition after the election with the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), but such a coalition is likely to possess only a slim majority and is hardly up to the job of dealing with the social shocks looming on the horizon. Should the election result in a further term in office for the current grand coalition (CDU-SPD-CSU), as many in the SPD and CDU hope, this will only serve to accelerate the decline of the two so-called Peoples Parties.

The Left Party therefore calculates at the next election in 2013, but also possibly earlier, it will be called upon to take up responsibility in a federal government in order to head off growing social opposition. The party has proved its credentials in this respect for many years in east Germany at a state and communal level.

It is unlikely that a three-way coalition will emerge from the election on Sunday. The SPD has categorically ruled out a coalition with the Left Party, and any attempt to "break its promise" would likely tear the party apart. The same applies to the FDP, which has ruled out a government coalition with the SPD and Greens, and also the Greens, which have promised not to form a coalition with the FDP and

CDU.

Nevertheless, the Left Party is determined before the election to establish the conditions for its eventual participation in a federal government. Should the SPD experience an election debacle, as seems likely, the old guard in the party will be forced to step down. Party chairman Franz Müntefering is approaching 70, and, following a defeat for his party, Steinmeier is hardly likely to stand again as the party's chancellor candidate. Collaboration with the Left Party would be much easier with figures like the Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit, the former chair of the SPD Young Socialists, Andrea Nahles, and the head of the so-called "networkers," Sigmar Gabriel at the top of the SPD.

That is why the Left Party is now doing everything in its power to demonstrate its reliability to the SPD. Following recent state elections in Saarland and Thuringia, and as talks continue over the composition of the new state parliaments, the Left Party has made clear it is ready to make any and every compromise in order to form coalitions with the SPD and Greens. In Thuringia, the head of the Left Party in the state, Bodo Ramelow, has just declared he is ready to relinquish the post of prime minister in order to facilitate a coalition with the SPD and Greens. He made the offer although the Left Party emerged as the strongest party following the state election, and according to tradition, it is the winner of the election that automatically takes over as state prime minister.

Any participation by the Left Party at a federal level would inevitably be directed against the working population. It would continue the domestic and foreign policies of the current government and impose them against any and all public opposition.



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