

US commander demands increased military commitment from Germany in Afghanistan

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The commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, US General Stanley McChrystal, took the unusual step of giving an interview to the German boulevard *Bild* newspaper on Wednesday calling for an increased commitment by Germany to the US-led war. In his interview McChrystal made clear that he expected Germany to increase its troop levels in Afghanistan. He also called for a change of strategy by German troops stationed in the north of the country, involving a greater readiness to take risks and engage in combat.

This interview in the mass-circulation *Bild* is part of an ongoing campaign by the American high command to pressure its European allies to substantially increase their troop levels in the run-up to the Afghanistan conference due to be held in London on January 28.

The German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) had previously announced that Berlin saw the conference in London as an opportunity to discuss a new strategy for Afghanistan, and that the German government would only announce any changes to its troop levels at a later date. Westerwelle has also spoken out against sending additional troops to Afghanistan. McChrystal's intervention into the public arena is obviously aimed at pressuring the German government to make a firm commitment to increased troop levels at the London conference.

In the same interview McChrystal announced he planned to use the annual Munich Security Conference in February as an additional platform to agitate for a troop surge on the part of European nations. McChrystal also declared that during his trip to Germany he would meet with German members of parliament responsible for the German Afghanistan mission to promote the new US strategy.

In his *Bild* interview, McChrystal criticized German military tactics in northern Afghanistan, whereby German troops remained largely in their own bases or travelled through hostile territories in armored vehicles. It was necessary for "every force to accept some risks...and change

the way they operated in the past." The conclusion to be drawn from the US general's remarks is clear. German troops had to be prepared to bloody their hands and engage with the enemy in a classic battle front confrontation.

In another measure to increase pressure on the German government, the US high command recently announced plans to massively increase the number of American troops in northern Afghanistan—the territory under the military command of Germany. The US Army is planning to send its first units to Kunduz and Mazar-e-Sharif next week and station around 2,500 US soldiers there, including a helicopter battalion by this summer. US Army Special Forces are already stationed in Kunduz.

While critical of the tactics of the German army, McChrystal was glowing in his praise for Germany's recently appointed Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union). The two men have already met and, according to McChrystal in his *Bild* interview, the German defense minister was "very forthcoming with me, and I appreciated that." McChrystal added, "I think we are going to have a very great working relationship, and I am excited about that."

For his part, zu Guttenberg reacted immediately to express his support for the proposals made by McChrystal. In front of the German parliament building on the same day the defense minister described the US general's critique of German military tactics as "corresponding to reality."

Last summer, during a visit to Kunduz, McChrystal had already called on the German army to adopt US training methods, now zu Guttenberg signaled the readiness of the German military to do so. The German army could no longer afford to maintain any "rigid division between training and security," zu Guttenberg said and added, "a soldier engaged in training must be able to protect himself and in a situation to fight."

While McChrystal can rely on the unwavering support of the German defense minister, there are growing concerns within the political elite in Berlin that unconditional support for US policy in Afghanistan could, in the long run,

adversely affect German foreign and military policy. This is what lies behind the reluctance of Foreign Minister Westerwelle, who is certainly no opponent of US foreign policy, to make a definite commitment to enlarging Germany's troop deployment in Afghanistan.

In an article entitled *NATO's Last Stand* written for the outlet *IP Global*, William Drozdiak, president of the American Council on Germany, makes the political case for intensified German involvement in Afghanistan. He makes clear that the future of NATO is in the balance: "The future cohesion of NATO and the viability of American leadership of the Atlantic alliance may hinge on whether the Afghanistan conflict can be turned around—even if the Western allies return home with something short of victory." The author then argues that in the Afghanistan war Germany has as much at stake as United States and must "accept a large measure of responsibility if it (the NATO mission) fails."

Drozdiak then declares that, "Chancellor Merkel and Defense Minister zu Guttenberg face a daunting task in persuading the German people that, contrary to what many of them may believe, Afghanistan remains crucial to Germany's own security."

In fact, the US government has been pressuring Berlin for an increased deployment since last summer. Although the German coalition government of conservative parties and the FDP led by Angela Merkel would like to agree to the American request, its room for maneuver is limited by the huge public opposition to the war.

According to opinion polls conducted at the end of last year, over 70 percent of the German population was opposed to the presence of German troops in the eight-year-long conflict in Afghanistan. The massacre at Kunduz, involving an air strike ordered by the German army last September, has exploded the myth that the German military presence in Afghanistan was aimed at "reconstruction" and "restoring democracy" in that war-torn country.

The most recent revelations of corruption in the Afghan administration and reports of a series of setbacks for NATO forces at the hands of rebel forces, combined with a growing death toll for German troops, have only served to fuel public opposition to the war.

At the same time, German political and military circles have received a series of rebuffs from the US military command. President Obama decided on his latest surge of 30,000 extra troops without any consultation with his European allies, just as the most recent deployment of US troops to northern Afghanistan was made independently of any negotiations with the NATO member assigned to control the region—i.e., Germany. The US strategy of expanding the war into Pakistan was also undertaken unilaterally, with no

regard paid to the regional interests of America's allies.

In the case of the Kunduz massacre, German military circles also reacted indignantly to the criticisms rapidly leveled at German commanders by General McChrystal. McChrystal travelled personally to inspect the results of the aerial bombardment and immediately issued a report outlining his criticisms of the German officers who had ordered the bombardment of two stranded fuel tankers, killing 170 people. After the Kunduz massacre, Defense Minister zu Guttenberg has been called upon to explain his comments justifying the massacre.

Since the Second World War, German foreign policy has been based on support for the NATO alliance and its principal ally across the Atlantic, the United States, combined with a multi-lateral policy aimed at harmonious relations with other states—including, since the 1970s, Eastern European states. The first major rift in this policy came in 2002, when the German social democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder refused direct German support for the US-led war against Iraq.

Following the replacement of George Bush by President Barack Obama a year ago, the German ruling elite hoped for an end to the unilateral foreign policy that characterized the Bush administration and ended in the disastrous Iraq war. Their hopes have been dashed. While the Obama government is quite prepared to accept German and European soldiers as fodder for its growing war scenarios, it is steadfast in insisting that Washington determine the military and geo-strategic agenda.

The German government confronts a dilemma. For over half a century it was able to conduct its own foreign policy and advance its interests under the auspices of the United States. Germany has no interest in the break-up of NATO and no alternative military strategy to offer should the alliance collapse. At the same time, there is a growing chorus of voices in Germany warning against a foreign policy that unconditionally follows in the footsteps of the United States—a major power whose political and economic influence is waning and that increasingly resorts to hazardous and provocative military interventions.



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