

German government falls in behind US strategy for Afghanistan

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In a speech to the German parliament (Bundestag) on Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) pledged to send additional German troops to back the US surge in Afghanistan ordered by President Barack Obama. The German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party, FDP), will announce Germany's new contribution to the US-NATO war to 60 foreign ministers assembled for the London Afghanistan Conference on Thursday.

The German government agreed Monday evening to increase its current contingent of 4,500 troops by 500, plus an additional 350 soldiers in the form of a "flexible reserve."

At the same time, Germany will step up its financial contribution to the war and provide €50 million (\$70 million) to a €350 million international fund aimed at bribing members of the Taliban to collaborate with occupation forces. Berlin will also nearly double its contribution for so-called "civilian development" projects to a total of €430 million.

The increase in troops and money come in response to appeals made by the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, US Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who gave an interview to the German *Bild* newspaper earlier this month calling for an increased commitment by Germany.

With nearly three-quarters of the German population opposed to the war, the government has defied public opinion and given the green light for measures that will inevitably increase the toll of death and destruction in war-ravaged Afghanistan. In addition to more troops and money, the German government has also agreed to adopt the US military strategy of "partnering," i.e., the pairing of German soldiers with Afghanistan troops in combat situations.

This latter step is also in line with the demands raised by McChrystal, who has criticized the German army (Bundeswehr) for its reluctance to engage in direct combat. The new German military strategy will lead to a far higher level of casualties amongst Afghan rebels and civilians at the hands of German troops, as well as significantly increasing the death toll of German soldiers.

Merkel sought to disguise the real content of her Afghanistan policy, deceitfully describing the "new approach" at a press conference on Tuesday as "a much more defensive approach, in accordance with which the German army's offensive capacities will be restructured."

In her Bundestag speech, Merkel stressed the role played by German troops in training Afghan soldiers and police, while the government's development minister, Dirk Niebel (FDP), earlier this week emphasized Germany's role in "civil reconstruction projects."

All of this is humbug aimed at throwing sand in the eyes of the German public. Merkel's duplicity in relation to the real nature of the war in Afghanistan and the consequences of Germany's new position is possible only because the political opposition has made clear it backs the new line. The head of the Social Democratic faction in the German parliament and former foreign minister responsible for German military policy in Afghanistan, Frank Walter Steinmeier, welcomed the government's new approach, declaring that "it is very pleasing to see that the government is moving in our direction."

Under conditions where it knew its vote would have no effect, the Left Party has voted in the past in the parliament against the participation of German troops in Afghanistan, arguing that the country was the wrong

place to fight the “war on terror.” At the same time, prominent leaders of the party, including former chairman Oskar Lafontaine, indicated that they were prepared to drop their demand for the withdrawal of German troops in favor of discussions with the government over an appropriate “exit strategy.”

Since coming to power last September, the CDU-FDP coalition government has struggled to arrive at a united position on how to proceed in Afghanistan. The bombing of two tankers in Kundus on September 4 on the orders of a German colonel, which claimed the lives of up to 170 Afghans, only served to fuel the public debate in Germany about the role of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. The Kundus massacre represented the biggest loss of civilian life at the hands of the German army since the atrocities committed by Hitler's Wehrmacht in the Second World War.

Earlier this month, the head of Germany's Protestant church, Bishop Margot Käßmann, was subjected to a deluge of criticism from government ranks when she spoke out against the war, declaring it could not be justified and that the Bundeswehr should be withdrawn.

Differences over how to proceed also extended into the ranks of the government. At the end of last year, Foreign Minister Westerwelle declared that he might boycott the January 28 conference in London if it focused on the issue of deploying more troops.

Westerwelle, the chairman of the “free market” FDP, represents a wing of German foreign policy, exemplified by former long-time FDP foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, which favors a multilateral foreign policy, balancing Germany's commitment to NATO with close relations to countries in the rest of Europe, including Eastern Europe, as well as Central Asia.

Despite pressure from the FDP, Merkel has resisted giving any clear date for the withdrawal of German troops. In this respect, her policy dovetails with the position worked out for the London Afghanistan Conference itself.

A draft communique prepared for the conference and released to the press makes no mention of a timeline for withdrawal. Instead, the statement declares that Afghanistan will not be able to take over full responsibility for its own security for another half a decade, and emphasizes the “long-term commitment” to Afghanistan on the part of the NATO allies.

The German agreement to send more troops will not satisfy entirely the demands of the US, and falls short of the wishes of the German military high command, as Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union, CSU) made clear this week. The fact that differences still remain within the government over its Afghanistan policy is indicated by the fact that the German chancellor, defense minister and foreign minister all held separate press conferences on Tuesday to praise their common “new approach.”

Nevertheless, despite ongoing wrangles, the coalition partners in the German government have cobbled together an agreement that will significantly intensify the war.

Together with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Merkel issued the call for an Afghanistan conference last September, ostensibly to develop a new strategy for the war.

The “new” strategy is now clear, i.e., more of the same criminal military occupation that has already brought death and misery to hundreds of thousands of Afghans in a war which has already lasted twice as long as the First World War. Increased numbers of German troops will bloody their hands alongside American and NATO forces in a military adventure with no end in sight.

A genuine opposition to the war requires the mobilisation of the masses of workers and young people across the globe for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, coupled with a guarantee of reparations to compensate for war casualties and finance the rebuilding of the devastated country.

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