

German parliament approves new Afghanistan strategy

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A large majority of the German parliament voted Friday, February 26 to expand the country's military operation in Afghanistan. In future, the number of soldiers deployed in the Hindu Kush will be increased from the current level of 4,500 to 5,350. In addition, significantly more police will be sent to Afghanistan to train local security forces.

By extending its mandate for Afghanistan an additional year, the parliament has declared its approval of the US government's new Afghanistan strategy. Central to this strategy is a massive escalation of the war and an increase in the number of occupation forces. Aggressive military operations are also to be increased in order to bring insurgents to their knees through the exercise of brutal violence. The result will be a corresponding surge in the number of civilian and troop deaths.

Parliament decided to redefine the Afghanistan operation at the beginning of February. It no longer talks of a stabilisation operation for the maintenance of peace, but of a "non-international armed conflict." This a euphemism for civil war. This means German soldiers will be subject to international law and allowed to kill unarmed civilians under certain conditions. Until now, they have only been permitted to use firearms in exceptional circumstances.

Although an escalation of the war has been rejected by more than two thirds of the German population, parliament approved it by a large majority. Some 429 of the 586 deputies voted for the new strategy, 46 abstained and 111 voted against it. Apart from the governing parties, the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union alliance) and the FDP (Free Democratic Party), the overwhelming majority of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) also supported the new mandate. The leadership of the Greens recommended that its fraction abstain, while the Left party opposed it.

The SPD's executive had recommended that its parliamentary fraction unanimously support the move despite serious reservations in the party. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former foreign minister, justified this with the claim that the government had come into accord with the SPD in many respects. "A change in perspective has gained acceptance," he said. Efforts to reconstruct civilian life were to be doubled and withdrawal of

military forces would begin in 2011.

Actually, it is the effort toward waging war rather than securing peace that is to be doubled. There will also be no fixed date for withdrawal. Prior to the parliamentary ballot, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) once again expressly refused to set a specific date for the departure of the German army. On Friday, he told the Südwestrundfunk radio station that such an announcement would only encourage the terrorists to hold out for a certain time before striking back again.

Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg also opposed setting a fixed date for withdrawal. "To say that we'll have no more German soldiers in Afghanistan by a particular day would be playing into the hands of those who are only waiting to say: 'Great! When that time comes, we'll just turn the clocks back,'" he said in a television interview last Wednesday.

Fogh Rasmussen, general secretary of NATO, had already stressed at the London conference on Afghanistan at the end of January that "transition" (of power) was not a code word for "exit."

"The Afghan people should have no fear that we will leave too early," he said. "We will not."

The German parliament's consent to an escalation of the war comes at a critical time for the US and NATO. The war front is beginning to crumble in view of increasing opposition within Europe. Only last week, the government of the Netherlands collapsed because the Social Democrats felt they were no longer able—faced with breaking their earlier election promises—to sanction a further extension of the mandate for the 2,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan. As a consequence, fears grew within NATO that this could lead to the withdrawal of other countries.

In the last few days, representatives of the US government have therefore put great pressure on European NATO members to send additional troops to Afghanistan and participate more robustly in military operations. The number of US soldiers killed in Afghanistan having risen to over 1,000, and the US government is now trying to shift a larger measure of the war burden onto other lands in order to appease opposition at home.

On February 23 at the National Defense University in Washington, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates declared: “One of the triumphs of the last century was the pacification of Europe after ages of ruinous warfare. But, as I’ve said before, I believe we have reached an inflection point, where much of the continent has gone too far in the other direction. The demilitarization of Europe—where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it—has gone from a blessing in the twentieth century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the twenty-first.”

Last week in Berlin, US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke warned that at least 2,000 more personnel were needed for the training of Afghan police and soldiers. “I hope Germany will think about making a more solid commitment,” he said.

By accepting the new mandate, the German government has yielded to pressure from Washington. There are several reasons why this happened.

Firstly, the German government is unwilling to relinquish to US control the strategically significant region in the Middle East, which is of considerable importance to the energy supply of Europe. Although—or rather because—it is becoming increasingly obvious that the war is guided by imperialist goals, Germany wants to make sure it gets a share of the booty.

Secondly, Berlin fears a crisis or even a fracture within NATO. As a consequence of the international economic and financial crisis, economic tensions between the US and Germany have sharpened considerably. Economic contradictions have also intensified within Europe. If these are exacerbated by a political conflict with the US, Germany fears isolation. During the Iraq war, Washington showed that it knew how to exploit political tensions within European for its own purposes. Numerous European commentators have already attributed to Wall Street speculators a large measure of blame for the crisis in Greece and the fall in the euro.

And thirdly, there exists a close relationship between militarism and the dismantling of social gains. The German government is vehemently insisting that European Union member states balance their budget deficits at the expense of social expenditure and not give way to the opposition mounting against this course. Thus it is also unwilling to make any concessions to the opposition to the war in Afghanistan. To do so might encourage popular resistance.

The SPD is playing a particularly despicable role in supporting the warmongers. By accepting the new Afghanistan mandate, it is delivering a stab in the back not only to those who oppose the war, but also those who resist social cutbacks. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the SPD parliamentary fraction leader, has made his consent to an extension of the Afghanistan military operation, as well as reform of Hartz IV (unemployment benefits) legislation—recently

necessitated by a ruling from the German Constitutional Court—contingent upon an offer to cooperate with the federal government. In view of a sharpening dispute within the CDU/FDP coalition, Steinmeier seems to have hopes of a return to government via a reconstitution of the grand coalition.

The SPD is backed by the Greens and the Left party. By abstaining from the ballot, the Greens made clear that they are not prepared to take a stand against the war, despite mounting pressure from its own ranks. In 1998, they bought their way into the federal government by consenting to the war in Kosovo and, as a governing party three years later, organised the despatch of the German army to Afghanistan. In the meantime, they have attempted to form a coalition with the CDU in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (and possibly also at a federal level) and are incapable of changing their position on the war. Therefore, they cowardly shirk any candid statement about it.

The Left party speaks out against the war at an official level, drawing attention to itself with headline-grabbing campaigns. During the debate about the Afghanistan commitment, the Left party fraction was thus expelled from the assembly hall by the president of the parliament, Norbert Lammert, when they unrolled posters bearing the names of civilians that had been killed in a bomb attack in Kunduz, ordered by a senior officer of the German army last September.

However, despite such spectacular stunts, the Left party strictly refuses to mobilise the population in serious opposition to the Afghanistan operation and cause the government real difficulty. On February 20, it drew a mere 2,000 people to an anti-war demonstration in Berlin, although several dozen organisations had signalled their support for the demonstration and the Left party could have easily mobilised 10 times the number.

Rejection of the Afghanistan war enables the Left party to conserve its “leftist” image, while actively implementing social cutbacks in Berlin, Brandenburg and numerous municipalities in eastern Germany.

In fact the Left party’s opposition to the war is merely a bargaining chip that can be exchanged for a place in government when the opportunity presents itself. When the chance of entering government emerged in Saarland and Thuringia last year, several leading party functionaries were quick to stress that, naturally, the Left Party was not calling for an immediate military withdrawal, but merely for an “exit strategy.” This is also how the federal government describes its new strategy.



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