

German parliament votes to extend participation in Afghan war

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On January 28, the German Bundestag (parliament) voted by a clear majority to extend the country's participation in the Afghan war for a further 12 months. This decision brings German military participation into its 10th year.

Some 420 deputies voted to extend the Afghanistan mandate, 43 abstained and 116 voted against it. As well as the governing coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the vast majority of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary group also supported extending the mandate. Much of the Green Party abstained, with the Left Party voting "No" en bloc.

The parliamentary vote stands in inverse proportion to the mood of the population. In recent surveys, more than 70 percent of respondents opposed the war. Anti-war sentiment increased following the Kunduz massacre on September 4, 2009, when German Colonel Georg Klein ordered the bombing of two fuel tankers, killing 142 Afghans at a stroke, including many civilians and children.

To reassure the public, politicians and the media have emphasised the possibility of early troop withdrawals, which is now included in the new mandate. Accordingly, the first Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) troops in Afghanistan are scheduled to be withdrawn in late 2011. The last combat troops are slated to leave the country at the end of 2014.

In particular, the SPD justified its consent to the extension of the mandate with reference to this so-called "exit strategy". To the cheers of the SPD parliamentary faction, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) described the planned troop withdrawal as a "turning point". But the motion that was passed contains a critical caveat, stating that German troops will start to be withdrawn at the end of the year "as far as the situation permits and without compromising our troops or jeopardising the sustainability of the transition process."

The assessment of the security situation and the determination as to whether a troop withdrawal is possible will be made by the military, not parliament. And even if the withdrawal actually starts, the German troop presence will still remain well into the future. The SPD's demand for the withdrawal to be complete by 2014 only applies combat forces. However, the majority of German soldiers are regular troops. What will

happen to them remains completely open.

Last year, President Obama announced the withdrawal of the last US "combat" troops from Iraq, but tens of thousands of American troops remain stationed on Iraqi soil.

In truth, the "exit strategy" is directly linked with an intensification of the war, which is necessary, according to the military, to create the conditions for a withdrawal. The same argument was made last year in relation to US troops in Afghanistan. First, Obama announced that American troops would be withdrawn gradually in the coming years, and then he massively increased the number of troops in Afghanistan.

The war in the Hindu Kush has been escalated in recent months, rapidly leading to a rise in the number of dead civilians, soldiers and insurgents. Fighting also increased considerably in the German area of operations in the north. According to the American approach to counterinsurgency, Bundeswehr soldiers, along with Afghan police and military units of the region, are to "fight their way free", while US special forces hunt down insurgent leaders.

To cover up the reality of the war, the representatives of the coalition government, as well as those of the SPD and Greens, have emphasised the supposedly humanitarian character of the military operation. Mention was made several times of "military protection of the civilian reconstruction efforts".

But the facts tell a completely different story. The living conditions of the Afghan population have deteriorated significantly since the war began.

According to a UN report on the situation in Afghanistan, the number of people living in poverty has increased from 33 to 42 percent. The number of undernourished people rose from 30 to 39 percent. The number living in slums has risen almost twice from 2.4 million to 4.5 million. Access to sanitation has fallen from 12 percent to only 5.2 percent of the population. At the same time, opium production has increased significantly, and thus so has the power of the warlords. The acreage of poppy fields has risen from 131,000 to 193,000 hectares.

No one speaking in parliament, not even Left Party leader Gregor Gysi, who recited some of these UN figures, drew attention to the contradiction between the reality of war and the initial mandate used to send German troops to Afghanistan. The original mandate, extended annually since 2001 without major

opposition, provides for “support in the maintenance of security” as part of a “peace and reconstruction mission.”

Meanwhile, former federal President Horst Köhler, Defence Minister Guttenberg and Chancellor Angela Merkel have said that the military action involves conducting a war. But the Bundestag has never voted on conducting a war. The mandate just voted upon does not provide for such a mission. In other words, no institution has democratically legitimised what the Bundeswehr is actually carrying out in Afghanistan.

In May, when Horst Köhler said that Afghanistan really involved Germany’s economic interests, which also had to be defended by military means, a veritable barrage against him began among politicians and from the media. The fear was that the truth behind the war propaganda would become visible.

But now, Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg bluntly says, “The security of trade routes and the sources of raw material is without a doubt among the military and global strategic considerations.... Without a doubt, energy supply is an essential component in the changes in the international balance of power.”

Afghanistan is at the centre of Western interests due to its geostrategic position in Central Asia, with its vast oil and natural gas reserves. In 2008, American researchers also “discovered” large deposits of so-called “rare earths” in Afghanistan, which are essential for the production of high-tech goods.

Accordingly, Germany is also anxious to secure a place among those able to profit from these resources. The withdrawal of Dutch troops last year served as a welcome opportunity to increase the number of German soldiers and police officers in Afghanistan in 2010. This year, the number of police trainers will be increased again.

The SPD and the Greens support this policy, attempting to justify the war, which was started under an SPD-Green Party government, in public by citing the alleged improvements in Afghanistan. The SPD in particular always tries to present the mandate as a “peace and reconstruction mission”.

As for the Greens, their defence policy spokesman in parliament, Omid Nouripour, pointed to improved education, but failed to mention that one in three Afghan girls has no opportunity to attend school at all. By their abstention, the Greens have made it clear that despite growing pressure from within their own ranks, they are not willing to take a position against the war. They purchased their entry into the federal government in 1998 through their support for the Kosovo war, and three years later, as a party of government, they organised the sending of the Bundeswehr to Afghanistan.

The Left Party is playing a vicious double game: proclaiming pacifism in words while collaborating with war in deeds. Above all, as a reliable party of state it sees its task as diverting the growing resistance in the population. Because the Left Party knew that its votes were not required to secure passage of the mandate, it speaks loudly against the war.

The subterfuge practiced by the Left Party on these sorts of issues is shown by a recent WikiLeaks revelation, according to which, Left Party leader Gysi assured US Ambassador Philip Murphy in Berlin that the Left Party had only raised the demand for the dissolution of NATO to keep the party’s left wing quiet.

The Left Party has four representatives sitting on the parliamentary defence committee, working loyally in the body in which all parliamentary decisions about the direction, financing and troop strength of the mandate are decided. All of this is done outside of the public gaze. Far from using the information they gain from participating in this committee to mobilise the public against the war, the Left Party meets its obligation to maintain the confidentiality of the work of this committee.

The growing intensity of the war is also reflected in its impact on German soldiers. The number of soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—i.e., deep psychological damage—has increased 12-fold since 2006. Last year alone, 655 cases were reported, and the true figure is likely to be much higher.

In this context, the role of recently uncovered scandals involving the Bundeswehr is remarkable. Several dozen letters from soldiers in Afghanistan to their relatives in Germany have been opened illegally. Some envelopes arrived with no contents.

Although the Defence Ministry denies any allegations of censorship, as far as is known, the opened post came from a unit of paratroopers from the Seedorf barracks in Lower Saxony. This unit is stationed in Afghanistan in a remote outpost, and is constantly involved in skirmishes. The Char Darrah region it occupies is considered to be the main focus of the German operational theatre. Last year alone, four of its soldiers were killed in Afghanistan.



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