

Germany does an about-face on Libya war

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Three weeks after rejecting any German participation in the war in Libya, the German government has now done a complete about-face. According to Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party) and government spokesman Steffen Seibert, Germany is willing to engage militarily in Libya, and even to send ground troops into the country.

In March the German government, together with China, Russia, Brazil and India, abstained in the vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which gave the green light for the bombing of Libya. It also withdrew German soldiers stationed with NATO units in the Mediterranean tasked with imposing an arms embargo on Libya.

In order to save face, the German government has now declared that the imminent deployment of its armed forces is to conduct a “humanitarian mission”, and not a “combat mission”. This is pure subterfuge. The government used similar arguments to justify its intervention in Afghanistan, where for a long time it sought to make a distinction between the ISAF “civilian re-construction” mission and the combat mission carried out by forces attached to Operation Enduring Freedom—until both operations were merged and the government openly admitted that its forces were at war in Afghanistan.

Now the planned German army mission in Libya is to take place under the authority of the European Union, acting in turn on behalf of the United Nations, rather than as part of the current NATO operation.

However, the fact is that no request has been made by the relevant UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Ocha). This suggests that the announcement by the German government at the weekend is an appeal to the United Nations to make a request as soon as possible, allowing Germany to intervene militarily.

Westerwelle stressed that when it was a case of “alleviating the consequences of this conflict for the population, we will not neglect to take up our responsibility.”

The Ministry of Defence stressed that such an operation would include operations on Libyan territory. If the armed forces take part in a humanitarian operation that includes such a contingency in its operational plan, according to a ministry spokesman, “It’s quite clear that we would set foot on Libyan soil”.

The government will then organize a vote in the German parliament (Bundestag) on a so-called “robust mandate”, permitting the use of weapons.

It is quite likely that ground troops will be mobilised to fight in Libya. According to agency reports, European Union diplomats in Brussels expect the UN to request reinforcements for fighting in the coastal city of Misrata. In addition to naval forces, soldiers would then probably be used

on land.

On France Info radio, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said that “Misrata finds itself in an untenable situation.” France’s Defence Minister Gerard Longuet agreed to set up a sea corridor to resupply the besieged Mediterranean city.

It is expected that the UN will make an appropriate request to the EU foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg on Tuesday. The German government will then determine how many German soldiers are being used and what tasks they should perform. The Bundestag must then give its agreement.

A similar operation has been in preparation since the end of March by the Italian military under the name “Eufor Libya.” This operation involves the use of so-called EU battle groups, which were founded in 2004 specifically to conduct lightning operations in crisis situations. Each battle group consists of 1,500 soldiers. Currently, two groups are on standby, including a German unit with 990 soldiers under Dutch leadership.

The German change of course comes at a time of crisis for the NATO operation against Libya. The original plan of bombing the way free for so-called rebels to advance on Tripoli and bring about rapid regime change has not worked out. The insurgents are militarily and numerically too weak. In NATO headquarters, talk is now of a long “war of attrition”.

Moreover, NATO is not assured of the loyalty of Gaddafi’s opponents. Rebel leaders reacted angrily to the recent bombing of an opposition convoy on Thursday by NATO warplanes.

The Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had reservations about the NATO deployment, like Germany, has intensified his own efforts to achieve a negotiated solution aimed at allowing followers of Gaddafi to either participate in a new government or at least be guaranteed a secure retreat into exile.

Under these conditions the German government detects an opportunity to set foot in Libya and at the same time recover the ground it lost through its abstention in the Security Council. To this end they are prepared to risk the lives of German soldiers on Libyan soil, but not because of any “humanitarian” concerns for the population of Misrata.

In recent years Germany has developed strong economic and political interests in North Africa. Already heavily dependent on Russian energy, it has intensified its efforts to obtain large quantities of oil and gas from North Africa, and in particular in Libya. Libya is Germany’s fourth most important oil supplier.

A study prepared by the official research institute Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, Science and Politics Institute), which appeared in 2009, two years before the Libyan war, states: “The interests that guide

Germany's action in the Maghreb, are first and foremost energy and security.... Oil and gas from these countries is increasingly important. "

The study continues that "the German economy has a manifest interest in improving its status in the Maghreb. Although Germany is among the five major trading partners in all Maghreb countries except Algeria (measured by trade volume), German direct investment is still quite modest."

Germany is not alone in this respect in the Maghreb. Russia, China and India are all highly active in the North African states. Germany's main competitor, however, is the former colonial power, France. Germany's abstention in the Security Council was due primarily to the fact that the German government interpreted the war effort as a hasty attempt by France and also Great Britain to recover their former dominance in the region.

Germany's alignment in the UN Security Council alongside Russia, China, Brazil and India was also no accident. These so-called BRIC countries are rapidly developing into Germany's most important trading partners. It quickly became apparent, however, that Germany's common front with the BRIC countries against its traditional allies—the US, France and Britain—had serious foreign policy repercussions. The German government and particularly Westerwelle came under severe criticism both at home and abroad.

Both the Greens and the SPD accused the government of refusing to participate in a "humanitarian" war, while other German politicians warned of the dangers of Germany's international isolation. It became clear that leading German economic and foreign policy circles were not prepared to be pressured involuntarily into an alliance with Russia and China against their old allies.

According to such forces, it is a fundamental principle of German foreign policy not to confront its two most important allies, the United States and France, at the same time. The criticism was so fierce that Westerwelle, who resigned as head of the FDP following dramatic losses for his party in recent state elections, is now under pressure to leave his post as foreign minister.

The German government is now trying to regain the domestic and foreign policy initiative with its about-face on its Libya policy.

According to the FDP deputy Rainer Stinner, the question of Germany's policy of alliances was crucial in the change of attitude. By assisting in the "humanitarian mission", Germany could dispel doubts about its readiness to demonstrate its solidarity in the alliance.

The government also hopes, however, that it will be able to profit additionally from a military operation under the authority of the EU as opposed to the current operation under the command of NATO. In the EU Germany sets the tone, while NATO is dominated by the US, which in the Libya conflict has been able to rely on the loyalty of France and Britain.

The reversal by the German government has been on the cards for some time. Having rejected German participation in AWACS reconnaissance flights over Afghanistan for years, a few days ago the government sent 300 soldiers to conduct AWACS operations in the Hindu Kush—thereby providing relief for the NATO mission in Libya.

According to his spokesman, Westerwelle had made his commitment to participate in a "humanitarian" use of EU troops on March 21, i.e., just

four days after the Libya vote on the UN Security Council. This commitment was kept secret from the public, however, in the run-up to the scheduled state elections.

The German government should have no problem garnering support in parliament. The SPD and the Greens have long called for military participation in Libya, and have persistently criticised the "zigzag course" of the government. Now they have made clear that they will support a German army mission in Libya in a parliamentary vote.

"Germany would do well to correct the mistakes of the past four weeks and take part here," Rainer Arnold, the defence spokesman of the SPD parliamentary group, said last Friday.

Green Party parliamentary leader Renate Künast told *Spiegel Online* that her party would not stand aside when the government asks the Bundestag for a mandate. "It took long enough for the foreign minister to correct his course, which showed a complete lack of solidarity," she added.

The security spokesman for the Green parliamentary group, Omid Pour Nouri, added that the need for "humanitarian assistance in such a situation is obvious." He also demanded that Germany take part "in the maritime blockade of weapons".

The Left Party, which had praised the German government for its abstention in the UN Security Council, has criticized its latest about-face. The Left Party foreign policy spokesman in the Bundestag, Wolfgang Gehrcke, complained that the government had broken its promise not to employ German soldiers in Libya.

The Left Party does not oppose the Libyan war, however. In fact, its former chairman Lothar Bisky—who now leads the Left Party's faction in the European Parliament—introduced a resolution there calling for military intervention in Libya, and for official recognition of the National Transitional Council in Benghazi. Nobody in the Left Party criticised Bisky for his stance.

In his latest comments on the announcement of the Bundeswehr mission in Libya, Gehrcke also writes: "Furthermore, it is necessary to guarantee access to aid for the civilian population, including medical care and the provision of water and food", i.e., exactly the same argument the government used to justify German military involvement.



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