

Germany: Foreign Minister Westerwelle under fire for abstention in Libya war

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The German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle has come under heavy attack following the conquest of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, by NATO-backed rebels. The German media and politicians have leveled harsh criticisms against him because Germany did not participate in the rape of the Mediterranean country and there is now a danger that Germany may come away empty-handed when the spoils are divided.

In March, Germany, together with the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), abstained in the UN Security Council vote which gave the green light for military intervention in Libya, and subsequently did not take part in the war.

NATO has systematically bombarded the country for six months, armed and trained the rebels and freed up their passage to Tripoli with the support of elite ground troops. This has seriously violated the UN mandate, which only allowed the establishment of a no-fly zone and the “protection of the civilian population.”

NATO has hoisted a puppet government into power, consisting of former officials of the Gaddafi regime, Islamists, tribal representatives and agents of Western intelligence. It differs from the Gaddafi regime mainly in the fact that it is even more servile to Western oil interests and big business and has no links with a revolutionary-nationalist past. It is just as ruthless in its repression of political opponents as its predecessor, and there are now a number of reports in the international media giving details of massacres of Gaddafi's supporters.

The subjugation of Libya by NATO was not conducted on humanitarian grounds, but rather for economic and geopolitical reasons. It ensures the warring countries access to the rich energy resources of the country and strengthens their influence in North Africa and the Middle East. It is a colonial crime comparable to the conquest of Abyssinia by Mussolini or the Sudetenland by Hitler. On those occasions the media also cried crocodile tears about the inhuman brutality of the Ethiopian royalty and the oppression of the Sudeten Germans by Prague.

This time round, however, no such excuses are employed by the German media and politicians regarding this resurgence of colonialism. Instead they are all outraged that Germany was not involved in the first place.

There had already been some sporadic criticism of the German abstention in the Security Council. But when it became clear that NATO could overthrow the Gaddafi regime—despite initial difficulties—this criticism rose to deafening proportions. It appears that some critics think that Germany has missed a second chance to settle in north Africa following the surrender of Rommel's Africa Korps in 1943.

Typical in this respect is a comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on

Saturday with the headline “The high price of German abstention.” The comment referred to the German attitude in the vote on the UN resolution as “the biggest foreign policy mistake carried out by this government.”

The author, Stefan Kornelius, does not hide his motives. He strongly deplores the resulting economic damage for Germany. “Germany pays a high price for this abstention,” he writes. “It is hardly surprising that the Libyan National Transitional Council does not want to do business with us.” Germany must also probably forego any claims to prominent NATO command posts.

On Sunday, the former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer gave an interview in *Der Spiegel* and also slammed Westerwelle. The Green Party politician described the German abstention in the UN Security Council as “the biggest foreign policy debacle since the founding of the Federal Republic.” Germany's position in the world had thereby been “substantially damaged.”

As foreign minister, Fischer pushed through the first foreign combat mission by the German army (in Yugoslavia) and German military participation in Afghanistan, in the face of considerable internal party opposition. Now he accuses Westerwelle of offending Germany's Western partners, pursuing a “separate world policy” and seeking new strategic partnerships.

Fischer refers explicitly to former Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU), who, in a recent article for the journal *Internationale Politik*, accused the federal government for the fact that Germany “has for some years now failed to be a power to be counted on—both at home and abroad.”

The SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel joined in this refrain, describing Westerwelle's behaviour with regard to Libya as “disoriented” and “undignified.”

Westerwelle even came under criticism from his own party. Late last week witnessed a bizarre race as who could debase themselves most to NATO.

After Westerwelle welcomed the conquest of Tripoli by the rebels, but failed to applaud the role of NATO, the FDP party leader Philipp Rösler gave an interview on Friday in which he expressed his “deep respect” and “gratitude” towards the NATO partners who “had stopped the murderous Gaddafi units in their tracks.” Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) publicly declared her “deep respect” for the performance of NATO.

These remarks were widely interpreted as a criticism of the foreign minister. After several telephone conversations with party chief Rösler and growing rumours of his impending dismissal, Westerwelle finally also prostrated himself before NATO on Sunday.

In a column in *Welt am Sonntag* he wrote: “We are pleased that the Libyans were able to overthrow the Gaddafi regime with the help of

the international military mission. We have respect for what our partners have done.”

The FDP leadership responded in writing to declare that “the imminent replacement” of Westerwelle was nothing more than a rumour.

The calls for his resignation continue, however. On Monday *Spiegel Online* stated that Westerwelle had long since lost his last chance to stay in office “by his pompous, self-righteous attitude and lack of a sense of historical and political context” and demanded his immediate resignation.

The German foreign policy dilemma

In the debate about Westerwelle the media concentrates mainly on his character traits and largely obscure the relevant political issues. At stake is nothing less than the future orientation of German foreign policy. The reason for the German abstention in the UN Security Council had nothing to do with scruples about the belligerence of NATO, but rather was an effort not to alienate China, Russia and other BRIC countries.

In particular Russia and China enjoyed intensive economic relations with Libya—relations that have been hard hit by the war and the overthrow of Gaddafi. At the start of the NATO attacks, no less than 36,000 Chinese workers fled from Libya. Most of the Chinese were employed in large construction projects.

Rosoboronexport, the Russian arms supplier, has estimated that it has lost about four billion US dollars in arms deals due to the embargo against Libya. Russia was also active in the Libyan oil sector and maintained a longstanding military cooperation with Libya. The new regime is unlikely to renew these relationships.

For their part, Russia and China were not willing to risk an open political confrontation with the NATO powers over the Libyan war. Both countries waived their veto right on the Security Council and thereby enabled the adoption of the Libya resolution with their abstention.

China has since tried to keep a foot in both camps. In June both Gaddafi’s foreign minister Ubaidi and a foreign policy spokesman for the transitional council, Mahmoud Jibril, were received in Beijing. In their coverage of the war, however, the Chinese media stressed that Western oil interests were the major reason for the intervention of NATO.

The majority of the Russian population also rejects the war. In March, 78 percent of the population opposed the bombing of Libya by NATO, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused NATO of violating the UN resolution. Prime Minister Putin was even more explicit and spoke of a “crusade” by NATO.

At the G8 summit in Deauville in May, however, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev signaled an adaptation to NATO in order to secure Russia’s interests in Libya in the event of a defeat for Gaddafi.

German foreign minister Westerwelle has avoided an open confrontation with his critics in order not to further weaken the already dysfunctional governing coalition. In a number of statements, however, he made clear that the crucial question was the strategic orientation towards the BRIC countries.

In the middle of last week, he told German television that what was important was not merely the tending of old partnerships and the

deepening of existing friendships “but in the world of the 21st century, it is also necessary to take the new power centres of the world seriously and build new strategic partnerships.” This, Westerwelle said, was “the simple recognition of a new era.”

In his long, programmatic contribution to the *Welt am Sonntag*, Westerwelle also stressed the importance of these “new centres of power” for German foreign policy. Apart from Russia, China, India and Brazil, he named South Africa, Vietnam, Mexico, Colombia and Turkey.

Westerwelle declared his commitment to NATO and Europe “as the foundation stone of German foreign policy.” The future of Europe was “the crucial question of German foreign policy.” He then relativised his comments immediately by linking this relationship to “fiscal discipline, budget consolidation and the strengthening of competitiveness.”

To those who are reluctant to call for some indebted countries to withdraw from the EU, he said: “Whoever cannot stand the pace, should not hold others back.”

He laid more weight on “building strategic partnerships with the new powerhouses of the world.”

“Our exports there have multiplied in the last ten years,” he wrote. “Through their economic advancement these states have grown into a political force without which we cannot negotiate and agree on global solutions.”

The debate over Westerwelle reflects the dilemma of German foreign policy. This debate will continue, regardless of whether Westerwelle retains his post.

Given the crisis of the EU and the decline of the United States the German economy is seeking new markets and investment opportunities in the “new centres of power.” This foreign policy brings Germany into conflict with its traditional European and American allies who are also aggressively pursuing their own global interests.

The praise, heaped by the Greens, Social Democrats and the majority of the governing parties on NATO for its “success” in Libya, should give pause to thought. Their praise and enthusiasm is not so much directed at the French, British or American governments, which will do everything to exploit the military success in their own favour. Rather their admiration centres on the brutal, illegal and risky methods used by the NATO powers. They see this as an example of how Germany should advance its own imperialist interests in future.



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