

NATO reform strengthens Germany's role

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Though coalition talks between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) have only just begun, Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière has already presented a new plan for NATO.

It envisages Germany assuming a leading role in the military alliance. Only six weeks after the federal election, it is clear that the new government will have a far more aggressive foreign policy, seeking to lead the country back into the ranks of the major military powers.

The proposal of de Maizière, who is currently defense minister until a new government is formed, was accepted by a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels last week. It proposes that member states develop and finance their military capabilities collectively rather than independently, before making them available to the entire alliance. For this purpose, an undetermined number of countries will be brought together in “clusters”, each of which will be led by a responsible nation.

Along with countries like Britain, France and Italy, Germany is to assume such a leading role for the smaller member states. Under the direction of the leading states, the aim is the development of joint projects. This could include arms production or joint command centres. Plans for the joint fuelling of planes while they are airborne, or arms trading, are also reportedly under consideration. The model is the division of occupied Afghanistan into several regional military commands.

For years, German imperialism remained somewhat reluctant to engage militarily. The Afghan mission was sold in 2001 as a humanitarian operation to dig wells. The word “war” was considered taboo in official politics for years. After opposing the Iraq war in 2003, Berlin subsequently abstained when NATO attacked Libya in 2011. This is now viewed as a serious mistake,

which cannot be repeated under any circumstances.

The German bourgeoisie and leading business interests now view more aggressive German participation in future military interventions as essential. In February, it was announced that major German corporations had formed an alliance for raw materials to press the German government to secure trade routes and access to raw materials.

While the parties held back during the election campaign for tactical reasons, there is not a day that goes past without commentary in the media calling for German intervention in Syria. In the weeks since the federal elections, the Left Party has also announced its support for military operations by the German army.

Besides German economic interests, the “precarious situation of the United States” also plays an important role in the NATO reform, *Spiegel Online* writes. In the past, the virtually unlimited US defence budget secured for the US military a leading role in NATO. However, given its economic and financial crisis and the increasing number of US wars and military interventions, Washington is calling for more support and a spreading of responsibilities among the different NATO powers.

Berlin views the United States' decline as an opportunity to assume a more prominent role in NATO and in future wars. Only in August, a bombardment of Syria by the United States and its allies seemed unavoidable. However, the unexpectedly strong opposition by the American population blocked the plans of the Obama administration. Instead the United States made an agreement with Russia, cutting across the interests of France and Saudi Arabia.

Representatives of other states praised de Maizière's reform proposal for NATO. British Defence Minister Phillip Hammond spoke of a “good initiative.” Britain and above all the United States have repeatedly called for Germany to play a stronger military role for years,

because their own military capacities have regularly been stretched to the limit by Middle East wars. NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen also thanked de Maizière's state secretary for the German initiative.

Although at first glance the proposal appears to intensify cooperation within NATO, it will in the final analysis deepen the tensions between the major powers. As "insiders" explained on the side-lines of the defence ministers' meeting, the new strategy could lead to competition between the arms industries of the leading states. If a particular weapons system is developed under one major power, it is likely that the other member states in that cluster would buy it.

France supported the German proposal only at the last minute. Along with its increasing rivalry with Germany, France repeatedly raised the question of whether smaller states in a German-led cluster could rely on Germany to lead responsibly. Germany had in the past been very reluctant to intervene, and the sending of troops always was dependent on a parliamentary vote, they pointed out.

There are several discussions within the German bourgeoisie over the parliamentary restriction.

The parliamentary restriction is one of the last remaining limitations which is placed on the German army. Although the army belongs to the executive branch of government in Germany, it is actually a parliamentary army, since troop deployments must be approved by a majority of the federal parliament. Like France, other allies see this as a barrier to Germany's reliability as a state with leading responsibilities in NATO.

In an opinion piece entitled "parliamentary army and alliance capabilities" by the SWP think-tank, Ekkehard Brose, the ministerial director in the office for foreign affairs, pointed to the current dilemma for German foreign policy last month. In order to be able to play a leading role within the structures of NATO in the future, he suggested limiting the parliamentary restriction. The participation of German soldiers in reconnaissance and its responsibility to lead should be "secured by law, without regard to the specific case."

Brose's proposal aims to effectively guarantee of the participation of the German army in future wars. In the reform of parliamentary powers which he demands, the parliament would be stripped of all powers except that

of deciding to withdraw troops from war zones.

Defence minister de Maizière made a similar suggestion during the first round of coalition talks with the SPD. CDU deputy parliamentary leader Andreas Schockenhoff stated that military operations carried out within the framework of the EU should be exempt from parliamentary authorisation, so that the government could decide on them alone.

Although the SPD responded dismissively at first, with General Secretary Andrea Nahles stating that the parliament's power to decide would not be altered, they do not have a principled stance against the proposal. Only last year, SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel suggested that the Social Democrats could make concessions. One had to be prepared to give up sovereignty step by step in the areas of security and defence policy, he explained at the Petersburg dialogue.

The previous defence spokesman for the SPD parliamentary group, Rainer Arnold, was more explicit on his party's stance. Although he opposed a reduction of the authority of parliament, he also tried to allay doubts of Germany's NATO allies as to its reliability. In any case, the German parliament would be ready to vote within two or three days, which would be much quicker than troops could actually be sent, he said.

De Maizière's NATO reform plan and the debate on lifting parliamentary control over military missions are bound up with Germany's increasingly aggressive foreign and military policy. In the face of the increasingly aggressive approach to foreign policy and the domestic attacks on the social and democratic rights of the population, the future government will come into sharp conflict with the working class. They will act just as ruthlessly towards the population at home as their soldiers do abroad as soon as the class struggle takes on a more open form.



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