

# New German defence minister makes Christmas visit to Afghanistan

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Only a few days after her appointment as defence minister, Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union-CDU) visited German troops in Afghanistan. She used her visit to promote the German army and its foreign interventions.

Von der Leyen flew early on the morning of Sunday, 22 December to camp Marmal, the headquarters of the northern command under German control in Mazar-I-Sharif. Von der Leyen, the first woman to hold the post of defence minister, declared she wanted to visit the troops as quickly as possible.

Numerous media outlets reacted with surprise to Von der Leyen's nomination as the new defence minister. The trained doctor and mother of seven children, who was minister for labour in the previous government and, before that, families minister, has not been known for a particularly strong understanding of the military. Von der Leyen intends to use her position in the defence ministry as a springboard to the Chancellor's office as head of a future government. Her brief visit in Afghanistan was above all a media spectacle and the beginning of a charm offensive for the German army.

The new commander-in-chief of the armed forces was accompanied by 43 journalists. The reports of the visit were a propaganda campaign for Von der Leyen, the German army and its future operations. Von der Leyen took two days to explain that the security of the armed forces was her highest priority. "The person is the most important thing, not the cost," she repeated in several interviews. She had previously noted that the German army had to do more for the families of soldiers, for their wives, for the children, but also for soldiers returning from operations with psychological problems and trauma.

The journalists who travelled with her reported in great detail about the sort of jam the minister ate at her

joint breakfast with the troops, and what the ranks were of the commanding officers she met. "Von der Leyen repeatedly sought out discussions with soldiers," wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* enthusiastically, "allowing the equipment and conditions of the operation to be detailed."

Von der Leyen's aim is to provide the German army with a friendlier image, in order to overcome the continuing popular opposition to foreign military operations. Since the SPD-Green government under Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer reintroduced an aggressive militarist foreign policy fifteen years ago, opposition to the build-up of the military and involvement in war has also increased.

However, the new government intends to strengthen and expand the army. In the coalition agreement between the CDU-Christian Social Union (CSU) and SPD, they explicitly commit to strengthening Germany within NATO and for the creation of new weapons systems. A joint military and security policy is to be imposed on Europe.

At the same time, the new government has committed itself to the "strengthening of collaboration across departments in appreciation of a more effective foreign and security policy, for the success of which civilian and military instruments must complement each other." Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) noted that Von der Leyen would work closely with foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) to this end.

As it states in the coalition agreement, Germany has to "help fashion the global order" and in the process be guided by "the interests of our country." An entire chapter is dedicated to the securing of raw materials. "Targeted action [is] required to avoid the possible negative effects on the creation of wealth in Germany."

Von der Leyen appears to be the right person to

enforce this and at the same time weaken opposition within the population. With an arch-conservative family background, and internationally well connected as well, she is considered a combative politician capable of imposing her views.

Ernst Albrecht, Von der Leyen's father, was state President of Lower Saxony from 1976 to 1990, and on the right wing of the CDU. As President of Lower Saxony he surrounded himself with wealth and privilege. Albrecht maintained close ties with the super-rich and with old Nazis.

His daughter Ursula grew up with six siblings, living for a time in Brussels. After her marriage to a cardiologist, who is also the head of a company conducting clinical trials, she spent several years in the US. Through two of her brothers she is well aware of the profit interests of German companies that are global players. Hans Holger Albrecht is the CEO of Forma Millicom International Cellular, which operates mobile telephone and Internet services in fifteen African, Latin American and Asian countries under the "Tigo" brand. Her brother Donatus Albrecht is a member of the board of the Munich-based co-operative company Aurelius, which operates across the globe.

From the media's point of view, her ability to represent German capitalism's interests worldwide benefits from her efforts to involve the opposition parties. In the past, Von der Leyen has repeatedly called for a quota for female representation in German businesses, and has received support in this from the Greens. She is viewed as a supporter of cooperation between the CDU-CSU and the Greens.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* expects that Von der Leyen will pursue the issue of a quota for female representation in the army. The percentage of female soldiers was still too low, the newspaper declared, and both female and male applicants for the forces had to be encouraged.

The Left Party is also being drawn into the military policy of the grand coalition on the issue of women's representation. In her first talk show appearance shortly after it was announced that she was taking on the post of defence minister, Von der Leyen appeared alongside Left Party chairman Gregor Gysi. He said that although he had thought at first that this would not go well, he acknowledged afterwards that, "We would have to take a new approach." In Gysi's words, "I hope you can

make a contribution to this. If you would be an anti-war minister, that would be great."

In the same discussion, journalist Elisabeth Niejahr from the weekly magazine *Die Zeit* expressed her hope that Von der Leyen would, as the first woman in the defence minister's post, achieve what her predecessor Thomas de Maizière (CDU) had not. This was, as she said, "To explain to the Germans their new role in the world." This role has emerged, she said, because of the decline of the US, leaving a power vacuum which Germany must help to fill.



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