

German government steps up military intervention in Africa

Our reporter
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On May 12, the German parliament voted by a large majority to expand the deployment of the German Army (Bundeswehr) in Africa. Four-hundred-and-ninety-six deputies supported the extension by one year of the European Union's (EU's) training mission in Mali (EUTM), to which the German army will contribute 300 soldiers. There were 67 votes against and 2 abstentions. On German involvement in the Atalanta mission off the Horn of Africa, which has been running since 2008, 456 deputies voted in favour.

Both missions are aimed at strengthening Germany's economic and strategic interests in Africa by military means. Already at the end of January, the parliament (Bundestag) approved the dispatch of 650 troops as part of the United Nations Minusma mission to the resource-rich but dangerous north of Mali.

The Bundeswehr is now active in large parts of West and East Africa. Besides Mali and the Horn of Africa, German soldiers are currently active, within the framework of international missions, in Somalia (EUTM SOM), Liberia (UNMIL), Sudan (UNAMID), South Sudan (UNMISS), Djibouti (Atalanta) and Western Sahara (MINURSO).

The new moves were rushed through parliament without any public discussion ahead of the Pentecost holiday weekend. The European powers are extending their interventions across the raw material-rich continent. In line with a related EU Council of Ministers decision, the Bundestag action will expand the EUTM mission to northern Mali and large areas of the Sahel.

The decision adopted by the Bundestag states: "The area of deployment is in southern Mali...and comprises state territory up to the Niger Basin, including the locations Gao and Timbuktu, as well as the connecting roads between the two locations north of the Niger."

Among the tasks assigned to the Bundeswehr are training Mali's security forces and those of the G5 Sahel states (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad), and advising Mali's Defence Ministry.

The lengthening of the mission off the Horn of Africa, which is currently under German command, includes plans for an expansion of the operational area. The decision declares: "The area of operations for Atalanta includes the Somali coastal zone and domestic coastal waters, as well as marine areas off the coast of Somalia and the neighbouring countries in the Indian Ocean. In addition, there is the airspace over these areas."

The resolution stipulates that military operations on Somali territory and in other African states are possible: "German troops are permitted to intervene to a maximum distance of 2,000 metres against pirates' logistical infrastructure on beaches. ... Bordering areas and sovereign territory of other states in the region can be used with the consent of the relevant governments and to the extent provided for in the agreement reached or to be reached." Operation Atalanta is "empowered to resort to all necessary measures, including the use of military force."

Representatives of the German government and opposition who spoke in the parliamentary debate last Thursday underscored the fact that Germany's military intervention in Africa would be expanded still further. Social Democratic Party (SPD) deputy Christoph Strässer described the sending of 300 soldiers to Mali as a "relatively modest contribution to the stabilisation of a country." There are situations, he added, "in which nothing without such an intervention" can be done, and it would "unfortunately not work to offer support only from civilian resources, humanitarian assistance and development aid."

Henning Otte, the defence policy spokesman for the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) parliamentary group, stated, “Why Mali in particular? Because Mali is part of an arc from Syria through Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Chad that is acutely threatened by terrorism. We also cannot afford to lose sight of Libya.” Everywhere, he continued, “the Bundeswehr [is] required,” and for that it needs “the necessary personnel and financial and material equipment.”

Matthias Ilgen, an SPD member on the defence policy parliamentary committee, made clear that the economic and geopolitical interests of German big business were being pursued under cover of the “war on terror.” He said: “Missions of this type continue to be right and important because as one of the leading trading nations in the world, it is in the most essential interest of the Federal Republic of Germany to keep sea lanes secure. This interest has to be represented.”

Ilgen spoke in favour of strengthening the German Navy. With its missions in the western Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea, off the Lebanese coast and in the Baltic Sea, he warned, it was at the breaking point “in terms of personnel and resources.” His fraction was therefore demanding “more personnel for the Navy.” Luckily, Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (CDU) had announced that she “intended to take this in hand.” The SPD now hoped that “actions will follow announcements.”

Jürgen Hardt, foreign policy spokesman for the CDU/CSU, spoke in similar terms. He could “promise the defence minister that foreign policy politicians in the CDU/CSU will support efforts to put the Navy in a better position to cope with the current and future burdens, especially through investments focusing on new equipment and personnel.” Concretely, the German government was currently planning “the purchasing of new ships” that were “much better equipped to conduct missions far from home.”

Frithjof Schmidt of the Green Party also pledged the support of his fraction for the Mali intervention. He declared: “My fraction is, in the large majority, of the opinion that it was and is correct for the international community...to have assumed responsibility in Mali in several senses: the UN peacekeepers with a focus on the north...and the European Union with its training of the Malian army in the south.”

The Left Party, the only fraction to vote as a group against both motions, nevertheless supports the offensive policies of German imperialism. It merely proposes that these be pursued, in the first instance, by political and civilian means prior to the deployment of soldiers.

The Left Party’s representative on the parliament’s foreign affairs committee, Sevim Dagdelen, urged “finally to strengthen the civilian alternative to this Bundeswehr mission.” Her party was already asking itself, “Why is the illegal fishing by Western fishing companies, which is a reason for the emergence of piracy...merely observed by you? How long do you intend to observe? Why is the German government not taking any initiatives to reach a political solution to the conflicts in Somalia and Yemen?” She continued: “We in the Left Party think a civilian solution is required instead of an ever-expanding military geopolitik that will lead to increasing conflict in the region.”

In reality, the Left Party has for some time been supporting Germany’s “ever expanding geopolitik,” including in Africa. In early 2014, the Left Party’s defence policy spokeswoman, Christina Buchholz, traveled in a Bundeswehr plane together with Defence Minister Von der Leyen to participate in a visit with soldiers in Mali. In her speech in parliament, Buchholz did not oppose the intervention of German militarism in Africa on principle, but merely criticised its lack of effectiveness. “Neither the French combat mission nor the Bundeswehr’s operation have made Mali more secure,” she complained.



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