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German government announces the end of military restraint

By Ulrich Rippert

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) began her government statement on Wednesday with explicit support for the anti-government demonstrations in Ukraine. Although the demonstrations are under the leadership of extreme right-wing and in part openly fascist politicians, she declared that the Chancellery, the Foreign Ministry and the German Embassy in Kiev supported the opposition “with all means available to us.”

Merkel said that she was very impressed by the “courageous demonstrations for Europe”. The protesters in Kiev aspired to the same values “which we also follow in the European Union” and must therefore find a hearing. The Chancellor made it clear that the German government was involved at all levels in the preparation and organisation of the Ukrainian demonstrations.

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) was even clearer, when he presented the main features of the new German foreign and security policy at the same parliamentary session. His core thesis was that the principle of military restraint can no longer be maintained in its present form.

In the diplomatic language of the Foreign Ministry, it was expressed as follows: “As correct as the policy of military restraint is, it must not be misunderstood as a culture of standing aside.”

Steinmeier avoided the word “superpower”, but said Germany was “too big and too important” that it could stand aside any longer from areas of crisis and focal points of world politics. Almost threatening, he added, “We are not a small state on the periphery of Europe.”

Under the headline “Germany and the World”, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a full-page interview with Steinmeier on Thursday. In it, the Foreign Minister repeated: “Germany is too large, just to comment on world politics.” When asked what that meant for the use of military force, the ultima ratio (last resort) of foreign policy, Steinmeier said, “No foreign policy in the world can banish the ultima ratio from its political thinking.”

With an eye on the current Berlin visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry, Steinmeier said, “The US has not lost its interests in Europe and the world. But America cannot be everywhere. Whether we like it or not, that shifts more of the responsibility for security in Europe onto our shoulders.”

Last weekend, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) said that Germany must take “more responsibility within its alliances.” At the same time, she announced an extension of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) missions abroad. She wanted to develop a “Strategy for Africa” together with Steinmeier and Development Minister Gerd Müller (Christian Social Union, CSU). As always, she justified this with humanitarian arguments and stressed that the main task of the new international strategy of the Bundeswehr consists of “militarily securing diplomatic initiatives, humanitarian aid, and efforts for economic construction.”

To this end, the Bundeswehr is to increase its contingent of troops stationed in Mali for training purposes, and equip them significantly better militarily. Germany will also participate actively in the recently adopted EU Mission in the Central African Republic, as it had agreed this mission as an EU partner. Germany was “obliged to act” in Africa, von der Leyen said.

Berlin has sought to present its announcement of the end of military restraint as peacefully as possible. However, it represents a fundamental historical break in German policy. One hundred years after the beginning of World War I, and almost seven decades after the end of World War II and the monstrous crimes of the Nazi dictatorship, a German foreign minister is again saying that Germany’s size and economic strength requires a policy of global military intervention.

The return of German militarism is linked to an intense propaganda campaign. Military abstinence is not the right response to the war crimes and Nazi crimes of the past, but getting involved and a willingness to fight for freedom and democracy; the Bundeswehr is not an imperialist army, but a peacekeeping force and must be prepared to take up arms in the name of human rights and humanity, thus go their arguments.

What is to be made of this demagoguery can be seen by what is happening currently in Ukraine. The German government is supporting the opposition movement in the name of democracy and freedom, a movement headed by Vitali Klitschko, who is sponsored by the pro-CDU Konrad Adenauer Foundation, alongside open fascists like Oleh Tjahnybok of the All-Ukrainian Association “Swoboda”.

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the German government has worked hard to break Ukraine away from the Russian sphere of influence and to bring it into its own. In 1994, the EU concluded a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Ukraine. The current EU Association Agreement is bound up with massive social attacks and seeks to transform Ukraine into a low-cost production platform for German and European corporations.

With its actions in Ukraine, Berlin stands directly in the traditions of the German war crimes of the past century. Twice, Berlin has tried to bring Ukraine under German control militarily: At the end of the First World War, when it forced the young Soviet Union to hand over the Ukraine in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, subjected it to military occupation and installed a puppet regime under Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyj. Then during the Second World War, when Germany once again conquered Ukraine and committed terrible crimes against the civilian population.

It is similar today in Africa. The “new Africa strategy” has nothing to do with providing military backup to humanitarian aid, as the defence minister claimed. The deployment of combat troops to Mali serves the imperialist interests of German big business and builds on the campaigns of the Deutsche Afrika Korps (DAK) in World War Two.

In 2011, when then Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party, FDP) abstained in the vote in the UN Security Council on the NATO war against Libya, it was criticised as a terrible mistake which must not happen again. Now, the incoming Social Democratic foreign minister has drawn the necessary conclusions and announced a new foreign policy strategy of military engagement.

Part of the new foreign and security policy is close collaboration with the government in France. Immediately after being sworn in as a minister, Steinmeier flew to Paris in mid-December where he emphasised that he attached great importance to the Berlin-Paris axis. Since then, several meetings have already taken place with his French counterpart Laurent Fabius. The two foreign ministers intend to carry out joint visits to areas of crisis, jointly prepare European Summits and appear together in the European election campaign.

France “cannot be left alone” with the task of security in Africa, the German foreign minister said on Wednesday, adding that he hoped the “Franco-German brigade has a future in the common thinking of our countries.”

Increased cooperation between the German and French governments is not limited to foreign and security policy, the buildup of military forces and joint combat operations. Both governments are also working closely together on the implementation of austerity measures and radical cuts in social spending.

The austerity programme announced by President Hollande earlier this year draws strongly on the anti-working class policies of Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws of the SPD-Green government (1998-2005). Peter Hartz, who as a Social Democrat and member of the IG Metall union had developed this programme of comprehensive social cuts, has visited Paris several times in the past few weeks to support the Hollande government, and continues to act as a consultant.

A few weeks after taking office, the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD in Berlin made clear where the focus of its programme lay. It is intensifying the social counterrevolution in Europe, and strengthening militarism abroad and at home.

The SPD is increasingly taking on the leading role and receives support from opposition parties and the trade unions. Once again, the Left Party has offered its cooperation to the SPD. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Left Party parliamentary faction leader Gregor Gysi called on the SPD to hold serious discussions on future cooperation “without preconditions”.