

Calls for deployment of German navy against Syria

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

On June 1 the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an op-ed titled “Towards a realistic German security policy”, calling for the participation of the German navy in a military intervention in Syria.

The author, Thomas Speckmann, associate professor of political science and sociology at Bonn University and a regular contributor to the newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Tagesspiegel*, has long called for the navy to play a central role in military interventions.

Not long ago he published an article in the magazine *Internationale Politik* (IP) titled “All men on board: Why the Bundeswehr’s future is on the water”. He called on Germany “as the export nation with the world’s biggest container fleet and the third biggest merchant fleet” to finally start thinking in “maritime” terms.

In his article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Speckmann states that the situation in Syria was continually worsening and that in the event of a further deepening of the crisis, military intervention could become a “humanitarian necessity”. He demands that the federal government reassess “its attitude towards military intervention” and asks how German armed forces could most effectively take part in a military intervention in Syria.

Speckmann warns “that air and ground forces could be ill-prepared due to repeatedly protracted modernization projects” and therefore calls for an “involvement using modern navy forces that are already at Germany’s disposal.”

Furthermore, he maintains that “sending war vessels” would be politically easier to push through at home than “combat missions of ground and air forces”. He argues that an “exceptional role” for the navy should “in fact be completely natural for Germany as an export-oriented nation in times of globalization when more than eighty percent of world trade take place by ship”.

Speckmann’s comments not only show how far discussions about a possible attack on Syria have developed within the German ruling elites. They also reflect the growing aggressiveness with which the ruling class is reviving German militarism, after being compelled to exercise restraint because of two world wars. Two decades after German reunification, the deployment of the German navy to secure German economic interests is now labelled “completely natural”.

On the German navy’s official website, the open sea is called “one of Germany’s most important economic foundations” on which “almost seventy percent of German imports and exports are handled.” As a highly industrialized export-oriented nation that lacks raw materials, “the federal republic [of Germany] is particularly dependent on a constant flow of

necessary imports to be able to function both economically and politically.” The German navy is already involved in military operations at the Horn of Africa, off the Lebanese coast, and in the Mediterranean Sea.

The current debate on a military build-up must be seen in connection with the reform of the German army which is being promoted very intensively by Defense Minister Lothar de Maizière. Here too the navy plays an important role. The Navy chief of staff, Vice Admiral Axel Schimpf, declared that reforming the navy meant creating a “modern fleet that is highly flexible and universally deployable.” The fleet will comprise a total of 55 vessels and 40 aircraft.

While a squadron of minesweepers is being dissolved and several speedboats are being sold off, the fleet will be strengthened with corvettes and frigates. According to Schimpf, six multi-purpose warships are to be abolished. As of 2013, three armed supply vessels and six submarines classified 212 A should be serviceable.

The Wilhelmshaven naval base, the German armed forces’ largest base, will be complemented by a new naval support command tasked with securing operations and resupplying units.

On October 1, 2012, the naval command as the navy’s supreme authority will be set up in Rostock. It will comprise the previous staffs, the navy leadership, the fleet’s command and the naval authority. The command will be directed by the navy’s chief of staff.

One of the main axes of Maizière’s army reform program is the new “organisation of leadership,” implemented through the “Dresden Decree” on April 1, 2012. It significantly strengthened the chief of staff’s position. The decree says that “as the Bundeswehr’s most senior soldier,” he would also be the direct supervisor of all soldiers and in charge of all operations. He will be given three new departments: planning, force command, and strategy and operations.

Furthermore the decree determines that “operational and tactical leadership will now... be primarily given to the command and dislocated from the ministry”. A military council will be set up, headed by the chief of staff. The other chiefs of staff will also “be disassociated with the ministry so that the military commands gain more autonomy”.

The “Dresden Decree” not only effectively annuls the German constitution’s insistence of the “primacy of politics over the military”, it virtually turns it into its opposite. Before the decree, the different chiefs of staff were subordinate to the civilian leadership of the Defense Ministry. Now they have been totally removed from political control and are only answerable to the general chief of staff.

The “Dresden Decree” abolishes almost all of the limitations Germany introduced after its experiences with the monarchy, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich. The Potsdam Agreement in summer 1945 explicitly denied Germany the right to an army and its own general staff. Ten years later, despite strong opposition, Germany re-armed itself, but a general staff still remained against the law. Its place was taken by the chief of staff, whose powers were severely limited.

These limitations are now systematically being abolished. The Bundeswehr is once again reviving the disastrous tradition of German militarism. It is noteworthy that in the course of

the reforms, the navy infantry is once again called “Seebataillon” – the name of the navy under the emperor.

It is not yet clear whether Berlin will follow Speckmann’s advice and permit the German navy to take part in a military operation against Syria. While Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle still calls for a “political solution”, there are growing indications that the federal government does not want to be left on the sidelines in case of war.

Germany’s abstinence during the intervention in Libya is now generally regarded as a serious foreign policy mistake, and the German government is signaling its readiness to take part in a Syrian operation to secure its share of the spoils.

On Monday the *Financial Times Germany* (FTD) reported that Berlin was to become the “planning center for the rebuilding of Syria after a possible overthrow of President Assad”. The “group of friends of the Syrian people”—an alliance of states who strive for regime change in Syria—have set up an office in the German capital with the support of the government.

According to a foreign office spokeswoman, the aim is to contribute not only politically, but also economically to a “new start” after an end of the conflict. For the FTD, this is an attempt on Germany’s part “to position itself in a timely way for the period after the end of the Syrian regime”. The ultimate goal is to “transform the

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