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What Middle East Policy to Expect from the New German Government? When promising ideas threaten to be buried in transatlantic waters

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ALI FATHOLLAH-NEJAD, NOV 4 2009

Last week, on 28 October, a new German government took office. A coalition of Chancellor Angela Merkel's still ruling conservative Christian Democratic/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) with the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) as junior partner replaced the Grand Coalition of conservatives (CDU/CSU) and social-democrats (SPD). While the new administration is faced with multiple socio-economic crises internally, on the external front the challenges are not less significant.

At a press conference held in Berlin a few days after the election outcome, prospective foreign minister Guido Westerwelle[1] refused to respond in English after a BBC reporter had asked him to do so. When, in quite a non-chalant manner, he added that "This is Germany here", the field for polemics had been opened. Not only did speculations spark about the FDP leader's supposedly missing English language proficiency (although one would hardly think that any of his predecessors did better – quite the contrary), the political leanings of a FDP-run Foreign Ministry entered the debate.

Pragmatic answers to Mideast challenges

In an interview[2] to the journal of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) – perhaps the most influential German foreign policy think-tank[3] –, Westerwelle's statements were quite astonishing. On the war in Afghanistan, he pledged "to end every German military deployment as quickly as is realistically possible" while nonetheless echoing the highly controversial claim made by former Defense Minister Peter Struck (SPD) that Germany was being defended in the Hindu-Kush. Still he appeared more straightforward than many in the SPD or even the Green Party – who tend to succumb to a paternalistic "liberal interventionism" – when stating that the Afghanistan operation was not based on "altruism".

On Iran, he recognized the central requirement of improving U.S.–Iranian relations and praised Obama's "de-escalation" imprint as opposed to George W. Bush's "policies of containment and escalation". As a second key element, he pointed to the precarious security architecture both globally and regionally. The nuclear powers would need to cut their arsenals, thus following their obligations enshrined in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)[4]. "The more seriously the existing nuclear powers take their obligation to help create a world free of nuclear weapons, the greater credence they will have in the eyes of states like Iran, who [*sic*] find the prospect of possessing a nuclear arsenal extremely tempting," Westerwelle added.

He further pleaded for a regional approach to the manifold Middle East conflicts, modeled on the so-called Helsinki Process, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), in the 1970s. For some years now, conflict researchers and international peace organizations have strongly advocated that a Conference on Security and

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Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME)[5] be set as number one of the global political agenda. However, while the latter envisages civil society participation, Westerwelle's suggestion comprises the involvement of the U.S., Russia and the UN.

Despite the unsatisfying details of his Middle East plan – which by the way underlines Berlin's commitment to a two-state solution in the Israel/Palestine conflict –, there appears to be an improvement from past orientations. While the former Foreign Ministry headed by the SPD's Frank-Walter Steinmeier proved to be quite disregarding of such an idea, the acknowledgement by the FDP, which over the last few years has consistently favored such an initiative, is without doubt a development in the right direction as how to handle the much-loaded Mideast crises.

The Coalition Agreement: Westerwelle's foreign policy ideas enriched with a conservative flavor

The conceptions promoted by Westerwelle have indeed found their way into the Coalition Agreement[6] (pp. 121-122) – though enriched with a clear conservative handwriting. This is displayed when in Berlin's official attempt to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the agreement states that the new government, along with its partners, would support harsher sanctions against Tehran if necessary. Such a political instrument was hardly favored by the FDP in the past which had been rather critical towards the Grand Coalition's handling of the Iran dossier and Berlin's unflinching insistence on the "carrot and stick" approach that after all proved to be a failure[7]. On the contrary, voicing the stark resentment from considerable branches of the industry, the Liberals criticized the government in *Bundestag* appellations[8] for imposing trade limitations on German companies, which went beyond the sanctions framework as mandated by UN Security Council resolutions.

Yet, in a speech at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) on 22 October, the President of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Hans-Peter Keitel, pointed to the fact that Washington would not wish to see the sanctions regime bypassed. This indicates that Germany still fears the U.S. Treasury Department's warnings to be excluded from the vast American market if trade ties with Iran are being maintained. This happens while German entrepreneurs moan about losing the Iranian market while Chinese and American companies, directly and indirectly respectively, get increasingly involved there.

Providing a nice face for "Germany's defense in the Hindu-Kush"

Nevertheless, the FDP's fresh conceptions are likely to be counterbalanced by a strong transatlanticist camp within the much stronger Union parties. One of the latter's exponents is the new Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU). The Bavarian aristocrat is a member of the DGAP, the *Atlantik-Brücke* ("Atlantic Bridge"), the Aspen Institute, and spokesman for his party's Transatlantic Forum – all of which advocate a strict Atlantic orientation of German foreign policy. Being one of the most prominent[9] German politicians, Guttenberg is expected to provide a handsome image for the highly contested war in Afghanistan, which his predecessor, the fallow Franz-Josef Jung (CDU), plainly failed to do. Jens Berger, whose blog *Der Spiegelfechter* ("shadow boxer") is amongst the country's most read[10], writes[11]: „In Washington there is no single neoconservative think-tank in which the name Guttenberg would not prompt a pleasurable click on the tongue". In the meanwhile, it is expected[12] that the policies around the "Afghanistan problem" will not be set in the liberal Foreign Ministry, but in the conservative Defense Ministry.

Hawks vs. public opinion: Militarization or security?

A definite darling of America's neo-cons is Eckart von Klaeden, an *Atlantik-Brücke* executive committee member, who is the Foreign Policy Spokesman for the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group. Known for his hawkish stances, he can be expected to lobby against any FDP initiatives trespassing the transatlantic framework. Despite a majority[13] of Germans favoring the *Bundeswehr's* withdrawal from Afghanistan, Guttenberg[14] and Klaeden[15] have repeatedly favored the military engagement there – which the Obama Administration wants the Germans to even boost further. In December, the *Bundestag* will decide upon the continuation of its mandate for what euphemistically is often called "peace and stabilization mission".

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By currently providing about 4,500 troops in the no-longer calm northern areas of Afghanistan, Berlin finds itself as third largest troop contributor after Washington and London. It is now being discussed to increase the level of German troops to 7,000. This might reflect the country's great-power aspirations, as Andreas Buro – one of the founding figures of the German peace movement – accurately notes^[16]: “While the NATO states Canada and the Netherlands have announced their troops to be withdrawn already by 2010/2011, the Federal Government still adamantly adheres to the war alliance. Not because of Afghanistan, but because Berlin would like to distinguish itself as an important EU military pillar for the leading NATO power, the US.”

However big the political odds are – be it the CDU/CSU's transatlantic hawks or America's call for a rising engagement of her allies – a rational-pragmatic input by the FDP could constructively impact the foreign policy discourse in Europe's largest country. One can hope that the insight gains in prominence that the only truly responsible way to help Afghanistan to free itself from this mess is to end the NATO war. That the latter provides an indispensable feature for the continued armed conflict in that war-torn country must not remain a historic lesson that only the Left Party and the peace movement have learned. Yet, it remains to be seen how successful the latter two can articulate public opinion and thus force the new government to abstain from a further militarization of Berlin's foreign policy. Germany's – and for that matter, any other NATO member's – security is not defended in the Hindu-Kush, but jeopardized.

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Ali Fathollah-Nejad is currently a Ph.D. researcher in International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He can be reached through his website fathollah-nejad.com.

[1] See Cate Connolly, “German election: Guido Westerwelle sets sights on foreign ministry”, *guardian.co.uk*, 28 Sep. 2009.

[2] “Guido Westerwelle's Foreign Policy: Germany's new foreign minister answers IP”, *IP Global*, 27 Sep. 2009.

[3] See James G. McGann, *The Global “Go-To Think Tanks”: The Leading Public Policy Research Organizations In The World*, Philadelphia, PA: Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, University of Pennsylvania, 2008, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/2008_Global_Go_To_Think_Tanks.pdf, Table No. 2, p. 26.

[4] For the text of the NPT, see <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt/text/npt2.htm>.

[5] “CSCME: Number one on the world political agenda”, 1 Feb. 2007, IPPNW.de, *Initiated by IPPNW* (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) e.V. (Registered Association) and IALANA (International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms) Germany.

[6] “Wachstum. Bildung. Zusammenhalt. Der Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und FDP”, 16th Legislative Period, enacted and signed on 26 Oct. 2009.

[7] See Christoph Bertram, “Rethinking Iran: From Confrontation to Cooperation”, *Chaillot Paper*, No. 110 (August 2008), Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.

[8] See <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/extrakt/ba/WP16/121/12109.html>.

[9] See e.g. “Beliebteste Politiker: Guttenberg zieht an Merkel vorbei”, *FR-online.de*, 24 July 2009

[10] See <http://www.deutscheblogcharts.de/archiv/2009-42.html>

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[11] Jens Berger, "Deutschland wird Schwarz(Gelb): Der Koalitionsvertrag steht und die Versprechen des Wahlkampfs sind vergessen", *Telepolis*, 24 Oct. 2009.

[12] René Heilig, "Bundeswehr bleibt an der Afghanistan-Front: Verbündete ziehen ab, Deutschland steht zum »Mittelweg« – was will Westerwelle?", *Neues Deutschland* (Berlin), 22. Oct. 2009.

[13] See e.g. "*stern-Umfrage zu Afghanistan: Deutsche für Abzug – und für Jung*", *stern.de*, 16 Sep. 2009.

[14] Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, "Afghans Respond Favorably to NATO Efforts in Afghanistan", *Atlantic-Community.org*, 7 Jan. 2008.

[15] Eckart von Klaeden, "Afghanistan: Der richtige Einsatz" [Afghanistan Is Not Iraq – Germany Must Stay!], *Die Zeit*, No. 30/2009.

[16] Andreas Buro, "Abzug jetzt: Friedenspolitik statt Krieg", *junge Welt* (Berlin), 8 Oct. 2009, p. 8.