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Without a second thought

Why Germany's premature decision against military intervention in Syria harms the whole of European foreign policy

Read this article in German or Russian.

Read the counterpoint to this article by Rolf Mützenich.

Can Germany take part in a military operation in Syria and, if so, how? A few days ago, the German newspaper *Bild* reported that Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen has a team examining these questions. The aim of any action should be to prevent or react to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's potential use of chemical weapons against the civilian population trapped in the rebel-held city of Idlib. Already on the evening of the same day however, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Andrea Nahles announced that any 'participation by Germany in the war in Syria' would not be supported by the Social Democrats. This message was reaffirmed on Monday after a meeting of the party leadership.

This course of action was striking, but not so much because of the statement itself. After all, there are some good military reasons against such a mission. The situation in Idlib itself is extremely confusing: Russia's role on the ground gives the conflict a dimension that extends beyond a merely regional context. And a military operation which remains exclusively symbolic makes the intervening party look weak rather than strong. This has already been shown by limited measures in the past.

On the other hand, of course, an operation would not take place in Idlib itself, but would aim at facilities of the Syrian military in other parts of the country. The actual aim of such an operation would be to signal to the Assad regime (and its sponsors in Moscow) that the violation of international law comes at a price, and that waging war against one's own people with outlawed weapons will not go unnoticed.

An unnecessarily hasty ‘No vote’

The refusal of the Social Democrats, however, was not particularly noteworthy because of the above considerations but because of the haste with which it was announced. No official request of the US (or any other ally) for military assistance from Germany had been made. The use of poison gas in Idlib had likewise not been confirmed. And of course, there had been neither a debate on security policy nor any careful examination of the local military situation.

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In short, the fact that the case was already deemed clear just shows that the decision was not about security policy and the international role of Germany, but about the SPD’s domestic political position in a catastrophic political situation. Nevertheless, for a responsible foreign policy, a purely domestic political tactic is not sufficient – particularly if it’s such a knee-jerk one. The carefully considered reasons for the SPD’s ‘No vote’ were later submitted later by deputy chairman Rolf Mützenich.

Even if one follows his reasoning, which admittedly offers some good arguments, the hasty rejection did cause foreign policy damage.

Germany comes across as weak

First, this behaviour has shown allies and associated powers that in cases like this, Germany does not even want to discuss participating in an intervention before it makes a decision. The ‘No vote’ has taken place without international consultation and internal consideration. What’s more, the military situation itself and the specific strategic as well as geopolitical implications did not play any role at all. Such a speedy determination limits the Federal Government’s political and military latitude. Moreover, it confirms the suspicion among the allies that Germany is not a seriously approachable partner when challenges arise in matters of international security. This not only harms Germany, but might also not help the SPD in the medium and long term.

Second, the swift refusal misjudges the usefulness of the credible threat of military force for the protection of international law. If, as in Idlib, the threat of chemical weapons is actually imminent (which the past practice of Assad and Moscow strongly suggests), then it makes sense to examine the use of public and emphatic military antidotes. The objective is to dissuade the potential aggressor from his plans: by showing him that his

behaviour can be costly, it's possible to influence his cost-benefit ratio and encourage rational political action.

Germany cannot keep itself from a difficult debate. This will not do justice to the delicate overall strategic situation in which Germany and Europe find themselves in 2018.

Third, in light of this lack of understanding, the Germany's insistence on international law comes across as stale and weak. Of course, Assad belongs in the International Criminal Court. And of course a military operation requires a mandate from the UN Security Council. But what if international law cannot be enforced without the threat or use of force? Relying solely on the norms of international law doesn't have any weight behind it. Assad cannot be arrested and handed over to the court without the use of military force. And according to international law, a military operation can also take place without the mandate of the Security Council, if it relies on the concept of emergency relief – which in this case is not out of the question.

What it means for the European security architecture

Unfortunately, as far as the mandate for intervention is concerned, it's the Security Council's structure itself that protects the violation of international law. It makes little sense for the enforcement of international law to rely on the mandate of a body in which one of the perpetrators, Russia, has a veto and can therefore dodge its and its client states' responsibility. This way, the Security Council becomes the exact opposite of what it should actually be: the guarantor of international law. Like the quick 'No vote', the repeated German appeal to the Security Council has something automatic about it. Not only does it often seem to evade real responsibility, but even appears cynical, fully aware of the exploitation of the Security Council.

The hasty refusal of any intervention in Idlib once again denies Germany the opportunity to hold a wider debate on its own interests, the actual protection of international law, the strengthening of the global order, and Berlin's responsibility.

We have to consider that German interests are directly affected in Syria: the war there was the single most important trigger for the sGermany cannot keep itself from a difficult debate. This will not do justice to the delicate overall strategic situation in which Germany and Europe find

themselves in 2018.tream of refugees which since 2014 has increasingly shifted to Europe and Germany. So the importance of this issue for German domestic policy and for the cohesion of the EU is obvious. The 'No vote' ignores the geopolitical question about war and peace in not so distant countries and its direct effect on German cities and towns. At the same time, there *is* an urgent need to seriously examine the connection between the civil war and the refugee issue.

Likewise, there's little discussion of Russia's role in the conflict. However, it's the one that makes Assad's warfare possible by rescuing him militarily, equipping his army and directing and supporting its operations. By means of the veto in the Security Council, Russia is drawing on international law in order to protect one of the most horrendous murderers of our era. Yes, German involvement in a military strike could bring Berlin into additional conflict with Moscow. Of course, the German government can opt for or against such a confrontation, but it should at least *consider* the risks and benefits of such a policy. In addition, a hasty 'No vote' has the unsavoury implication of granting special treatment to Russia – despite its responsibility for the situation in Syria.

A 'fast-track' decision-making process on security policy fails to fulfill Germany's growing role and responsibility for the European security architecture – which is ever more important in the Trump era. This suggests that Germany considers only simple solutions which, in fact, are no longer enough. German foreign policy can no longer be done just according to domestic considerations. Germany cannot keep itself from a difficult debate. This will not do justice to the delicate overall strategic situation in which Germany and Europe find themselves in 2018.



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