

Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle
in the German Bundestag on the occasion of the first reading
of the draft mandate for extending
Germany's participation in ISAF in Afghanistan

21 January 2011

Mr President! Ladies and gentlemen! It is not by chance that today's debate on Afghanistan and the situation in the country began with a policy statement by Dirk Niebel, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development. This clearly shows that we must give prominence not only to the military service that our men and women of the Bundeswehr are performing there. Since so many service members are present here today, I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to you and to your comrades, on behalf of this house of parliament, for everything you are doing in Afghanistan.

Of course we also know – and the servicemen and women are especially aware of this – that we will not succeed in Afghanistan if we place all our faith in a military solution. Our military commitment serves to bolster stability in Afghanistan. The visible progress that has been made on civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan is highly remarkable. No other German government has been engaged in civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan to the extent the current government has. No other German government has done as much for building up and training Afghan security forces as the current government has. May I ask you to take this into account when criticizing us. The situation was different when you were in power.

However, civilian reconstruction and safeguarding these achievements with a view to the country's stability can of course only be part of the solution. The political solution is what matters most. This realization is at the heart of the shift in strategy that took place almost exactly one year ago at the London Conference on Afghanistan. At the time, this strategy shift was highly controversial, also in this house of parliament. But it is becoming clear that what the German government negotiated in London together with its partners was right. We will not achieve peace in Afghanistan by military means, but only through a political solution. Our international engagement therefore aims to bring about a political solution, with a view to creating sustainable and lasting stability in Afghanistan – so that also once our engagement has ended, the country will not again become a safe haven and refuge for international terrorism.

It is key to this political process that all actors be involved. It is paramount that we are ever more successful in our efforts towards regional involvement, that is to say involving affected neighbouring countries. A start was made in London with the Conference on Afghanistan. Subsequently, for the first time, a conference on Afghanistan – attended by all actors – was held in Kabul, that is, in the country itself. Participants included, one should note, those neighbouring countries that have not taken part in the process for years. At this conference, agreements were also reached between Afghanistan and Pakistan. From a Central European vantage point, such trade agreements would appear easy to conclude. Yet anyone with background knowledge about relations between the two countries knows that these agreements represent a huge step forward.

Regarding Iran, there are many questions – I am thinking, for example, of those relating to the drugs trade – that can only be answered by involving neighbouring countries and through relevant networking. All of this happened.

Late last year, NATO held its summit in Lisbon. It was a true milestone. I would like to again mention the four dates – not just three – of our road map, of our strategy for the future:

First, during the first half of this year, we want to begin transferring responsibility for local security in the districts and provinces.

Second, we are confident that, by the end of the year, we will be able to reduce the presence of our Bundeswehr forces for the first time.

Third, by the end of 2014 we should have succeeded in completely transferring responsibility for local security to the Afghans. This is not only our aim, it is also the express aim of the Government of Afghanistan that there will no longer be any of our combat troops in the country.

The fourth point is often forgotten. Also beyond 2014, Germany must remain actively committed to sustainable security in Afghanistan. Were we not to do so, the Taliban would immediately regain the upper hand. They would again sow the seeds of terrorism throughout the world, and all efforts, also those of our Bundeswehr men and women, would have been in vain. We would be back to square one. There must be no second vacuum left behind in Afghanistan. This is what we believe is at stake.

In the policy statement I delivered in December 2010, I commented on this in detail. Contrary to everything that has been insinuated in this connection, it is totally clear that every road map is always contingent on the situation actually turning out as foreseen. By the way, this has not only been included in the text of the mandate for the first time, but is word-for-word what I said in my policy statement on behalf of the German government in December.

In other words: by the end of 2011, we want to reduce the presence of our Bundeswehr forces for the first time. Yet it is self-understood that, for all of this, the following conditions must be met: only if the situation permits, and only if our servicemen and women on the ground are not endangered. Because what we want is an irreversible and sustainable process of transfer of responsibility. This is the objective.

(...)

The German government is confident that, as security responsibility is progressively handed over, the presence of Bundeswehr forces can be reduced, starting at the end of 2011. The German government will use all of the leverage that is justifiable in terms of security policy to draw down forces as early as possible – if the situation permits, and provided that neither our service members nor the sustainability of the transition process are put at risk.

On this point, one does not have to be a military expert. Simple common sense will tell you this is the rational way forward. And that is what matters in the end.

Vice-President Dr Hermann Otto Solms:

Mr Minister, our colleague Mr Omid Nouripour (The Greens) would like to ask you a question.

Dr Guido Westerwelle, Federal Foreign Minister Westerwelle:

Please, go ahead.

Omid Nouripour (Alliance 90/The Greens):

Mr Minister, you have just said that, if possible and if the security situation permits, the presence of German servicemen and women in Afghanistan is to be reduced by the end of this year. I have the following question: Are you excluding the possibility that the mandate ceiling could in the meantime be raised due to the employment of AWACS planes, or that some of the flexible reserve personnel may be brought in?

Dr Guido Westerwelle, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs:

On this issue, I share the position of the Chairman of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and I suggest you take a close look at it.

Generally speaking, travelling seems to purify the mind – because SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel in an interview today said that these are two separate matters. Germany has declared that, for the time being, we are not participating in the AWACS operation, since we are focussing on basic and further training. Apart from this, we naturally discuss and reassess everything with our Allies at regular intervals. Therefore, the question of whether I would exclude anything may be useful for political bickering between parties, but it is totally inappropriate as regards substance – considering that, in an alliance, we can only succeed together. This question is totally inappropriate!

I am telling you this, dear colleague, because I believe you really could learn a thing or two from the larger opposition party, the SPD.

These days, the Social Democratic Party is struggling to find a position, holding discussions, and weighing the arguments, and it has publicly stated in response to the Federal Government's request that it will not abandon our men and women in uniform, and that it wants to support them.

Your party is completely different. No Foreign Minister sent as many service members into missions abroad as The Greens' Foreign Minister – but your memory grew clouded as soon as you switched to the opposition.

What you are doing is irresponsible – I repeat, irresponsible!

Vice-President Dr Hermann Otto Solms:

Mr Minister, would you reply to a question by our colleague Mr Stefan Liebich (The Left)?

Dr Guido Westerwelle, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs:

Yes.

Stefan Liebich (The Left):

Mr Foreign Minister, you have just read some passages from the text that we will be voting on, but not from the section that is up for vote. Can you confirm that the condition the SPD has made a prerequisite for its consent is not even met in the Federal Government's motion, and that what you have read here, along with every figure indicating a withdrawal, is merely mentioned in the explanatory part of the motion?

Dr Guido Westerwelle, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs:

I will give you a short reply – although you have been a member of the German Bundestag not for a few weeks, but for a few months already.

With all due respect, dear colleague, you should know that it is standard practice for us to submit a text, for which the explanatory part of course forms the political context. Are you seriously suggesting that the German Bundestag resolve that the German government is confident? I think the German Bundestag should be more self-assured here. The armed forces operate under a parliamentary mandate, not a government one. That is why the German Bundestag has the final say. Anything else would be surreal.

It will then be our task to make every effort to move forward this year the process that we will hopefully unanimously, or at any rate by a large majority, agree in this house. Last year, three important milestones were set along the path towards the political solution we seek: London, Kabul, and the conference in Lisbon. This year will see another important milestone right here in Germany, namely the Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn. I predict that this conference, scheduled for the end of the year, will focus on the high-stake issues: a political solution, reintegration, including reconciliation, and dialogue. This Afghanistan conference must however also concentrate on the time following 2014. This was where I left off before the questions were asked.

Dear colleagues, anyone who now conveys the impression in Afghanistan that, as of 2014, people will be left in the lurch – because we don't care about them any longer, they can do what they want and should handle things on their own – he or she will only find that no progress will be made on good governance or on the fight against drug trafficking and corruption, or on democratic development, which is our common objective. We would thereby risk the partners we need for building up the country on a secure and permanent basis turning their backs on us – due to fear for their own, and their families', lives.

This would not be responsible policy; what we want is a responsible handover of responsibility. Something that has been jointly decided in the German Bundestag must be completed in a responsible way. And you must not disappoint the friends you need to enhance security also here in Germany, given the threat of terrorism.

As a member of the United Nations Security Council, we have taken on a coordinating role as regards Afghanistan. I will therefore address the German Bundestag on a regular basis on this topic. I assume that we will also hold regular discussions in the committees. I can assure you that I will keep you, that is your spokespeople and representatives, informed on progress whenever possible. You have probably noticed that I have done so in recent months, and this practice will be continued. In my opinion, a broad majority in the German Bundestag is not so much a political issue, but rather would stand for clear support for the men and women in the Bundeswehr, who are risking their lives in Afghanistan for our freedom and security.

Such a broad majority is also of importance for our international partners, and for our Allies – so they can rest assured that there is broad political support.

Politicians must be prepared to shoulder responsibility, even if this costs them some opinion poll percentage points.

What is most important is the security, freedom, and future of our country and of Afghanistan. Ladies and gentlemen of the opposition, and of The Greens:

you should follow the example of the Social Democrats. These words coming from me should give you pause for thought.

Thank you.