Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 7.12.2011 www.osw.waw.pl

Germany decides its 'exit strategy' from Afghanistan

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An international conference devoted to the future of Afghanistan took place on 5 December in Petersberg near Bonn. The conference was organised by the German Foreign Ministry. Before the conference, the German government decided on the strategy for the Bundeswehr's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Until 2014, Germany will be gradually and slowly reducing its contingent in the north of Afghanistan, where it is in charge of Regional Command North. In 2012, the German contingent's limit will be reduced from 5,350 to 4,900 soldiers, and in 2013 to 4,400 soldiers. In fact, the Bundeswehr's contingent will be reduced only slightly in 2012 since not more than 5000 soldiers are now stationed in northern Afghanistan (350 form the 'flexible reserve', who can be sent to Afghanistan only in exceptional cases with the Bundestag's consent). Thus, the Bundeswehr's limit will be reduced only on paper, i.e. in the mandate for 2012 to be presented to the Bundestag, because the limit of 4900 soldiers is likely to be used in full.

Commentary

- The reductions are gradual because the tasks being implemented by the German contingent are of key significance for the functioning of the contingents of the other countries in the north of Afghanistan. The Bundeswehr is for example responsible for the logistics (the operation of the airports in Termez in Uzbekistan and Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan) and command. Furthermore, northern Afghanistan is an increasingly important region considering the intensified usage of the northern route of supplies for the ISAF troops across the country.

- The German Foreign Ministry has been trying to influence the form of the discussion on the 'exit strategy' inside Germany and to emphasise the role Germany is playing in the discussion on the political and economic future of Afghanistan at the international forum. Considering some objective factors (including Pakistan's refusal to participate in the talks), the conference was not a success which could also have a positive effect on the image of the German Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, initial arrangements regarding the schedule of the German 'exit strategy' from Afghanistan once again revealed the weakness of this ministry and of Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle himself. He was pressing for the development of a plan for quick and significant reductions of the German contingent, which the Defence Ministry objected to. This also seems to prove that the stance of the Federal Ministry of Defence is having an increasing influence on

security policy issues in Germany. Its present head, Thomas de Maizière, was the director of the Chancellor's Office and a close associate of Angela Merkel, who holds him in high regard.

- From 2014, the Bundeswehr will still be present in northern Afghanistan, where it will be carrying out tasks involving training and advice for the Afghan army and partly also for the police. The military engagement of the Bundeswehr will be accompanied by Germany's continued participation in development and economic co-operation projects. Germany is noticeably more interested in the Afghan mining industry; a memorandum of co-operation was signed in June this year, and the German Association for International Co-operation (GIZ) is providing consulting services in this area. This may be proof of the desire for a long-term economic engagement in northern Afghanistan despite the fears of a deterioration in security following the withdrawal of the ISAF coalition troops in 2014.