

German-American Disagreement on How to Deal with the Threat of Terrorism: The Role of National Political Culture and Implications for the Transatlantic Relationship

By Frank Gadinger
DAAD/AICGS Fellow

Introduction¹

The close relationship between the U.S. and Germany has undergone a dramatic change, beginning with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the resulting U.S.-led “war on terror,” and the Iraq War. In particular, the Iraq War and different counter-terrorism policies have led to a diplomatic crisis in the transatlantic relationship; it was a new phenomenon for Americans and Germans to disagree on fundamental policy issues. While the war on terror has shaped the domestic as well as the foreign policymaking processes in the U.S. in nearly all central issues (homeland security, Iraq War) as a dominant paradigm until now, such a development cannot be observed in Germany. Furthermore, President-elect Barack Obama and Senator John McCain hotly debated how and where to fight the war on terror in the course of the presidential campaign; they tried their best to act tough on questions of national security. One cannot find such a culture of public debate about foreign policy and security issues in Germany. Of course, there were some challenges in counter-terrorism policies immediately after 9/11, such as more restricted visa procedures, the institutionalization of a unified counter-terrorism center (*Gemeinsames Terrorabwehrzentrum*), and legislation changes, such as the addition of Section 129b to the Criminal Code, which makes it possible to prosecute membership in and support of terrorist groups abroad. Yet, in comparison to the counter-terrorism measures of the Bush administration, one can see that the German government has reacted soberly and more pragmatically.

The Political Climate in Germany and the U.S.

The seventh anniversary of 9/11 serves as a good illustrative example to compare the different political climates in the transatlantic relationship. When reviewing the media landscape around that period of time in both countries, the differences in their approaches on the issue are enormous. In the U.S., the ceremonies for the seventh anniversary of 9/11 reminded all Americans of the national wounds of the terrorist attacks: every newspaper was full of memorial letters from companies and emotional private stories of people who lost

¹ While writing this essay, I have benefited from many discussions with AICGS colleagues as well as from interviews with U.S. and German experts on terrorism and transatlantic relations, namely Daniel Benjamin (Brookings), Julianne Smith (CSIS), James Goldgeier (Washington University), Paul Pillar (Georgetown University), Guido Steinberg (SWP), and Ulrich Schneckener (SWP).

AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the December 5, 2008, AICGS Advisor.
<http://www.aicgs.org>

family members on 9/11. Accordingly, politicians and journalists stressed the potential threat from al Qaeda and referred to the necessity of forcefully fighting the global war on terrorism. In contrast, Germany's debate that week tended to marginalize the 9/11 memories. Instead, and maybe symptomatically for this difference, there was wide public debate not on al Qaeda, but rather on a new movie called *Baader Meinhof Komplex*, which reconstructs the historical development of the left wing Red Army Fraction (RAF) in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, in 2008, many books, policy papers, and commentaries in both Germany and the U.S. dealt critically with U.S. foreign policy—perhaps as a result of the election campaign. The critical debate focuses on three dimensions: First, it focuses on the personal governmental style of different Bush administration members (e.g., Dick Cheney) and George W. Bush himself, most prominently in the movie “W.,” directed by Oliver Stone. Second, there is a debate that pragmatically discusses the strategic and political mistakes of fighting the war on terror with the wrong strategy in the wrong battleground—Iraq. Finally, and most fundamentally, the debate on counter-terrorism strategies and illegal practices, such as the treatment of detained terrorist suspects (Guantanamo Bay), torture, and extraordinary renditions, highlights the ways in which these practices undermine American values of democracy and liberty. Still, most of these voices criticize different aspects of the war on terror, yet without questioning the necessity to fight a war against terrorism.

In Germany, the debate on terrorism exists only in the short term. Following the thwarted terrorist attacks on trains in Dortmund and Koblenz (2006) and on American and possibly Uzbek targets in Germany (2007), the former and the present Ministers of the Interior, Otto Schily and Wolfgang Schäuble, tried to push the security agenda forward with initiatives that would tighten laws. Yet, the German Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) is traditionally very skeptical of changing the Constitution (*Grundgesetz*) in order to restrict the protection of human dignity; for example, it stopped Schäuble's plans to legalize the shooting-down of hijacked passenger planes in exceptional circumstances. Generally, there is strong opposition in Germany to increased rigidity of laws on fighting terrorism and any increase in authority for the executive branch, as was seen in the public outcry against “online spying.” It is difficult to speculate how Germans would react to a dramatic terrorist attack in Germany; sometimes there seems to be a tendency toward collective repression of this potential danger. Although public polls illustrate that Americans and Germans fear international terrorism and both want their governments to prioritize it,

AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the December 5, 2008, AICGS Advisor.
<http://www.aicgs.org>

there seems to be a fundamental difference on how to deal with the threat of international terrorism. What might be the causes for that gap regarding how to deal with the terrorist threat?

Views of Terrorism and Foreign Policy

Ever since 9/11, the fight against terrorism has caused disagreements between the U.S. and Germany about the goals and methods of this conflict. In addition to the personal animosity between President George W. Bush and former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, fundamental differences in national political cultures have also become more apparent.

Germany

In Germany, terrorism is seen as a crime, and thus the methods used in counter-terrorism strategies are restricted to law enforcement and intelligence activities. Due to long historical experiences with national terror groups, Germans—as well as Europeans in general—reacted more pragmatically to the new threat of jihadist terrorism. In some aspects the American critique on Germany's soft counter-terrorism approach was certainly right: until August 2002, for example, only membership in a German—not in a foreign—terrorist organization was punishable according to German law. Receiving training in a terrorist camp abroad remains legal to this day—incomprehensible for an external observer.²

In German foreign policy, terrorism is still narrowly associated with NATO's mission in Afghanistan. The German public is skeptical of the war, despite former Minister of Defense Hans-Peter Struck's famous assertion that Germany's security is also defended at the Hindu Kush. Germany underwent a fundamental identity change after World War II and, consequently, was often labeled a "civilian power" because of its distinct pacifist foreign policy orientation. Due to the historical experience with the Nazi regime, the German public is far more reluctant to support any use of military force in foreign policy. Thus, public discussion about pacifism and terrorism in Germany is a fine line between an active policy and German historical responsibility. In Germany, every debate surrounding the use of military force is framed within a larger discourse on historical taboos and international reputation (although it would be too simple to perceive the German political culture as a pure "consensus culture" or Germany as a "peace-loving country"). With the wars in Kosovo and Afghanistan and the interventionist policies of the Schröder government, this pacifist

² See Guido Steinberg, "Counter-Terrorism and German American Relations: A German Perspective" AICGS Issue Brief 26 (Washington, DC: The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, October 2008) for a detailed account of the different counter-terrorism strategies between the U.S. and Germany on the political level.

AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the December 5, 2008, AICGS Advisor.
<http://www.aicgs.org>

paradigm has changed. Now, certain German political scientists speak of “new German policies of great power” that assert a reunified Germany’s leading role in the European Union. However, in the current debate on the *Bundeswehr*’s mission in Afghanistan, the critical-pacifist argument is still dominant, which refers to the historical knowledge that military violence often results in political disaster, as Germany’s own history has demonstrated.

United States

In the United States, in contrast, the 9/11 attacks have led not only to a security crisis, but also to a national identity crisis, as the U.S. historian John Lewis Gaddis observed. For Americans, who had few experiences with attacks on U.S. soil by foreign terrorists, 9/11 was a shock that demonstrated the vulnerability of the hegemonic superpower. The self-image of the U.S. as an “exceptional” nation has been damaged. The declaration of a “war” against terrorism immediately after 9/11 symbolized the nation’s latent feelings of disbelief and revenge. America’s political reflex to quickly find a solution to any problem has led to a counter-terrorism strategy that has put too much faith in military strength and that was also based on a flawed diagnosis. The Bush administration’s tough rhetoric of accusing terrorists and “evil” dictators of hating America’s freedom was not only oversimplified; it also ignored the underlying root causes and sources of the threat. Terrorism experts have stressed that hatred of freedom is not the main driving force of terrorism. Instead, the diagnosis is more complex: People commit terrorist acts primarily in the Western world, often reflecting the conflicts in their home countries in response to their personal and political situations. Feelings of frustration and injustice, together with a perceived alienation in Western societies, is much closer to an explanation of why young people become more radically militant, such as the terror cell in Hamburg before 9/11.

In addition to the flawed diagnosis of the causes of terrorism, it is commonly accepted by terrorism experts and researchers that the two cardinal mistakes of the Bush administration’s strategy were to see the counter-terrorism strategy as a war and to invade in Iraq. The declaration of war lifted the terrorist’s status to the level of a serious enemy, which is exactly the recognition terrorists want.³ The military categories of victory and defeat ignore the fact that terrorists are not interested in “winning” in a military sense. Rather, they are primarily

³ For one of the best scientific accounts to understand the roots of terrorism see Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want. Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006).

motivated by revenge; they try to draw public attention to their cause and to spread the fear instilled by terrorism.

Additionally, the Iraq War provoked a recruitment of al Qaeda terrorists. Osama bin Laden presented the Iraq War as a “war on Islam,” which was a much more credible narrative in the Middle East—especially after the images of torture in Abu Ghraib—than the U.S.’ claims to the liberation of Iraq and the danger of weapons of mass destruction. In sum, the U.S. fell into the trap set by Osama bin Laden. al Qaeda and Jihadist terrorism in general are more powerful now than on September 11, 2001; furthermore, the terror network has transformed from an organization to a widespread ideology, which is obviously not controllable by military action.

Fighting Terrorism and Rebuilding Trust

As has been seen in the years following 9/11, a military strategy is not the answer to ending Jihadist terrorism. Political, economic, and cultural efforts are needed to overcome the ideology of terrorism. To do so, the U.S. will need its allies actively engaged in their common struggle. A first step to deal with the terrorist threat more adequately would certainly be to abandon the rhetoric of war in counter-terrorism strategy, which is what Obama tried to do in his campaign. The closing of Guantanamo Bay, demanded by Obama and McCain, is another step in coming back to a more sober level in fighting terrorism and rebuilding trust in the transatlantic relationship. Nevertheless, in spite of many disagreements and failures in counter-terrorism strategies, there are also hopeful signs of effective cooperation, especially in police and intelligence activities, as demonstrated by the thwarted attacks of the “Sauerland cell” in Germany in September 2007.

Another point of rebuilding trust through mutual cooperation might be the war in Afghanistan. In contrast to the Iraq War, Germany has supported the mission in Afghanistan from the beginning with Schröder’s promise of unconditional solidarity with the U.S. following the 9/11 attacks. Although Germany is at the beginning of an election campaign for 2009, which has already provoked a debate on the unpopular war in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that the grand coalition in Berlin—with new leadership in the SPD party—is going to withdraw German troops. Such a withdrawal would not only damage Germany’s credibility to its NATO allies who complained of Germany’s reluctance to share the same military burden, but it would also, and even more dramatically, encourage terrorist groups there that their tactics are finally successful.

AICGS would like to thank the German American Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the support of this essay. This essay appeared in the December 5, 2008, AICGS Advisor.
<http://www.aicgs.org>