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Germany and Elections: Dodging the Afghanistan Bullet

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Are additional German commitments to Afghanistan likely?

What can Germany do to help security become “Afghan-owned”?

Foreign policy and, even more so, security policy do not typically impact the outcome of general elections. This lack of impact is even more the case during times of mounting unemployment and the collapse of major businesses. Voters focus on jobs, social services, and future pensions. But in the case of an incumbent head of government opposing the seated foreign minister for the office of chancellor, the potential electoral implications of the Bundeswehr deployment in Afghanistan should not be underestimated for the 2009 campaign. The opposition will be eager to find issues on which to oppose the government, while the government will walk a tightrope between promoting its successes and distinguishing itself from its own coalition partner.

Recognizing this, both Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) have attempted to assure that some of the most potentially contentious issues are removed from the political discourse, particularly Afghanistan with its high public disapproval ratings. But this does not necessarily mean that debate over Afghanistan will not occur and that the coalition will be able to “dodge the Afghanistan bullet” which could prove potentially lethal. To date, the split in support between the elite and public for the German Afghanistan policy has not been bridged by a robust discussion of the policy where the case for German national interests “defended at the Hindu Kush” (as coined by former defense minister Peter Struck) has been laid out convincingly for a public still wary of the deployment. Whether there is a foreign policy debate this summer—and the election may not be the propitious time, certainly for the coalition—there is a need for a discussion on the broader outlines of future German security policy to occur.

The Afghanistan Challenge

Chancellor Merkel has made clear that the German military force will remain in Afghanistan, but that none of the parliamentary-imposed caveats will be lifted at this time. Moreover, in an attempt to keep Afghanistan out of the election campaign debates, the Grand Coalition, i.e., Merkel and Steinmeier, has extended the usual length of the Afghanistan mandate to 13 December 2009.¹ This will give time to hold the September 27 election, allow for the formation of the government and the subsequent election of the chancellor, and permit the new government to form before the vote on the continued German presence in Afghanistan occurs.

This will not, however, assure that German participation in Afghanistan will not become an election issue, particularly if there are heightened fatalities or even a terrorist attack. Even as Foreign Minister Steinmeier visited the Bundeswehr this spring in Afghanistan, a German soldier was killed in an exchange of fire with insurgents and nine were wounded during two attacks. Additional fatalities could spark public and electoral debate, and there should be no doubt that the Taliban are well aware of the German election cycle and have in fact said so. Furthermore, the opposition parties are not blind to the government’s vulnerability on this issue with 86 percent of the German public opposed to a Bundeswehr combat mission in Afghanistan.² This is not a new phenomenon; there has consistently not been support. In November 2001, 60 percent of Germans wanted the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan to end (even before German deployments), according to a CNN poll.³ While the Free Democrats (FDP) are eyeing a coalition with the CDU/CSU and supportive of the deployment, the Left Party (*Die Linke*) has gone on record opposed.

On 17 June 2009 the government requested Bundestag approval of a NATO decision to send four AWACS (airborne warning and control systems) and 100 to 300 Bundeswehr soldiers to man the aircraft as part of the ISAF mission with the possibility for use by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as well. This enhanced AWACS deployment was debated in the Bundestag on 11 June and a debate and vote are anticipated on 3 July, when it is expected that the Defense and Foreign Affairs committees will make recommendations to the Bundestag at which time a vote will occur. While the vote is expected to approve the resolution⁴ for a mandate until 13 December 2009, it could prompt broader discussion.

Even now the Grand Coalition is grappling with charges brought by the three opposition parties—including the FDP, but also the Greens (*Grüne*) and the Left Party—that Germany pursued a supportive policy with respect to the Iraq conflict by providing intelligence to the Bush administration via headquarters in Qatar in its efforts to displace Saddam. According to the concluding report of the investigative committee of the Bundestag, the Greens and SPD under the Schröder government pursued a dual policy of expressing external opposition to the Iraq War while at the same time rendering intelligence support behind the scenes to the U.S. Current SPD Foreign Minister and SPD chancellor candidate Steinmeier served in the Kanzleramt of the SPD-Green Coalition. A CDU Member of the Bundestag has also echoed the charges against the foreign minister and has questioned his trustworthiness. Despite the previous government's insistence that this support was provided in the war on terror, the Left Party will have no compunctions about using the issue during the campaign, particularly given the weakness of the SPD evident in the recent EU election. At this point, party leaders have set July for further discussion of what has been considered part of the more general anti-terrorism efforts in the post-9/11 era. With respect to Afghanistan, this or other issues pushed by the opposition parties could also spark a debate over German Bundeswehr deployment in Afghanistan.

To date the coalition government has maintained an Afghanistan policy that attempts to balance the domestic expectations for the force with pressure from the NATO alliance to expand its involvement. This has often meant difficulty in satisfying both internal and external expectations, but the light footprint advocated by the Bush administration in the early days of the deployments and, in part, now discarded by the United States, particularly by the current administration, continues to describe the German involvement (based on NATO Resolution 1386 (2001) and UN Resolution 1833 (2008)). Although the third-largest allied force presence in the country, the emphasis has been and continues to be on civilian development and reconstruction.

Networked Security Policy

The concept adopted by Chancellor Merkel for a “networked security policy” marries civilian and military approaches to the German presence in Afghanistan and specifically reconstruction, but the contours of the policy remain difficult to discern in its impact on the country's overall security. Within the German Northern Command area of responsibility, the concept mirrors the “comprehensive approach” adopted by the alliance with a focus on the civilian side. The concept is similar in tone and nature to that of the Obama administration's announced policy for a greater role for both civilian reconstruction and development assistance as well as force presence. This is not entirely new but is a different focus and different level of commitment for the United States. As in the case of the German official “networked security policy,” the critical element will be its implementation on the ground and in the field.

On the civilian side of German networked security, under Ministry of Foreign Affairs overall direction with joint civilian-military command, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have had important successes in creating a region of security in the north, which has permitted the rebuilding of society in those regions. The contribution since 2002 for the civilian reconstruction has totaled over €1 billion⁵ with emphasis on a wide range of development projects to stabilize the country and build civil society, particularly in the north. One of the areas of high priority has been education in the region and nationally: ten times more young people now attend school than was the case under the Taliban. A full half of the female children in 2005 were in school, cited often as a considerable success over the Taliban era, and a total of 6 million school-aged children now attend school. Over 3,500 schools have been constructed and 30,000+ teachers educated, a large number through German efforts.

However, the successes have had setbacks as well. A recent school visited by Chancellor Merkel and cited for its achievement in female education had to close when the girls were threatened by militant Islamists. This clearly put a high priority on the development and reconstruction issue—education and especially female education—at odds with military protection, both important facets of the German Afghanistan “networked security policy” strategy. In the Kunduz German theater of operations (the size of the state of Hesse), just under 700 soldiers struggle to maintain security. There are other civilian issues which have fallen short of expectations for a variety of reasons, including persistent government corruption, failure of efforts to introduce good governance, lack of mechanisms for rule of law, unsuccessful efforts to eradicate drugs production, and others. These all lead to difficulties in establishing a stable and functioning civil society, despite impressive funding for civilian projects which increased from €80 million in 2006 to €420 million in the period 2008-2012.

There is consensus from both the German and U.S./allied side that security must become “Afghan owned” which is possible only by moving ownership from ISAF to the Afghans themselves. Of highest priority for both is the training of the Afghan police and the Afghan National Army. Both are formidable tasks where the funding has not matched the good intentions and the efforts have fallen short of expectations. Germany has placed greater emphasis on the police over the past year and tripled its funding from €12 million in 2007 to €35.7 million in 2008; nevertheless, it remains in a catch-up mode.

A second part of the “networked security policy” adopted by the German government for Afghanistan is the boots on the ground numbering between 3,500-3,900 with a mandate for up to 4,500. Again, the experience has been a positive one for the region and the security provided by the German forces has permitted construction of a roads network and other projects with implications for trade and commercial activity. This in turn has encouraged the return of refugees who had fled the area during the Taliban regime and in the fighting beginning in fall 2001. There will be an increase of forces for the anticipated August elections to assure that the elections can occur peacefully, but the requirement for the force numbers not to exceed the ceiling will mean that deployments will need to allow for rotations so that the overall ceiling is not surpassed, although there are questions regarding this interpretation of the constraints imposed.

Germany has also assumed responsibility for the Quick Reaction Force with 250 troops in the north (previously Norwegian) and provides assistance for airlift, medical care, and some of the logistics for the fourteen national contingents in the region. While certainly to be seen as an achievement from the broader perspective of the ISAF mission, the Bundestag constraints mean difficulty in coordination with other commands and an inequity in fatalities considerably below those from national troops stationed in high combat areas in the south and east. The use of the German military is highly constrained, exemplified in the cautious use of Tornados solely for surveillance missions. This has prompted considerable pressure from the U.S. and other allies to share the burden more broadly by moving into contentious areas, particularly the south. Proscribed by caveats imposed by the Bundestag on what has become known as a “parliamentary army,” the Bundeswehr has often chafed under the parameters imposed, but it nevertheless takes pains to remain within those limits.

When NATO head of Allied Joint Forces Command in Brunssum Four Star German General Egon Ramms was asked recently by the widely-read German magazine *Focus* how the announced U.S. administration policy to consider Afghanistan and Pakistan (AfPak) from a regional perspective would impact the insurgents, he emphasized that even if there is movement by the insurgents into the south, the German forces will not be permitted to move into the south due to the constraints imposed by the Bundestag.⁶ The article quotes as well an unidentified German political leader’s response to a similar question with respect to the south, “its mandate limits Bundeswehr deployment in southern Afghanistan to providing emergency aid to its allies in exceptional situations.” There appears to be no desire by the Grand Coalition in Berlin to seek a more expansive mandate—nor is there any indication of openness by the Bundestag to granting a broader mandate if requested. The chancellor is equally adamant and the likelihood of change in the caveats appears slight.

A U.S. Summer Ceasefire?

The Obama administration continues to review and restructure its policies with respect to Afghanistan and a change in strategy has received a high priority with the new president. In addition to the shift in focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, the outlines of the review have emerged. From a broad perspective, there is clearly a new concept according a greater role for civilian reconstruction and development assistance as well as force presence. Not entirely new, this is a different focus and represents an enhanced commitment for this administration.

Not only did President Obama underscore his commitment to the region and the fight against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks almost immediately upon assuming office with the announcement of 17,000 new troops, he has repeatedly expressed his commitment to Afghanistan, most recently in his speech to the Muslim world from Cairo. He has also announced the strengthening of civilian efforts through greater development assistance and on-the-ground experts. While this parallels the European comprehensive approach as well as the German concept of networked security policy, a truly coalition-agreed strategy in all its necessary dimensions remains lacking.

President Obama has particularly put an emphasis on training of the Afghan police and army with an eventual goal of 82,000 and 134,000, respectively. While the Germans have had the lead on police training (along with a smaller effort by the EU), achievements in the area have been halting and difficult. General Ramms has commented that “we recognized the importance of the police too late.”⁷ But while Afghan ownership of the police and army are accorded high priority by both the U.S. and Germany, difficulties persist and shifting ownership to the Afghans remains an unattained goal.

To date, the new U.S. administration appears not to have put substantial demands on the Germans, as the U.S. review is ongoing and there was a German commitment at the 2009 NATO summit this spring for an additional up to 600 troops primarily for the elections, on a temporary basis. This has been in contrast to the reports in the press of a stinging letter from Defense Secretary Gates prior to the Vilnius Defense Ministers meeting before the 2008 NATO summit⁸ and during the meeting of reported pressure on Germany from the allies, including Gates, to participate more fully in Afghanistan, particularly in the south. At that time, Gates’ sentiments echoed comments made at the 2008 Munich Conference on Security Policy that “in NATO, some allies ought not to have the luxury of opting only for stability in civilian operations, thus forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying.”

Another shift in the Obama approach has been to minimize civilian casualties, the greatest “strategic vulnerability” as Gates has deemed the accidental killing of any Afghans. Both Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and new ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal have echoed his sentiments in public fora in Afghanistan and in U.S. congressional testimony. Less clear is whether there will be a significant shift in overall U.S. strategy. If the latter is the case and there is a shift, i.e., as alluded to in Gen. McChrystal’s confirmation testimony on Capitol Hill, to forces based on functional rather than national/regional responsibilities, the Bundeswehr and Bundestag may need to rethink current positions and policies.

Conclusion

While the days of the strictly “civilian paradigm” for German security policy are over, the evolution of the use of German forces has been cautious and still marked by its historical legacy despite the 12 July 1994 Constitutional Court decision determining that Germany could participate in conflict areas operating within multilateral agreements, i.e., “mutual collective security.” This can only be done with an explicit decision by the Bundestag and within the limits set by the legislative branch by simple majority vote for every deployment into combat zones (not humanitarian efforts). On the one hand, Germany has come a long way since the 1990/91 Gulf War where the Germans and Japanese paid for the incursion, but did not put boots on the ground to the 1999 Kosovo participation against genocide in a non-UN mandated conflict. On the other hand, it participated in the Lebanon crisis in 2006, particularly in the rescue of foreign nationals, and still has a sea patrol to prevent arms smuggling, but without any presence on the ground for fear of facing Israeli soldiers. Now in Afghanistan Germany has the third largest presence albeit with substantial caveats on that presence and has lost nearly forty *gefallen Soldaten* who will be remembered with a memorial.

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This evolution of the Bundeswehr since the German 1990 unification is impressive, but demonstrates a persistent pressure on the German government over the appropriate use of force. The ability of the current CDU/CSU/SPD coalition government to dodge the Afghanistan bullet in the election is highly unlikely and could even prove to be a critical issue during the campaign, particularly if there is a terrorist attack or additional unusually high fatalities. Whether this turns out to be the case, it is clear that after the election there is a need for German policymakers to engage the public in a discussion that has not yet taken place in depth. What should be the role of the Bundeswehr in a country that aspires to be a truly international actor? Specifically, the conflict in Afghanistan must be understood not just by the political elites but presented to the public as a defense of its national interests against the threat of future terrorists and as a fully engaged alliance member.

NOTES

- 1 See Bundestag text 16/10437 on 16 October 2008.
- 2 Der Spiegel, 2 November 08.
- 3 CNN Polling, November 2001.
- 4 See Bundestag text 1/13377 on 17 June 2009.
- 5 German Government, "Deutschland hilft in Afghanistan," 2008 (DHA): pg. 7.
- 6 Andrea Hoffmann. "Verhandlungen machen keinen Sinn," *Focus*, 18 May 2009, <www.focus.de/politik/ausland/ausland-verhandlungen-machen-keinen-sinn_aid_399884.html>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Konstantin von Hammerstein and Alexander Szandar, "NATO Turns the Screws on Germany," *Spiegel Online*, 2 November 2008, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,534524,00.html>>.

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