

AICGS Transatlantic Perspectives

April 2011

German Security Policy on the Move - Challenges In and Post Afghanistan

By Pia Niedermeier

What is Germany's role in the transition from ISAF forces to national control in Afghanistan?

What challenges remain for German-American relations in future missions?

German foreign policy is clearly on the move as the Federal Republic tries to fulfill its claim to more international responsibility and leadership in the twenty-first century. But for transatlantic relations, Germany's ongoing process of adaptation to new international and national circumstances has created some challenges. Rhetorically, the two Merkel governments have been committed to the Federal Republic's so-called multilateral reflex. Indeed, the 2006 White Paper on the transformation of the Bundeswehr asserts that "the transatlantic partnership remains the foundation of Germany's and Europe's common security. The North Atlantic Alliance will continue to be the cornerstone of Germany's future security and defence policy."¹ Within NATO, however, Berlin has more often than not staked out its own position—even if that has led to a direct confrontation with the U.S. or put consensus within the Alliance at risk. Nevertheless, making more independent decisions is not to be conflated with a new unilateralism; Domestic considerations and Berlin's assessment of its international capabilities are determining the scope and substance of action and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Germany's contribution to the mission in Afghanistan is a telling case in point: The nature of its contribution is shaped by tension between Berlin's willingness to play an active role internationally and its constraints from domestic considerations.

The Development of Germany's Afghanistan Engagement: From Laggard to Active Partner?

Ever since the Schröder government's decision to participate in the war in Afghanistan, German governments have had to balance a show of solidarity with the United States and NATO with the concerns of a skeptical domestic public. Trying to meet the contradicting international and domestic expectations simultaneously had three effects on Germany's engagement in Afghanistan. First, when justifying the mission domestically, German politicians largely relied on a narrative that portrayed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as a stabilization mission with humanitarian motives. Second, the German contribution, while always significant in absolute terms, restricted its troop operations by limiting their deployment to the North and by taking on a defensive force posture. Berlin faced a troublesome divergence between the rationale officially used for the mission and the realities on the ground. Third, when faced with requests from allies to share the burden more equally, Berlin pursued a strategy of most and least: contributing the most that could be justified domestically and the least that was acceptable to the allies. For some time, this strategy put Berlin center stage in NATO's burden-sharing debate. Germany also contributed to and had to deal with the effects of a narrative gap within the Alliance. The allies justified the war differently. Some were guided by the war on terror, some by peace-building in Afghanistan, and some purely by solidarity with the United States—creating discrepancies among the main drivers of policy. Hence, compromises on common strategy were hard to achieve, causing serious rifts within the alliance. Today both the transatlantic and the domestic rifts have converged remarkably.

International conferences in London, Kabul, and Lisbon in 2010 have resulted in a strategy of transition from ISAF contributors to the Afghan government, which should take the lead in providing security and allow international combat forces to withdraw by 2014. To this end,

the international community pledged more troops to train Afghan National Security Forces, an increase in civilian and development spending, and assistance for the Afghan government in forging a political deal with the Taliban. Albeit far from perfect, this strategy has reinvigorated a sense of common purpose that had largely eroded after the first years of the mission and can best be described using Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's idea of "three surges": a military offensive against the Taliban insurgents, an increase in civilian aid to strengthen the Afghan government and economy, and a diplomatic effort to find a settlement with the Taliban and countries in the region.²

As a result of this strategy, Germany has stepped up its ISAF contribution both in quality and quantity, narrowing the gap between Berlin and its partners. First, the quality of Germany's engagement has changed with the new Bundeswehr mandate focused on protecting the Afghan population and training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Consequently, Germany has deployed two training and protection battalions of roughly 1,400 soldiers to partner with the ANSF, in addition to eight Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLT), since 2010. The Bundeswehr remains the third largest troop contingent, with 5,300 troops. Partnering with the ANSF has also led to an alleviation of some of the national caveats placed on German forces, such as their mobility and use of lethal force.³ Second, in civilian terms the German government pledged in London to double its civilian spending to roughly \$600 million per year, and will, hence, remain the third largest contributor. It likewise remains the third largest bilateral donor for police training in Afghanistan, contributes the largest contingent to the EU Police Mission (EUPOL), and provides personnel for the Focused District Development (FDD) program and its bilateral police program.⁴ Politically, Germany plays a less tangible but no doubt important role chairing the International Contact Group for Afghanistan and being the UN Security Council's lead coordinator on Afghanistan for the next two years.

On a national level, the gap between elite and public discourse has changed remarkably even amid public resentment of the war. The deterioration of security in northern Afghanistan and the increasing attacks on German soldiers have driven home the reality that the Bundeswehr is engaged in a combat mission, not just a peacekeeping operation; this realization is reflected across party lines in the Bundestag. The military mission is now more broadly defined as a proper counterinsurgency campaign: protect the Afghan population, rather than only providing the security conditions for reconstruction to take place.⁵

The mission's political goals likewise reflect this new realism and soberness. Similar to the United States and other ISAF contributors, the German parliamentary debate has largely centered on defining measurable and more humble goals to be achieved in Afghanistan as a precondition for international forces to withdraw. For the first time, the government presented a progress report on Afghanistan to the Bundestag and the public in December 2010 that reviewed the developments in Afghanistan and Germany's contribution to the effort. Although the report was not the independent and critical evaluation that the opposition called for, it offered a surprisingly blunt assessment of the dire situation on the ground. These developments in public discourse are no small feat for a country in which a culture of military self-restraint is still deeply embedded within the public as much as it is within its elected leaders.

To some degree, it can be argued, the Merkel governments have changed policy amid domestic and international constraints and Germany has moved from the position of a laggard in NATO to an active partner. This, however, does not mean that "all's well that ends well." Two distinct challenges remain for German-American relations and Germany's role in the transatlantic alliance in and beyond this mission.

The Narrative Gap

Certainly the narrative gap between the allies, and between Germany and the United States in particular, has narrowed considerably. But because mission fatigue is widespread across ISAF partners, domestic considerations might easily re-open the narrative gap.

By tying its enduring military and civilian commitment to handing over responsibility to the Afghans, the Alliance has paid a high price for its newfound sense of purpose. Over the course of the past

two years the nature of the burden-sharing debate has changed. Previously the Alliance debated who should and could carry more of the burden. Today, the debate is no longer about doing more but about not doing less as the withdrawal is no longer a distant possibility but a reality. The Dutch and Canadians will draw down their combat troops completely by the end of the year and other allies are trying to appease their publics by suggesting they want to follow the Dutch. In this respect the ambiguous outcome of the German debate concerning the renewal of its ISAF mandate in January 2011 did not escape U.S. attention. The Federal Foreign Ministry had argued for a strong commitment to and language on withdrawal. Only at the urging of former Federal Minister of Defense, Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, did the mandate also speak of a drawdown of troops based on conditions on the ground. The recent remarks by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that “[f]rankly, there is too much talk about leaving and not enough talk about getting the job done right”⁶ is a timely reminder that the United States will continue to demand burden-sharing from Germany and other allies. Indeed, some in Washington have voiced concern that the increasing emphasis Berlin has placed on its civilian part of the mission should not be seen as a substitute for a long-term military engagement.

The Strategic Gap

Beyond Afghanistan, a particular challenge for German-American relations can be described as a strategic gap. This refers to the lessons Germany is likely to draw from Afghanistan for the future of its security policy.

Domestically, the engagement in Afghanistan has certainly altered the public debate. Even though Germans had to abandon the image of the Bundeswehr as an advanced development agency, the reputation of the armed forces among the German population remains high.⁷ But strategic cultures change slowly; wide-spread mission-fatigue will be an impediment to any future German decision on military intervention. Germany’s abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and its reluctance to participate in enforcing the no-fly zone over Libya underline this point. It seems that the Merkel government does not want to repeat the Afghanistan scenario in which, against the background of unclear political goals, it found itself trapped between a skeptical public and the demands of allies to share the burden.

But lessons reach beyond the realm of public opinion. The ISAF mission has made clear that the Bundeswehr faces serious impediments when it comes to conducting counterinsurgency campaigns. These impediments range from a defensive mindset in operations to a lack of adequate force structure and equipment, such as light infantry or strategic and tactical airlift.⁸ The ongoing defense reform has acknowledged these problems, but it has been largely driven by budget constraints and less by a strategic review. If current plans are implemented and potential for cooperation in Europe and NATO are not adequately used, then Germany might end up with a force that is smaller and even less capable than the current one.⁹

The new Federal Minister of Defense, Thomas de Maizière, has announced a thorough review of the ongoing reform process. Yet, there appears to be limited political appetite on the part of the Merkel government to use the Afghanistan mission as a catalyst for a more profound review of the role of German armed forces as an instrument of Germany’s foreign and security policy. As it starts carving out its own national interests and priorities, Germany will continue to decide about the use of its armed forces on a case by case basis. Germany will likely be a cumbersome partner within both NATO and the EU for some time to come. This process, however, is not to be conflated with a new unilateralism in Berlin. It is rather the outcome of a process of normalization that allies have long called for.

The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) strengthens the German-American relationship in an evolving Europe and changing world. Affiliated with the Johns Hopkins University, the Institute produces objective and original analyses of developments and trends in Germany, Europe, and the United States; creates new transatlantic networks; and facilitates dialogue among the business, political, and academic communities to manage differences and define and promote common interests.

Through its three program areas (Business & Economics; Foreign & Domestic Policy; and Society, Culture, & Politics), AICGS provides a comprehensive program of public forums, policy studies, research, and study groups designed to enrich the political, corporate, and scholarly constituencies it serves.

AICGS
1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
www.aicgs.org

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

NOTES

- ¹ Federal Ministry of Defence, *White Paper 2006. On German security and the future of the Bundeswehr* (Berlin: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2006): 7
- ² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses," New York, 18 February 2011, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>> (8 April 2011).
- ³ Timo Noetzel, "Germany's Small War in Afghanistan. Military Learning amid Politico-Strategic Inertia," *Contemporary Security Policy* 31/3 (2010): 486–508, p. 502.
- ⁴ Deutsche Bundesregierung, "Fortschrittsbericht Afghanistan zur Unterrichtung des Deutschen Bundestages," p. 26-28 and p. 83.
- ⁵ Deutscher Bundestag, "Antrag der Bundesregierung zur Fortsetzung der Beteiligung bewaffneter deutscher Streitkräfte an dem Einsatz der Internationalen Sicherheitsunterstützungstruppe in Afghanistan," *Drucksache* 17/39, 18 November 2009; Deutscher Bundestag, "Stenografischer Bericht. 85. Sitzung," Berlin, 21 January 2011.
- ⁶ Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, "Statement to NATO Defense Ministers," NATO Headquarters Brussels, Belgium, 11 March 2011, <<http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1547>> (8 April 2011).
- ⁷ Falk Tettweiler and Detlef Buch: "Sinkende Zustimmung zum Afghanistan-Einsatz," *Europäische Sicherheit* 9 (2010): 73-76, p. 73.
- ⁸ See Noetzel in Fn 3; Benjamin Schreer, "Political Constraints: Germany and Counterinsurgency," *Security Challenges* 6/1 (2010): 97-108.
- ⁹ Sophie Brune et al., "Die künftige Bundeswehr und der Europäische Imperativ," *SWP-Aktuell A 15* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2011).

Ms. Pia Niedermeier was a DAAD/AICGS Fellow in February and March 2011. She is a Research Assistant at the International Security Division, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin.

AICGS is grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its generous support of this essay.