



Afghanistan

Understanding German Objectives and Strategies

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When US President Barack Obama revealed the United States' new Af-Pak strategy on 27 March 2009, it was received exceptionally positive by the American allies including Germany. A new momentum was given, to come up with comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the worsening situation in Afghanistan.

Germany was pleased by the change of paradigm in the new US strategy. Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier said, "finally we are on the path to a joint strategy, which will bring us joint success" and that the new US strategy "provides a great number of openings for aligning our approaches". The emphasize of strengthening civil reconstructions efforts, paired with military efforts to provide security and to wipe out terrorists and extremist elements in Afghanistan, while at the same time shifting the focus to a regional approach and working closer together with Afghan security forces and neighbouring countries, is perceived as a promising new change in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan and eventually improving and strengthening the country's stability.

I

AFGHANISTAN: THE GERMAN STRATEGY

The German strategy in Afghanistan has been aimed at building a reasonable balance between civil and military efforts. German troops have been widely involved in reconstruction activities in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, where Germany maintains two Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), in Konduz and Feyzabad. The success of German efforts in the north is respectable. The ISAF troops seem to be well connected to the local population and the Afghan people have welcomed their presence.

Furthermore, the relative stability and peacefulness in that particular region has helped to make visible progress in reconstruction and restoring order. The new US strategy, that was basically adopted by the NATO states as well, foresees not only the expand of the civil component in the approach, or the incorporation of regional partners, but also an increased troop deployment in Afghanistan to effectively fight the Taliban and other terrorists.

The US alone will double their contingent and Germany should be reassured that demands for more troops or a deployment of troops in other regions will sooner or later reach them. Yet it seems, as if that component of the Af-Pak strategy had been forgotten during all the euphoria about new approaches and more jointly efforts. Although President Obama did not make any direct demands for more German troops, this will dependent much on how the situation in Afghanistan will actually develop.

Germany is the third largest contributor of troops for the ISAF mission, having deployed about 3750 soldiers as of May 2009. It is the lead nation for the Regional Command-North (RC-N) and provides the Quick Reaction Force for the region since last year. The German efforts in northern Afghanistan are supported by Hungary, Sweden, and Norway, providing together an overall contingent of 1150 men. But relying on these facts will hardly help to improve and control the situation, even in the northern provinces. Once regarded as relatively peaceful, secure and stable, the operational area of RC-N has seen an increase in violence and instability in recent months and the security situation is deteriorating.

To successfully meet the objectives as lined out by the new Af-Pak strategy, there will be an increased demand for more troops, as they are needed to secure reconstruction work as well as hunting down

terrorists.

If the situation in the north fails to improve, or Germany's allies in the south do not succeed in their efforts, the German government will have to face tough decisions.

II

GERMAN POLITICS & AFGHANISTAN

Germany's involvement in Afghanistan is sanctioned by parliament. In order to send German armed forces to missions abroad, the Federal Parliament has to approve their mandate. Initially there was a broad consent to send troops to Afghanistan and the mandate was extended and enlarged every year. But in recent years the annual renewal of the mandate has become controversial. The current mandate for the German troops was renewed in October 2008 until December 2009.

In order to organize the upcoming elections in Afghanistan, the maximum force level to be deployed was raised to 4500. However, the troops may only operate within restricted parameters of the mandate, which means that German soldiers are not allowed to operate in south Afghanistan, unless for a very brief time and only if it is indispensable for the overall mission objectives of ISAF. While Germany willingly focuses on reconstruction and the training of the Afghan National Army and police units, it has become reluctant to strengthen efforts with regard to the military component of the mission in Afghanistan. Within the framework of the Operation Enduring Freedom, Germany pulled out its special forces from Afghanistan last year and only contributes to the safeguarding of the seas at the Horn of Africa, with the respective mandate providing for a maximum troop level of 800 men.

Up to June 2009, 32 German soldiers and three GSG9 policemen have been killed in Afghanistan and another 117 servicemen have been wounded. Additionally there are still rumours that

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up to 12 soldiers of the German Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK, Army Special Forces) have been killed during their participation in Operation Enduring Freedom.

However, one should note, that only 19 of these casualties have been reportedly due to enemy actions. The situation in the northern provinces of Afghanistan is getting more and more dangerous as the Taliban have intensified their actions in this region and deliberately started to target German ISAF troops. German armed forces respond to these increasing threats by adopting a more robust approach. On 7 May 2009 special forces captured a high-ranking Taliban commander in the province of Badakshan, who was thought to be responsible for numerous attacks on German soldiers. Only a few days later German forces killed two enemy combatants for the first time during the ISAF mission. There has been a heavy increase in attacks on German soldiers starting from 2008 onwards. Between 2002 and 2009 132 serious incidents were counted of which 73.5% occurred since August 2007. With 37 attacks since the beginning of 2009, fears within the German government and army command rise that this year might see a new, sad peak of attacks and probably German casualties.

Facing parliamentary elections this year, both parties of the ruling grand coalition try to avoid the Afghanistan mission becoming a campaign issue, as public opinion is clearly against the deployment of German troops. In order to ease public sentiment politicians of the ruling coalition are eager not to describe the mission in Afghanistan in terms of a war. How long they will be able to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a campaign issue largely depends on the developments in Afghanistan and the direction the discourse in Germany will take. But with a mounting number of attacks against German soldiers the subject will probably stay constantly within the media's focus and thus produce more controversies amongst German voters. The Left Party already addresses the Afghanistan issue and is strictly against any German commitments there, and the Green Party, which initially supported the mandate for the Afghanistan mission, as it was then part of the ruling coalition together with the Social Democrats, will face serious difficulties to explain their constituents the ongoing support for that mission. If the two main parties, namely the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, are getting dragged into the subject during the election campaign, it is hard to say what the results could be. There is a strong fraction of Social Democrats that is getting more apprehensive towards the mission in Afghanistan and

depending on how the electoral campaign will unfold itself it could very well happen that they demand a clear guarantee that the German troops are not getting reinforced. The future of the Afghanistan mission will be dependent on the outcome of the German general election this year. A Christian Democrats led government will probably be more in favour of the German commitments in Afghanistan, but regardless of who will actually win the elections, it will be very difficult to further enlarge the mission.

The growing number of attacks on German soldiers in Afghanistan and a rising number of casualties is enforcing the 'anti-war stance' of large parts of the German public. The fighting in Afghanistan got a new dimension, as attacks on German soldiers, become more frequent and are being deliberately planned and executed. The Taliban seem to know about the effects and repercussions their actions in Afghanistan have back in Germany. Images of caskets being flown in to Germany are really bad publicity for the government and although it underlined its commitment to the involvements in Afghanistan, this commitment seems to be ending when soldiers are getting killed or no longer can stay out of harms way and therefore public opinion is getting more and more opposed to the mission.

Obviously in all these years German politicians have not been able to properly articulate the mission objective to the people and they failed to win public opinion. This is not too big of a problem, as long as the mission is running smooth and well, but as soon as media attention turns towards a raising number of wounded and dead soldiers, the bad publicity pushes the German government to react. Out of the desire to distract attention from the mission in Afghanistan, the government missed the chance of a major public relations surge to tell and show the people, what the German soldiers are doing in Afghanistan and what they were already able to achieve. After all, it was former Minister of Defence Peter Struck, who bluntly explained to the public that 'German freedom is being defended at the Hindukush', a sentence that became quite famous because it left the German people confused and puzzled and from then on symbolized the government's shortcomings in explaining the people why German soldiers are posted in Afghanistan and why they are dying.

Instead of simply stating that it is our freedom that is defended (which of course is true at core, but beyond comprehension for many people), it would probably have been better to explain the public why it is so important to support the young

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Afghan government in gaining control of the country and that this is simply not possible without the help of ISAF. The German commitments in Afghanistan are part of a larger effort to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorists again. Germany has done much in Afghanistan and its efforts in reconstructing the country and training its security forces are respectable, and this should be the focus of the media and the public.

Instead of calling for withdrawal or at least refusing to reinforce the troops in Afghanistan every time a soldier gets killed or wounded, Germans should be proud of their sacrifices and be willing to provide the troops with every support, be it more soldiers, or more equipment, or simply morale, that is possible. It is simply not reasonable to send soldiers into a crisis zone while not accepting that they might get hurt or even killed. Refusing to send soldiers into the southern provinces of Afghanistan just because this would be too dangerous, while German allies like the US, Canada, or Great Britain need and request our help and suffer heavy casualties, just appears to be morally wrong.

German politicians and the people hid behind German history when it came to sending German soldiers on missions abroad. Germany rather preferred to contribute monetarily, but the situation has changed. Of course, history will always remain a sensitive aspect when German soldiers are doing their duty in other countries, but it is time, that we show the world that Germany is a reliable partner within the frameworks of international institutions such as NATO or UNO, and that it is willing to take its share of responsibility (not to speak of the fact that the responsibility factor is one of the arguments with which Germany tries to attain a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council).

III

CONCLUSIONS: GERMANY, AF-PAK & BEYOND

Regarding the situation in Pakistan, the German government is mainly powerless. It has no real lever to push Pakistan into anything. In order to

help the thousands of internal refugees that fled the fighting in SWAT Germany provided money, to help these people.

In 2009 it has already spent 12.6 million Euros in humanitarian aid to Pakistan. On 7 May 2009, Pakistan Defence Minister visited Berlin and asked Germany and the international community for help in the fight against terrorism. But it remains completely unclear in what way Germany could help. Pakistan will certainly not tolerate any foreign troops on its territory, which leaves Germany once again with only sending money to Pakistan. Whether this is a solution to solve the conflicts and problems in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan is at least questionable.

Finally, an increase in troops seems to be inevitable to successfully implement the new strategy and to fight insurgents and terrorists. Much will probably depend on the election outcome in Germany and in what way the controversies and discussions with regard to the Afghanistan mission will develop. A complete withdrawal seems unlikely though, but the fact that the deployment of Tornado fighting jets for aerial reconnaissance sparked a large controversy that finally ended up in front of the Constitutional Court, shows that it will be very hard and difficult for any government to expand the mission in Afghanistan. But this challenge is not only faced by Germany. In order to become a success, all ISAF contributing nations should strengthen their efforts and probably send more troops to Afghanistan where it appears to be necessary. After all the ironic colloquial interpretation of ISAF as 'I saw Americans Fighting' should make us think about our commitments and whether it is really fair to keep once own soldiers out of herms way, while other nations have to take the burden on their own.

The new US Af-Pak strategy has brought about a change in paradigm that was welcomed by the world's leader. But as these leaders at least in parts have to base their decisions on their electorate, especially when general elections are coming up, it is possibly time for a change of mind within the public opinion. People should seriously start thinking about the consequences of not supporting the necessary actions that have to be taken in Afghanistan. It is time for a paradigm change in Germany, to accept that we have a military that is very well capable of doing its duties abroad and that our armed forces are ultimately in Afghanistan to protect us as well as the Afghan people, who had to suffer from suppression and extremism for decades.

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