

Chapter 4

Did the Afghanistan War Change Germany?

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Given the fact that literature about Afghanistan already fills bookshelves, it is difficult to draw general conclusions from the war at the Hindu Kush. I will, however, briefly discuss some of the most pressing problems that have accompanied Western engagement in Afghanistan and then turn my attention to prospects of a successful transition from the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) to the Government of Afghanistan, and the role of regional stakeholders. Because my perspective is that of a German observer, I will do so from the particular situation of ISAF's third biggest troop-contributor.

The German public was far from prepared when Chancellor Schroeder after 9/11 sent German soldiers to a protracted combat mission to the Hindu Kush. The unclear goals of the mission, from fighting Al-Qaeda to protecting human rights, have become a characteristic feature of the German debate. Whatever mistakes were made, the political focus now rests on the political perspectives for both the Afghans and the future of the international community's engagement. The preparations for a successful transition are thus also a subject of this chapter as is a short excursion about the American experience in Vietnam and a reference toward the regional actors who have been neglected for far too long and who are now garnering more attention as the withdrawal date approaches. In conclusion I will turn my focus to how the almost decade-long mission of the international community has not only changed Afghanistan, but also left its mark on the Western countries engaged in the war. Perhaps the most obvious example for this development is Germany. The Bundeswehr's first

out-of-area mission dates back to 1992, when German corpsman were sent to Cambodia to run a military hospital, but it was not until German participation in the Yugoslav wars that a military operation sent shock waves around the still pacifist-leaning country.

Unclear Mission

In the initial stage of the operation German participation was clearly framed as part of an anti-terror combat mission, and former Chancellor Schroeder even put his chancellery at risk when he linked the decision to a vote of confidence. But after Schroeder's straight talk, the Afghanistan discourse in Germany soon shifted in another direction. The focus on the anti-terror operation was substituted by mere moral justification of the mission. The surprisingly quick collapse of the Taliban's reign in Kabul enabled German politicians to rephrase the task and emphasize the importance of democracy promotion and reconstruction, protection of human rights, and especially women's rights, as the core of the Afghanistan mission. Given the traditional skepticism among the German population towards military means, this strategy hardly came as a surprise. Already during the debates about German participation in the Yugoslav wars the decision had been explained in a comparable way. A sole focus on Germany's pacifist tendencies, however, would not tell the whole story, given that there were conflicting policies within ISAF.

Obviously, contradictory political guidelines and military caveats are among the most

pressing issues to resolve among the NATO allies, and are being rightfully named as a major obstacle to success at the Hindu Kush. But it should be remembered that this disunity was also a result of Washington's reluctance to transform the enacted Article 5, the mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, into a unified NATO mission by its allies. Instead, the administration of George W. Bush chose to fight the war their way and left NATO on the sidelines. After the defeat of the Taliban, when ISAF step-by-step took over responsibility, cherry picking among the members became much easier than it would have been during the initial phase of the mission. The result was a divided and partially dysfunctional structure of ISAF and a constant source of tension among the allies. Underlying this dispute among ISAF nations, the overall objective of the mission remained unclear.

The United States did not integrate its anti-terror mission "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF) into the structures of the alliance. The two missions were at best contradictory, as in many situations the nation-building approach of ISAF clashed with covert OEF operations. The Americans' targeted search, however, was not limited to Al-Qaeda personnel, most of whom had left the country to seek shelter in neighboring Pakistan anyway. In fact it was extended to Taliban commanders as well. Over the course of the following years, "targeted killing," either by Special Forces or drone attacks, eliminated most of the old leadership of the Taliban and other opposed military forces. As a result, younger and even more radicalized local leaders have been stepping in. Leaving aside the question of legality of these policies, the mounting civilian casualties have been undermining the legitimacy of the Western presence and put a strain on already-troubled relations with Pakistan. Today, after President Obama's careful reformulation of American policy towards negotiations with the insurgents, the fact that a war against Al-Qaeda turned into a war against the Taliban is

becoming a serious obstacle for a settlement, as it remains unclear whether or not there is anybody with sufficient authority left to negotiate a settlement.

To make matters worse, these policies also turned out to be an obstacle in generating support for the war among the European public who expected a nation-building mission, not a combat mission. The high expectations in terms of human rights and democracy promotion as well as the moral justifications of the mission put forward by many politicians now backfired; with every piece of bad news, support for the Afghanistan mission further eroded.

The debate about the character of the Afghanistan engagement is by no means reduced to the public. The political and military leadership (Bob Woodward's book *Obama's Wars* gives a good account of the American case) was divided over whether to conduct a mere counter-terrorism operation with exclusive focus on Al-Qaeda or a more comprehensive counter-insurgency operation with massive increases of troops and funds. As is almost characteristic of the entire mission, no clear decision has been taken.

Transition

With the deadline for withdrawal of major combat forces scheduled for 2014, the focus has turned to the question of a post-ISAF regime; it is becoming clearer that the entire Afghanistan mission will be judged on the success of the transition to Afghan responsibility. The prospects are daunting, although the buildup of Afghan security forces has made significant progress. The number of deployable ANA units is on the rise and the partnering program is, in spite of a recent backlash, producing satisfying results. The police remain a cause of concern, but the establishment of

training facilities has created visible results. Thus, while the buildup of Afghanistan's security forces is making progress, the notorious lack of government capacities and legitimacy of the government in Kabul makes smooth transition unlikely. President Karzai's repeated overtures to the Taliban, as well as President Obama's disposition to negotiate with the Taliban, are indications that military success does not necessarily translate into political strength.

Although the U.S. has already made it clear that the 2014 withdrawal date does not mean that all American soldiers are going to return home, and that limited military operations such as drone strikes ought to continue if deemed necessary, it is obvious that Afghans will have to bear the main burden for their own security. The process of transferring responsibility from ISAF to Afghan authority, initiated with the turnover of Bamiyan province to the Afghan government, is already underway and may be the most visible sign of a changing political environment.

The Prestige Trap

When Richard Nixon inherited the Vietnam War after taking office in 1969, his main concern was to avoid becoming the first American president to "lose a war." His security adviser Henry Kissinger was convinced that the United States could not afford to lose face in the conflict without setting in motion the famous "domino effect." Although Afghanistan today, absent a geopolitical conflict like the Cold War, is certainly a different case, the ill-fated insistence on a face-saving exit for the U.S. from Indochina offers some food for thought. It was not too long ago that former Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer declared that "NATO cannot afford to lose in Afghanistan." Even if Scheffer's statements and similar comments of others are driven by an honest concern about the Alliance's future, NATO

must avoid the prestige trap. What is at stake is first of all the future of Afghanistan itself. The best way to win back trust for the Alliance is thus to formulate a coherent and realistic strategy and avoid misleading categories like "losing" or "winning" for a situation that does not fit into the binary friend-or-foe model. As today almost everyone, including the U.S. Secretary of Defense, is concluding that the war cannot end without political dialogue, it is time to speed up the necessary negotiations. The international foreign ministers conference, to be held in December 2011 in Bonn, should be seen as an opportunity to proceed with such a process.

George C. Herring's conclusion that the "lessons learned" from the Vietnam War depend primarily on one's general political point of view and ideological predisposition seems to apply for Afghanistan as well.¹ For many Americans, the most obvious lesson from Vietnam was general opposition toward large-scale military involvement abroad. Not to send GIs into "another Vietnam" became a familiar argument in subsequent crises, and provided the political pretext to withdraw American troops from troubled regions such as Lebanon or Somalia. Another conclusion was made by the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Colin Powell, whose doctrine demanded overwhelming American military superiority and unambiguous political support for the troops as a precondition to engage at all.

The U.S. tragedy in Vietnam, however, also offers some solace. After the final chapter was closed in 1975, the dominos did not fall; the U.S. by no means lost its strong position in Asia and has been able to defend its dominant position to the present day. Too ambitious an aim for foreign interventions, however,

1 George C. Herring, *America's Longest War. The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, 4th edition, Boston 2002.

limits not only the ability of policymakers to adjust to a changing military and political environment, but also increases the potential to overestimate such factors as prestige and reputation. In the German case, after politicians had raised expectations sky high, public disappointment with subsequent setbacks in guaranteeing human rights in Afghanistan further increased the lack of political legitimacy for the mission.

Regional Perspectives

The prospect of a Western withdrawal sheds a different light on the role of regional stakeholders. Over the course of the Afghanistan engagement it has been a weakness of NATO to keep ISAF too narrowly restricted to NATO members and close allies. Although the U.S. briefly cooperated with Tehran in the early stages of “Operation Enduring Freedom” the Bush administration soon put an end to a pragmatic working relationship with one of Afghanistan’s most important neighbors. And the Russians observed with bewilderment how ISAF was repeating many of the mistakes the Soviet Union’s 40th Army had made during its 10-year occupation of the country. Cooperation with Russia, however, started late and Moscow’s experiences were never really examined.

The 2011 report of a Task Force supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation underscores again that Afghanistan’s neighbors and key players such as India and Turkey have a profound interest in regional stability; their inclusion is of paramount importance for a successful transition.² Accommodating rival powers

such as India and China, however, will not be easy, as every player seeks to advance its own clearly-defined interests. The fragile domestic stability of Pakistan and the precarious security situation in its neighboring provinces with Afghanistan leaves Islamabad with a pivotal role in any negotiated solution. As the report made clear, a successful regional strategy will require national reconciliation in Afghanistan as well as a comprehensive peace settlement that includes the major regional stakeholders. Although this seems to be a tough task to achieve within a narrow timeframe of only three years, the good news is that, unlike in Vietnam or Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, at least no geopolitical conflict like the Cold War is impeding a solution.

How the Afghanistan War Changed Us

Despite political disputes in the past, shared experience in the field has strengthened the coherence of ISAF and the readiness of the Bundeswehr. It is of peculiar irony that with the constant extension of the Taliban’s sphere of operation to the north, the heated debates about caveats almost disappeared. The traumatic experiences, especially around Kunduz, have transformed the Bundeswehr. Today, German soldiers are engaged almost on a daily basis in combat operations against Taliban units in RC North. Cooperation has improved significantly with the Afghan National Army and—essential for military success in the region—with the newly deployed contingent of the U.S. Army. The increased American presence in the north also jump-started the ailing German police-training effort.

² Negotiating Peace. The Report of The Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in its regional and multilateral dimensions, The Century Foundation Press, New York 2011, <http://tcf.org:8080/Plone/publications/pdfs/afghanistan-negotiating-peace/>

AfghanTCFTaskForce%20BookComplete.pdf (German Version published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08089-20110525.pdf>).

But not only have the tactics of the German army been transformed. Step by step the Afghanistan mission has become part of the public discourse. Until today, several books have been published, not only by pundits but also by ordinary soldiers, telling their stories. German television runs movies about soldiers returning from Afghanistan suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, a genre unknown to Germans since the Second World War came to an end. And the Ministry of Defense has to deal with veterans' affairs and the question of how to honor the memory of dead soldiers—almost an unnecessary duty during the Cold War.

Twenty-one years after reunification, Germans still view the use of military force with skepticism and the political class is reacting to that sentiment. The case of Afghanistan, however, is according to all major polls, accorded a

peculiar hopelessness. Since 9/11, however, Germany underwent a remarkable development in its foreign and security policy. Afghanistan has been by far the most important factor driving this change. In spite of strong public rejection and of political mistakes in framing a clear mission for both the military and the public, major political parties in government and opposition alike did not step away from the country's commitment towards its allies and partners within ISAF and Afghanistan itself. In the Bundestag, the nation's parliament, which has to decide upon the deployment of troops, a stable majority has voted consistently in favor of Germany's ISAF contribution. To draw a general conclusion that German voters' rejection of the Afghanistan mission means an overall rejection of military engagement, however, would be premature.