

# Working Paper

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## The Bundeswehr in Afghanistan: A New Focus on Training

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## The Bundeswehr in Afghanistan: A New Focus on Training<sup>1</sup>

Some time ago, at the headquarters of ISAF, I tried to explain to a high-ranking US general why Germany has a problem with the “war on terror,” as it was called then. When I started my explanation with the term “war” he interrupted me and said “You don’t even call it a war!” Today that term has been dropped by the Obama administration, the general has left Kabul, but some of the German problems remain the same.

Right from the beginning of his term, the new German defense minister Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, a conservative politician from Bavaria, made clear that he stands for political directness and does not hesitate to speak his mind. Therefore, nobody was surprised when he described the ongoings and involvements of German soldiers in a different way than his predecessor: he spoke of “warlike” events in Afghanistan. Until that time it was rarely explained to the public, why a stabilization operation, can, in principle, always involve combat. This even holds true for a mission which is intended to bring about order and security to an area so as to improve the conditions for reconstruction. This uneasiness with outright combat explains that on German MoD’s website in the past there was much about supporting the Afghan government in distributing humanitarian relief supplies and in the controlled return of refugees, but next to nothing about how to provide a safe and secure environment, not to mention counterinsurgency (COIN). Despite the fact that every night German soldiers were on patrol in the “rocket villages”, from which missiles were fired against the PRT in Kunduz, the war was hidden behind a humanitarian curtain. That curtain was lifted in September 2009 when a German-ordered attack (close air support) resulted in the death of up to 142 people, many of them civilians. Part of the problem was that there were not enough infantry troops available. And still today, the number of combat troops may be insufficient to enable the Bundeswehr to prevent another Kunduz.

Looking at the opinion polls this is not surprising. There are plenty of polls which show a majority of the German respondents are against increasing the num-

ber of troops and against combat missions of the Bundeswehr. 69 percent of Germans would like to see the Bundeswehr withdraw from Afghanistan – according to a survey conducted for German public television in December 2009.

The public scepticism vis-à-vis the mission in Afghanistan is reflected in the sentiment of parliamentarians in the *Bundestag*. The CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and the Bavarian CSU (Christian Social Union), which formed a coalition with the FDP (Free Democratic Party), support Germany's involvement in Afghanistan. But FDP chairman, Guido Westerwelle, has clearly announced his opposition to plans strengthening and widening the role of German forces. This has been a consistent irritant to US military planners who regularly called on the previous CDU/CSU-SPD government to commit Bundeswehr troops to combat operations. Germany's former foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, now parliamentary leader of the **Social Democratic Party (SPD)**, said recently: “We can withdraw from where we are not urgently needed” and favoured a withdrawal in a timeframe between 2013-2015. The traditionally pacifist Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens) made a U-turn when it comes to German military operations abroad during their time in a coalition with SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder from 1998 to 2005. The decision to support Bundeswehr operations abroad has divided the party ever since. Most hostile towards German military participation is Die Linke (the Left), a coalition of the former Communist ruling party of the GDR and splinter groups of the SPD frustrated with the policies of the latter. In conclusion Oskar Lafontaine, former chairman of the SPD, and now vice-chairman of the Left, said: “The government must withdraw the Bundeswehr out of Afghanistan.”

Chancellor Angela Merkel knows the polls. Still, she outlined a new strategy for German involvement in Afghanistan. With it comes the deployment of another 500 troops to northern Afghanistan. An additional 350 soldiers will be placed on standby, to be sent if and when they are needed. Germany currently has 4,300 soldiers in Afghanistan – the third-largest foreign contingent after the US and UK. The German government will also provide more money to boost reconstruction and development projects by doubling its input to a total of 430 million euros a year, and to entice insurgents to lay down arms and reintegrate into society. Furthermore, the international commu-

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published under the title “Germany: Frau Merkel goes to war (again)”, in: *Limes*, 15. April 2010, <<http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/germany-frau-merkel-goes-to-war-again/1539>>.

nity will be raising the funds provided for civilian reconstruction on a massive scale in the years to come.

### **Training the Afghan National Army: Some light at the end of the tunnel?**

One of the new qualitative elements of the strategy entails to significantly enhance the number, quality, and efficiency of the Afghan security forces. This is fully in line with the German contribution, presented by Chancellor Angela Merkel in the German Bundestag prior to the London conference. Germany will significantly increase the number of trainers it provides for both the army and the police force in Afghanistan: "Our new strategy is for our soldiers to operate outside the camps, training the Afghan army and working to prevent attacks before they can occur. Without this, we cannot protect the civilian population," Chancellor Merkel said.

Public support for the ISAF mission in all troop-contributing countries is falling. Thus, NATO's Secretary General Rasmussen declared last year that "our populations, Afghan and international, want to see light at the end of the tunnel." Will the Afghan National Army (ANA) light the way out of Afghanistan for ISAF? Part of the problem is that the Bush administration switched its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2002, a priority only recently reversed. Because the effort to build the Afghan security forces has been an 'economy of force'-operation, and, consequently, has not been adequately resourced with the appropriate number and skill sets of personnel, progress in creating the Afghan army and police has been less expeditious than it potentially could have been.

Germany supports the training of the 209<sup>th</sup> ANA Corps in northern Afghanistan. Of thirteen ANA battalions, or *kandaks*, fielded to date, six are now rated capable of operating independently (Capability Milestone, CM-1) – a margin which corresponds to nationwide figures. The training will now be enhanced both qualitatively, by embedded partnering in addition to mentoring, and quantitatively, by for example transforming the former "Quick Reaction Force" into training and protection battalions.

German training and protection battalions will on the one hand foster ANA capabilities to train their own forces as well as to conduct combined operations. It is envisioned that German force partnered with ANA units will form the so-called Combined Team. "Combined" encompasses: training and preparation for

operations, planning and conduct of operations as well as after action reviews. The German battalions are designed to be COIN capable and mobile throughout the RC North area of operations. The 280 Bundeswehr ANA instructors currently deployed will be stocked up to a total of up to 1400 troops. Embedded partnering with the ANA is to be flanked with more training for the Afghan police force. To this end, the number of police instructors deployed is to be increased from 123 to 200. In this way 5000 Afghan police officers can be trained every year, and enabled to help ensure security.

The emphasis on ANA infantry forces means that NATO forces have to provide everything else, from artillery and air strikes to medical care and supplies. For the ill-equipped ANA, advisers are not just teachers. They are a lifeline to the enormous resources of NATO. In a shooting war where a weak indigenous force faces a threat beyond its capabilities, a training effort can complement a larger NATO military presence but not substitute for one. At least for the time being.

There is no lack of Afghan recruits. About 4000 of them are waiting in the pipeline, without enough trainers to take them in. But the biggest problem among recruits during their eight-week basic training course is illiteracy. Only about 14 percent of the new recruits are literate, leaving most unable to read simple instructions for a weapon, a map or a road sign. In addition to classes in combat, the training program therefore includes courses in basic literacy. One always has to remember where the process started from. It's virtually back to basics.

Partnering means that ISAF and ANSF will train, operate and live together. In the past it was not uncommon for U.S. and Afghan forces operating combined to have no idea what NATO's ISAF forces are doing and vice versus. One former senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan called "unity of effort" the most serious problem: "It's not the Taliban. It's not governance. It's not security," he said. "It's the utter failure in the unity of effort department."

The ANA is on the right way but it will take strategic patience and endurance to build up an ANA which will be able to substitute NATO forces: An Afghan face needs an Afghan pace. Currently, the light at the end of the tunnel still comes from the flashlight of NATO advisers.

## Modesty and Ambition

But if Chancellor Merkel's "new strategy" fails to bring peace and the war in Afghanistan continues, the public pressure on her to cut short Germany's military mission there will grow more intense. Although Germany's foreign minister Guido Westerwelle has said German troops could start to leave Afghanistan in 2011, Chancellor Merkel is completely right to refuse to announce any deadline. "It would be wrong to name a concrete date for the troops to leave," she said, "because we cannot predict what will happen and because we don't want to give an excuse to the Taliban to go quiet and then see them stage a large attack following a withdrawal."

Right now, the Afghan population is sitting on the fence, waiting to see what happens. Disillusionment with both the international community and the Afghan state has grown. But the majority of people remain far more fearful of what would happen if foreign troops were to leave. Thus, the next years will be critical, if both Afghans and Western publics are to be convinced that something looking like success can be achieved. That clearly requires a combination of modesty and ambition: modesty in realizing the plan to build up Afghan security forces, which is much more credible than establishing a functioning democratic state, and ambition, which means a real comprehensive strategy with more focus on civil instead of military means; we need at least as many agricultural adviser teams as ANA training teams.

The motto of the German engagement is a "responsible hand-over". Step by step, with clearly defined stages and interim benchmarks, the Afghans must assume responsibility for their country. Then it will probably be possible to scale back German military engagement together with the ISAF partner nations.