

Germany must go South!

Jan Techau and Alexander Skiba

The decision of Germany's grand coalition government to dismiss the Pentagon's call for more German troops in the South of Afghanistan is a grave foreign policy blunder. It does a great disservice to the goal of building a stable Afghanistan and adds to the intellectual dishonesty of Germany's foreign policy debate. Not only will Berlin's refusal create serious damage in the relationships with its closest NATO allies. It will also reduce Germany's room for maneuver on other security challenges.

When former chancellor Gerhard Schröder tied his decision to support the US-led war effort in Afghanistan to a vote of confidence in the Bundestag in 2002, politicians in Berlin were well aware of the tasks ahead in the Taliban and Al Qaida plagued failed state. It was Peter Struck, the social-democratic defense minister, who aptly stated: "Germany's security is being defended at the Hindukush." Security interests laid at the heart of sending Bundeswehr troops to the far-away theater. While the fighting in Afghanistan went on, while a suicide bomber attacked a German convoy (killing three in 2003), and while rockets repeatedly hit the German HQ in Kabul, Germany's domestic debate rarely focused on the military component of its engagement.

Meanwhile the security situation in Afghanistan has become dire: Since 2006, the Taliban are again winning ground – especially in the South – and the military rationale for Germany's deployment to Afghanistan has increased. For the future of Afghanistan will be won or lost in this region of the country, the US and other NATO allies have lobbied Berlin for some time to contribute troops for offensive operations where they are most needed. This presents a catch-22 for Germany's political elite: Many would agree that military solidarity within the Alliance is imperative. But it

is equally true that the strong pacifistic and isolationist tendencies in the German public require the illusion of a purely humanitarian and supportive role.

The resulting political balancing act is satisfactory to neither side: The German public is not provided with the full picture on Afghanistan due to a cross party fear of rejection at the ballot box. And allied demands to do more militarily outside the North are put off with the recurring hint at the wide-spread skepticism among the German public.

When Germany's defense minister Franz Josef Jung brushed off the request from his US counterpart to consider a change of the Bundeswehr's mandate this vicious circle came into play. Jung's referral to areas of responsibility sounded odd and formalistic. A revival of the Taliban in the South – where Americans, Brits, Canadians and Dutch have carried out the main fighting – would put the whole NATO mission in Afghanistan at risk.

There are three main reasons for Germany to seriously reconsider its position on Afghanistan. In the tough domestic battle ahead to achieve a new and extended mandate, Germany's political elites must thoroughly explain the legitimate interest to succeed in Afghanistan.

1. Under the Taliban, a failed state served as the logistical base, safe haven and economic backbone of Al Qaida. 9/11 was masterminded in Afghanistan and some of the attackers lived in Germany before boarding their planes to the USA. The connection between Germany's security and Afghanistan could not be clearer: The lasting roll back of the Taliban, the fight against Al Qaida and the long-term stabilization of the country lie in the German national interest.
2. Germany's refusal to pick up its fair share of the burden is strategically unsound. A country that relies on others to guarantee its own security is ill-advised to waver when it is called upon by its partners. This behavior is even more questionable if one takes into account Germany's economic weight and its demand to have more say in geopolitical matters (just look at Berlin's continuing campaign for a permanent UN security council seat). From the outside, Germany appears to want to have its cake and eat it too—a strategy that squanders political capital lightly within NATO inviting others to step in.
3. Afghanistan is not only a test case for Germany's future security policy and for the functioning of the Alliance. It is also a test case for the Western-style liberal democracies to pursue their legitimate interests in a world that has grown increasingly complex. The failure of Western engagement in Afghanistan would be disastrous signal to asymmetric challengers of the likes of Al Qaida or the Taliban. It would also be a sign of impotence vis-à-vis states like China, Russia and Venezuela, which are threatening or challenging our conception of world order.

The logic of paralysis

Germany's political elites are torn: In fear of the general public they compromise on following through on the country's strategic interests. The quick and brisk rejection of Secretary Gates' inquiry from the social democrats as well as the conservative parties eyes on

the upcoming federal elections in 2009. Leadership on military matters is akin to political suicide in Berlin.

Amid all the gloom, there is also some hope: A sizable portion of politicians in the chancellery, ministries and the Bundestag are coming to realize the important responsibility that comes with being a great power in the 21st century. The German electorate needs to understand that in order to shape globalization and preserve our way of living we sometimes must also fight. This requires some straight talk from all political parties: Pursuing the national interest is not a purely humanitarian or developmental undertaking. It also involves keeping global trade routes open, guaranteeing access to natural resources, stabilizing the oil price, fighting terror networks and giving a perspective to failed states. For these interests to be realized, Germany needs the full spectrum of its power arsenal, including high end military means.

International demand for meaningful contributions from Germany in matters of strategic and global implications such as Afghanistan will increase rather than decrease in the future. The public debate on these matters is still a long shot away—but once it stirs in Germany, it must be lead responsibly and truthfully regardless of political affiliation. The German public will understand that in order to win you sometimes have to fight.



Jan Techau
<techau@dgap.org>



Alexander Skiba
<skiba@dgap.org>

Die hier geäußerten Meinungen sind die der Autoren.