

Counter–what? Germany and Counter-Insurgency in Afghanistan

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Over recent years, the strategic debate in Anglo-Saxon countries about the implications of a sustained counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan has evolved. There is not much disagreement amongst countries like Great Britain, Canada or the United States that NATO faces an intensifying insurgency and that NATO strategy has to be adjusted accordingly. The recognition is that the Western security community is confronted with a Taliban-led insurgency that is gaining momentum. NATO may be engaged in a so-called 'small war' in Afghanistan but this misnomer belittles the operational reality that coalition forces on a frequent basis are engaged in sustained combat with insurgents. The majority view amongst NATO members is that under these circumstances a common NATO strategy for the Afghan operation has to be based on a common understanding of counter-insurgency.

Germany contests the notion that NATO forces are being dragged into a long-term counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan

Yet, as the current debate within the Alliance shows, such a common appreciation does not exist. Germany, a key ally and one of the lead-nations of the ISAF operation, for example contests the notion that NATO forces are being dragged into a long-term counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. The

changing operational reality of the Afghan conflict provides German strategic thinkers with challenges they are unprepared for. Germany's allies should recognise the absence of the concept of counter-insurgency (henceforth, COIN) in Germany. COIN, as it is understood in the Alliance, is an inherently Anglo-Saxon concept which does not resonate in contemporary German strategic debate. This deficit entails significant risks for NATO and inhibits efforts to find common ground on a new Afghanistan strategy. It might also restrain Germany's ability to play a leading role in the reconstruction effort and hamper the Bundeswehr's attempt to adapt to the changing operational realities on the ground.

Benign neglect

At least three reasons contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, by now it is a traditional feature of the transatlantic security community that changes in US strategic debate gain prominence on the European continent only after some delay. This time was no different. As early as 2003 an American debate on the implications of COIN for national strategy emerged. Pressed by painful lessons of the operational conduct in Iraq, US strategic debate rediscovered the challenges of a classical COIN campaign. This resulted in fierce discussions on the changes needed in US strategy. With the exception of Great Britain, European debate largely failed to take notice of this development. Moreover, while it took the US political and military establishment some time to absorb the lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, the US finally did initiate substantial changes on the



A German soldier trains a member of the Afghan National Army. *Courtesy of the Bundeswehr.*

strategic, operational and tactical level in both operations. Indeed, British commanders in Afghanistan were reportedly surprised about the speed and success with which US forces adjusted their COIN strategy. Similarly, European strategic debate only slowly takes notice of the remarkable progress that COIN efforts in Iraq have brought about. The absence of a German strategic debate on COIN at least partly fits within this wider European malaise.

The second factor was the relatively stable security situation in northern Afghanistan for which Germany had taken over military responsibility as the lead-nation in the framework of the ISAF operation. Until now the North has not experienced the heavy fighting that British, Dutch, US or Canadian troops have been confronted with in the South and East of Afghanistan with its Taliban

and Al-Qa'ida strongholds. For German forces in northern Afghanistan, ISAF still is a low-intensity operation. Since the German government refused to deploy regular combat troops to support the allies in the South, the German political and army leadership could afford to maintain their perception of ISAF as a mere 'stability and reconstruction operation'. Yet, in 2007, German patrols, convoys and military bases have increasingly become subject to insurgent attacks with ambushes, suicide bombers and mortar rounds. Insurgents have started to terrorise the local population also in some northern provinces too, threatening ISAF efforts to stabilise and rebuild those areas. At the same time, NATO allies have become increasingly frustrated with Berlin's refusal to provide combat forces. The demand is for Germany to share equal risks in the face

of British, Canadian or American troops taking casualties on a more frequent basis.

The third and probably most important factor to explain the benign neglect in German political debate on COIN is societal. German policy-makers from the beginning of NATO's Afghanistan campaign have framed Bundeswehr participation domestically as a 'non-combat' operation. As a result, regular German forces would be involved in nation-building tasks only and would not conduct offensive operations against insurgents alongside NATO allies. Fighting the Taliban and other enemy forces would be left predominantly to US forces within the framework of Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) or to those ISAF forces operating in the south and east of Afghanistan. This message by successive German governments as well

as most politicians in the German Parliament nurtured the public's view that Bundeswehr units were predominantly support elements for civilian development organisations rebuilding Afghan society. Portraying the Bundeswehr mission in such a way also paid tribute to Germany's 'culture of restraint' when it comes to the use of force. That is, a majority of Germans still favour an approach to the use of force which limits Bundeswehr deployments to defensive or supportive roles within the context of multinational operations. The overwhelming notion still prevailing in domestic German strategic debate is that fighting wars belongs to Germany's political past. Yet, in the face of the evolving 'small war' such understanding of military power restrains the German ability to adapt politically and militarily to NATO's COIN efforts in Afghanistan.

A different concept of conflict

One general lesson which can be derived from historical cases of Western forces taking on COIN operations is that such conflicts are predominantly lost on the home front. Western democratic societies are prone to losing the 'political war of attrition' such a campaign entails. Afghanistan is no different. Already, there are severe cracks within the Alliance, with political support becoming harder and harder to obtain. The German case, however, is particularly worrisome.

While in other NATO countries – particularly in the UK, US and Canada – a discussion on the modern nature of COIN operations has begun, a German equivalent is notably absent. Even in the highest political and military echelons the term 'counter-insurgency' and its related strategic and operational implications often are not known, let alone understood. With very few exceptions, the German translation of counter-insurgency – *Aufstandsbekämpfung* – is absent in domestic debate. This could be attributed to the fact that, unlike many of its allies, the Federal Republic never engaged in a 'small war'. Germany lacks historical memory of such conflicts which could inform current debate. Nevertheless, the remarkable absence of COIN as a concept in German domestic discussion is more likely due to

unwillingness in large parts of the political elite to accept allies' interpretation of the nature of conflict in Afghanistan. At its core, 'counter-insurgency' implies the fight against enemy resistance and ranks the military dimension equal to non-military instruments. It can also interchangeably be used with the concept of 'small wars'.

German political and legal caveats on the use of Bundeswehr units for combat purposes in Afghanistan will remain in place

Such a conceptualisation of conflict in Afghanistan, however, runs counter to the German elite's preferences which for the most part still deny the changing level of politically motivated violence even in the northern parts of Afghanistan. To accept the concepts of 'counter-insurgency' or 'small wars' would amount to a defeat of Berlin's self-perception as a somewhat revised 'civilian power'. This power perceives military force as only one instrument within a wider strategic framework that emphasises the non-military dimensions of security. Instead, the German government, in line with a majority in Parliament, has both domestically and abroad advocated for an approach which eschews the notion that the military dimension is one critical element of NATO strategy towards rebuilding Afghan society. The German consensus is on a 'comprehensive approach' to the Afghan problem, meaning in essence a strategy which integrates the political, economic and military aspects of the overall campaign. In addition, German politicians strongly emphasise that there is no military solution to the conflict.

All of this is now conventional wisdom within the Alliance. The problem with the German insistence on the 'comprehensive approach', however, is that while NATO allies base their planning on a 'comprehensive approach to counter-insurgency', German political

elites focus on a 'comprehensive approach to post-conflict reconstruction'. This differentiation is of critical importance since the emphasis on 'post-conflict' obstructs an efficient German contribution to NATO's COIN campaign in at least two ways. Firstly, given that it implies the absence of a high level of violence such as displayed by insurgent groups in Afghanistan, the term 'post-conflict' promotes a German understanding that civilian instruments will not be applied within the framework of ongoing military operations. Secondly, it also neglects the military instrument as the most essential tool in order to conduct targeted offensive actions against insurgents.

This deeply embedded, consensual thinking amongst German political elites potentially has serious consequences for NATO strategy. The political concepts of allies regarding the Afghan conflict simply do not match. Even worse, the neglect of COIN in German strategic debate currently leaves the country ill-equipped to contribute to all dimensions of an effective COIN campaign.

Fragile political consensus

Already the German army's engagement in Afghanistan rests on a fragile political consensus. Strategic decision-makers in Berlin not only confront an increasingly sceptical domestic audience with regard to the ISAF mission; a majority of voters remain deeply opposed to any Bundeswehr participation in combat operations. Further, the government's room for manoeuvre is limited by the need to secure parliamentary support for the Afghan operation. Precisely because lawmakers are aware of the prevailing culture of restraint in Germany, political elites refrain from endorsing concepts like COIN and the related notion of selective war-fighting. And with the upcoming federal election in 2009, both major political parties (the conservative Christian Democrats [CDU/CSU] and the Social Democrats [SPD]) will not be in a position to consider paradigmatic changes concerning the Afghan operation. In fact, challenged by the far-left (Die Linke), which vehemently opposes the Bundeswehr engagement in Afghanistan, the governing coalition will

be even more careful to avoid appearing in any way 'militaristic'.

This political situation ensures that German political and legal caveats on the use of Bundeswehr units for combat purposes in Afghanistan will remain in place. For political reasons, the Bundeswehr is still bound to resort to force only as a defensive measure, and not in the framework of selective offensive military operations against Afghan insurgents. Yet, any COIN operation that wants to have a credible chance of success will have to resort to the use of force against radical insurgents. In fact, the changing operational reality in northern Afghanistan has forced German commanders on the ground to conduct the very kind of offensive operations the political elite is trying to avoid acknowledging at almost any cost. Politically, therefore, Berlin finds itself in a mess over Afghanistan.

Limited Institutional Capability

This deficit is exacerbated by insufficient institutional strategy-making capability. The German government stresses the need to develop a comprehensive military approach to operations – *Vernetzte Sicherheit* – which reflects on the national level the NATO view. Yet in Germany, this consensus on a comprehensive approach does not extend beyond rhetoric and has not been translated into institutional reform efforts. Government still lacks a strategic decision-making centre to integrate policies and to formulate strategy. The so-called *Bundessicherheitsrat* (Federal Security Council), which in theory could play that role, is structurally dysfunctional. The principle of departmentalisation (*Ressortprinzip*) ensures that the boundaries of authority between the different ministries involved in the Afghan operations inhibit effective co-ordination between ministries. The result is constant institutional rivalry which has undermined operational effectiveness in Afghanistan.

In short, institutional deficits prevent the implementation of a coherent and joint government approach to Bundeswehr operations such as those in Afghanistan. Institutionally, Germany

lacks sufficient capability to execute a comprehensive approach to post-conflict reconstruction missions, let alone COIN operations. This weakness is also reflected in the Bundeswehr's institutional make-up. The Federal Ministry of Defence remains largely structured according to its Cold War design. Throughout the Cold War the armed forces did not have a General Staff or central institutions for command-and-control. Since the end of the Cold War, for successive German governments the challenge was to transform the Bundeswehr into an expeditionary force. However, for a long time German strategic debate concentrated on the issue of capabilities; the field of strategic and operational command structures for military operations was neglected. Only in December of 2007 Defence Minister Franz-Josef Jung decided to establish a command staff for expeditionary operations in an attempt to address this deficit of strategy-making capabilities.

The German land force (*Heer*) has finally started working on a new doctrine which is meant to address the issue of COIN operations. These efforts should be understood as a reaction to NATO's efforts in this field. However, it remains to be seen if any doctrinal changes will then be translated into practical steps. In any event, efforts to strengthen institutional strategy-making capabilities will have to be accompanied by a change in the cognitive German approach to conflict in Afghanistan: the recognition of COIN as operational reality by the political and military establishment. Recent developments in Afghanistan suggest much work needs to be done.

The 'hollow' Success of Harekate Yolo II

That Germany is a long way from developing a political approach to COIN operations became apparent during Operation *Harekate Yolo II* in northern Afghanistan. This operation, which commenced in late October 2007, comprised approximately 900 Afghan security forces plus 500 ISAF troops. Norway, Germany and the United States provided the bulk of those forces. While the Norwegian contingent consisted of

highly mobile infantry units, the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) of ISAF in the north, the German contribution focused on combat support elements, particularly signals, logistics and medical support. The US provided so-called 'Embedded Training Teams', which are military assistance units that train Afghan security forces.

Allies should develop 'strategic patience' vis-à-vis Germany's approach to the Afghanistan campaign

The operation was commanded by the German-led ISAF Regional Command North (RC North). It predominantly was a response to the deteriorating security situation in north-western Afghanistan. In the provinces of Faryab and Badghis, criminal groups with close links to the Taliban had attacked local police stations repeatedly, resulting in heavy casualties among Afghan security forces. For months the local population was exposed to terror perpetrated by those groups. The Afghan government was unable to provide for security. Eventually, insurgents were able to gain partial control over some sections of the so called 'Ring Road' that cuts through the area, which is a lifeline for the Afghan business sector. The operation quickly succeeded in decisively weakening insurgent groups in the two provinces. This allowed the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to initiate civilian reconstruction programmes in those areas. *Harekate Yolo II* signalled a significant change in ISAF's operational conduct in northern Afghanistan. Until this operation, ISAF had concentrated on patrols aimed at gathering intelligence and contributing to the security of its bases in the north. By contrast, the goal of *Harekate Yolo II* was to establish military control over the region so that civilian reconstruction programmes could be initiated and stability enhanced.

But underneath the operational success of *Harekate Yolo II*, the picture

looks more clouded in view of German handling of the operation. The first deficit concerned strategic communication. There was a remarkable silence on the part of the government, including the Ministry of Defence, about the aims and achievements of the operation. Both politicians and high-ranking defence officials were instead quick to declare that *Harekate Yolo II* did not reflect a 'new quality' in the Bundeswehr's engagement in Afghanistan, when in fact it did. ISAF had initiated *Harekate Yolo II* as an integrated COIN operation based on offensive military action followed by extensive economic build-up in areas cleared of insurgents to achieve political success. However, political support for sustained economic reconstruction efforts and a quick infusion of development aid in the region was lacking. The integrated application of civilian and military instruments as a core element of COIN remains alien to German elites' concept of modern conflict.

Effective co-ordination of military and civilian efforts in the context of *Harekate Yolo II* did not occur, a result of the absence of effective co-ordination mechanisms between military and civilian actors and unwillingness on the part of the defence bureaucracy to recognise the changing nature of conflict. In fact, the military and political leadership seem to be reinforcing one another in their insistence that the

primary military task for the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan still is post-conflict management – at a time when operationally the German armed forces are experiencing combat. As a consequence, crucial lessons learned from *Harekate Yolo II* for future German COIN operations are likely to be buried politically.

A Two-Tier Alliance?

Allies should develop 'strategic patience' vis-à-vis Germany's approach to the Afghanistan campaign. To call on Germany to provide regular combat troops in southern Afghanistan in order

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to share equal risks looks reasonable from their perspective given their own struggle to maintain domestic support, and given the principle of alliance solidarity too. On the other hand, it fails to accept that in the current situation Berlin could simply not absorb what

would amount to a reversal in thinking about the role of German armed force in the conflict. Therefore, promoting and supporting incremental steps towards a German approach to COIN would make more sense. One of those steps is the acknowledgement that the Bundeswehr will provide a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) to replace the Norwegian contingent in the North. Significantly, German public discourse is well aware that the QRF is supposed to be a combat force. However, it is doubtful that the German political elite will fully share allies' perspectives on Afghanistan any time soon.

In the end, the German reluctance to accept the Anglo-Saxon concept of COIN in Afghanistan reflects a very serious development within NATO. The organisation already shows signs of a 'two-tier' alliance: those countries accepting the logic and implications of waging a COIN campaign and those states that do not. The consensus rule within NATO will only exacerbate this process and will make the formulation and execution of a common Afghanistan strategy a very difficult undertaking. Allies should recognise the looming danger of yet another COIN operation being lost on the home front. This time, however, it will not remain a single country's problem but will affect the Western security community as a whole. ■