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Germany's Involvement in Afghanistan

by Natalia Kohtamäki

Germany has been taking part in the stabilization operation in Afghanistan since the end of 2001. The Bundestag's last vote in October 2008 on the extension of the mandate for the Bundeswehr's participation in the ISAF mission conducted under NATO auspices has stirred up the debate on the rationale of Germany's actions in that country. The German government has been treating American calls to strengthen the ISAF force with reserve, perceiving the parliament's decision to boost the German contingent to 4,500 soldiers as adequate. This position will most likely be maintained until the next parliamentary elections scheduled for the autumn of 2009.

Background. Germany's involvement in Afghanistan should be seen in the context of the evolution in German foreign policy following the country's reunification. Controversial in particular was the question of sanctioning the use of military measures, with Germany gradually surrendering the so-called 'culture of restraint' it had been practicing in favor of launching steps proportional to its potential. The breakthrough came with the Federal Constitutional Court's 1994 ruling that the Bundeswehr's participation in 'out of area' NATO operations did not infringe upon the German constitution. This ruling made possible Germany's full involvement in NATO and EU military missions, although many politicians and a significant segment of the public remain cautious on the question of the Bundeswehr's participation in armed operations.

Germany has been involved in stabilization operations in Afghanistan from the very beginning. When the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was set up in December 2001, Germany supported the initiative, dispatching Bundeswehr troops to Kabul. In 2003 (from February till August), Germany, along with the Netherlands, commanded the ISAF, and when the operation was taken over by the Atlantic Alliance in August 2003, Germany became one of the countries with the largest contingent in Afghanistan (3,400 in January 2009), although other NATO allies are calling into question the effectiveness of the Bundeswehr's operations there. Given the limitations placed by Germany on its troops (caveats), the participation of German soldiers in combat operations is subject to many restrictions. They are stationed in Afghanistan's relatively quiet Northern provinces and command IFAS troops there. Despite the appeals of its NATO allies, Germany has consistently been refusing to extend the Bundeswehr's operations onto Afghanistan's most unstable Eastern and Southern provinces. The German contingent is also taking part in actions of a civilian nature in two Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) led by the Germans in Kunduz and Feyzabad.

The operation in Afghanistan is also significant in terms of Germany's economic interests. The German government is implementing a large-scale investment plan, taking part in major projects, including those aimed at modernizing communal systems supplying potable water and electricity. Germany is investing in the pharmaceutical industry, construction and food processing in Afghanistan, with big German firms such as Siemens, Daimler, Hochtief AG or AAB active there.

Decisions to dispatch military units for combat operations encounter firm opposition from the German public, provoking repeated debates in the Bundestag about the rationale of Germany's involvement in Afghanistan, as was the case when the special KSK (*Kommando Spezialkräfte*) unit, the QRF (Quick Reaction Force) or the Tornado jets used for reconnaissance flights were dispatched

to Afghanistan. In the last vote on the extension of the mandate (16 October 2008), parliamentarians agreed to increase the German contingent to 4,500 soldiers. The decision was meant to improve the force's reaction capabilities needed in the face of new challenges, such as the Afghan presidential elections scheduled for 2009. In addition to the SPD and the CDU, the decision to maintain a German presence in Afghanistan was also supported by the FDP. The Green and the Left parties in turn sharply criticized Germany's actions in Afghanistan, stressing in particular the ineffectiveness of the steps taken. Indicated in the debate was the need to hammer out a strategy for leaving Afghanistan. Given the German public's continued opposition to the country's role in the Afghan operation, ruling coalition politicians have been striving to downplay the issue of the Bundeswehr's participation in the ISAF mission in the upcoming electoral campaign. Hence the decision to hold the next vote on the mandate in fourteen months, i.e. after the elections to the Bundestag.

In its strategy for Afghanistan updated in September 2008, the German government stresses the need to link the military element of the Afghan mission with civilian reconstruction of the country. This explains the large sums allocated for developmental aid, education, cultural projects and infrastructure. In 2008, German aid to Afghanistan is to exceed EUR170 million. Since 2002 (since 2007 within the framework of the UE EUPOL mission) Germany has also been supporting the rebuilding of Afghanistan's police force, with around EUR117 million allocated to the project in 2002–2008.

Controversy Surrounding American Declarations. The declarations of the American President-elect Barack Obama indicate that he sees the war in w Afghanistan as a priority, intending to focus American military efforts there. In the face of those declarations, the Germans have begun to wonder to what extent the new US administration intends to link its intensified Afghan operations with support on the part of its allies. During the election campaign Obama declared that he would seek to persuade America's NATO partners to lift the limitations on the use of their forces in Afghanistan. The German government reacted skeptically to those pronouncements, emphasizing that the enlargement of the German contingent under the October mandate had come in response to months of pressures from other NATO members for a reinforcement of Germany's involvement in the ISAF operation. Representatives of the German ruling coalition see any changes in this regard as unfeasible, reiterating also that it would not be rational to transfer German soldiers to Southern Afghanistan.

Public Mood. The mood of the German public exerts an influence on the government's position, with 74% of respondents critical of the Bundestag's October decision to extend the mandate, and 80% declaring that Germany should not react favorably to Obama's calls to strengthen the German contingent in Afghanistan. This indicates that the German public's support for Obama (67% of respondents wanted him to win the US presidential election) has little effect on its anti-military stance. Opponents of the Bundeswehr's further involvement in the ISAF operation point to the growing human cost (30 German soldiers have been killed so far) as well as financial (in connection with the extension of the mandate, expenditures are expected to rise from the projected EUR487 million to EUR688 million during the 14 months of the mandate's validity). They also note that the long-promised stabilization is hard to see, as is the gradual taking over by the Afghans of domestic security tasks performed by international forces.

Conclusions. The consent to strengthen the Bundeswehr contingent in Afghanistan given by parliament in October 2008 can be seen as the German government's concession to its NATO allies, which had for a long time been calling for more active German participation in the ISAF mission. Further steps in this direction, however, are unlikely in the nearest future. In spite of high hopes for a new opening in trans-Atlantic relations harbored by German politicians in connection with the American president-elect, changes in Germany's engagement in Afghanistan do not seem likely. This is the position of politicians representing both the governing coalition and the opposition. Given the negative approach of the German public to the problem and the deepening economic crisis, the German ruling parties should not be expected to change the guidelines of their Afghan policy in the nearest future. Any possible alterations to the mandate granted could generate violent public criticism, which is not without significance in the coming election year.