

Germany's Presence in Afghanistan and the Failure of Communication

by Maxim Worcester

The German Army and civilian helpers have now been in Afghanistan since the end of 2001. Towards the end of 2003 German troops deployed to Northern Afghanistan, where they took over the US Army camp in Kunduz, at the same time Germany took on the responsibility for the entire northern region of the country and established bases in Kunduz, Feyzabad, Taloqan and Mazar-e-Sharif.

Germany rapidly established a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kunduz which was run by both the Military and representatives of the German Foreign Office. The concept from the outset was that the German Army, together with the Afghan Security Forces, would ensure the security of the region. The German Ministry of Overseas Development would then be able to provide aid and reconstruction for the region. The German Ministry of the Interior was responsible for training the Afghan Police and the Foreign Office was to coordinate all the efforts.

A sound enough plan when viewed from a desk in Berlin which reflected the official view that the Germans were in Afghanistan not to wage war on Islamic extremists, but there to improve the lot of the civilian population.

At first it appeared that the German softly-softly approach was working. Whilst the US, British, Canadian, Dutch and other troops in the South were coming increasingly under attack, the North was relatively quiet and the few German troops were able to move around the country in small and lightly armed groups. IED attacks were the exception rather than the rule. As the troops in the south of the country came under increasing attack, so the pressure on Germany to share the burden became greater, there was however not the will in Berlin to agree to the deployment of German troops to the battlefields of the South, other than to provide logistic and communications support.

On no account did the German government want to suggest to its citizens that the German armed forces were embroiled in what to all other involved nations was a war. The W word was to be avoided at all cost and it was not until late 2009 that the new German Defence Minister referred, in an oblique manner, to the W word by speaking of "a near war situation". This attitude was of no great help to the German troops deployed who, for some time now, and not just since the attacks on German troops increased dramatically in the summer of 2009, have called for more effective weapons both to defend themselves and to take the fight to the enemy.

The political agenda in Berlin did at no time want to create the impression that there was a war, let alone take the fight to the enemy or even refer to the insurgents as enemy. Calls for an increase in armoured vehicles such as the Marder went unheard. For some time now, German troops have urged the powers in Berlin to deploy the highly effective self-propelled Artillery System Panzerhaubitze 2000 to the region. This request was finally granted in April 2010 by Defence Minister zu Guttenberg. This weapon now gives the German troops the reach they need to combat their enemy without having to engage directly. The Dutch troops in the South have used this very weapon with success. The debate in Berlin rages on with regard to the deployment of Leopard 2 tanks to the region – such requests are rejected as the bridges would not be able to carry the weight of such tanks. A further argument is that a Main Battle Tank is too wide for the narrow streets of the Afghan villages or that the topography is simply “wrong” and that tanks would throw their tracks due to the rough terrain.

What is really behind the refusal to send tanks to support the German troops is, once again, the fear of creating the impression in Germany that German troops are at war. The fact that Dutch, Danish and Canadian forces in the South effectively used the very same German tank is glossed over.

The war has now finally reached the North and the German Army is unable to respond to the attacks in the way the troops in the South are able. This has nothing to do with the professionalism and training, let alone the dedication of the German troops. They simply don't have the equipment or the numbers to do much more than to defend their positions. Reconstruction work has come to a grinding halt as the situation is too dangerous for the PRTs to venture out. As a result, the villages are left to themselves and are becoming increasingly the victims of insurgents, corrupt politicians, police and war lords. The German troops are not in a position to render aid as it is not in their responsibility to do so, even if they could under the current situation. The rules are quite clear here – the relevant Ministries are responsible for such work, the troops are there to provide the necessary security. The credibility of German troops and civilian helpers has suffered greatly as a result of them not being able to deliver on the promises the politicians in Berlin have made to the Afghan people.

The recent casualties among German troops in early 2010 and the attack on two tankers in September 2009 have provoked renewed interest among the German population for what is really going on in Afghanistan. It tends to be forgotten, that NATO deployed to Afghanistan in 2001 as a direct result of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The clearly stated intent of the intervention, initially by US troops and subsequently by NATO and other allies, was to rid the country of those who masterminded the attacks and to ensure that such attacks would not occur again.

It was also a sign of solidarity with the United States following the 9/11 attacks. The German population, wary of being involved in a war on terror, was fed the line that reconstruction and nation building was at the heart of German involvement in Afghanistan. At no time was there a debate on securing Afghanistan and what might be involved in such an undertaking. Thus in the eyes of the German population the deployment of German troops to Afghanistan was a peace mission, a mission to bring to Afghanistan the values of the West. The 8 largely unproductive years of German involvement in Afghanistan have thus been down to the political constraints Berlin has put on a war that dared not speak its name until very recently.

The security situation is about to get worse rather than better in the coming months as the spring offensive gathers steam. Given lack of numbers and suitable equipment, German troops are perceived to be a soft touch by the insurgents. Furthermore, the insurgents realise that public support in Germany is at an all time low. They clearly see the possibility of

inflicting a propaganda defeat on ISAF forces by increasing German casualty rates and kicking off a debate in Germany which could lead to the early withdrawal of German troops.

The decision to deploy additional US troops to the North is a move to fill an expected vacuum in the region in advance of such a withdrawal and to ensure that the insurgents do not gain the upper hand as German offensive actions are reduced to a minimum due to lack of numbers and suitable equipment. It echoes the current debate in the South where overstretched British troops are expected to vacate parts of Helmand Province, thus allowing the US Marine Corps to operate on their own under the new strategy laid down by General McChrystal. The British troops are expected to concentrate their attention on Kandahar, where they will face the insurgents in a bitter urban conflict. Whilst this move has not been confirmed at the time of writing it does highlight the shift in strategy to concentrate efforts on clearing insurgents from populated areas, holding the same and gradually winning the hearts and minds of the population by providing security and improved conditions for the local population.

It has to be expected that attacks on German troops who venture out of their camps under the new strategy, will increase in severity and that the camps themselves will come under attack. It was this very threat of an attack on a German camp using petrol tankers in September 2009 which led to the decision to call on the US Air force to bomb the trucks. That attack was widely reported in Germany and continues to be an issue in German politics.

Compared to the casualties suffered by ISAF troops in the South, German casualties have been light. British casualties stood at 358 at the end of March 2010, German casualties now stand at 43. Just to put this into perspective - one single British regiment, 3 Rifles Battle Group, suffered 30 deaths in its 6 month deployment which ended in March 2010. These casualties were the result of aggressive patrolling in conjunction with the Afghan Army, this is just the strategy expected of the German troops in the North.

At the heart of this new strategy is the establishment of security in large civilian areas and the training and build-up of the Afghan military presence in such regions. This strategy is certainly smarter than the previous one of sporadic engagements with the insurgents, followed by a retreat to isolated bases. There is no certainty that the McChrystal plan will work. The strategy is reminiscent of the Briggs Plan which led to the defeat of the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) in the Malayan Emergency between 1948 and 1960. Here too, the Commonwealth forces secured the villages and drove the insurgents into the jungle, where they were harassed by small and highly mobile patrols. Much use was made of intelligence to identify insurgents by paying informers. Insurgents were urged by the use of propaganda to lay down their arms and reject the MRLA. This "hearts and minds" strategy worked in Malaya – those who worked with the Commonwealth Forces were rewarded, those opposed suffered the consequences. It remains to be seen if it will work in Afghanistan.

The NATO commander is aiming for something that has never been achieved before in Afghanistan. Throughout Afghan history, insurgents have always come out on top over foreign forces, the British know this only too well, as do the Russians. The whole strategy is also reliant on the Afghan government and the integrity of Afghan forces; both have revealed themselves as corrupt and incompetent. This, by the way, was not the case during the Malay Emergency. What is clear, is that the proposed new strategy will result in a higher casualty rate both amongst the troops and civilian population before it can be successful. Such casualty levels would, however, be unacceptable to a German public who were led to believe that their soldiers were largely in Afghanistan to drill wells and ensure that girls could have access to education.

The German population has also not been sufficiently told who the troops are fighting, the Taliban or Al Qaida. What the West is up against are insurgents, radical Islamists, who are a threat to the stability of the region. Some politicians in Germany are keen to point out that Al Qaida has been largely driven out of Afghanistan and that thus the task has been completed. What is not talked about is the danger Islamic radicalism poses to the stability of the region in particular and the West in general. The potential threats of insurgents armed with weapons of mass destruction are seen as unrealistic and as an excuse to continue the war. In any case, German soldiers are not concerned who is shooting at them, the debate only serves to convince them that their government and the German population lack understanding of the true situation in Afghanistan.

As the debate in Germany picks up momentum, the German government is coming under increasing pressure to take decisions. It can hardly afford to withdraw its troops much before late 2011; such a move would have a profound effect on NATO and on US-German relations. It can prepare for withdrawal and as a part of this preparation must begin to explain to the people why it is that German troops are in Afghanistan. At the same time the government should give the German troops the equipment it needs to defend themselves from insurgent attacks. The troops need heavy weapons such as artillery and other stand-off weapons in order to engage the enemy outside the range of insurgent weapons. In an ideal world German troops would have helicopter lift capability which would allow them to deploy by air rather than by road, thus avoiding casualties through road-side IEDs. This lift capability could be provided by the US Air Force, it does, however, require a political decision to make use of such capabilities. In short, the German government needs to take a clear decision to allow German troops to take the fight to the enemy and not wait to be attacked before responding. This decision needs to be explained and justified to the electorate. If it decides not to change the Rules of Engagement by adopting the McChrystal strategy, this too needs to be explained and justified.

Germany's involvement in Afghanistan has revealed how Germany has neglected to set out what role her armed forces play following the end of the Cold War. Its then role was clear – to protect the country and NATO from a Soviet attack. As a consequence the German armed forces are “defence heavy”. Heavy tanks, big troop numbers, conscription and fast jets were the name of the game. Today's threats call for suitably trained troops which can be rapidly deployed and which can adapt equally rapidly to their immediate environment. They also need to be able to work together with a wide range of allies, following the same agreed strategy. The Afghan war has revealed that German forces lack this ability. Rapid deployment is difficult given the absence of heavy lift aircraft in the German inventory; currently the German forces also lack modern transport and attack helicopters. The history of the transport helicopter NH 90 and attack helicopter Tiger is a tale of procurement inefficiency. Germany is also wary of using fast jets and attack helicopters in a forward support role as this use of air power is deemed to aggressive. By definition, Counter Insurgency (COIN) is seen much in the same light and the highly regarded German Special Forces, KSK, and other specialised units, are not permitted to put their talents to good use.

Investments in the new technologies of command and control, communications and surveillance are bogged down by ministry lethargy. Modern armed forces must be backed up by excellent intelligence. All military commanders want good tactical intelligence to give them the greatest advantage; such intelligence not only improves the effectiveness of the response but also reduces casualties and collateral damage.

Whatever the outcome in Afghanistan, the German armed forces are about to undergo a process of transformation from a force designed to defend the borders of the country to one

which will be required to deploy out of area. Today, Germany is being defended in the Hindu Kush, as a former German Defence Minister famously proclaimed and Chancellor Merkel only recently repeated in a speech to the German Parliament. Tomorrow Germany might have to defend itself and its allies in one of many regions of the world. This process of transformation is also driven by budgetary constraints – big ticket items and a top heavy organisation will have to be sacrificed on the altar of efficiency. There will be increasing pressure on all NATO members to share resources and thus on interoperability.

The German government above all needs to convince the electorate of the need for the armed forces, why they are in Afghanistan and why in future German forces will increasingly be asked to participate in out of area operations.

In many ways the debate comes at the right time. Financial constraints will concentrate the mind and make decisions necessary. Germany has a new Defence Minister who speaks his mind and has a deep understanding of global security matters. Elections are on the horizon and politicians will have to get off the fence and take policy decisions which reflect changing levels of global security and the role the German government expects her armed forces to play in the future.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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