

Still on the way to Afghanistan? Germany and its forces in the Hindu Kush

A SIPRI Project Paper

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I. Introduction

Deployment of military forces to foreign countries by the Federal Republic of Germany has become more common in recent years. The 2006 decision to provide troops for the UN mission in Lebanon was the most recent example (and the most unlikely precedent) of a German foreign and security policy that few would have predicted only a decade ago. While engagements in the Middle East and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have sometimes dominated political discourse, Germany's largest mission is stationed in Afghanistan. Germany has been a major contributor to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which was established in 2001 to provide and maintain security in support of the Afghan Government's reconstruction efforts.¹ Recently, German involvement in Afghanistan has been the focus of much public debate, mainly because of increased violence in the country and repeated NATO calls for German support for its counter-insurgency campaign.

On 7 February 2007, the German Government decided to expand its military presence in Afghanistan at the specific request of NATO. Six Tornado aircraft were stationed in Mazar i Sharif to assist the alliance in surveillance operations, chiefly covering the troubled southern provinces.² The decision came after a lengthy debate, which clearly exposed the growing discomfort of many Germans with their country's military role in Afghanistan. Currently Germany has approximately 3000 military personnel in Afghanistan. These are divided between Kabul and the northern provinces, where there is a larger base in Mazar i Sharif as well as two provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), in Kunduz and Feyzabad. German governments have for some time rested the justification for the military commitment on the need for peaceful and democratic reconstruction of a war-torn country. However, recent events in the Hindu Kush in the north of Afghanistan have begun to undermine this rationale. The insurgency in the south, where NATO assumed command in 2006, has emerged as a serious threat to the international forces as well as the Afghan Government.

¹ ISAF is mandated under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter (Peace Enforcing) by UN Security Council Resolutions 1386, 1413, 1444, 1510, 1563, 1623, 1659 and 1707. It exists in accordance with the Bonn Agreement of 6 Dec. 2001. ISAF's stated primary role is to support the Afghan Government in providing and maintaining a secure environment in order to facilitate the rebuilding of Afghanistan. More than 35 000 troops make up ISAF, with contributions from 37 countries. ISAF's area of operations covers the whole of Afghanistan. See <<http://www.nato.int/ISAF/>>.

² Connolly, K., 'Germany beefs up Afghan presence with six fighter jets', *The Guardian*, 8 Feb. 2007.

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Because Afghanistan remains volatile terrain, and because the ISAF mission has changed significantly over time, a majority of Germans are anxious about their country's future engagement. Along with other NATO members, Germany is concerned about getting more deeply involved in Afghanistan's troubles, especially while a successful end to the engagement is getting further out of sight. The death of three soldiers in May 2007 also raised serious doubts about the mission's purpose and success.³ Although the German Government was quick to rebuff calls for a withdrawal,⁴ it is not clear whether Germany will continue in the middle term to adopt greater military responsibility or seek an exit route. Because ISAF's task has turned into an awkward and sensitive test for NATO, much of its success will depend on the position of its leading member states.

This paper examines the guiding principles behind the German military contribution to ISAF, both in the context of German foreign policy in general and the international state-building project in Afghanistan. In the light of this discussion some conclusions are drawn about the future direction of Germany's Afghanistan policy.

II. Germany's route to Afghanistan

Redefining Germany as a military actor

It was not until the 1990s that the Federal Republic of Germany began to define itself as a military actor beyond national defence. Since the country's highest court decided in 1994 that troop deployments in foreign countries resulting from its membership in multilateral organizations were constitutional, the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) have participated in UN, NATO and European Union (EU) missions, notably in the Balkans and in Africa. In the meantime the defensive military doctrine of post-World War II Germany made way for an understanding of the army as a modern interventional force.⁵ However, the policy shift was accompanied by strong domestic criticism and up until today the new doctrine remains controversial among the public.

German sensitivity in dealing with military issues results from historic experiences. The country's Nazi and imperialist past has shaped its post-World War II security policy. Deployment of German forces abroad thus tends to be considered in the light of two main lessons resulting from the horrors of the Holocaust and two world wars. The first lesson is that Germany should restrict its military actions to defence. Most Germans therefore consider enforcing national interests with military means to be illegitimate. According to the second lesson, Germany emphasizes its special responsibility to help prevent human suffering resulting from warfare and genocide. It was this second point that, initially, was the only viable justification for military

³ By 2007 German casualties exceeded 20, a figure significantly lower than for countries stationed in the south, e.g. Canada, whose force is of a similar size to Germany's but which had lost more than 70 soldiers by 2007. 'German politicians want troops out of Afghanistan', Spiegel Online, 28 June 2007, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,491222,00.html>>; and 'In the line of duty: Canada's casualties', Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 25 Sep. 2007, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/casualties/total.html>>.

⁴ Dempsey, J., 'German party calls for Afghan pullout', *International Herald Tribune*, 20 May 2007.

⁵ Haftendorn, H. and Kolkman, M., 'German policy in a strategic triangle: Berlin, Paris, Washington . . . and what about London?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Oct. 2004), p. 471–72; and Nicola, S., 'Germany's "new" armed forces', *International Relations and Security Network, Security Watch*, 26 Jan. 2006, <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=14558>>.

engagements and was first applied to crisis interventions such as the UN and NATO missions in Somalia and Kosovo. Since then Germany has sought to focus its growing number of military engagements on humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping.⁶ As a result the German Armed Forces' deployments came to be seen in Germany as armed development aid rather than genuine military operations.⁷

The ISAF mission in the German political debate

The humanitarian aspect of Germany's new military doctrine was more easily applied to the first robust involvement in Kosovo than to the mission in Afghanistan. In the case of Kosovo, the coalition government (led by Gerhard Schröder) of the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) and the Green Party argued that it was a moral responsibility to help end gross violations of human rights within Europe.⁸ However, after the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the missing (or at least the less-articulated) humanitarian aspect of the intervention in Afghanistan forced the government to find a different justification. A controversial and frequently cited statement in 2003 by the Minister of Defence, Peter Struck, reflected the need to find alternative rationale. Struck argued that Germany's security was being defended in the Hindu Kush. Despite condemnation of his remarks, in subsequent statements Struck went further and replaced the phrase 'Germany's security' with 'Germany's democracy', or simply 'Germany'.⁹ Notwithstanding considerable resistance within the ruling parties, the fact that it was the traditional opponents of military action who initiated the main missions helped to damp down criticism in the parliament.¹⁰

In the later history of Germany changes of government have more often than not meant continuity in foreign policy. This was the case when Angela Merkel came to power in 2005 as Chancellor of a 'grand coalition' of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the SPD. However, this did not mean that different understandings of Germany's security policy had vanished. In 2006 the first White Paper authored by the German Ministry of Defence since 1994 stressed national interest as justification for military action, and for the first time in the post-World War II period mentioned the guarantee of free trade and energy security as a task for German forces.¹¹ This break with the traditional altruistic conception of military involvement was criticized by the

⁶ Bald, D., 'Der Paradigmenwechsel von der Verteidigung zur Intervention' [The paradigm shift from defence to intervention], *Wissenschaft & Frieden*, vol. 24, no. 3, dossier 53 (2006), p. 7; and Hacke, C., *Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: von Konrad Adenauer bis Gerhard Schröder* [The foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany: from Konrad Adenauer to Gerhard Schröder] (Ullstein: Berlin, 2003), pp. 391–92.

⁷ 'Germany's armed forces: abroad, by inches', *The Economist*, 29 July 2006, p. 28.

⁸ Hacke (note 6), p. 469; and Staack, M., 'Außenpolitik und Bundeswehrreform' [Foreign policy and reform of the Bundeswehr], *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 21, no. 23 (June 2005), p. 33.

⁹ Struck, P., 'Landesverteidigung findet auch am Hindukusch statt' [National defence is also taking place in the Hindu Kush], German Parliament, stenographic record, 16th legislative period, 2nd session, Berlin, 8 Nov. 2005, p. 43.

¹⁰ Kister, K., 'The routine of danger: Bundeswehr foreign deployments have become a constant of German security policy', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 Oct. 2004, Translation from German, World News Connection, National Technical Information Service (NTIS), US Department of Commerce.

¹¹ German Ministry of Defence, *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Ministry of Defence: Berlin, Oct. 2006), <<http://www.bmvg.de>>, pp. 9, 15–21.

opposition and the press.¹² Other observers took a different stance: *The Economist* claimed that the White Paper had ‘missed the point’, because it failed to define either the conditions under which the German Armed Forces would be deployed or in what kind of missions.¹³ Despite some short-lived controversy the White Paper seems to have passed up an opportunity to start off a broader discussion about the future of Germany’s foreign military missions. A debate about Germany’s strategic interests in general, and specifically about national interest and military involvement in Afghanistan, has yet to take place in Germany.¹⁴

Instead, by the time the White Paper was launched, the actions of the Afghanistan mission had made headlines of a wholly unwelcome kind. The German newspaper *Bild* published macabre pictures that showed German ISAF troops posing with human skulls.¹⁵ The pictures stirred doubts about the adequacy of the soldier’s preparation for the mission and its strains.¹⁶ On top of this came a parliamentary investigation sparked by a German ex-Guantanamo prisoner who was arrested in Pakistan and claimed to have been tortured by German forces.¹⁷ It resulted in heavy criticism of the Minister of the Chancellery, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for his handling of the case, and further discredited German anti-terrorism policy.

‘Kunduz for Baghdad’: Afghanistan on Germany’s foreign policy agenda

Despite domestic controversy, the military engagement in Afghanistan functions as a cornerstone for Germany’s relations with NATO and other international partners. With the assumption of greater responsibility in Afghanistan, the Schröder Administration sought to strengthen Germany’s role as an influential player and a middle power committed to peace. Schröder’s proclamation of a foreign policy more independent from traditional transatlantic ties culminated in the refusal to support the 2003 US-led war in Iraq. The blunt and unilateral rejection of involvement in the war caused the worst antagonism in German–US affairs in post-World War II history.¹⁸ In the light of damaged relations Germany sought to temper moods in Washington by increasing its commitment in Afghanistan, especially in the north. One commentator summed up this quid pro quo with the phrase ‘Kunduz for Baghdad’.¹⁹ In 2003 the German deployment became one of the mainsprings of ISAF’s expansion beyond Kabul and Germany took

¹² Nachtwei, W. and Bonde, A., ‘Stellungnahme zum Weißbuch zur sicherheitspolitik Deutschlands und zur zukunft der Bundeswehr [Statement on the White Paper on security policy and on the future of the Bundeswehr], Berlin, 15 June 2006, <<http://www.nachtwei.de/index.php/articles/353>>.

¹³ ‘New model army?’, *The Economist*, 26 Oct 2006.

¹⁴ Danner, F. X., ‘Clueless in Hindu Kush’, *Internationale Politik*, vol. 7, no. 1 (spring 2006), p. 91; and ‘Germany’s armed forces’ (note 7), p. 28.

¹⁵ ‘Germany acts over skull row’, BBC News, 27 Oct 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6090356.stm>>.

¹⁶ Sussebach, H., ‘Schulz zieht in den krieg’ [Schulz goes to war], *Die Zeit*, 2 Nov. 2006.

¹⁷ ‘Case involving former terrorist suspect reopened in Germany’, Deutsche Welle, 7 Aug. 2007, <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2728050,00.html>>; and Stark, H., ‘German soldiers admit they guarded US prison in Afghanistan’, Spiegel Online, 22 Jan. 2007, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,461369,00.html>>.

¹⁸ Haftendorn and Kolkmann (note 5), pp. 472–75; and Schöneberger, T., ‘Deutsche Afghanistanpolitik seit 2001’ [Germany’s Afghanistan policy since 2001], Exam paper, Köln University Research Institute for Political Science, Nov. 2006, <<http://www.politik.uni-koeln.de/jaeger/archiv/exarbeiten.html>>, p. 12.

¹⁹ Hett, J., ‘Provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan: Das Amerikanische, Britische und Deutsche modell’ [Provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan: the American, British and German models], Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze, Apr. 2005, p. 15.

on joint leadership of the mission together with the Netherlands.²⁰ Afghanistan soon assumed the status of a model case for the German approach to counterterrorism. As shown below, successive German governments have put emphasis on differentiating this approach from a purely military anti-terrorism policy.

III. Between caution and commitment: the conception of the German mission

International forces in Afghanistan: state building on the cheap?

NATO has given the mission in Afghanistan a high profile as part of the redefinition of the alliance's role in a new security environment after the end of the cold war. However, the alliance's commitment and the recent assumption of greater responsibility have often obscured the different priorities of member states. From the outset the engagement in Afghanistan and the reconstruction of the country was planned with limited resources, and the international focus soon shifted elsewhere. Former Afghan finance minister Ashraf Ghani has criticized the international community's efforts as 'state-building on the cheap'.²¹ His remarks could not have surprised many analysts because the international commitment to Afghanistan is clearly much smaller than in other interventions, such as in the Balkans or in Timor-Leste.²² The strategy of reconstruction with a 'light footprint' is intended to give Afghan institutions as much responsibility as possible in order to generate local support for the process. Yet, at the same time, it ensures a limited deployment of forces for those countries sending troops.²³

There can hardly be any doubt that the ISAF strategy suited the interests of many contributing countries. Today, the willingness to further engage in Afghanistan appears to be just as limited. For example, the US Administration has long been under heavy domestic pressure to reduce the number of troops abroad.²⁴ European countries regularly reaffirm their political, military and financial pledges to the mission, but the reality is often in stark contrast to the rhetoric. NATO members hesitate to become too entangled, and are often unwilling to send troops with strong combat capabilities or even sufficient equipment.²⁵ Moreover, following a decision on the dispatch of troops, there is often a long way to go until forces become operational in Afghanistan, and the governments of several contributing countries have faced mounting problems in maintaining their level of military support in the face of domestic opposition.²⁶ This reluctance to engage is further demonstrated by the fact that governments have made the involvement of their

²⁰ Saikal, A., 'Afghanistan's transition: ISAF's stabilisation role?', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (Apr. 2006), pp. 529; and Hett (note 19).

²¹ Ghani, A., Quoted in Assembly of Western European Union, 'Recommendation 780 on European forces in Afghanistan: learning lessons', Document 1930, 20 June 2006, <http://www.assembly-weu.org/en/documents/sessions_ordinaires/rpt/rpt.php?annee=2006>, p. 28.

²² International Crisis Group (ICG), *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes*, Asia Report no. 123 (ICG: Brussels, 2 Nov. 2006), <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4485&l=1>>, pp. 2–3.

²³ UN Security Council, 'Briefing by Special Representative for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi', Press Release SC 7295, 6 Feb. 2006.

²⁴ 'A geographical expression in search of a state', *The Economist*, 8 July 2006, pp. 24–25.

²⁵ Ghani (note 21), p. 15; and Saikal (note 20), p. 528.

²⁶ 'Afghanistan is "most complex" mission in history of alliance', *Atlantic News*, no. 3793 (13 July 2006), pp. 1–2; Barber, T., 'Prodi faces crucial test of unity', *Financial Times*, 13 July 2006; and 'Prodi backed in key Afghan vote', BBC News, 27 Mar. 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6501399.stm>>.

forces subject to various caveats. These provisos, such as the German ban on flying after dark, have hobbled ISAF's effectiveness and triggered criticism from both inside and outside the alliance.²⁷

ISAF's changing role in Afghanistan

It is no coincidence that many NATO countries are reconsidering their role at a time when conditions for ISAF in Afghanistan are subject to change. The strong resurgence of the Taliban and their allied militias in southern Afghanistan is a clear reminder of the remaining and re-emerging problems.²⁸ Over the past year international forces have been involved in increasingly fierce combat with insurgents and NATO has assumed greater responsibility. With the expansion of its role to the entire country during 2006, ISAF has inherited a difficult and dangerous task from the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).²⁹ Reconstruction efforts are at risk in all regions, not just in the south, while insecurity is growing and the problems of crime and weak government remain entrenched.³⁰ Even in the more stable north, suicide attacks have claimed increasing numbers of casualties among foreign troops. These developments indicate that Afghanistan is still at a crossroads between a peaceful future and a regression to conflict and instability.

As a result of NATO's ongoing problems, ISAF and Afghan forces remain dependent on the US troops of OEF for deterring and combating the activities of spoilers and insurgents.³¹ Despite this, the two missions have maintained their different mandates and objectives; OEF forces are deployed to root out terrorism while NATO's priority is state building. There is, however, disagreement within NATO about how robust its forces should be in support of the Afghan Government. With the growing number of attacks on ISAF forces and the confrontation with the insurgents in the south, the wish of NATO members to limit their involvement to a low-key, low-risk engagement grows more and more obsolete. While national commands remain distinct from one another, the expansion of ISAF was largely accomplished by incorporating OEF forces.³²

These profound changes to the tasks of the mission and its environment have led to considerable ambiguity over ISAF's role. The force was initially established to help the government provide security and counterbalance the power of the warlords of the Northern Alliance. The warlords who, in alliance with OEF, had fought the Taliban emerged as the new major political and military power in Afghanistan but agreed to participate in the transitional process. Consequently, ISAF was established to enforce their pledge.³³ The ISAF mandate, as defined in the 2001 Bonn Agreement and resolutions of the UN Security Council, is not always precise. Apart from training Afghan security forces, ISAF is supposed to 'assist' and 'support' the Afghan

²⁷ Gordon, P. H., 'Winter in Afghanistan', E!Sharp, Mar. 2006, <<http://www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/gordon/20060320.htm>>, p. 1.

²⁸ 'A geographical expression in search of a state' (note 24), p. 23.

²⁹ 'Revised operational plan for NATO's expanded mission in Afghanistan', NATO Topics, 16 Oct 2006, <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan_stage3/>.

³⁰ 'A geographical expression in search of a state' (note 24) p. 24.

³¹ Assembly of Western European Union (note 21), p. 15.

³² 'Phase 4 of NATO deployment in Afghanistan in August maybe', *Atlantic News*, no. 3765 (4 Apr. 2006), p. 2; and Assembly of Western European Union (note 21), pp. 25–26.

³³ Ghani (note 21), p. 11.

authorities in ‘maintaining security’.³⁴ Obviously, these take on a different character in the light of Taliban resistance and other insurgencies in southern Afghanistan. The expansion of ISAF in the south has already demanded changes to its rules of engagement (ROE), and NATO announced new ROE as early as 2005. Although their specific content is not publicized, the new ROE apparently permit defence against an attack as well as pre-emptive action to reduce security threats.³⁵

The nature of the German force

Because the ISAF mandate leaves room for interpretation, much of its implementation depends on how contributing countries construe it. Germany has been gradually extending its engagement since 2001, when the German Parliament authorized the deployment of up to 1200 troops with ISAF.³⁶ With the approval of the deployment of German ISAF forces beyond Kabul in 2003, the troop numbers were stepped up to a maximum of 3000 men and women, making the ISAF contingent Germany’s biggest foreign mission by the end of 2006.³⁷ Germany personnel took over the US PRT in Kunduz in November 2003 and established another in Feyzabad in September 2004. In June 2006 Germany assumed NATO’s regional command for northern Afghanistan, based at a large field camp in Mazar i Sharif.³⁸ In the wake of the 2006 mandate extension, the government decided that although the German involvement was focused on the north, troops could be deployed on a short-term basis in other parts of Afghanistan.³⁹ A NATO request for German reconnaissance aircraft to assist forces in the south soon followed and, eventually, at the request of Chancellor Merkel’s government, on 9 March 2007 the German Parliament voted to dispatch six Tornado aircraft.⁴⁰

German forces have also been deployed in Afghanistan as a part of OEF. A small number of special forces from the covert unit Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK) have reportedly taken part in counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations. The KSK is being given an extremely low profile, and thus the government’s and the army’s information policies have repeatedly been subject to criticism. Dispatches of KSK soldiers after the end of the first coalition campaigns in Afghanistan have usually only been rumoured but, by 2007, it was clear that the forces were still used in Afghanistan

³⁴ Bonn Agreement, Annex I, ‘International Security Force’, 5 Dec. 2001, <<http://www.afhangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>>; UN Security Council Resolution 1386, 20 Dec. 2001; and UN Security Council Resolution 1510, 13 Oct. 2003.

³⁵ ‘NATO seeks stronger Afghan “rules of engagement”’, Reuters, 4 Aug. 2005; and Synovitz, R., ‘Afghanistan: NATO troops apply “robust” new rules of engagement’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 Feb. 2006.

³⁶ Press and Information Centre of the Bundeswehr Joint Operations Command, ‘German contribution to the ISAF’, <http://www.operations.mod.uk/fingal/germany/isaf_english.htm>.

³⁷ Nicola, S., ‘Germany’s “new” armed forces’, International Relations and Security Network (ISN), Security Watch, 26 Jan. 2006; and German Foreign Office, ‘Übersicht über deutsche Beteiligung an derzeitigen VN-geführten oder VN-mandatierten Friedensmissionen’ [Overview on German contributions to current UN-led or UN-authorized peace missions], Dec. 2006, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Aussenpolitik/VereinteNationen/DundVN/VN-Friedensmissionen-Grafik.html>>.

³⁸ German Foreign Office, ‘Expansion of German involvement in Afghanistan (Kunduz, Feyzabad and Mazar-e-Sharif)’, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/Afghanistan/Engagement-D-Kundus-Faisa-Mazar.html>>.

³⁹ German Foreign Office et al., ‘Das Afghanistan-Konzept der Bundesregierung’ [The Afghanistan concept of the Federal Government], 12 Sep. 2006, p. 21.

⁴⁰ German Air Force, ‘GAF Recce Tornados to Afghanistan’, 18 May 2007, <<http://www.luftwaffe.de/portal/a/luftwaffe/team/eins/afgh>>.

for ISAF and OEF purposes.⁴¹ Deployment of KSK forces continues to be highly controversial in Germany. Criticism accumulated when it was revealed that officers had helped to guard US prisons in Afghanistan and were accused of torturing a detainee.⁴²

Don't mention the war

The controversy over the KSK forces is also a result of the public's general rejection of the deployment of combat units. In consequence the German Government has embraced the notion of the Afghanistan mission as a security force, in contrast to a battle force, and has so far resisted calls for engagement in combat operations and to lift operational restrictions.⁴³ Instead, it is counting on a division of labour between US counter-terrorism operations and its own peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts. When Germany took responsibility for its first PRT in Kunduz, the Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, stated that the east of Afghanistan was the region to be most concerned about and therefore it made 'good sense for the United States to take over this area'.⁴⁴ More recently, the Minister of Defence, Franz-Josef Jung, has again stressed the peaceful role of the German forces. During a visit to Afghanistan in 2006, he explained that the German Armed Forces were in Afghanistan 'to do good'.⁴⁵ Jung considered it a priority to make Afghans understand this aim. A similar approach was taken towards public opinion at home. During the controversy over the surveillance aircraft, the government made frantic efforts to avoid the words 'war' or 'combat'. The government further pledged that the results of the surveillance mission would only be shared with its allies under strong restrictions. However, it was evident that Germany was neither able nor willing to deprive other ISAF countries of information crucial to military operations against insurgents.⁴⁶

Tasks and restrictions

The reservations of the German public and politicians are reflected in the tasks ascribed to the Afghanistan mission. The emphasis on the international forces having a 'light footprint' matches the German commitment to deploy only a limited number of troops with restricted tasks. It is thus not surprising that Germany advocated the expansion of ISAF based on the installation of PRTs—an approach that tries to maximize the effect of limited forces through the establishment of 'islands of security'.⁴⁷ The first German

⁴¹ Noetzel, T. and Schreer, B., 'German Special Operations Forces', German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Nov. 2006, <http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/common/get_document.php?asset_id=3452>, pp. 2–3.

⁴² Stark (note 17).

⁴³ Gallis, P., US Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance*, CRS Report for Congress RL33627 (CRS: Washington, DC, 22 Aug. 2006), p. 11.

⁴⁴ German Foreign Office, 'Speech by German Federal Foreign Minister Fischer to the German Bundestag in Berlin on 28 September 2005—extension of the ISAF mandate in Afghanistan (extract)', <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Reden.html>>.

⁴⁵ Erhardt, C., 'Die Leute müssen verstehen, daß wir Gutes tun' [The people need to understand that we are doing good], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20 July 2006.

⁴⁶ Friedmann, J. and Hengst, B., 'Einsatz im Kampfgebiet, aber kein Kampfeinsatz' [Mission in combat area, but no combat mission], *Spiegel Online*, 8 Mar. 2007, <<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,465256,00.html>>; and Kohler, B., 'Ein bisschen schwanger' [Somewhat pregnant], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 Feb. 2007, p. 1.

⁴⁷ German Foreign Office et al. (note 39), pp. 9–10.

PRT in Kunduz is among the largest such units in the country and consists of around 270 military and 30 civilian personnel. However, the German Government explicitly wants to keep its military presence ‘as small as possible’ and thus established the only PRT with a shared military and civilian command.⁴⁸

Germany is particularly worried about the protection of its forces, and many observers criticize the safety regulations that the German PRTs must work under for limiting force effectiveness. German aircraft, for example, must return to their base before darkness falls. Furthermore, German PRT troops are not allowed to stay overnight outside their camps and so are not able to carry out long-range patrols. Patrols also have to be accompanied by an armoured ambulance, which makes convoys larger and less flexible.⁴⁹ As a result of the emphasis on force protection, Kunduz was chosen as the location for the first German PRT because of the area’s safety and stability.⁵⁰

The official German interpretation of the ISAF mandate has for a long time been not much more precise than the already broad original formulations and it still reflects the reservations mentioned above. According to the government’s first Afghanistan Concept, produced in 2003, the German PRT aimed to increase the population’s ‘feeling of security through visibility’.⁵¹ The government further argued that the German PRT would ‘radiate’ into and thereby stabilize the Kunduz region.⁵² Such vague formulations as these are not uncommon in official sources, which often fail to define clearly what German ISAF troops are meant to do on the ground.

Only very recently has the government made these strategy papers part of its official outreach on the Afghanistan mission. German policy is explained in more detail in the September 2007 Afghanistan Concept. Most notable is the strong emphasis on a twofold approach, resting on the pillars of reconstruction and development on the one hand, and security on the other hand. Most concrete activities belong to the first pillar but the paper further acknowledges the need for security. In this regard, Germany reiterates its focus on Afghanistan’s north but pledges support for operations in the south ‘on an ad-hoc basis’. Germany wants to ‘continue its military contribution’ and ‘provide adequate support for the overall ISAF operation’, which primarily means provision of logistical and medical support as well as the surveillance missions of the Tornado aircraft. Thus, the bulk of the German Armed Forces’ engagement will rest on the responsibility of the PRTs in Kunduz and Feyzabad and of smaller provincial advisory teams that are to be established in areas without PRTs. Aside from its own military presence on the ground, Germany stresses the importance of developing and mentoring Afghan security and police forces. Until 2007 the training of these forces had been Germany’s special focus as a ‘lead nation’ in the security sector reform process, but was transformed into participation in the EU’s police mission (EUPOL). The 2007 Afghanistan Concept promises an increase of German support, ‘particularly in fields where Germany has

⁴⁸ German Foreign Office et al. (note 39), p. 6; and Jakobsen, P. V., ‘PRTs in Afghanistan: successful but not sufficient’, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report no. 6, 2005, pp. 23–24, 27.

⁴⁹ Jakobsen (note 48), pp. 23–24.

⁵⁰ German Foreign Office et al. (note 39), p. 6.

⁵¹ German Foreign Office et al. (note 39), p. 7.

⁵² Motion of the German Federal Government 15/1700, 15 Oct. 2003, p. 3.

special competencies', such as criminal investigation, border policing and supporting the Kabul Police Academy.⁵³

Like other ISAF participants, Germany seeks to limit its involvement in anti-narcotic measures. The German troops are not permitted to take direct action against flourishing opium production and the drug economy. This is ruled out by the ISAF mandate, and emphatically so by the German Government and Parliament, which fear an increased threat to their soldiers' security. Counter-narcotic measures are therefore seen as the responsibility of the Afghan Government. However, the German Government acknowledges that state building will not be successful in Afghanistan without a solution to the drug problem. In the parliamentary motion for the extension of the Afghanistan mandate in 2005, the government explained its approach at length. The strategy focuses on strengthening Afghan law-enforcement structures, such as the counter-narcotics police, and builds on alternative livelihood programmes to create economic alternatives to the drug economy. Furthermore, Germany sees its role as working towards regional cooperation to curb the trafficking of opium from Afghanistan. Apart from these long-term efforts, the PRTs are supposed to assist the Afghan army by providing intelligence and supporting its counter-narcotics operations with logistics and educational campaigns.⁵⁴

In search of a strategy?

Generally, German governments have not put much effort into publicizing their thinking behind the Afghanistan mission. The central policy document, the Afghanistan Concept, was only officially published in 2007, and the brief 2003 version that served as a basis for policy for several years was only released to members of parliament. As a result, a coherent strategy for the mission has not always been apparent. The inter-ministerial approach also contributes to confusion among onlookers because four departments—the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, the Interior, and Economic Cooperation and Development—are involved in the planning and implementation of the mission.⁵⁵

However, besides the Afghanistan Concept, German governments have always had an understanding of what the engagement in Afghanistan should look like. The thinking behind the mission strongly reflects Germany's wish to play the role of a responsible and reliable international partner, and it further takes into account the domestic debate about the transformation of Germany as a military actor. Germany views its engagement in northern Afghanistan as an active commitment to global peace and stability. On the other hand, the ISAF mission is defined defensively and with restraint. In supporting the Afghan Government, the German forces are to focus on mentoring the new institutions and brokering cooperation between the central authorities and local power structures, as well as on reconstruction and development.

⁵³ German Foreign Office et al., 'The German Federal Government's Afghanistan policy', 5 Sep. 2007, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/Afghanistan/070905-AfgKonzept-Kabinett.html>>.

⁵⁴ German Foreign Office et al., 'Deutscher Beitrag zur drogenbekämpfung in Afghanistan' [German contribution to anti-narcotic measures in Afghanistan], German Parliament, 15th legislative period, no. 15/5996, pp. 7–13.

⁵⁵ Eurocorps, 'The German PRT group', <<http://www.isaf6.eurocorps.org/prt.php?prt=kunduz>>.

Between domestic constraints and requirements on the ground

So much for the understanding in Germany of what the German troops are meant to do in Afghanistan, but how does this match the situation on the ground? Germany's rationale for its involvement, which stems largely from the optimistic days of the December 2001 Bonn Conference, seems appropriate as long as the mission can function as simply a back-up for the economic, political and social reconstruction process already underway. However, it is obvious that Afghanistan's recovery is not following a steady path, as the deteriorating security situation illustrates. Despite claims that Afghanistan's relatively stable northern region was fundamentally different from the south, it has become clear that security has not improved there either. The fatal bombing of a German patrol in May 2007 was the most severe of several assaults in the region within the space of a year.⁵⁶ As in other parts of Afghanistan, international forces face increasing attacks from an adversary that is difficult to locate and confront because it comprises unpredictable and mobile combatants. Germany has in the past reacted to the growing number of attacks with an increase in force protection.⁵⁷ However, it is questionable whether these measures—such as the decision that soldiers must use armoured vehicles when operating outside their camps—are the most suitable for improving the situation of the troops on the ground. In fact, the response to earlier violent incidents has triggered criticism. In June 2004, when Chinese road workers were killed in an attack, the German troops remained passive and did not leave their camp. A local development worker described this response as 'locking the door from the inside'.⁵⁸ At the same time, efforts to increase the 'feeling of security' among civilians have not borne fruit. In 2006 Afghans still saw security threats as their country's most serious problem.⁵⁹

While security problems are increasing, efforts to rebuild and depoliticize the Afghan security forces and to demilitarize society have yielded mixed results. Afghanistan's new security forces consist mainly of former mujahideen militias, some of which are involved in organized crime. Panjiri Tajiks in particular are over-represented within the security sector, a fact that might soon contribute to renewed factionalism. Moreover, the training of police officers has been limited in scope. Up to 2006, only 3300 out of 50 000 officers received in-depth training, while the majority attended courses of only two to four weeks.⁶⁰ The German Government has acknowledged that progress in the reconstruction of the Afghan police force is still inadequate, and has now passed on the main responsibility to the EU.⁶¹ Certainly, the size of the security apparatus should match the ability of the Afghan Government to maintain the sector through its own resources in the future, but the current size of the security forces, including the police and the army, is considered too limited to provide the necessary security.⁶² Together

⁵⁶ 'German troops die in Afghanistan', BBC News, 19 May 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6672099.stm>>.

⁵⁷ 'Bundeswehr in sorge vor terror der Taliban' [Bundeswehr concerned about Taliban terror], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 June 2006; and 'Anschläge auf Bundeswehr in Kabul' [Attacks on Bundeswehr in Kabul], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 July 2006.

⁵⁸ Burnett, V., 'NATO teams struggle to tame anarchic Afghan provinces', *Financial Times*, 14 July 2004.

⁵⁹ Jones, S. G., 'Averting Failure in Afghanistan', *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 1 (spring 2006), p. 114.

⁶⁰ Sedra, M., 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan: the slide towards expediency', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Mar. 2006), pp. 97–98, 103; and 'A geographical expression in search of a state' (note 24), p. 26.

⁶¹ German Foreign Office et al. (note 39), pp. 22–23.

⁶² Jones (note 59), p. 119; and Rubin, R. B., 'Afghanistan's uncertain transition from turmoil to normalcy', Council on Foreign Relations Report no. 12, Mar. 2006, p. 2.

with the Afghan Army and the ISAF troops, the security forces in Afghanistan amount to fewer than 120 000 personnel. Considering Afghanistan's territorial range and the need for a high level of militarization, it has been estimated that the security forces should number approximately 200 000 well-trained men and women.⁶³ Because such numbers seem out of reach at present there have been calls for at the least better training and equipping of the existing forces.⁶⁴

If the international and Afghan forces fail to provide security, support for the central authorities among the Afghan population will eventually cease and locals will turn to other groups, such as warlords and other militias, willing to fill the vacuum. This was evident when in 2006 Afghan President Hamid Karzai realized the urgent need to boost security personnel and to this end announced that local militias would be armed. These forces were termed 'community police' but were heavily criticized by diplomats and Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme for simply rearming warlord militias.⁶⁵

While the build-up of regular security forces remains insufficient, ISAF also has difficulties in encouraging disarmament and strengthening Afghanistan's central authorities. Due to the limitations of ISAF engagement, forces are dependent on the cooperation of local strongmen, which necessarily makes curbing their traditionally powerful position more difficult. PRTs are thus mainly dependent on cautious diplomacy in order to foster disarmament programmes and to consolidate the achievements of the reintegration process.⁶⁶

The dependence on maintaining at least neutral relations with some of the Afghan local warlords as a way to maintain basic security also partly explains ISAF's reluctance to significantly step up its counter-narcotics efforts. The Afghan opium economy, which has a 93 per cent share of global opium production and continues to grow,⁶⁷ is closely related to the problem of militarization and warlordism because of the financial revenues it provides to criminal networks and warlords.⁶⁸ The domestic drug trade and international trafficking of narcotics remain a major source of revenue for groups opposing the Afghan central authorities. While the Afghan drug economy has shifted back to the southern provinces—the main areas of drug cultivation—opium farming has diminished in the centre and the north of the country.⁶⁹ However, the northern Badakhshan province, where one of the German PRTs is situated, is one of the major areas of poppy growing in the country.⁷⁰ Around 20 per cent of heroin and morphine from Afghanistan is trafficked via routes through Central Asia using Afghanistan's northern borders.⁷¹

⁶³ Jones (note 59), p. 119.

⁶⁴ Wilder, A., 'Cops or robbers? The struggle to reform the Afghan National Police', Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 7 July 2007, pp. 56–57; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Reforming Afghanistan's Police*, Asia Report no. 138 (ICG: Brussels, 30 Aug. 2007), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Walsh, D., 'Western alarm at Afghan plan to arm villagers', *The Guardian*, 13 June 2006.

⁶⁶ Hett (note 19), pp. 17, 21.

⁶⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey 2007* (UNODC: Vienna, Aug. 2007), <<http://www.unodc.org/afg/>>, p. iv.

⁶⁸ Wright, J., 'Afghanistan's opiate economy and terrorist financing', *Janes Intelligence Review*, Mar. 2006, p. 37.

⁶⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (note 67).

⁷⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2007* (UNODC: Vienna, 2007), <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/world_drug_report.html>, pp. 195–200.

⁷¹ Wright (note 68), p. 38; and UNODC (note 70), p. 45.

Although the German Government stresses the importance of the contribution to anti-drug measures, the directives on how soldiers should act when witnessing illegal activities is not entirely clear and it tends to be left to soldiers to make individual decisions.⁷² Active participation in poppy eradication would certainly be a risk for ISAF since it would undermine support and goodwill from farmers and local powerbrokers. Drug confiscation efforts could be made more effective through more rigorous targeting of the more profitable side of the trade. However, this would almost certainly provoke increased violence against ISAF by the warlords who profit from it. Against this background there are limits to what German forces—or ISAF in general—can do to address the drug problem unless they are ready to counter more active resistance from local warlords connected to the drug trade. Even in this context, while German forces should neither start burning poppy fields nor abandon a long-term development strategy, they should make clear statements about their position through the extension of patrols and by seizing drugs if they are detected. At the same time Afghan law enforcement authorities need to be supported in solving problems of ineffectiveness and corruption.⁷³

A balancing act for German forces

Afghan state institutions, which German forces are expected to mentor, have not made substantial progress in developing legitimacy or exerting control over the country.⁷⁴ This failure is both a function and variable of the urgent problems of insecurity, lack of law and order, structural weaknesses of the central government and underdevelopment. Although the threats to the country's recovery are most tangible in Afghanistan's southern provinces, the north is not a world apart. Seen in this light, implementing the policy of the German deployment is a difficult balancing act for the mission on the ground. In their attempts to improve the security situation and help establish governmental authority, German forces are dependent on the cooperation of actors with interests that are actually or potentially contradictory to these goals. This situation reveals the limits and hazards of Germany's efforts to bring about change while engaging as little as possible. As a result of limited resources, urgent tasks like improving the population's security and establishing effective Afghan forces, have not been accomplished. Under such conditions, prospects for economic recovery remain bleak and local support for the international engagement is likely to erode.

IV. The road ahead for Germany in Afghanistan

The shortcomings of the German deployment are not unique—they are a general theme of the ISAF mission. However, the fact that Germany's engagement policy is shaped in response to domestic and foreign policy agendas rather than to circumstances on the ground is particularly problematic for ISAF because of the relatively large size of the German force contribution. The present reality of the situation in Afghanistan therefore requires a change in Germany's future approach. Above all Germany has to assume

⁷² Hett (note 19), p. 20.

⁷³ Rubin, B. R., 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2007).

⁷⁴ International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 4–5.

responsibility not only for its area of operation but also for the stabilization and reconstruction of the country as a whole. It must be acknowledged that the idea of a 'light' involvement is inadequate to the magnitude of the task that NATO has adopted in Afghanistan. However, as discussed above, for the German Armed Forces to fully engage in counter-insurgency operations would conflict too much with Germany's perception of its role in Afghanistan and its post-World War II political and historical sensibilities for this to be politically acceptable. A more feasible strategy would be for Germany to keep pursuing and advocating its integrated strategy of reconstruction and development as well as providing security assistance. However, it is clear that greater political, military and financial resources must be invested in the mission.

Crucially, Germany needs to step up its commitment to security in order to enable sustainable economic reconstruction and development. The Afghanistan Concept takes the necessary step of pledging to establish provincial advisory teams to increase the reach of the PRTs in the north; however, to back up the measure, caveats should be lifted to allow longer and more flexible patrols. There are strong reasons to continue with an anti-narcotics policy that focuses on substitute crops and alternative livelihoods, but this will be insufficient without effective law enforcement by Afghan authorities. If progress is to be achieved in Afghanistan, it will depend on the gradual transfer of responsibility to functional national institutions. The Afghan Government has recently promised increased support for the Afghan National Police, and particularly the border police, which are central to tackling the flourishing drug trade. Police reform is a key area that Germany has strongly identified itself with but where progress is still seriously constrained by a lack of resources and training.

The political effort is likely to be the most challenging, but it is nonetheless necessary in order to encourage domestic support for maintaining and extending the engagement. In its emphatic support for the Bonn Process, Germany found expression for its policy in Afghanistan but has been struggling to define its role after the conclusion of the process in 2005. Considerable tasks and problems remain, and it is difficult to foresee either the end of international involvement or the direction of Afghanistan's development.⁷⁵ The German Government increasingly acknowledges the threats to Afghanistan's stability and recovery and has tried to define areas of activity more clearly. Beyond this, Germany has yet to define its future role in Afghanistan. As recent debates on mandates and their extensions have highlighted, it is not even clear if Germany is willing to assume more responsibility or if it aims to reduce its engagement in the short or medium term.

The intense debate on the deployment of the Tornado aircraft revealed the gap between the German approach and the new situation for ISAF. The rather paradoxical government position on the purpose of the aircraft—reconnaissance, but not for offensive use—was mostly the result of an unresolved domestic problem. The fact that helping to rebuild Afghanistan would be a difficult long-term job and that international forces would not be able to keep out of combat and violence was not clearly envisaged at the beginning of the mission; it was rather a lesson drawn from the first years on the ground. Now that the mission is becoming increasingly dangerous for German soldiers,

⁷⁵ Danner (note 14), pp. 90–91.

support is fading at home, where today a clear majority considers the involvement to be wrong.⁷⁶

Although Germany is unlikely to withdraw its Armed Forces from Afghanistan, even in the wake of growing insecurity in the north, there have been conflicting signals from the ruling parties. Past decisions imply that German ISAF troops will not directly participate in combat operations in the foreseeable future; Germany has repeatedly ruled out appeals from NATO and the Afghan Government to do so.⁷⁷ While requests for support, logistics and surveillance have been accepted against considerable resistance, most Germans do not want to see the German Armed Forces fighting insurgents in the south of Afghanistan. In consequence, the scepticism of politicians towards the mission, particularly Operation Enduring Freedom, seems to be growing.⁷⁸ Members of parliament have, however, called for the mandate of the German Armed Forces to be extended to the whole country,⁷⁹ but since the government already has difficulties combating the growing fatigue over the current mission an extension is almost as unlikely as a withdrawal.

The nature of Germany's future role in Afghanistan (if it does not seek an exit) will depend not only on what further contributions it is willing to make but also on whether the question is publicly discussed from a long- or middle-term perspective. Otherwise, decisions will continue to be made on a short-term basis from one mandate extension or NATO request to the next. If long-term improvement of the situation in Afghanistan is to be achieved, Germany will have to significantly increase its commitment in the north and further invest in the establishment and professionalization of the Afghan authorities.

⁷⁶ ARD DeutschlandTREND, Aug. 2007, <<http://www.infratest-dimap.de/?id=16#ue1>>.

⁷⁷ 'Berlin bars deployment of German Army to violent Afghan south', Deutsche Welle, 4 May 2007, <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2473899,00.html>>.

⁷⁸ 'German defense minister calls for changes in Afghanistan tactics', *International Herald Tribune*, 14 May 2007.

⁷⁹ 'Was tun in Afghanistan?' [What to do in Afghanistan?], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 29 June 2007.