

The German Army and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

The Need for Strategy

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Alongside their NATO allies German troops are facing a growing insurgency in Afghanistan. However, the alliance still lacks a joint strategy to deal with this challenge. While the US government recently called on NATO to pursue a “classical” counter-insurgency campaign, Germany insisted on the development of a more “comprehensive strategy” before the next Summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Yet, over recent months the German position has been criticized by a range of allies for lack of credibility. To gain political influence over the making of NATO’s Afghanistan strategy, the German government first needs to adjust its national position on how to deal with the Afghan insurgency.

As early as 2006, the German government called for a more comprehensive strategy for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan that would better integrate military and non-military instruments. Not least because of the German position, the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Noordwijk in October 2007 agreed to develop a “comprehensive approach” in time for the Bucharest Summit. Such a “comprehensive approach” would require the development of a more credible German approach to counter-insurgency. This has been lacking so far, in particular because of Germany’s reluctance to provide combat forces.

Unpopular though it may be to say so, the much criticized U.S. counterinsurgency

campaign in Iraq could provide some impulses for German policy adjustments on Afghanistan. Largely ignored in the German debate, U.S. forces in 2007 introduced major changes to their Iraq strategy which in the second half of the year yielded remarkable success. In particular, a sharp decline in insurgent attacks and American casualties could be observed.

U.S. Counterinsurgency in Iraq

Changes in U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq are largely thanks to the Commanding General Multi-National Force–Iraq, General David Petraeus, who took over command in February 2007. Subsequently, the main pillars of U.S. counterinsurgency

strategy underwent significant readjustments, emblematic in the so-called 'surge' strategy. It built not only on an increase of about 30,000 combat troops, but also a change in military tactics. Those included an increase in offensive actions against insurgents as well as a greater troop presence throughout the major cities, particularly Baghdad.

In addition, the new approach involved a new basing concept. Unlike before, when U.S. troops were located largely in secure bases away from residential quarters, they are now located in smaller operating outposts in center of residential areas. This allows for the fostering of closer ties with the local population. It also enables U.S. forces to conduct offensive operations more quickly and efficiently. Moreover, operations are now being conducted together with Iraqi security forces. Small, integrated teams generate an 'Iraqi face' for those missions, in turn promoting local trust and intelligence gathering. In addition, integrating Iraqi forces into such operations helps to train as well as to control them.

The new basing concept also integrates Iraqi security forces more efficiently. In so-called 'Joint Security Stations' or 'Combat Outposts' Iraqi forces live and train alongside their U.S. counterparts. This structure also allows for joint planning and execution of offensive actions against insurgents. Close cooperation between U.S. forces and local Iraqi military and police units is a result. Finally, the U.S. forces are now in a much better tactical position to conduct sustained counterinsurgency operations because of their local presence.

The Utility of Selected Negotiations

The success of the military aspect of the new U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq was backed by progress on the political front. This included prioritised negotiations with certain insurgent groups. The ability of the U.S. military leadership to forge agreements with Sunni leaders has been particularly instrumental. After all, gaining

local trust and alienating large parts of the population from the insurgents are key to any successful counterinsurgency operation. Over recent months, al-Qaeda elements and Shiite extremists confronted increasing hostility from the Iraqi population.

So far, the new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq seems to be working quite well. Despite obvious differences, some general lessons of Iraq may also apply in the case of Afghanistan. As in Iraq, coalition forces are faced with classical challenges of a counterinsurgency campaign. This includes the issues of winning over the majority of the population and the build-up as well as integration of local security forces. Three lessons from Iraq stand out. First, a significant troop presence (mostly dismounted infantry) in key areas is needed, backed by targeted offensive military action against extremist insurgents. Second, an integrated approach to training local military and police forces is essential, including the conduct of joint offensive operations. Third, negotiations with important local groups should be an integral part of operational planning.

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

Even though there are regional differences in Afghanistan with regard to the intensity of the insurgency, a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy for NATO is indispensable. This is becoming especially clear now that the previously quiescent Northern parts of the country are coming under attack by insurgents. Unfortunately, ISAF elements in the North generally lack adequate capabilities to conduct offensive operations. In addition, the Bundeswehr in particular is subject to a restrictive interpretation of its mandate, which in turn limits its operational flexibility. It has even placed restrictions on accompanying Afghan soldiers in dangerous operations in the framework of the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) concept.

These limitations in German deployment, however, have not only obstructed joint operations with Afghan security forces. They have also undermined German credibility inside the Alliance, particularly with regard to the “comprehensive approach” advocated by Berlin. The conduct of joint offensive counterinsurgency operations is a prerequisite for successfully training the Afghan national security forces. Only by joint training and joint missions can these forces become more professional. In turn, professional security forces in combination with a stable security environment are essential for establishing effective governance in Afghanistan.

Operation Harekate Yolo II

Largely unnoticed in the German political discussion, the Bundeswehr engagement in Afghanistan changed significantly in the second half of 2007. The main evidence for this was Operation Harekate Yolo II which commenced in late October. The ISAF regional commands North and West had to react to a deteriorating security situation. 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 central government was unable to maintain control. Eventually, the insurgents were able to gain at least partial control over the ‘Ring-road,’ which is a lifeline for the Afghan business sector.

Operation Harekate Yolo II 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 U.S. provided so-called ‘Embedded Training Teams’, which play an important role in training Afghan security forces. The operation quickly succeeded in weakening the insurgent groups in the two provinces decisively. This allowed the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to resume its civilian reconstruction programs in those areas. Equally important, Harekate Yolo II signaled a significant change in ISAF’s operational conduct in Northern Afghanistan. Counterinsurgency has now become the major operational focus even for German forces. Up until this operation, ISAF had concentrated on patrols aimed at gathering intelligence and contributing to the security of ISAF’s bases in the North. Now, the emphasis will increasingly be on offensive operations against insurgents, together with Afghan security forces. This is necessary to fulfill the task of supporting the Afghan central government as well as to protect the local population and ISAF troops. However, this readjustment of ISAF’s strategy in the North requires a further shift in the Bundeswehr’s approach to the operation. In short, it has to develop an understanding of the nature of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and to define its strategy accordingly. This step is also needed in order to regain international credibility for Germany’s position on a ‘comprehensive approach’ for NATO.

A German Approach to Counterinsurgency

A comprehensive strategy for counterinsurgency comprises the political, the economic and the military dimension of the conflict. On the political level, three readjustments for German strategy seem to be of primary importance. The first requirement is a greater willingness to take on equal risk-sharing within the Alliance. This entails participating in combat. The indication that German combat troops will likely replace the Norwegian QRF this summer is a step in the right direction.

Secondly, German commanders on the ground need to deal with a wide range of political 'key-leader engagements' to secure the vital support of local groups. However, so far a strategic framework for such negotiations appears to be missing. Finally, more efforts have to be made in the realm of strategic communication to prepare a skeptical domestic audience for a changing operational reality. After all, counterinsurgency campaigns are overwhelmingly lost at the 'home front.' These three political aspects will also play a vital role in NATO's debate on counterinsurgency.

The economic dimension of the German approach to counterinsurgency also requires refinement. Offensive military action and immediate economic reconstruction need to go hand in hand. Otherwise, the overarching aim to secure local support for the ISAF mission and the Afghan security forces is untenable. Yet, so far the German armed forces and their civilian partners lack effective mechanisms for fast and smooth coordination of military and civilian means in the context of offensive operations. Operation Harekate Yolo II also displayed those deficits.

Finally, the German army should reconsider its approach to the military dimension of the Afghanistan campaign. This is particularly pressing with regard to the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA). In order to succeed in this mission, an increased German troop presence and more offensive operations alongside ANA counterparts will be required. Since a significant boost of German troops in Afghanistan is currently unlikely due to political resistance and a lack of available and deployable forces, a greater presence could be achieved by making better use of the forces deployed. This requires changing the current emphasis which the rules of engagement and the supplied military equipment place on force-protection. The German troops are concentrated in heavily fortified bases and rely almost exclusively on armoured vehicles and airlift as means

of transportation. They also lack sufficient capabilities for offensive operations.

These deficits minimize the Bundeswehr's ability to interact with the local community. They also restrain ISAF's ability to act decisively in the face of a deteriorating security situation in the North. Afghan security forces will not be able to fill this security vacuum effectively for years to come. Any strategy based on Afghans quickly taking over responsibility for their own security and on drawing-down Western troop presence is bound to fail.

The Bundeswehr, therefore, cannot escape the fact that its military dimension to the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan needs to be based on joint offensive operations with Afghan security forces against insurgents. Replacing the Norwegian QRF would prepare the Bundeswehr much better for this new operational quality. These forces, based on highly mobile infantry elements, would provide a German capacity for joint counterinsurgency operations with local security forces. This enhanced military capability, however, needs to be backed politically. That is to say, German regional commanders need greater operational flexibility in conducting those missions.

The German political leadership needs to accept the changing operational reality in Afghanistan. The Bundeswehr is involved in a sustained counterinsurgency operation which exhibits many characteristics of so-called 'small wars.' This includes the need for the Bundeswehr to engage in combat, and for a significant investment of political and financial resources—without the prospect of a decisive victory. As a result, there will be growing domestic scepticism in Germany with regard to the utility of force in such conflicts. Yet, a realistic alternative to staying the course in Afghanistan is nowhere in sight. In order to stand the chance of 'winning,' the conduct of counterinsurgency and its implications for the Bundeswehr need to take centerstage in the German strategic debate about the ISAF mission.

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