

Germany must stop shirking a debate on its military

By Timo Noetzel and Benjamin Schreer

This week the German parliament will vote on whether Tornado reconnaissance (Recce) aircraft should be sent to Afghanistan in support of the Nato-commanded International Security Assistance Force. The deployment is expected to be approved.

Decisions to send German troops abroad are – following engagements in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Congo and Lebanon – no longer a source of contention in domestic politics. The issue is rather whether Germany is prepared to let its armed forces join in combat operations. So far, the government has avoided confronting this issue directly.

The situation of the German armed forces is anomalous. The government seems to be giving in, piecemeal, to Nato allies' demands for more German support for combat operations in southern Afghanistan. If the deployment of the "Recce" Tornados is approved, they will be put under direct command of the Isaf commander. The government has agreed to strengthen the commander's powers so that he can call for German troops to operate in the south in case of need. The German army will also soon deploy one of its finest airborne brigades to Afghanistan, trained for irregular warfare. Finally, Franz-Josef Jung, defence minister, has indicated that he is prepared to once again send special operations forces to support the allies' fight in the south.

At the same time, German politicians continue to insist that the Bundeswehr's role in Afghanistan remains limited to combat support. This has created an odd situation: legally, the government has committed itself to participation in Isaf combat operations if need be; militarily, it will have the troops in place to conduct such tasks; politically, however, it is not prepared publicly to make the case for such operations.

This is the result of a particular German constellation. In recent years different German governments have reclaimed the right to use military power as an integral part of national foreign and security policy. However, a domestic debate about the purposes for which military power can legitimately be used has still not taken place. As a result forces are deployed abroad but are in effect tied down to defensive postures by national concerns.

The problem now is that Germany's allies are increasingly reluctant to accept these caveats. They make the case that alliance solidarity and cohesion requires equal burden-sharing. In short, they expect the German government to acknowledge that the alliance as a whole is at war against the Taliban and to act accordingly.

Yet the government still shirks away from an honest domestic debate about an expanded military role in Afghanistan. Instead, it emphasises the need for an "integrated civil-military strategy". The argument is that the war cannot be won militarily but that it must be won by stronger state-building efforts, ie by civilian means.

This ignores the fact that without a stable security environment, efforts to stabilise and rebuild this devastated country are bound to fail. Nato therefore has no choice but to take the fight to the Taliban and prevent it from taking control of the south. Last summer Nato learnt in Operation Medusa that the Taliban has regained the ability to mount serious military engagements. Currently, there is every indication that the Taliban is reorganising and re-equipping for a spring offensive. In this situation to call for an enhanced "civil-military" approach but to refuse to participate in offensive combat operations is increasingly untenable. The government has put the German armed forces into a position where they are going to have little choice but to participate directly in combat operations if the situation further escalates in the south. It has, however, not prepared the German public either for this eventuality or for its likely consequences, which would be the deaths of German soldiers. Angela Merkel, chancellor, has to prepare public and parliament for the probability that German land forces will be drawn into Nato combat operations in Afghanistan if Isaf comes under sustained pressure in the south.

In sum, the decision to deploy Tornado aircraft to Afghanistan will not relieve the government from the liability of adjusting further to the changing Isaf operation. Germany needs to continue to press for more coherence of civilian and military efforts. However, only by recognising that military power is a fundamental part of strategy can Germany have significant and effective influence on Nato strategy.

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