

146th Bergedorf Round Table

The Role of the Federal Armed Forces in German Foreign and Security Policy

May 28–30, 2010, Berlin Office, Körber Foundation

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

This summary contains those points of the discussion that we consider to be of particular importance in the current policy debate. An edited and authorized version of the whole discussion will be published in the 146th Bergedorf Protocol.

I. Lessons Learned from Past Foreign Missions

Several participants thought that one lesson that could be learnt from the past was that in future one ought to approach foreign missions with **less perfectionism**, a **greater sense of realism**, and **more humility**. Instead of trying to legitimize missions by claiming that they are about the imposition of a certain set of values, one should restrict oneself to basic pragmatic issues. In stark contrast to this was the “**meta-idea**” which one participant thought was needed to convince the electorate of the necessity of a mission.

Several people were of the opinion that in future the German Federal Armed Forces should no longer be used for “**political goals that have not been openly declared.**” Thus the Congo mission was in reality a test devised by France in order to ascertain whether or not Germany was prepared to honour its declared intention to assume international commitments. But this had been kept secret from the general public by pointing to other reasons such as the need to safeguard the elections. Such “**political abuse**” gave other players the wrong impression and demotivated the soldiers involved. In retrospect doubt had to be cast on the long-term usefulness and effectiveness of the mission in the DR Congo.

If they were striving for greater honesty, German policymakers would also have to jettison the fuzzy rhetoric to the effect that in each and every case **soldiers could be deployed only as a “last resort.”** In many cases the deployment of armed forces at an early stage of a conflict was a good way of preventing even worse things from happening.

II. Afghanistan

The participants subjected German policy on Afghanistan to critical scrutiny. An interest in self-justification was still predominant, and there was still no systematic **evaluation of the effectiveness of the mission**. However, without regular assessment of this kind it was impossible to secure the approval of the electorate. Other participants spoke of “**a failure to provide political**

leadership” and of **“a faceless policy on Afghanistan.”** The German government had never been in favour of conducting a political strategy debate. This was the reason why the mission was in a state of **“approval crisis”** and why German society was completely unable to come to terms with it.

Afghanistan was yet another example of the fact that the aims and problems associated with a mission were not spelled out openly. It was wrong to keep telling the German public that **Germany’s security was being upheld in the Hindu Kush area also** and that this goal could be achieved only through the stabilization of Afghanistan. In point of fact ISAF was finding it difficult to attain its aims, since nation-building was actually possible only in the European theatre. The mission was now much more about the security of NATO than about the security of Germany. **Al-Qaeda** had long since shifted its activities to other countries. As in the case of the 9/11 attacks, future assaults would not be planned in Afghanistan, but in large European and American cities. Generally speaking the German Parliament needed to discuss the political justification of a mission in far greater detail. The debate was **unduly fixated on the military component**. Instead of talking continually about the size of the military contingent, it would be more meaningful **to give some “muscle” to policymaking** and to strengthen Germany’s diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. When compared with other countries, Germany was very much underrepresented in this area.

The mission’s prospects of success were by and large deemed to be uncertain or slight. In any case Germany had to decide whether or not it was going to participate in **counterinsurgency operations** and to what extent it actually wanted to become involved. A greater use of **special forces** and **drones** by the American armed forces could create numerous problems for Germany. With regard to the **transfer of responsibilities to the Afghans**, a participant called for a transfer strategy planned by all of the players involved and not only by the German Federal Armed Forces. The transfer would not be completed within a short space of time. In fact, it represented a completely new phase which was primarily in the hands of civilian players. In this context the German Federal Armed Forces would play only a marginal role.

III. Multilateral Framework and Alliance Context

It was generally agreed that German foreign missions should always take place in a multilateral context, and preferably within the framework of the EU or NATO. In this framework action based on Article 51 of the UN Charter or participation in a **“coalition of the willing”** was possible.

Controversy surrounded the national restrictions or so-called **“caveats”** that had been placed on the German Federal Armed Forces. Basically Germany had to run the **same risks as its European allies**, for otherwise the European community of fate would cease to exist. This meant, for example, greater involvement in the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Politically motivated caveats had to be excluded quite categorically. Some participants disagreed, and pointed out that the German Federal Armed Forces could not run the same risks as the armed forces of other European NATO states if it did not receive the requisite support from the electorate or if it did not possess the necessary capabilities. There would always be national caveats within NATO.

With regard to future missions the question arose of whether it was meaningful to define abstract **German interests** and to design **mission scenarios** on this basis. Whereas some participants were in favour of spelling out German foreign policy interests in detail and determining beforehand the possible contribution of the German Federal Armed Forces, others adhered to the notion that every mission had to be judged on its merits. Instead of engaging in theoretical planning games, Germany should promote military integration within the EU and, as an example of this, support the establishment of a **European Army**. This was at all events a fundamental German interest. The incorporation of Germany into the EU had not as yet led to a conceptual basis for joint foreign missions. The European Security Strategy adopted in 2003 and the Implementation Report issued in 2008 had not led to any conceptual consequences. Instead there had been a **revival of ideas based on the nation-state**, and these had gone unchallenged.

IV. Decision-Making Processes and Comprehensive Approach

Many participants deplored the **lack of foreign policy coordination** between the Federal Chancellery, the ministries, and civilian players. Thus it had not yet been possible to utilize the concept of the **comprehensive approach**. Nor had the concept succeeded “in getting to Afghanistan,” primarily because the will to form a network was nowhere in evidence. Ministerial coordination had not worked for years. And most NGOs simply did not want to coordinate their activities with the German government. Over and above this the German government lacked the necessary planning and analysis staff. For example, a central **cross-ministerial situation report** on Afghanistan still did not exist. In order to centralize political planning and leadership, it would be appropriate to enlarge the **Federal Security Council**. Other demands included a **national security strategy** modelled on that of the US, and a **new German government White Paper** in the current legislative session.

Many of the participants were of the opinion that the **German Parliament** should keep out of the **operational planning of foreign missions**. When it came to specific questions, it had to make it plain that the responsibility lay with the executive. Furthermore, the informal decision-making in coalition committees and prior coordination in an alliance framework, as for example in NATO, clearly restricted the decision-making possibilities actually available to the German Parliament. Some participants believed that the German Parliament should not stipulate **limits on the number** of troops deployed in foreign missions, for it would prevent the German Federal Armed Forces from reacting quickly to changed situations. However, it was pointed out that the German Parliament had never turned down motions tabled by the executive if these were meaningful in military terms. Furthermore, the German government could take military action on the basis of the **Parliamentary Participation Act** if it was necessary to counter a threat, and seek the consent of the German Parliament at a later date. A proposal to replace the German Federal Armed Forces mandates currently being approved by the German Parliament with “**foreign policy mandates**” which encompassed all the relevant ministries and the whole gamut of foreign policy tools was greeted warmly, though it was doubted whether such an idea could be put into practice.

V. The German Federal Armed Forces and the General Public

There was no agreement when it came to the issue of the relationship between the general public and the German Federal Armed Forces. A participant accused German society of displaying **“an ongoing lack of interest in the German Federal Armed Forces as an institution”** and called for much greater societal and cultural involvement. Society had become accustomed to repressing the fact that a soldier is someone who “kills and is killed.” Other participants disagreed. Solidarity with the German Federal Armed Forces was very much on the increase. However, the electorate distinguished between the German Federal Armed Forces as an institution in which it placed a great deal of trust, and the foreign missions, which it often saw in a critical light. In the long run each foreign mission had to demonstrate its legitimacy openly and in public. Here the German Parliament had a crucial role to play. Approval in the German Parliament could come about only as a result of a very precise evaluation. In order to improve the relationship between the German Federal Armed Forces and the general public, there were proposals for the introduction of an **“Armed Forces Day”** and an **annual ecumenical service** for the soldiers who have died in action.

Imprint

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