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**Can the Bundeswehr Learn to “Eat Soup with a Knife?”  
Assessing German Counterinsurgency Operations in Afghanistan**

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## ***Introduction***

The *Bundeswehr* (the German armed forces) is no longer merely a peacekeeping and stabilization force in Afghanistan; it has become part of the countrywide counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against the Taliban and other insurgent groups. For more than two years, German soldiers have been confronted with a growing insurgency that has sprawled from the South of Afghanistan to the once quiet North. For the German military mission in Afghanistan this development has led to a situation that German political decision makers have desperately tried to avoid since 2001: the engagement of German forces in serious combat operations. However, since the realities on the ground in North-Afghanistan cannot be changed by wishful thinking in Berlin, Germany has only two options, which are to accept the tremendous political and military challenge of counterinsurgency (COIN) or to become largely irrelevant in Afghanistan. In light of this dilemma, the Bundeswehr slowly began to adapt to the deteriorating situation and started to conduct COIN operations. The consequences were two-fold. First, German soldiers have engaged in substantial ground combat for the first time since the end of World War II. Second, the Bundeswehr had to learn COIN, a complex and difficult type of warfare for which it was, in fact, never prepared. Both of these two points represent an unprecedented paradigm shift for German security policy, and no less importantly, within the German armed forces. This paper attempts to track the evolution of this paradigm shift and analyzes German policy and strategy with respect to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

“Learning to eat soup with a knife” is the metaphor that John Nagl has chosen to describe the challenge of COIN for Western militaries. It is also the title of Nagl’s much cited book (published in 2005), which is an insightful study of the British military’s success in Malaya and the failure of the U.S. military in Vietnam in adapting to COIN warfare.<sup>1</sup> “Can the Bundeswehr learn to eat soup with a knife?” adopts Nagl’s metaphor in order to answer the underlying research question of this paper: Are the German armed forces able to adapt successfully to the challenges of COIN in Afghanistan?

Since the object of this study is in a state of flux, an absolute answer to this question can only be given after NATO has (successfully or unsuccessfully) withdrawn from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is worth taking a closer look at the evolution of the German military engagement in Afghanistan to date. The outcome of this process will have an impact

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<sup>1</sup> Nagl, John, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife. Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007 [2005].

on the future role of Germany in Afghanistan and within the transatlantic alliance, and it will probably shape the identity of the Bundeswehr and German security policy for years to come.

### **Research Design and Analytical Framework**

This paper is a classic policy analysis. As a qualitative case study, it applies the method of process tracing over the period 2001 to 2010. It uses elements of organizational theory and a comparison with the United States armed forces in order to analyze the learning process of the Bundeswehr with regard to COIN.

In order to assess the COIN capabilities of the German armed forces an analytical framework is chosen that represents the four pillars of COIN: shape, clear, hold, and build.<sup>2</sup> It is widely acknowledged that those are the four major strategic objectives in modern COIN, even though there is a vivid debate among politicians, military personnel, and scholars on how to achieve them. Since the achievement of all of these four strategic goals represents the dependent variables for the lasting defeat of an insurgency, the performance of the German armed forces in these four fields will be assessed. Thereby, not only the operational aspects on the ground will be discussed but also the underlying political decisions made in Berlin. For many other NATO states, the German mission in Afghanistan is affected by strict rules of engagement (ROASs) set by the German parliament that define the range of operations the Bundeswehr is authorized to conduct. Hence, the political process in Berlin has an immediate impact on German operations in Afghanistan.

### **Origins and Basic Assumptions of Modern Population-Centric Counterinsurgency**

Insurgencies and guerilla warfare have represented a problem for incumbent regimes and armed forces from the very beginning of recorded human history.<sup>3</sup> Until the end of World War II, insurgencies were usually countered with harsh use of force directed against anyone suspected of supporting the insurgents. While the results varied greatly, the suffering among the civil population was constant when this COIN approach was chosen.<sup>4</sup> In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two important political developments changed the nature of COIN. First, the communist revolution in China ultimately turned the population into the primary object of conflict in insurgency warfare. Second, human rights standards in Western states (fortunately)

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<sup>2</sup> The meaning of these strategic objectives in COIN are explained below.

<sup>3</sup> Laqueur, Walther, *Guerrilla. A Historical and Critical Study*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.

imposed considerable self-restraint with regard to the use of force in COIN operations among civilians. As early as the 1960's both of these factors became key elements in the writings of a few progressive military thinkers who developed the idea of "population-centric COIN". The three most important proponents of population-centric COIN were the French officer David Galula and the British officers Sir Robert Thomsen and Frank Kitson, whose writings represent the intellectual basis for today's COIN thinking, most prominently manifested in the COIN field manual of the US armed forces FM 3-24 issued in December 2006.<sup>5</sup>

The new approach focused no longer on fighting insurgents solely with military means. Galula and Thomson had correctly realized that it is impossible to defeat an insurgent organization that hides among the populace without alienating the people from the incumbent regime by the inappropriate use of force.<sup>6</sup> Rather it is necessary to separate the population from the insurgents physically and psychologically. Achieving the former requires the protection of the population from coercion and intimidation by the insurgent organization. Achieving the latter requires representing a political "cause"<sup>7</sup> that is more attractive than the prospect of being governed by the insurgent organization. Generally, it means the improvement of the people's living conditions. This can only be realized by backing promises with deeds, since in contrast to the insurgents' propaganda an incumbent government must deliver visible results and improvements on the ground to win over the contested support of the population.

### **Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build – In Theory**

The strategic paradigm for population-centric COIN operations became the concept of "clear, hold, and build". Though already the centerpiece of Galula's COIN theory of 1964, the concept of "clear, hold, and build" was rediscovered only in 2006. By this time, the U.S. military in Iraq had realized that its previously applied kinetic enemy-centric COIN approach was a path to failure. The consistent implementation of the new strategic approach under the intellectual auspices *and* military leadership of General David Petraeus turned the tide in

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<sup>5</sup> United States Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No.3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No.3-33.5*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [2006].

<sup>6</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency. Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger Security, 2006 [1958]; Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency. Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972 [1966]; Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations. Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency*.

Iraq.<sup>8</sup> It took the U.S. and NATO three more years until they realized that in Afghanistan, too, “clear, hold, and build” is the most expensive but only possible solution to prevent failure.<sup>9</sup> In March 2009, the newly elected U.S. president Barack Obama presented the revisited American strategy for Afghanistan, which was endorsed by all NATO states. Obama’s newly appointed ISAF commander (COMISAF), General Stanley McChrystal, became the face of the alliance’s new population-centric COIN strategy in Afghanistan, which quickly became known as the “McChrystal Strategy”.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the three pillars of “clear, hold, and build”, McChrystal added the fourth pillar of “shape”, as the first strategic objective that has to be obtained by the counterinsurgents.

The “*shape*” phase is the starting point for the COIN campaign. During this phase the necessary preparations have to be made to deploy COIN forces into the selected area of operations. Therefore, a maximum of information about the environment needs to be gathered. This includes the geographical terrain as well as the human terrain. The latter means, for example, information about the ethnic composition of the local population, the division of local power, frictions between local groups, political views, needs and grievances of the people, etc. The key to this kind of intelligence is extensive contact with the population and the local authorities and leaders. Since it is unlikely that the population is open and trustful, an open eye, vigilance, and an ability to read between the lines are required. Small detachments of Special Forces or intelligence officers with support of reliable indigenous personnel are best suited for this phase. Only with that intelligence is it possible to achieve the first strategic objective of “shaping” the environment for the deployment of COIN as well as shaping the parameters of the subsequent operational phases.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco. The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, London and New York: Penguin Books, 2007 [2006]; Robin Schroeder, “Die Sicherheitslage im Irak – Grund zur Hoffnung,” Institut für Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Kiel (Ed.), *Jahrbuch Terrorismus 2007/08*, Opladen and Farmington Hills: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2008, pp. 59-88. Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe. War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*, New York: Random House, 2008; Thomas E. Ricks, *The gamble. General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq*, London and New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos. How the War against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2008; Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, W.W. Norton, 2009; Robin Schroeder, “Terrorismus, Aufstandsbekämpfung und Wiederaufbau in Afghanistan: Eine Bilanz,” Institut für Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Kiel (Ed.), *Jahrbuch Terrorismus 2007/08*, Opladen and Farmington Hills: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2009, pp. 77-107.

<sup>10</sup> Though General McChrystal had to resign from his position as COMISAF after he had publicly criticized members of the Obama administration, the strategy is still valid.

The “*clear*” phase stands for the expulsion of the insurgents from the area of operations. Therefore, the COIN forces move into the area for capture and kill operations. Since it is unlikely that the insurgents seek open armed confrontation with the militarily superior combat troops, most of them will hide among the populace or retreat to safe havens. Once there is no open presence of the insurgent organization, the area can be considered as “cleared”. However, this situation could not last for long if the COIN forces were to leave the area after combat has ended, since the insurgents would return immediately. This leads to the strategy’s third phase.

The “*hold*” phase is the most difficult and cost-intensive one. In this stage the COIN forces have to prevent the return of the insurgents, effectively protect the population from coercion and intimidation, and demonstrate to the people that they are willing and able to keep a permanent presence among the population until indigenous security forces are able to reliably take over this task. During this phase, a “line” has to be drawn between insurgents and the population, as Thompson puts it in his theory.<sup>11</sup> The most important public service, the maintenance of the population’s physical security, has to be provided as a sine-qua-non condition for all following efforts to win the people’s trust and support. To achieve this crucial strategic objective, vast numbers of COIN forces are needed to reach a necessary minimum-degree of presence among the people. This requires “vast efforts and means”<sup>12</sup>; in other words, it is costly in blood and treasure.

The last stage of the strategy, the “*build*” phase begins simultaneously with the “hold” phase. In addition to the effective protection of the population, the local people’s support also needs to be gained by improving their living conditions. In this way the people develop personal stakes in the rule of the incumbent regime. As a consequence, they begin to actively support the government, which assumes that the security forces can provide the required minimum of security. One of the most important elements of the hold phase is the handing over of responsibility to the indigenous authorities. In many cases this requires the build-up of administrative structures in the forefront. No less important is the well-balanced improvement of the economic infrastructure through the provision of financial aid, jobs, education, and reconstruction projects.

Once the strategic objectives of all four phases are achieved, it is possible to slowly widen the territory of operations and to apply the “shape, clear, hold, and build” approach in

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.

<sup>12</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency*.

neighboring areas where the insurgents still have a foothold. Thus, in theory, the counterinsurgents expand like an oil-spot in water, which is why the term is frequently used as a metaphor in COIN strategy.<sup>13</sup>

### **Germany and Counterinsurgency from a historical perspective**

When discussing the German military engagement in Afghanistan, observers often argue that Germany does not have any experience with insurgencies and irregular warfare. Germany did not rule a large colonial empire like Britain or France and thus did not encounter colonial uprisings and insurgencies as frequently as the latter European powers. Germany also never fought a COIN campaign during the cold-war era, in contrast to, e.g., the United States, Russia, France, and Britain. However, during World War II the *Wehrmacht* (armed forces) was confronted with insurgencies in almost all countries occupied by Germany. In addition to the German anti-partisan-campaigns from 1940 to 1945, the colonial troops of the German empire fought an insurgency in South-West Africa (which began in 1893) and during World War I.<sup>14</sup>

From 1904 until 1907 German colonial troops brutally smashed the uprising of the Herero and Nama tribe in the former colony of German Southeast Africa, which is present day Namibia. The military campaign against the rebelling tribes resulted in a genocide. So many as 85,000 Herero and 10,000 Nama lost their lives. Most of them died of thirst, when they were forced to flee into the dry Omaheke-Dessert.

During the course of World War I, German troops conducted two major COIN campaigns. The first one was a draconic reaction to sporadic attacks on German forces by irregular fighters as well as groups of French and Belgian soldiers isolated behind the enemy lines in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Belgium and northern France. An uncertain number of (estimates are as high as 6,000) civilians died in brutal collective punishment operations from August to November of 1914, which actually ended civilian resistance in the occupied areas behind the frontline.<sup>15</sup> The second campaign was directed

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<sup>13</sup> For the first time, the oil-spot-metaphor was used by the early French general and counterinsurgency-strategist Joseph-Simon Galliéni. Joseph-Simon Galliéni, *Neuf ans à Madagascar*, Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1908, p. 326.

<sup>14</sup> This part of the paper draws extensively from: Peter Lieb, "Few Carrots and Lots of Sticks: German Anti-partisan Warfare in World War Two," in: Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Eds.), *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, Oxford: Osprey 2008, p. 57-77.

<sup>15</sup> John Horne and Allan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

against a Bolshevik insurgency in the occupied Ukraine in 1918. After the German military leaders realized that the “standard approach” of sheer force would never lead to a lasting stabilization, the German army began to cooperate closely with the Ukrainian administration and to engage the local population. Since popular support for the Bolshevik insurgents was not very strong, this COIN campaign was quite successful. From May 1918 until the German withdrawal in November, the insurgency was countered effectively and a calm situation could be established. This almost unknown German COIN campaign can be considered as a first example of modern population-centric COIN and as proof of the superiority of this approach to the exclusive reliance on force.<sup>16</sup>

In the period between the World Wars irregular warfare did not play a role in German military thinking. Lessons learned like during the Ukraine COIN campaign were largely forgotten (a mistake that would be repeated by many other armies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century). After the German *Wehrmacht* had invaded the largest part of continental Europe, insurgencies of local, regional, and national resistance organizations followed swiftly. The subsequent German anti-partisan warfare evolved into one of the longest and most awful series of war crimes in modern history. On the Eastern Front, where the anti-partisan war was deeply entwined with Hitler’s ideological war of eradication against “Judeo-Bolshevism”, the brutality against the civil population was immense. The collective punishment of civilians and mass killings were regular practice.<sup>17</sup> On the Western Front, the anti-partisan war was not ideological and good intelligence enabled more targeted killing and capturing of resistance fighters, but indiscriminate killings happened here as well.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, the *Wehrmacht* developed in its struggle against partisans some techniques that were copied in other COIN campaigns later on. One of them, for example, were the platoon-sized *Jagdkommandos* (hunting detachments) that conducted kill-and-capture operations almost identically to the U.S. task forces operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another technique was the establishment of so called *Wehrdörfer* (fortified villages) in areas with cooperative/neutral populations, which were enabled to defend

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Lieb, “A Precursor of Modern Counter-Insurgency Operations? The German Occupation of the Ukraine in 1918,” in: *Working Papers in Military & International History* No. 4, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance: Hannes Heer, „Die Logik des Vernichtungskrieges - Wehrmacht und Partisanenkampf,“ Hannes Heer und Klaus Naumann (Eds.): *Vernichtungskrieg - Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995, pp. 104-13.

Philipp W. Blood, *Hitler’s Bandit Hunters. The SS and the Nazi Occupation of Europe*, Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Yet, those were exclusively conducted by SS troops. Lieb, “Few Carrots and Lots of Sticks”.

themselves against the partisans. The partisan organizations in World War II were also notorious for their brutal and intimidating policies toward the civil population. Finally, the general idea of building indigenous forces for COIN was implemented by the creation of pro-German militias and paramilitary *Selbstschutz* (self-protection) units.<sup>19</sup> In sum, however, the German anti-partisan-operations were characterized by utmost brutality. Winning over the hearts and minds of the population barely played a role. Instead, the collective punishment of civilians to deter them from (further) collaborating with partisans was the primary approach to reduce popular support for the insurgents.

The countless war crimes against civilians committed by the German military during World War II are a central element of Germany's collective guilt in the post-war era. From 1945 until today it contributed significantly to the dismissive and suspicious stance on everything related to the military in large parts of the German population. The armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany, the *Bundeswehr*, which entered service in 1955, operated under a strictly defensive and conventional doctrine. From 1955 to 1991, the only operational scenario the *Bundeswehr* trained for was the repulsion of military aggression by the Warsaw-Pact. Hence its spectrum of operational capabilities was completely focused on large-scale conventional war fighting in concert with other NATO armies. Unconventional warfare and operations against irregular fighters in civilian environments, i.e., COIN, were not only entirely disregarded due to the *Bundeswehr's* exclusive doctrinal focus but were also a taboo in German military thinking due to Germany's uneasy history with this kind of war.

### **Operational Experience of the Bundeswehr after the German Reunification**

The end of the East-West-Conflict and German reunification necessitated a general realignment of Germany's security policy and the military's operational spectrum. One of the most significant changes was the participation of German forces in out-of-area missions, i.e., deployments beyond NATO territory. As early as 1992, German medical units were deployed to Phnom Penh within the framework of the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) in Cambodia. It was the first German military operation under a UN-mandate. From 1993 to 1994 German forces were part of the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II). As in Cambodia, the *Bundeswehr* was primarily involved in humanitarian assistance. However, since the scope of the mission was much broader, and involved the deployment of paratroopers for force protection, it required a legal basis for German military operations

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<sup>19</sup> Lieb, "Few Carrots and Lots of Sticks".

abroad. The new *Auslandsverwendungsgesetz* (foreign deployment law), enacted by the German parliament on July 28, 1993, became the legal basis for German out-of-area missions.

Before 2001, the major theatre for German foreign deployments was the Balkans.<sup>20</sup> After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Germany became one of the most important troop contributors for peacekeeping operations under UN mandate in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo from 1995 until the present time. The missions in the Balkans were essentially defined by the tasks of peacekeeping, stabilizing, and state-building. Those types of operations significantly shaped the self-perception of the Bundeswehr as well as the public image of the German armed forces. Until today German ground troops deployed in the Balkans had to use force only sporadically and in most of the cases in self-defense. In contrast to combat operations, non-violent peacekeeping and stabilization operations did not generate much opposition in German politics. The missions in the Balkans contributed to humanitarian relief, political stability, and general progress. Indeed, the peacekeeping and stabilization missions in the Balkans can be considered a success. Thus, they became Germany's blueprint for its contribution to ISAF.

### **The German Engagement in Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, Germany participated in military operations from the very beginning, first under the mandate of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and later as part of ISAF. In December 2001, just two months after the first American commandos entered Afghan soil, one hundred German Special Forces (*Kommando Spezialkräfte*) were deployed to Kandahar. From here, they conducted reconnaissance as well as capture and kill operations alongside U.S., British, and French Special Forces to root out the Afghanistan-based al-Qaida-network. As part of OEF, German Special Forces remained in Afghanistan even though they were secundered for rather unimportant tasks. Their presence was primarily a political symbol of German solidarity with the United States.<sup>21</sup> Much more than ISAF, the OEF lacked public support in Germany from the beginning. Since the anti-terrorism campaign OEF is synonymous with the "Global War on Terror", it was largely seen by Germans as U.S. President George W. Bush's private vendetta against Islamic extremism. Particularly in the aftermath of the controversial invasion of Iraq, the American "Global War on Terror" became

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<sup>20</sup> See Andreas M. Rauch, *Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2006, pp. 140-195.

<sup>21</sup> Uli Rauss, „Kommando Spezialkräfte - Die Profis, *Stern online*, 13.11.2004

highly unpopular in Germany and was equated with the deliberate violation of human rights and international law by the U.S. In 2008, the German parliament decided to officially end the German OEF participation in Afghanistan. Thereby the German parliament set a clear political signal to the voters that it would no longer support the “bad”, i.e. offensive, OEF mandated operations in Afghanistan, and instead focuses exclusively on the “good” ISAF mandate, which the German government always presented as a peaceful stabilization mission in support of the state building and reconstruction process.<sup>22</sup>

Germany played a central role in creating ISAF, most importantly during the Afghanistan Conference in Bonn from November 27 to December 5, 2001. By highlighting the proposed mission’s character as a concerted civilian-military effort for stabilizing and reconstructing the post-Taliban Afghanistan, Germany clearly sought to distance itself to OEF.<sup>23</sup> Here, the German armed forces were supposed to continue what they have successfully done in the Balkans since 1995. On December 20, 2001, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 authorized ISAF, which began operations in the Kabul area in early 2002. In August 2003, NATO took over leadership of ISAF, thus ending the problematic system of a national ISAF command that rotated every six months. Also in 2003, the coalition realized that it made no sense to concentrate the state building efforts solely in the Kabul area, while the rest of the country was falling into chaos, under the control of local warlords or, once again, under the rule of Taliban shadow governments returning from Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> In October 2003, UN Security Council Resolution 1510 extended ISAF’s mandate to cover the whole of Afghanistan thus expanding the mission throughout the country. At the same time Germany took command of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the North-Afghan city of Kunduz. Kunduz became the first PRT under ISAF mandate, thereby representing the first step of ISAF’s expansion. At this point in time the other eight PRT’s in Afghanistan operated under OEF mandate.<sup>25</sup>

In the fall of 2004 the ISAF mission stretched all over North-Afghanistan by establishing four more PRTs in Mazar-e-Sharif, Meymana, Baghlan, and Feyzabad. The latter became the second PRT under German command. From the beginning, the German PRT

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<sup>22</sup> Ansgar Graw, „Gutes ISAF-Mandat, böse OEF-Mission,“ Welt Online, September 20, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Lutz Holländer, „Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr: Bilanz und Perspektive,“ in: Joachim Krause and Jan C. Irlenkaeuser (Eds.): *Bundeswehr – Die nächsten 50 Jahre*, Opladen Barbara Budrich, 2006, pp. 225-236, here p. 234.

<sup>24</sup> See: Rashid, Ahmed, *Descent Into Chaos*; Giustozzi, Antonio, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop. The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Today, there are 27 PRTs in Afghanistan which operate all under ISAF mandate.

concept represented a different type of PRT compared to the PRTs run by the U.S. and the British under the OEF mandate. The American and British PRT's were primarily military assets. They focused on establishing a minimum of security in their area of operation and served as bases for hunting remnants of al-Qaida. Between 2003 and 2005, when the Taliban returned to South Afghanistan, these PRTs also became the initial point for the first classic COIN operations.<sup>26</sup> In its effort to decouple OEF and ISAF, Germany created its PRTs as bases for civilian-military reconstruction and development projects. Civilian-military cooperation (CIMIC) was a centerpiece of this agenda.<sup>27</sup> The German PRTs' major contribution to security was assistance in building up Afghan security forces. The PRTs' military firepower was merely sufficient for locally confined low-level peacekeeping and self-defense. The similarity to Germany's mission profile in the Balkans is undeniable.<sup>28</sup>

Against this background, Germany's choice of its area of operation is not surprising. German authorities considered the North of Afghanistan as the country's most secure and stable region. Ironically, in 2003 when Germany took over the lead of its first PRT, there was a dispute between the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense as to whether Herat or Kunduz is the safest area for which to accept responsibility. Not anticipating the negative development of the local security situation in the years to come, Germany picked Kunduz as the supposedly quietest part of Afghanistan for its ISAF contribution. Herat was considered "too dangerous".<sup>29</sup> The possibility of becoming confronted with an insurgency and substantial combat at a later point in time was fully neglected. Six years later the then COMISAF commander, General David McKiernan, stated that the two regions in Afghanistan that worried him most were the notorious Taliban stronghold of Kandahar and Kunduz.<sup>30</sup>

Until 2006 ISAF's presence in Afghanistan expanded successively from the North, to the West, to the South, and, by the end of 2006, to the East. When the British, Canadian, and Dutch ISAF troops established PRTs in South Afghanistan in summer 2006, they immediately became engaged in large-scale operations against the Taliban who had regained considerable

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<sup>26</sup> Barno, David W., "Fighting 'The Other War'. Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan, 2003-2005," *Military Review* (September-October, 2007): 32-44.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Paul, *CIMIC and the ISAF Mission. Conception, Implementation, and Development of Civil-Military Cooperation of the Bundeswehr Abroad*. SWP Research Paper. Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> PRT Studien.

<sup>29</sup> Holländer, „Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr,“ p. 234.

<sup>30</sup> Julian Reichelt and Jan Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten! Wie Politik und Bundeswehr die Wahrheit über Afghanistan vertuschten*, Köln: Fackelträger, 2010, p.41.

strength in this region.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, Germany had assumed responsibility for the Regional Command North (RC-N). The nine provinces that RC-N comprises were still quiet and relatively stable. Germany's decision to lead RC-N and become the third largest contributor of troops at that time reflected the policy of taking over as much responsibility in the calm provinces, while avoiding becoming engaged in combat operations in the South. The fighting was left to American, British, Canadian, Danish, and Dutch troops as well as the emerging Afghan security forces.<sup>32</sup>

Despite repeated requests by the NATO allies operating in the South, the German government refused to send combat troops to the hotspots of the growing insurgency and concentrated on assisting the reconstruction efforts in the North. The refusal of Germany and most of the other European NATO states to engage in combat operations against the insurgents led to a considerable dispute within the transatlantic alliance. However, the "grand coalition" consisting of Germany's two biggest parties (Conservatives and Social Democrats), which comprised the German government from 2005 until 2009, knew that participation in combat operations would lead to vast domestic opposition. Thus, the coalition mitigated the political pressure by the allies who carried the burden of fighting in the South with a series of smaller acts of accommodation. These included

- a stepwise but constant build-up of troop-strength in the North;
- general allowance to deploy German forces for a limited period of time to other parts of Afghanistan in cases of emergency in September 2006 (which has not occurred to date);
- the dispatch of six Tornado reconnaissance jets in April 2007 (their use is strictly limited to ISAF operations);
- the redeployment of Special Forces in fall 2007 (under ISAF mandate),<sup>33</sup> and;
- the replacement of the Norwegian Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for the RC-North with slightly more than 200 German combat troops and *Marder* 1 A5 infantry fighting vehicles in summer 2008.

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<sup>31</sup> Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance: Judy Dempsey, "NATO Falling Short, General Says," *New York Times*, September 8, 2006; Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*, Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*; Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008

<sup>33</sup> Timo Noetzel and Thomas Rid, "Germany's Options in Afghanistan," in: *Survival*, 51:5 (October 2009), p. 71-90, here p.84.

The stepwise strengthening of Germany's military presence in North-Afghanistan put Germany in a position in which the critique that it does not provide enough resources for the ISAF mission was absolutely unjustified. However, the way Germany used its available resources was shortsighted and replete with flaws, because Berlin refused to accept realities on the ground. This was a major factor that enabled the insurgency to slowly take hold in the North beginning in 2008.

### **Insurgency in Denial**

The deterioration of the situation in North-Afghanistan began in 2008, and turned particularly worse in 2009. Kunduz province became a hotbed of the insurgency. Road-bomb incidents increased, direct fire attacks increased, suicide attacks occurred, and the German PRT was frequently shelled with rockets. Reconstruction projects had to be cancelled, girls' schools were closed by the insurgents, Afghan policemen and locals cooperating with the Afghan government or ISAF were threatened, tortured, or executed, and the Taliban established shadow governments and Sharia-jurisdiction as they had in the South before. The frequency of those events grew slowly but constantly.<sup>34</sup> Neither the German forces onsite nor the German government was prepared for such a development in this supposedly secure region. While the German forces could not respond adequately to the realities on the ground for a long time due to restrictions imposed by Berlin, the government itself followed a policy of denial or – even worse – deliberate misinformation of the public, despite better knowledge of the situation.<sup>35</sup>

Until late 2009 the government, the Foreign Ministry, and the Ministry of Defense, then led by the hapless and passive Minister Franz-Josef Jung, insisted on the public-policy dogma of state building in Afghanistan. The terms “war” was systematically avoided, and in response to journalists' queries, repeatedly denied, even though German soldiers were dying by hostile fire.<sup>36</sup> Also, a constructive discussion on how to alter the situation failed to appear. The government preferred to present the insurgents as “terrorists”, “criminals”, or “anti-government elements”,<sup>37</sup> thereby avoiding two things: first, admitting that the German forces in Kunduz were in fact confronted with a well organized and widespread insurgency; second,

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<sup>34</sup> Marc Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss. Warum Deutschland am Hindukusch scheitert*, Berlin: Econ, 2010; Reichelt and Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten!*; Stefan Klein, “Augen auf und durchhalten,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 8, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Reichelt and Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten!*; Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss*.

<sup>36</sup> Reichelt and Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten!*; Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss*.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance: “Jung sieht kritische Lage für die Bundeswehr,” *Welt Online*, 22.07.2009.

addressing this problem with an adequate strategy. German politicians were reluctant to use the English term “counterinsurgency”, because “counterinsurgency/COIN”, if known at all, was largely equated with the U.S. strategy in Iraq. However, particularly during George W. Bush’s term in office, the U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan was generally negatively connoted in large parts of the German society.<sup>38</sup> Afraid of their voters’ misinterpretation of COIN, German politicians refused to use this term officially until 2010. Their dilemma was that the German translation of COIN is *Aufstandsbekämpfung* or – even worse – *Partisanenbekämpfung*. Both terms were used in the German military until 1945 and thus were, as explained above, a taboo in German security policy and military strategy for the last fifty years. This raised a significant hurdle for a policy-change in Afghanistan from peacekeeping and reconstruction to COIN.

The spread of the insurgency to North Afghanistan, and to Kunduz in particular, has various reasons. First, even though Afghanistan’s North is ethnically dominated by ethnic Tajiks, there are several places around Kunduz that are inhabited by Pashtuns who make up the ethnic majority among the Taliban. There are longstanding family ties between these “Pashtun pockets” in Kunduz province and the Taliban heartland around Kandahar. Here, the insurgents found some support when they trickled into the North. Second, awareness of Germany’s reluctance to send its troops into combat, a high domestic sensibility for casualties, the declining domestic support for the German engagement in Afghanistan, and a generally lower presence of security forces directed the insurgent’s attention to North Afghanistan. Third, since the insurgents in the South came under immense military pressure due to American troop increases, they were seeking a second, less dangerous front. Fourth, the insurgency in the North received increasing material aid from Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> However, regardless of these factors, Germany, itself, was in many aspects responsible for the deterioration of the security situation.

### **Operational and Institutional Shortcomings**

Two successive German governments (Social Democrats and Greens from 2002 until 2005; Conservatives and Social-Democrats from 2005 until 2009) refused to take Germany’s mandate as a *security* assistance force seriously. For the longest time, the political

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<sup>38</sup> Compare the German public’s mistrust towards Operation Enduring Freedom.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazetti, “Taliban Widen Afghan Attacks from Base in Pakistan,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2009.

unwillingness to see German soldiers engaged in combat led to policies that rendered the *Bundeswehr* almost useless as a security provider. Until July 27, 2009, the German rules of engagement did not allow the *Bundeswehr* to take offensive military actions.<sup>40</sup> Force-protection, i.e., the physical safety of the soldiers, had highest priority. With the deteriorating security situation, the operational radius of the patrols shrunk constantly until patrols were only conducted in immediate proximity to the fortified base or in armored vehicle convoys. And only a small fraction of the soldiers actually left the base on patrol.<sup>41</sup> Under these circumstances, the protection of the population was by no means possible. The Afghan people quickly learned that Germany's presence had some positive impact regarding reconstruction and development, but not on their physical safety. Even in closest proximity to the PRT Kunduz, the Taliban could roam and intimidate the population. Since the German forces did not safeguard the population, had not much personal contact due to insufficient dismounted patrolling, and, additionally, left the prosecution of crime to the inapt and corrupt Afghan authorities, they lost the trust of the locals and thus the most important source of intelligence in COIN warfare. The lack of human intelligence (HUMINT) was aggravated by the fact that each new contingent in Kunduz had to gather intelligence about the area almost from scratch, since the *Bundeswehr* failed for a long time to maintain an intelligence data-base on site that outlasted the rotation of its contingents. Contingents were rotating every six months and later every four months, which is actually not enough time to become familiar with the operational environment.<sup>42</sup>

Besides those operational shortcomings, the German engagement in Afghanistan also suffered from institutional problems. First, there was considerable in-fighting between the three German ministries bearing responsibility in Afghanistan: The Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Ministry, and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Particularly the Ministry of Development, until 2009 rigidly led by the leftist Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul of the Social Democrats, was a spoiler in Germany's Afghanistan policy. By maintaining an out-dated, anti-military ideology it insisted on working de-coupled from the

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<sup>40</sup> This led to constant critique of Germany's allies and also to absurd situations for German soldiers. In May 2009, for instance, German Special Forces were forced to watch a notorious Taliban commander escape, since they were not allowed to shoot him, certainly contributed to the German government's change of mind, too. See: Susanne Koelbl and Alexander Szandar, "Not Licensed to Kill. German Special Forces in Afghanistan Led Taliban Commander Escape," *Spiegel Online International*, 19 May, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss*.

<sup>42</sup> Anita Blasberg and Stefan Willeke, „Das Kundus-Syndrom“, *Zeit Online*, March 4, 2010.

Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. Since it controls the funds for development and reconstruction, there were two major consequences. First, there was a severe lack of cooperation and coordination between the Ministries and the soldiers and development workers on the ground. Second, since the German forces did not have a sufficient budget to facilitate small-scale but quick reconstruction projects on their own. This would have demonstrated direct action by the German troops and led to small but visible improvements in order to gain the local population's trust and support.<sup>43</sup> Development workers rightly complained that the Bundeswehr failed to provide sufficient security around the places where development and reconstruction projects were supposed to be executed.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the German Foreign Ministry's diplomatic efforts on-site, which were supposed to back the work of the other two ministries, suffered politically from a severe shortage in personnel. Overall, the German concept of *Vernetzte Sicherheit* ("networked security"), i.e., the closely intertwined relation of security, development, and politics, turned into a farce in Afghanistan. This is somewhat ironic, since the concept *Vernetzte Sicherheit*, previously published in the German defense white paper of 2006<sup>45</sup>, is in fact nothing other than the very idea of modern COIN and could have been a strategic model for other militaries operating in Afghanistan at that point in time.

Finally, the Bundeswehr's performance in Afghanistan was hampered by the mistakes of politicians and ministries. Moreover, the Bundeswehr itself demonstrated serious organizational problems in this context. First, large parts of the "Cold War" generation of the Bundeswehr's contemporary high-ranking leadership never fully grasped the peculiarities of the asymmetric 21<sup>st</sup> century battlefield in Afghanistan. A new generation of officers who joined the German military in the post-9/11 era have a better understanding of the battlefield situation. Yet, another critical point still persists: the tendency of ignoring or not admitting even obvious problems. Admitting problems or delivering bad messages is not beneficial for a soldier's career in the German armed forces. This matter was particularly salient with regard to the rotation of the PRT commanders in Kunduz. Having command over a PRT in Afghanistan is a classic task for a senior Bundeswehr officer who is designated for a general's rank. Thus, commanders were reluctant to increase the risk for their soldiers by showing more presence in the field. Rather, they opted for a maximum of force protection until their term of

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<sup>43</sup> Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss*; Timo Noetzel, "Germany," Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (Eds.), *Understanding Counterinsurgency. Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges*, London: and New York: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Noetzel, "Germany."

<sup>45</sup> German Ministry of Defence, *White Paper 2006 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*, BMVg: Berlin, 2006.

command was over. This was another contradiction to the logic of COIN and contributed to the policy of denial by the government and the Ministry of Defense. Critique and demands coming from the bottom up, i.e., the troops on the ground, did not have much influence on the authorities in Berlin.<sup>46</sup>

### **A Late Wake-up in 2009 – The Bundeswehr Learns to Fight**

The rapid deterioration of the security situation in Kunduz finally paved the way for policies that were more appropriate to the realities on the ground. The nature of ISAF's operations in North Afghanistan shifted from stabilization and reconstruction to offensive action in late 2007. When large parts of Germany's area of responsibility were lost to the Taliban, the Bundeswehr conducted its first ground offensive since World War II. From October to November 2007, Operation *Harakete Yolo* was conducted to clear Taliban controlled areas in Badakhshan province where Germany runs the PRT Feyzabad. Even though the offensive was under German command, Bundeswehr soldiers conducted only reconnaissance and support operations. The combat troops were provided by the then Norwegian QRF and Afghan security forces. Another offensive characterized by similar task-sharing was operation *Karez*, which cleared areas in the provinces of Faryab and Badghis in May 2008.

In the first half of 2009, the situation around Kunduz deteriorated so far that Germany finally – and also for the first time since 1945 – sent its own combat troops into a ground offensive in July 2009. Operation *Oqab* was a joint operation including Afghan forces, some Belgian forces, and U.S. close air support. However, this time Germany was not only in command but also sent the German QRF (which had replaced the Norwegian QRF) into battle. The QRF alongside additional infantry from PRT Kunduz were engaged in heavy fighting on the ground, which included the use of Marder tanks and mortars. In the immediate aftermath of Operation *Oqab* the German government ultimately realized that the restrictive ROAs, which only allowed the use of force for self-defense, were no longer adequate. Since July 27, 2009, German soldiers are officially allowed to conduct offensive operations.<sup>47</sup>

With the alteration of Germany's ROAs Bundeswehr operations changed significantly. Now, patrolling could be more aggressive and deadly force could be used during raids. However, Germany's tougher approach did not demonstrate significant results. As in the

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<sup>46</sup> Reichelt and Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten!*; Blasberg and Willeke „Das Kunduz Syndrom.“

<sup>47</sup> Matthias Gebauer, „Neue Regeln für Afghanistan-Einsatz: Bundeswehr darf jetzt schneller schießen,“ *Spiegel Online*, July 27, 2009.

South of the country, areas cleared by offensive operations could not be held once ISAF forces withdrew.<sup>48</sup> Since the Bundeswehr's operations were "more conventional and less political than counter-insurgency"<sup>49</sup>, they were in fact enemy-centric and not population-centric. As a result, the security of the population could not be improved significantly. The number of German combat troops was simply too small to ensure around-the-clock presence even around population centers close to the PRTs. At least one more battalion was needed.

The dilemma of the German forces, which now were permitted to fight the insurgents, but did not have the resources to deal them a decisive blow, suddenly became public in the early morning of September 4, 2009. Taliban fighters had hijacked two fuel trucks that were stuck in the river bed of the Kunduz River. The insurgents were surrounded by villagers who were allowed to draw off fuel from the trucks, yet the German intelligence failed to recognize the civilians. The German PRT commander, who saw the chance to take out a large group of more than one hundred insurgents at once, finally requested two U.S. fighters for an air strike. At the end of the day 142 people had died, more than a half of whom were civilians. The Kunduz air-strike incident had various consequences.

First, Germany drew heavy criticism from ISAF Commander Stanley McChrystal. McChrystal was appointed ISAF Commander only three months before the incident. In accordance with the U.S. COIN doctrine, he had issued a guideline to avoid civilian casualties by all means. Now, Germany was accused by the U.S. of the disproportional use of force and for not acting in accordance with NATO's COIN strategy. Second, attempts to downplay the incident in the German Ministry of Defence led to the resignation of Minister Jung and the German Chief of Staff, General Wolfgang Schneiderhahn. Both were known for their passivity and denial of realities in Afghanistan. Third, the whole incident directed the German public's attention to Afghanistan. In the subsequent weeks a broad public finally became aware of the deteriorating security situation and the difficulties the German troops were facing in Afghanistan. The German government could no longer conceal the realities on the ground. Fourth, against this background, the German government and particularly Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, the new Minister of Defence, decided to address the topic of Afghanistan more openly.<sup>50</sup> The public policy of the Ministry of Defence became more informative, and the

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<sup>48</sup> Matthias Gebauer and Shoib Najafizada, „Blitz-Comeback der Taliban,“ *Spiegel Online*, August 1, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Winfried Nachtwei, quoted in Noetzel and Rid, „Germany's Options in Afghanistan,“ p.85.

<sup>50</sup> Reichelt and Meyer, *Ruhet in Frieden, Soldaten!*.

debate about the German engagement in Afghanistan more candid and realistic.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the strategic concept of population-centric COIN and its implementation by the Bundeswehr appeared on the German government's agenda for the first time. Berlin began to realize that neither development and reconstruction efforts alone nor repeated military offensives without holding the ground can bring security to Afghanistan.

### **A Paradigm Shift in 2010 – The Bundeswehr Learns COIN**

NATO's shift from actually having no real strategy in Afghanistan to a COIN strategy began when U.S. president Barack Obama took office in January 2009. From the beginning, the war in Afghanistan, which in many ways President Bush neglected, became a foreign policy focus of the Obama administration.<sup>52</sup> In March 2009 Obama presented a new strategy that was in full accordance with the principles of population-centric COIN, which had been successfully applied in Iraq. During a meeting of the NATO defense ministers in Bratislava in October 2009, the new COIN strategy was personally presented by General McChrystal and unanimously endorsed by all 26 NATO states.<sup>53</sup> Thus, in the forefront of the Afghanistan Conference in London in January 2010, the "McChrystal Strategy" became the transatlantic alliance's joint strategic concept for Afghanistan. The general goal of assisting the Afghan security forces in providing security was rendered more precise by the concrete strategic objective of holding cleared territory in order to safeguard the population.

Since the beginning of 2010 the German Ministry of Defence under Minister zu Guttenberg embarked on a public policy that advocates the necessity and implications of McChrystal's strategy. The Ministry openly provides information on the concept of "shape, clear, hold, and build", on the importance of safeguarding the people, and on combat operations and the risks for the soldiers involved. Finally, the Ministry ceased to clumsily paraphrase the term "counterinsurgency". It accepted the fact that there is no adequate German term that would not sound awkward or point in the direction of Germany's uneasy

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<sup>51</sup> This became particularly apparent by the information provided on the website of the Ministry of Defence.

<sup>52</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*; Schroeder, „Terrorismus, Aufstandsbekämpfung und Wiederaufbau in Afghanistan.“

<sup>53</sup> Tom Shanker and Mark Landler, "NATO Ministers Endorse Wider Afghan Effort," *New York Times*, October 23, 2009.

historical experiences with irregular warfare. Instead, the Ministry agreed to simply adopt the English term “counterinsurgency/COIN”.<sup>54</sup>

The new strategic thinking of the German government materialized in four remarkable alterations of its Afghanistan policy and the Bundeswehr’s operations on the ground. First, the Bundeswehr actually began to “hold” territory. This was reflected by the installation of permanent, manned Combat Outposts (COPs) in previously cleared areas.<sup>55</sup> This had already occurred in Kunduz province in January. In the immediate aftermath of the offensive operation *Gala-e Gorg*, COPs were installed in the district of Chahar Darah, which was previously under full control of the Taliban.<sup>56</sup> The installation of the COPs was combined with engaging the local population in the Bundeswehr’s “cash for work” program.<sup>57</sup> The permanent garrisoning of the COPs was facilitated by the deployment of an additional infantry battalion to Kunduz in January.

Second, the Bundeswehr adopted the American concept of “partnering”. This means that the training of Afghan soldiers by German forces is no longer confined to barracks and drill grounds. Now, German forces patrol and fight side by side with their Afghan partners and thus train them directly on the battlefield.<sup>58</sup>

Third, German forces are now supposed to “go in expanse” (*in die Fläche gehen*), i.e., to conduct joint Afghan-German patrolling in a broader area in order to expand the presence of security forces.<sup>59</sup> For this purpose, Germany created a new type of battalion designed for COIN operations. Two of these intricately labeled “Training and Protection” Battalions (*Ausbildungs- und Schutzbataillone - ASB*) will be fielded.<sup>60</sup> Each battalion is six hundred men strong. The first ASB, stationed in Kunduz, commenced operations in early August.<sup>61</sup> The second ASB, stationed in Mazar-e-Sharif, will be operational in October. The military

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<sup>54</sup> See for instance the ministry’s official announcement of the Bundeswehr’s new COIN strategy: German Ministry of Defence press release: “Vorgestellt: Die Counterinsurgency-Strategie für Afghanistan,” June 7, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Noetzel. „Germany“.

<sup>56</sup> Matthias Gebauer, „Bundeswehrsoldat bei Gefecht in Taliban-Hochburg verletzt,“ *Spiegel Online*, January 29, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> German Ministry of Defence press release, „Cash for Work – Mit der Angst im Nacken Träume verwirklichen,“ February 1, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Veit Medick, „Partnering-Strategie in Afghanistan – Mehr Risiko, mehr Kampf, mehr Tote,“ *Spiegel Online*, April 16, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> *In die Fläche gehen*,

<sup>60</sup> German Ministry of Defence press release, „Schutz- und Ausbildung: Schwerpunkte in Afghanistan,“ August 9, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> German Ministry of Defence press release, „Partnering: Ausbildungs- und Schutzbataillon in Kunduz aufgestellt,“ August 3, 2010.

assets of an ASB clarify its purpose as a forceful instrument to clear and hold territory. It consists of both paratroopers providing agility during operations as well as mechanized infantry and Marder tanks providing a surplus of protection and firepower. The combination of both types of troops is part of new German tactics for COIN operations in villages and in urban environments.<sup>62</sup> The long disputed deployment of three PzH 2000 self-propelled Howitzers to Kunduz in May also contributes to COIN operations, since German forces now can rely on immediate fire support within a radius of 40 kilometers around the PRT.<sup>63</sup> This broadens the operational range of patrols but artillery is certainly not an instrument for a lasting improvement of the security situation. It can only count as an asset for emergency situations.

Fourth, the electoral victory of the coalition of the Conservatives and Liberals in September 2009 brought considerable change to Germany's reconstruction and development policy in Afghanistan. The German Development Ministry's previous policy of a consequent de-coupling of civilian reconstruction projects and military projects, which completely contradicted the PRT and CIMIC concepts, was abandoned. Instead, the new Minister Dirk Niebel announced a policy of effective coordination and cooperation and concerted action.<sup>64</sup> Also, the ministry's financial support for projects of German NGOs in Afghanistan will be continued only if the NGOs operate within the boundaries of RC Kabul or RC-N and if their work is in accordance with the Bundeswehr's strategic objectives.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the German-led ISAF troops in North-Afghanistan were massively strengthened by the deployment of 2,500 U.S. forces. This reinforcement is part of the U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan and a specific reaction to the deterioration of the security situation in the North. The bulk of the American forces is stationed at a newly installed Forward Operations Base (FOB) in Kunduz, which is twice the size of the neighboring German PRT.<sup>66</sup> Beside a vast increase of ISAF forces in general, the presence of the U.S. troops has three important impacts on German operations. First, the build-up of Afghan security forces will be accelerated significantly since 1,000 of the 2,500 U.S. forces are assigned as trainers for the

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<sup>62</sup> German Ministry of Defence press release, „Schützenpanzer Marder: Das 20-Millimeter Argument“, August 3, 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Bärbel Krauß, „Bundeswehr rüstet auf am Hindukusch“, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, August 4, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> „Entwicklungspolitik – Niebel will Afghanistan-Hilfe an Bundeswehreinsatz koppeln“, *Zeit Online*, December 28, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Petra Bornhöft, „Afghanistan – Hilfsorganisationen streiten mit Niebel“, *Spiegel Online*, July 24, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Mathias Gebauer, „Afghanistan Surge. US to Send 2,500 Soldiers to German-Controlled Area“, *Spiegel Online International*, April 1, 2010.

Afghan army and police. Thus in the coming months more indigenous forces will operate alongside ISAF. Second, as in the South, the U.S. forces conduct targeted killings of the insurgent leaders, which has taken out a large number of senior Taliban in the North. The German ROAs do not allow deliberate targeted killings, but the German government does not criticize these U.S. operations, which could break the momentum of the insurgency in the North. Third, the U.S. reinforcement in Kunduz includes transport-, attack-, and Medevac-helicopters. This fills a serious gap of tactical airlift capabilities, since previously the German forces in the North suffered from a severe shortage of helicopters. A particularly important improvement is that in contrast to German helicopters U.S. helicopters can operate at night. Apache attack helicopters can provide quick close-air support for COIN patrols. Transport helicopters enable rapid airlift of infantry for surprise raids. Finally, the around-the-clock availability of Medevac-helicopters allows German patrols to conduct long-distance patrols without an otherwise compulsory team of medics and a doctor in a fully equipped armored medic-vehicle.<sup>67</sup> In sum, the U.S. reinforcement in North-Afghanistan has relieved the German forces significantly and enables them to operate more effectively.

### **Analysis: Has the Bundeswehr Learned to Eat Soup With a Knife?**

The Bundeswehr's evolution in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2010, demonstrates that Germany has learned from a series of mistakes that had contributed significantly to the deterioration of the security situation in North Afghanistan. However, since the German government adopted NATO's new strategy in early 2010, the Bundeswehr is supposed to act in accordance with the concept of population-centric COIN. To assess whether Germany's strategic shift actually resulted in an adequate implementation of the strategy's principles on the ground, the Bundeswehr's COIN operations will now be analyzed according to the "shape, clear, hold, and build" framework.

#### ***Shape***

Due to its secretive nature, it is not quite clear how effective German intelligence gathering in Afghanistan is. From 2002 to 2007, when the security situation in North-Afghanistan was relatively quiet, the gathering of HUMINT was certainly easier since the German forces had considerably more contact with the local population. According to narratives, the German

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<sup>67</sup> Michael M. Phillips, „German Offensive Aims to Repair Security, Reputation,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2010.

intelligence operations did work well when the situation deteriorated.<sup>68</sup> However, to the anger and frustration of the soldiers, the intelligence often did not lead to necessary action because the German ROAs did not allow it. A classic shape operation conducted by German forces was the reconnaissance mission of 160 paratroopers in districts of Badakhshan province in 2007, which occurred within the framework of the first German-led offensive *Harakete Yolo*. Also, the redeployment of KSK Special Forces in 2007 was a clear sign of the Bundeswehr's effort to improve its capability to conduct reconnaissance operations on the ground in hostile areas.<sup>69</sup>

Since 2009 the Bundeswehr has expanded long-term patrolling to gather intelligence in more remote areas. Also, in 2008 the installation of a so-called Provincial Advisory Team (PAT) in the city of Taloqan, which can be considered a "mini-PRT" with personnel strength of about 40 soldiers and a few civilians, contributed to shaping the environment. Besides small scale CIMIC development projects, it also serves as an outpost for reconnaissance and psychological operations in Takhar province.<sup>70</sup> Also, so-called key-leader engagements with the full spectrum of Afghan local authorities contribute to gathering intelligence and to reach out to the population.<sup>71</sup>

The Bundeswehr's biggest omission concerning "shape" operations was its failure to establish an institutionalized "memory" in the PRTs. The fact that, in the aftermath of a contingent rotation, the newly arrived forces had to gather much intelligence on the local environment from scratch is stunning.<sup>72</sup> However, the Bundeswehr's overall-capacity to shape the environment for COIN operations exists. Thus the German armed forces can benefit from almost a decade of presence in North-Afghanistan.

### *Clear*

Until July 2009, clearing operations were incompatible with the German ROAs, which did not allow the use of offensive force. Since the security situation required offensive action beginning in 2007, the consequence was that Germany commanded "clear" operations like *Harakete Yolo* or *Karez*, yet it did not participate in the actual fighting. When Germany took

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<sup>68</sup> Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss*.

<sup>69</sup> Nötzel and Rid, "Germany's Options in Afghanistan."; Nötzel, "Germany."

<sup>70</sup> Carsten Boos, *Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – A Way Ahead for Germany*, Research Report Submitted to the Faculty of Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Airforce Base Alabama, 2008; Noetzel, "Germany."

<sup>71</sup> Noetzel, "Germany."

<sup>72</sup> Blasberg and Willeke, „Das Kundus-Syndrom.“

over the responsibility from Norway to provide the ORF for RC-N, it was confronted with the absurd situation of having a mechanized infantry battalion on site that was assigned for combat operations, while the German ROAs remained full of caveats. However, despite legal contradictions, the QRF was used in Germany's first offensive ground operation since 1945, when Operation *Oqab* was launched. During that offensive German combat troops were clearly acting outside the old ROAs. Realizing this, the German parliament finally voted for an immediate revision resulting in the more adequate ROAs of July 27, 2009.

The adjustment of the ROA to the realities on the ground represented a quantum-leap for Germany's Afghanistan mission and for the role of its armed forces in general. Today the Bundeswehr has significant ground combat capacities at its disposal on site and does not hesitate to apply them. Particularly, after four German soldiers were killed in combat situations in April 2010, the German government decided to increase the Bundeswehr's firepower resulting in doubling the number of Marder tanks to twenty units and in the deployment of PzH 2000 howitzers. These ground forces are supported by U.S. close-air support by attack helicopters and fighter-jets. That the German forces are generally willing to resort to U.S. airpower for the purposeful killing of insurgents was best reflected in the September 4 air strike.

Today, the Bundeswehr is willing and able to use offensive force to clear areas of insurgents. Yet, with the devastating air strike of September 4 the Bundeswehr has also learned how severe the consequences of the imprudent use of offensive force can be. Today, the security situation in Afghanistan requires a thoughtful, proportional, but decisive use of force. The last months have demonstrated that the German armed forces can act accordingly. However, since the deployment of 2,500 U.S. forces to the North, it is most likely that the Americans will take over the bulk of offensive operations. One of their major instruments for those operations has already become the U.S. Special Forces hunter/killer teams.

### ***Hold***

Holding cleared territory is the most difficult strategic objective in COIN. For ISAF, the ability to hold territory will be pivotal for success in Afghanistan. Without being able to safeguard the people, the local population can hardly be expected to support the COIN forces and the incumbent government, no matter how many other benefits they might offer. Hence,

as for all other ISAF contingents, holding territory until Afghan forces can do it effectively on their own will be the central task in the near future.

According to the current commander of PRT Kunduz, Colonel Kai Rohrschneider, the Bundeswehr strictly adheres to the principle of maintaining a permanent presence in an area once it is cleared of insurgents.<sup>73</sup> The newly created ASBs will contribute significantly to this task. In the words of a spokesman of the German Ministry of Defence: "These battalions will work to establish an enduring presence together with Afghan security forces. [The German troops] will go district by district together with the Afghan National Army to ensure that they are effective in the areas where they operate."<sup>74</sup>

However, to keep the insurgents from returning, the fielding of ASBs alone will not be sufficient. Ideally, a capable police force should be present in towns and villages around the clock. However, reliable Afghan police forces that are able to operate on their own are still rare. Thus, more permanent COPs, as in Chahar Dara district, are needed to ensure overnight presence of German forces in areas known for much insurgent activity. Also, the efforts to build up an effective police force have to be increased. The next year will be critical for the strategic objective of holding territory. In 2010 the German government has finally understood that there is no alternative option to safeguarding the population and the Bundeswehr's new approach is an urgently need step into the right direction. Even though "partnering" has become the new key-word, the German forces will have to carry a good deal of the burden until Afghan security forces will be able to successively replace German troops. At present, it is not clear how seriously the Bundeswehr takes the promise to hold ground and safeguard the people. The most effective way to achieve this aim is probably the concept of dislocating small detachments of German combat troops together with indigenous forces in police-stations and COPs like the U.S. did in Baghdad from 2006 to 2008.<sup>75</sup> However, it is unlikely that Germany will go that far, since the risk for the individual soldier would be too high as that it would be politically tolerable.

## ***Build***

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in: German Ministry of Defence press release, „Reportage: Kampfeinsatz in Kunduz,“ January 21, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in: Phillips, „German Offensive Aims to Repair Security.“

<sup>75</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*; Ricks, *The Gamble*, Schroeder, “Die Entwicklung der Sicherheitslage im Irak.”

Once the permanent presence of security forces guarantees a minimum of security for the local population, their hearts and minds have to be won. Security supplemented by visible improvements in living conditions is the key for the people's active support of the government's efforts to counter the insurgency. Actionable intelligence that enables the security forces to root out the local elements of the insurgent organization is one example of the importance of active support.

From the beginning, the Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan was designed to assist with CIMIC operations in building up the country. This is best reflected in the Bundeswehr's original PRT concept as well as in the subsequent introduction of the smaller PAT concept. However, Germany's performance regarding the "build phase" of the four-tier COIN strategy is mixed.

On the positive side, Germany contributes substantially to the development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Germany is the third largest bilateral donor nation.<sup>76</sup> To date, Germany has completed over eight-hundred reconstruction and development projects. These projects include the (re-)construction of bridges, roads, electrical power supply, etc., as well as large investments in education and jobs.<sup>77</sup> The considerable German financial aid for the improvement of the Afghan's living conditions is a powerful asset to win over the people's trust and support. However, this only works in rather safe regions like the area around Mazar-e-Sharif. In places where people have to permanently fear insurgents' reprisals, material aid cannot achieve much. The provision of physical security for the population always is the paramount service that needs to be provided before the improvement of living conditions can ultimately win hearts and minds. Given this very important qualification, be Germany's commitment to development and reconstruction in Afghanistan is very strong. On the negative side, the vast amount of money Germany spent for development and reconstruction projects was not used effectively and in accordance with a comprehensive strategic concept. Particularly poor coordination between the military and civilian reconstruction agents, which often undermined the idea of CIMIC, contributed to these shortcomings. It has yet to be seen whether the new leadership in the German Development

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<sup>76</sup> German Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, "Reconstruction and Security - Germany's Commitment to Afghanistan," last updated July 12, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> German Ministry of Defence, *Unsere Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. Für Sicherheit und Frieden. Vollständig überarbeitete Neuauflage*, Berlin: BMVg, 2009; North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *Afghanistan Report 2009*, Brussels: NATO, 2009.

Ministry will indeed pave the way for more concerted action in this field. Particularly in the dangerous areas effective CIMIC will surely remain problematic.

Finally, Germany's efforts to build up Afghan security forces are significant. Generally, the training of Afghan forces has constantly increased. German military advisors, organized in so-called Operational Mentoring and Liaison-Teams OMLTs, train the Afghan National Army (ANA). By June 2010, six German OMLTs were training and advising the ANA, in addition to partnering with Afghan combat troops.<sup>78</sup> Although the number of OMLTs available for training the ANA is hardly sufficient, the training of the Afghan police is a matter of even more concern. Here, the shortage of German civil police forces is severe. According to German law, foreign deployments of civil police can only occur on a voluntary basis, which makes it difficult to find enough policemen willing to work in Afghanistan. German military police partially fill this gap, which mitigates the problem only slightly.

Overall, despite outstanding financial commitment, Germany's performance in "build" activities is not as good as it could be. Although German public policy frequently stresses the considerable efforts to build-up the country, ranging from road-construction to police-training, the results suffer considerably from the problems explained above.

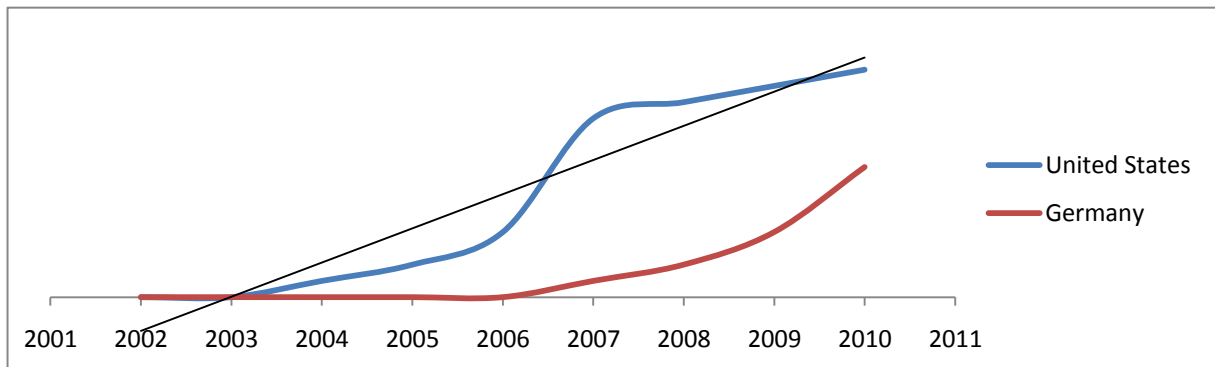
### **Conclusion: Learning Counterinsurgency – The Case of Germany**

Two conclusions regarding Germany's contribution to ISAF's COIN campaign can be drawn. First, a multitude of political failures has turned parts of Germany's area of responsibility in North Afghanistan into fertile ground for the insurgency. Second, in response to this (partially) self-inflicted deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, German politics and the German armed forces underwent a remarkable learning process. In fact, within two years Germany not only learned COIN from scratch but also broke with its historically inflicted "special status" when it comes to the use of military force on the ground. The pace of that evolution may provide some hints to the enormous political pressure of Germany's allies and the severity of the security situation. Nevertheless, it is an astonishing break with the past. This can best be demonstrated in a comparison with the COIN learning curve of the German and U.S. armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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<sup>78</sup> The OMLTs consists of 11 to 28 personnel. Together with Canada and France, Germany is the third largest OMLT contributor in Afghanistan. Great Britain and Italy provide seven OMLTs, the U.S. provide 76 similar Embedded training Teams (ETTs). See: NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) Press and Media Section /Media Operations Centre (MOC), *Factsheet: NATO's Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs)*, Brussels: NATO June 2010.

Tab. 1 COIN Learning Curve of United States and Germany



In Iraq, the U.S. forces were confronted with an insurgency commencing in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Though the insurgency was stronger than in Afghanistan at any point in time, it took the U.S. until late 2006 to respond accordingly with the implementation of the Petraeus-doctrine. For more than three years, the U.S. forces adapted only very slowly to the peculiarities of countering an insurgency, even though the U.S. had already had similar experiences with irregular warfare in Vietnam. However, once the shift in COIN thinking occurred the learning curve became very steep. Following institutionalization of the Petraeus-doctrine within the U.S. armed forces, a rigorous COIN strategy was also implemented in Afghanistan under General McChrystal's auspices. Since the leap forward in adapting to COIN, the learning process of the U.S. armed forces still continues with growing experience resulting in strategic and tactical refinements.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to the experience of the U.S. in Iraq, the situation in North Afghanistan was relatively calm for almost five years. Beginning in 2007 the German armed forces were confronted with an insurgency that gained full momentum in 2009. In 2007 the Bundeswehr had no experience with COIN, since it was an historically anathematized subject. The Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan was designed for peacekeeping and reconstruction. And the original ROAs only allowed the use of force in self-defense. These circumstances were quite unfavorable initial conditions for conducting a COIN campaign. However, even though there was no sudden and all-embracing shift in German policy, a stepwise learning process began. It started with the first German-led offensive in late 2007 and ended with the

<sup>79</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*; Ricks, *The Gamble*, Schroeder, "Die Entwicklung der Sicherheitslage im Irak."

implementation of the “shape, clear, hold, and build” concept on the ground in 2010. The process can be visualized as a less steep but constant curve within the last two years. Generally, this evolution can be considered as a huge step toward a normalization of Germany’s security policy and its relation to the use of military force.

Germany has finally adopted an adequate COIN strategy in Afghanistan. The adoption of that strategy should now lead to a decisive implementation of a corresponding doctrine within the German armed forces.<sup>80</sup> The analysis of Germany’s capabilities to operate in accordance with the “shape, clear, hold, and build” concept reveals that the Bundeswehr still faces difficulties in all four phases of the strategy. Nevertheless, today the German armed forces can operate in a way that makes it possible to achieve all four strategic objectives at least partially, i.e., in a confined area. How large this area will ultimately be remains to be seen.

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<sup>80</sup> Timo Noetzel and Martin Zapfe, “NATO and Counterinsurgency: The Case of Germany;” Christopher M. Schnaubelt (Ed.), *Counterinsurgency: The Challenge for NATO Strategy and Operations*, NATO Defense College Forum Paper Series 11, Rome, November 2009, pp. 129-151  
Florian Wätzel and Joachim Krause, “Das deutsche Engagement in Nordafghanistan,” Institut für Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Kiel (Ed.), *Jahrbuch Terrorismus 2009*, Opladen & Farmington Hills: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2010, pp. 311-339.