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Berlin Reluctant to Follow American Lead on Afghanistan

Fear of Rising Death Toll

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The German government hopes to discuss a new approach to Afghanistan at Thursday's conference in London. But the Americans see the strategy as already fixed. If Berlin adopts the new counterinsurgency methods, more German troops are likely to die -- making the operation even more unpopular back home. By SPIEGEL Staff

Important issues were being discussed on that afternoon in Abu Dhabi, including democracy in **Afghanistan**, security and reconstruction. But while the delegates in the conference room were discussing the fate of a nation, Richard Holbrooke was taking a nap. Holbrooke didn't emerge from his room until the afternoon's discussion was over. Feeling refreshed after his sleep, he was ready to discuss important issues once again.

Holbrooke, the US government's special envoy for Afghanistan, was in Abu Dhabi with representatives of 40 other countries to prepare for the major Afghanistan conference that will take place in London this Thursday. The German government saw Abu Dhabi as an important step on the road to London. Holbrooke apparently felt that his nap was more important.

At the conference, the Germans plan to discuss the new US strategy for the mission in Afghanistan. Holbrooke, however, takes a different view of the matter. The strategy for Afghanistan is already set, he said in Abu Dhabi, explaining that the purpose of the London meeting is to "implement" it.

Holbrooke's behavior creates the impression that this week is almost a complete waste of time for the Germans. The center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) will decide on its Afghanistan strategy on Monday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrives in Berlin on Tuesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel will issue an official statement on Afghanistan on Wednesday, and the conference in London takes place on Thursday. This is a lot of effort for a country that will be expected to simply accept something that has already been decided.

Sidelined

In recent months, the Germans have regarded the London conference as a key milestone in terms of the country's Afghanistan policy. They believed that the purpose of the conference was to decide on a future strategy for the country. But now the German government threatens to be relegated to a position similar to the one it held at the United Nations climate change summit in Copenhagen, where it was expected to participate in the talks but exerted little influence on the major issues. German politicians had been excited about the idea that their country could wield influence as a "medium-sized power," but the concept seems absurd now. Just as China shaped the course of the climate summit, so America dominates the debate on Afghanistan.

The weeks leading up to the London conference were also deeply humiliating for the Germans, and not just because of the arrogance of someone like Richard Holbrooke. The Americans decided to **deploy an initial contingent of 2,500 soldiers** to northern Afghanistan, and perhaps to even double that number in the future. It was a vote of no confidence in the Germans, who are responsible for the north, and the message was clear: You can't get it done, so move aside and let us take over.

"We have an enemy that wants to kill us," Mohammed Omar, the governor of Kunduz province, recently told the German news agency DPA, referring to the Taliban. He added, in a reference to the Germans and Americans respectively, "our friends observe that and don't rescue us. Now we have to ask our other friends to rescue us."

American General **Stanley McChrystal**, the commander of the NATO-led troops in Afghanistan, **told the German tabloid Bild** last week that the insurgents are trying to create a situation that is "dangerous enough that the security forces stay in their bases, stay in their armored vehicles and don't interact with the people." This is a precise description of the behavior of the German military, the Bundeswehr, in the Kunduz region, and it makes the soldiers, in McChrystal's words, "irrelevant."

A Cowardly Nation

Germany has acquired the reputation of a discredited nation, a nation incapable of waging war, a cowardly nation. It is an accusation that has been around for a long time. It was apparent when the Germans refused to take part in the first and second Iraq wars. It was apparent when the Germans requested a region that was guaranteed to be safe during the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Somalia. And it was apparent when the Germans took responsibility for what was then the relatively safe northern part of Afghanistan. Now the north is no longer safe, and the Germans are seen as too cowardly to take on the Taliban.

It is largely an unfair accusation. After the horrors of World War II, the Germans had to take an extremely cautious approach to the subject of war. For the Germans, unlike their current allies, military traditions are severely tainted by historical events. But now, almost 65 years after the end of the war, Germans are grappling with the question of how and when a democratic Germany should wage war.

Until now, the Germans had expected Afghanistan to be a clean mission in support of a worthy cause, with no bloodshed involved. Germany can now forget about that idea, after Colonel Georg Klein used fabricated information to **order an air strike** on two tanker trucks which killed up to 142 people, including civilians, on Sept. 4, 2009. It is no longer possible to separate the worthy cause from bloodshed.

'Eat, Drink and Die with the Afghans'

The strategy with which the Americans now hope to bring peace to Afghanistan after 30 years of war is called COIN, an acronym for counterinsurgency. Troops housed in barracks on the outskirts of Kabul are learning what it takes to implement the new strategy. Between the ruins of Taj Beg Palace and the crumbling remains of Darul Aman Palace, once built to house the country's parliament, the Americans have established a small base for their COIN Academy.

"We have to eat, drink and die with the Afghans," says a colonel with a clipped military haircut, a US Army trainer. In his classes, soldiers learn that their primary goal is to protect the civilian population.

To reinforce this message, US Marines, unaccompanied by tanks and not wearing bulletproof vests, march through contested areas together with Afghan soldiers, living side-by-side with the Afghans in local villages and sometimes spending the night in goat stalls.

The Bundeswehr has lost this contact with the local population in the past few years. After several attacks in 2006, then-Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung ordered that German soldiers could only leave their bases in armored vehicles. Since then, German commanders have made

sure that when their soldiers went on patrol, it would only be in large convoys. In their heavy flak jackets, helmets and protective goggles, the Germans look more like menacing creatures from Mars than friendly visitors ready to drink tea with the locals. This image is precisely what McChrystal meant with his critical remarks.

Until now, the Bundeswehr has focused mainly on its own safety in Afghanistan. If the Germans fall in line with the American strategy, this will no longer be possible, and the death toll will rise.

'The Germans Might as Well Stay at Home'

The Germans have not even been willing to follow the Afghan soldiers they train into the contested south. True "partnering," to use the American term, would require German soldiers to accompany the Afghans they have trained into all of the regions in which they happen to be needed, including contested Kandahar province. "We need regional flexibility," a senior US official said last week.

At the moment, the Bundeswehr is only permitted to come to the aid of its ISAF partners in the south in emergency situations. Former Defense Minister Jung ruled out sending German trainers to the south, because there was such a high likelihood that the Bundeswehr would become involved in combat there. "If the Germans don't want to risk their lives, they might as well stay at home," says one British colonel at ISAF headquarters.

Germany will also have to give up some of its noble objectives. No one is more aware of this than Bernd Mützelburg, Germany's special envoy for Afghanistan. When he describes the country's goals in Afghanistan, he makes little mention of Western democracy or girls' schools -- not because these goals are unimportant to him, but because he doesn't believe that they are realistic.

Negotiating with Warlords

In the end, the Afghans will have to assume responsibility for law and order in their country, and in doing so choose the approach that is right for them, says Mützelburg. His position almost led to an altercation in the foreign affairs committee of the German parliament, the Bundestag.

Mützelburg was asked whether this meant that the Western allies would be negotiating with warlords like radical Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Taliban leaders like Mullah Omar in the future. He replied that it did. This isn't Mützelburg's personal opinion, but the position of the German government. In a recent off-the-record comment, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle

said that he could support every word of Mützelburg's. But he cannot say such things in public, because it would cost him political support.

The hypocrisy of the Afghanistan debate is also evident in the West's approach to the upcoming parliamentary elections, which were originally scheduled for May 22 but which have now been postponed until Sept. 18. While the official position is that Afghanistan should develop into a democracy, the truth is that the West is not that particular when it comes to the details. After all, the West reluctantly accepted the massive election fraud that led to President Hamid Karzai's reelection.

At the conference of Afghanistan envoys in Abu Dhabi, which took place before Sunday's announcement that the elections had been postponed, there was widespread agreement that the election was taking place at an unfavorable moment. There was little time left for preparations, funds are tight, and in May, when the weather improves, the fighting will only get worse. But what to do? It wouldn't be wise to publicly call upon Karzai to violate the Afghan constitution, UN Special Envoy Kai Eide said in Abu Dhabi. That would set a bad precedent.

The envoys in Abu Dhabi agreed to leave Karzai alone, but to make it clear to him privately that it would be in the country's best interest to postpone the elections. The German government also favored this approach, and yet it cannot air its views publicly.

No Plain Speaking

This inhibition characterizes the Bundeswehr's entire operation in Afghanistan. The Germans are determined not to express their views clearly, speak plainly or debate the issues. Most of all, they are doing their best to deflect public attention away from Afghanistan, as if anything they said about the conflict would be too much for the German public to take.

Nevertheless, officials at the Defense Ministry are discussing how many additional soldiers Germany should deploy to implement the new strategy. The military leadership within the ministry believes that 1,500 more troops are needed. The Bundeswehr is already having trouble remaining within the upper limit of 4,500 dictated by its mandate.

The Defense Ministry's senior political staff considers 1,000 additional soldiers to be a good compromise. That would help Germany save face and repair the damage to its image among its NATO allies. Although Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg said that the Bundeswehr supports the "partnering" approach, he declined to mention whether this meant that soldiers would go on patrol without their armored vehicles in the future, or whether they would receive a new mandate allowing them to fight in the dangerous south. On the subject of Afghanistan, no one is willing to speak plainly when it comes to putting German troops in harm's way.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle wants to see the troop contingent remain at its current level. But even Westerwelle knows that his position will be hard to defend. At a meeting with the foreign policy experts of the various parliamentary groups on Tuesday of last week, he said that it was possible that the issue of troop levels would be raised on the sidelines of the London conference. He also said that he couldn't rule out the possibility that the government would present a new mandate to the Bundestag for its approval. But, he added, this would only be necessary if Germany planned to send more troops to Afghanistan and expand its area of operations.

Change of Language

Chancellor Merkel hopes to gain SPD support for a new mandate, even though her coalition government already has enough votes in parliament to approve the measure. Officials at the Chancellery say that this is necessary because the Bundeswehr is represented by all parties in parliament, not just those in power. In the past, the foreign missions of German soldiers have always been approved with the support of a broad social consensus, and the Merkel administration wants to keep it that way.

This puts the ball in the SPD's court. It is prepared to continue supporting the mission, but only under certain conditions. In a position paper, the Social Democrats insist that a troop withdrawal should begin in the summer of 2011 and be completed between 2013 and 2015. The party is opposed to sending more combat troops to Afghanistan or beefing up the current contingent. Instead, it wants to see the Bundeswehr focus even more heavily on training Afghan soldiers, which the SPD believes can be achieved through a redeployment of resources within the framework of the current mandate. According to the position paper, if a "modest and temporary" buildup becomes necessary, the government will have to "demonstrate the need for this and petition for it" in the Bundestag.

None of this suggests that the Bundeswehr is likely to receive a new, clear mandate. Military experts at the Chancellery and the Defense Ministry are already feverishly searching for language that could make the new challenge seem less ominous. One idea is to use the term "protective force," instead of combat troops, to describe the additional ground troops that could be sent to the Hindu Kush region after the Afghanistan conference. Meanwhile, officials at the Chancellery are thinking about replacing the unpleasant term "counterinsurgency" with "civil protection."