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What is this thing called war?

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Slowly and painfully Germany's leaders and voters are coming to terms with being at war in Afghanistan

GERMAN troops have been fighting in Afghanistan for eight years. But Germans have been slow to accept this. "Stabilisation deployment" was how the politicians described Germany's role in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), to which it is the third-largest contributor of troops. This was meant to convey the impression that the soldiers were helping Afghans build schools and dig wells rather than killing or being killed. Thus did ministers seek to reconcile Germany's duties as an ally with its instinctive pacifism, born of the horrors of the second world war.

The euphemism now lies buried beneath the rubble of reality. On April 15th the Taliban killed four and wounded five German soldiers who were escorting two Afghan battalions south of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, the main area of German operations. Three soldiers were killed on patrol two weeks earlier. In September a German commander called an airstrike near Kunduz that killed and wounded as many as 142 people, some of them civilians. This was the bloodiest action involving the German army since 1945. German war deaths now stand at 43.

In the wake of this bloodshed has come plainer speaking. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who became defence minister in October, alluded early on to Afghanistan's "warlike conditions". Now he frankly admits that Germany is at war. Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has kept her distance from its tragedies, appeared at a memorial service for fallen soldiers for the first time on April 9th. Federal prosecutors have now cast politicians'

hesitant talk of war in legal form. In siding with the Afghan government in a civil war, they ruled on April 19th, Germany is engaged in a “non-international armed conflict”. “Legally, the situation is now fully clarified,” says Claus Kress, a professor of international law at the University of Cologne.

The purpose of this new candour is twofold: to shore up support for an increasingly unpopular war and to give the armed forces a legal framework in which to prosecute it. Success on both counts matters to the entire ISAF operation. The Dutch have already said they will withdraw from Afghanistan this year. Canada plans to pull out most of its troops by 2011. The Taliban are clever enough to exploit Germany’s ambivalence by making its deployment more painful. The task for German leaders is to show that they are not the weakest link, but nevertheless to reassure voters that the pain will end soon.

Opposition to the war is rising. Some 62% of Germans want to pull out, the highest level recorded by Forsa, a pollster. But the resistance is politically passive and a cross-party consensus in favour is holding. In February the Bundestag extended the Afghanistan mandate by another 12 months and raised the number of troops that could be deployed by 850, to 5,350. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) led the government that took Germany into the war. Only the ex-communist Left Party is demanding an immediate pullout.

What happens this year and next will be decisive, says Rainer Arnold, an SPD member of the Bundestag. In the short run he expects more violence. The new ISAF tactics call for allied troops to accompany Afghan forces in joint operations, exposing them to attack. If the bloodshed continues to increase “support will fall so massively that it will be very difficult” to continue in Afghanistan, says Mr Arnold. If it ebbs, “society and my party will tolerate a few more years.”

Belatedly, the government has decided that it is wiser to defend the mission than to downplay it. On April 22nd Mrs Merkel appeared before the Bundestag to defend NATO’s plan to pacify the country alongside the Afghan army and police and then hand over responsibility for maintaining peace as quickly as possible. Mr zu Guttenberg, the cabinet’s most charismatic minister, has fashioned himself into a champion of his troops, many of whom feel they are undertrained, ill-equipped and badly led by generals schooled in fighting Soviet tanks. He has visited Afghanistan three times and ordered more equipment, including armoured vehicles and howitzers. The Americans may supply up to 70 sorely needed helicopters.

This stood Mr zu Guttenberg in good stead when he suffered the first big reversal of a dazzling career. On taking office he called the Kunduz airstrike militarily “appropriate” despite its horrific death toll. But he then reversed himself and sacked the top general and his ministry’s most senior civilian official for failing to inform him properly. They in turn have accused him of lying. Mr zu Guttenberg is expected to survive a parliamentary inquiry, thanks largely to his soldierly sheen and his popularity with voters.

Now the Kunduz airstrike has become the catalyst to help Germany redefine the Afghan operation in more warlike terms. As part of a “stabilisation” force, troops were expected

to act more like policemen in camouflage, which “drastically limited” their scope for action, says Mr Kress. That may be one reason why the relatively tranquil north has become progressively more dangerous. Germany loosened its rules of engagement last summer. But the government waited until early this year to admit that the operation qualified as an “armed conflict,” which frees soldiers to operate still more forcefully in their own defence.

The federal prosecutors seem to have endorsed this shift by deciding not to charge the German commander who had ordered in the Kunduz airstrike with war crimes. He would have been guilty only if he had known that the number of civilian casualties would be disproportionate to the military gain, the prosecutors said. Out of bitter necessity, Germany is making its peace with war.