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Mood in Northern Afghanistan Shifts against German Troops

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The situation in northern Afghanistan is deteriorating. Bomb attacks against German soldiers are increasing in frequency and force, and local ambivalence has turned into hate. The risk for Bundeswehr troops deployed in the country has increased as has the number killed.

They were carrying one of their great generals to his grave, thousands of mourners marching through the streets of the small city, chanting words of hate and trembling with rage. Gen. Mohammed Daud Daud -- the police chief for northern Afghanistan, a hero in Takhar province and an ally of NATO forces -- had died a day earlier in one of the worst Taliban attacks in a decade. The attack also killed two German soldiers and wounded German Gen. Markus Kneip, the commander of coalition troops serving as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in northern Afghanistan.

But when the crowd surged through the streets of the provincial capital Taloqan, it wasn't calling for revenge against the attackers but, rather, against those who are supposedly to blame for everything: Americans, Germans and any other foreigners. At the head of the march was a car equipped with loudspeakers. Inside, a young cleric chanted "Khariji," an umbrella term for evil directed toward the foreigners. It didn't seem to matter that the Taliban promptly and proudly claimed responsibility for the attack, or that German soldiers were among its victims.

When the mourners gathered around a walled-in area to recite the prayer for the dead, even the dignitaries who had come to the town for the funeral -- including former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and current Interior Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi -- repeated the mantra that "Afghanistan's foreign enemies" were actually behind the attack.

And then the rumor mill started churning. One of those making the rounds in the town was that the German general's female interpreter had supposedly blown herself up. In interviews, Daud's brother claimed that the general had survived the explosion but was then shot down by foreign soldiers. Even the interim hospital director, Said Amin, who had spoken with the wounded, refused to believe that the Taliban was involved. "They can't even do something like this on their own," he said. "They must've had foreign help."

The rumors were grotesque, one more implausible than the next. But the locals still believed them.

A New Environment of Mistrust

The German military, the Bundeswehr, now has two noxious enemies in Afghanistan: the rumor mill and the Taliban's improved explosives. Last Thursday, a massive bomb exploded beneath a German "Marder" infantry fighting vehicle, killing one and wounding five soldiers. The incident brought the total number of German soldiers killed thus far in Afghanistan to 52. Four have died in the last two weeks alone.

Until now, the heavily armored Marders were considered relatively safe. But the insurgents are apparently now capable of building larger bombs, and the attack last Thursday shattered the myth of the vehicle's safety, signaling a new stage in the war.

At the same time, NATO forces are growing increasingly mistrustful of the Afghan security forces. The Germans have been "partnering" with the Afghans, training them and fighting alongside them. But, on Feb. 18, an Afghan soldier shot three Bundeswehr soldiers near Baghlan. As a result, German soldiers are starting to question whether they are dealing with partners of questionable loyalty.

'An Eye for an Eye'

The attack on the Marder triggered the usual debate in Germany. Hellmut Königshaus, the commissioner for the armed forces in Germany's parliament, the Bundestag, once again called for improvements in equipment, including an armored vehicle with a robotic arm capable of removing explosive devices. Green Party national co-chair Claudia Roth demanded a fresh debate over the German strategy.

Indeed, Germany is once again at odds over the war in Afghanistan. This ironically comes at a time when the northern part of the country was supposed to be getting safer. Since 2009, American special forces have conducted nighttime "capture or kill" operations, often several times a week, though prisoners are rarely taken. Last year, they killed at least two dozen Taliban commanders in Kunduz. By last fall, half of the Taliban's leaders were dead, and most of the

remaining ones had reportedly fled to Pakistan. Some even defected to the government's side.

Likewise, coalition and Afghan troops were gradually recapturing large swaths of Taliban-held territory. They were operating in tandem with -- and rearming -- the same local militias they had tried to disarm before 2006. In early January 2011, Gen. Hans-Werner Fritz, Gen. Kneip's predecessor as the German regional commander in the north, sounded self-assured and confident of victory in a video press conference with Pentagon correspondents. "They are leaving the area," he said, in reference to the Taliban. "If they don't leave, they are killed." But Gen. Kneip, who barely escaped with his life, has now been forced to realize that this strategy can cut both ways.

In fact, instead of giving up, the Taliban simply adjusted their strategy to match that of the Americans: killing enemy leaders. On Oct. 8, 2010, the governor of Kunduz province died when insurgents detonated a bomb in a mosque during Friday prayers. On March 10, 2011, a suicide bomber blew himself up next to Abdul Rahman Sayedkhili, the provincial police chief of Kunduz. On April 15, Khan Mohammad Mujahid, the police chief in Kandahar province, died in a suicide bombing at his headquarters. And now Gen. Daud and Gen. Shah Jahan Noori, the Takhar police chief, were killed in the May 28 attack.

Indeed, a German officer describes the Taliban's new strategy as "an eye for an eye." "For each Taliban leader we kill," he says, "we can now expect an attack on a top official in the Afghan government."

The only thing that can explain the large number of deadly attacks is that the Taliban have widely infiltrated the Afghan security forces. NDS, the Afghan intelligence service, estimates there are between 130 and 150 so-called sleepers within the ranks of the Afghan National Army and the police force. They can be activated at any time for attacks against ISAF, it says, even inside camps. As an NDS representative recently told an international group of military officials, up to 7 percent of all Afghan soldiers and police officers sympathize with the Taliban, creating a reservoir of spies and assassins. And these are the troops that are supposed to guarantee security in the country beginning in 2014.

Part 2: Bigger, Better Bombs...and More of Them

The Taliban's main weapon against the Bundeswehr in northern Afghanistan has been homemade explosive devices. These bombs are now so powerful that they can penetrate the thick armor of the Marder and the Fuchs, a German armored personnel carrier. On May 25, a bomb ripped through the armored floor of a Fuchs northwest of Kunduz, killing a German captain and wounding two others.

According to an initial investigation, the bomb that destroyed the Marder consisted of about 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of explosive material that had been buried in the road. The bomb was designed so that the force of the explosion would go straight up. Soldiers report that the tank was practically torn in half. In the chaos following the explosion, it took medics an agonizingly long time to recover the wounded and dead from the tank's wreckage.

The Marder was at the head of a column of about 20 Bundeswehr vehicles. After receiving a tip from an Afghan source on May 29, the soldiers had been on a mission to search for hidden bombs. They found and defused the explosives the source had described. But then the patrol decided to search for more bombs and moved forward along the same road. When the first Marder passed the spot along the road where the bomb was hidden, the Taliban detonated it by remote control.

The design confirms a trend of bigger and more sophisticated bombs that the Bundeswehr has been seeing in northern Afghanistan in recent weeks. The number of explosive devices has also apparently increased. For example, during a patrol on May 3, a chain of hidden explosive devices caused minor damage to three German vehicles moving as part of a convoy.

A Bloody Confrontation

Another threat to German soldiers comes from the sensitivity of the local population, which already harbors little goodwill toward the foreigners. Ten days after the attack on General Daud, the Bundeswehr witnessed firsthand just how quickly the mood can shift. For years, with its wide streets shaded with plane trees, Taloqan, the capital city of Takhar province, had been considered a calmer, smaller counterpart to troubled Kunduz. The relationship with the government was relaxed, and Governor Abdul Jabar Taqwa had even praised the generosity of the Bundeswehr, calling it "one of my ministries."

On the night of May 17, a US special forces unit staged yet another raid, this time in the primarily Uzbek village of Gawmali, near Taloqan. A tailor there had allegedly provided the insurgents with vests to be used in suicide attacks. According to ISAF, the tailor's wife and daughter pointed weapons at the soldiers and did not respond to warning shots and calls. In the end, the women, the tailor and a guest were killed.

In the early morning hours, a rumor spread that "the foreigners" had killed four civilians after raping the two women. What's more, the foreigners were said to have descended upon the village for the sole purpose of spreading terror.

At about 8 a.m., a first wave of protesters marched through the streets of Taloqan carrying four bodies covered in flowered shrouds. The procession wound its way toward the foreigners at the German base. The protesters started throwing stones, but they pulled back after the Germans fired warning shots.

The next wave arrived two hours later. This time there were an estimated 2,000-3,000 people, some of whom were armed with Molotov cocktails and hand grenades. They tried to storm the German base, but Afghan guards and Bundeswehr soldiers fired on the crowd. By evening, 12 protesters were dead, and local hospitals were treating 75 people for wounds.

Caught in a Catch-22

On the following day, the Bundeswehr reported that there were "no indications that attackers had been killed by shots coming from German soldiers." But, by the next day, the message had changed. The Bundeswehr released a statement online indicating that German soldiers might have shot an attacker after all. "According to current information," the statement said, "it cannot be ruled out that one person was shot in the head-and-neck area."

A United Nations investigative report now concludes that the Bundeswehr shot and killed three attackers in Taloqan. The UN account describes the situation as follows: The mob was raging out of control, four Afghan and two German soldiers were already wounded, and the camp's generator was on fire. The Germans had applied the correct methods of escalation, first firing with signal pistols, then firing warning shots in the air and, finally, shooting at the attackers with live ammunition.

The UN calls the behavior of German soldiers "appropriate." The same conclusion is reached in the German investigative report that the Defense Ministry has kept under wraps for more than a week now, along with the images recorded by surveillance cameras at the base. Though the reports seem balanced, the Germans soldiers are still hated in Taloqan.

Still, there's no denying that they were caught in a Catch-22 situation. If they had not defended themselves, the unrest would presumably have taken the same course as an April 1 incident in Mazar-e-Sharif, where reports that an American pastor had burned a copy of the Koran in Florida drove a mob into the streets. The mob stormed the local office of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), killing three UN diplomats and four guards. Since a demonstration had been pre-announced, German commanders ordered the Nepalese guards not to shoot. The guards obeyed their orders -- until the intruders tore their weapons away and shot them.

Yet another one of the problems faced by foreign troops in Afghanistan is that President Hamid Karzai has a tendency to deftly side with the Afghan victims. He promptly sent a commission to Taloqan to investigate the attack. It offered the president's condolences to the families of the tailor and the other victims and gave each of them compensation of 50,000 Afghani, the equivalent of roughly \$1,100 (€750). Each was also promised a plot of farmland measuring 500 x 500 meters (25 hectares, or roughly 62 acres).

Of course, none of this matters much in Taloqan, where residents now believe that the foreigners are killers. Now that the local population's confidence in the foreigner aid teams has been destroyed, the last remaining German reconstruction and development workers and the entire UN staff are being withdrawn.

Part 3: An Ominous Ethnic Free-for-All

While it was the Taliban and their sympathizers who set out to kill foreigners in Mazar-e-Sharif, the unrest in Taloqan offered a taste of the power struggles of the future. Uzbeks are the largest ethnic group in the province, but the Tajiks have a grip on power and hold the most important government posts.

Some reports posit that local Uzbek warlords took advantage of a moment of anger to incite ethnic Uzbeks to riot. "It's our right to protest peacefully, isn't it?" asks Maulawi Lutfullah, the local leader of the Uzbek party Jonbesh, with a smile. But when asked what hand grenades and Molotov cocktails have to do with a supposedly peaceful protest, he keeps the smile, denies knowing where they came from and issues a threat. "If the government doesn't pay attention to us and doesn't give us any positions," he says, "we'll see what we do next!"

ISAF officers, reconstruction workers and diplomats had long believed that the reality in Afghanistan adhered to rational patterns. But after the April 1 attack in Mazar-e-Sharif, it became clear to everyone just how lethal the combination of rumors and mob power could be.

Years ago, the Taliban were the first to stir up resentment against the foreigners. In fact, they were so good at it that opposing foreigners became popular across the political spectrum. President Karzai is still playing the same game. Just a few days ago, he warned the West that Afghans would condemn Western soldiers as enemy occupiers if they killed any more civilians in airstrikes on homes.

Change...But Stay

The president's national security adviser, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, reinforced Karzai's warning. "This is his final word on this matter, and it should be taken seriously," Spanta told SPIEGEL. "If nothing changes, sentiments among the population will start turning against NATO."

When asked whether negotiations with the Taliban could help resolve the Afghan conflict, Spanta replied: "They could be helpful if Pakistan were willing to support the peace process. But that's not the case. Pakistan has a different strategy: The West is obviously weary and will soon withdraw. Then, in one or two years, Pakistan can finally move into Afghanistan and use it as a strategic area. That's what this is all about."

Despite the tension, Spanta says he wants the Germans to stay and calls the war against the Taliban "a common cause." He is also quick to point out that he is remaining in Afghanistan despite having his name on several terrorist hit lists.

Future Battles

The lesson of the last few weeks is that this war seems to grow quiet at times, only to reawaken and strike with renewed force. New vehicles and equipment will not stop this from happening, and chances are that new strategies won't either. Although a number of strategies have already been employed, they have done nothing to change the patterns in the north: relative calm lasting days or weeks, followed by a deadly attack.

The question is how much of this Germany can stomach. But a withdrawal would trigger a rapid escalation of the war. Were that to happen, German soldiers would no longer be dying -- but large numbers of Afghans would. Indeed, today's war is nothing compared to tomorrow's.

According to a Western intelligence agent in Kunduz, the goal of the Taliban leadership in

Pakistan is to conserve its forces for future battles. "They want to get them all into position for Day X," the agent says, "after the ISAF troops withdraw."