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Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: political and ethical dilemmas

Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg has clarified a bit of the German debate when he characterised the Afghanistan conflict as a "non-international armed conflict". Indeed, it is a warlike conflict. The international law differentiates between "international armed conflicts" and "non-international armed conflicts". Although "war" is no viable legal term anymore, it still exists in reality in form of organised violent conflicts between and within states. While the number of interstate violent conflicts has decreased significantly since 1945, the share of non-international armed conflicts has increased even stronger. State actors tend to confront these conflicts with counterinsurgency measures.

Counterinsurgency is a special kind of warfare combining offensive, defensive and stability activities. It aims at the victory against a seemingly weak opponent who cannot be defeated by military mean alone. The core of it is a political problem: The question of competing conceptions of order. Success is to be reached by carrot-and-stick- tactics. "Carrots" in form of rewards for those parts of the population who cooperate with the interveners and "sticks" in form of punishment, i.e. military countermeasures for those who oppose violently. Usually, it is an asymmetric conflict in which the strong one uses modern military capabilities and the weak employs all means at his or her disposal, including acts of terrorism.

The NATO-led International Stabilisation Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) was and is the counterpart of the US-led war against Al Qaida and the Taliban. Meanwhile, both missions de facto have been integrated under US command. The worsening of the security situation in North Afghanistan not only led to an increased US engagement with special force in the German-led Regional Command North. The intensified activities of the insurgents and raising pressure of the allies are increasingly pushing the German government to change emphasis from stabilisation to counterinsurgency. Accordingly, the rules of engagement for the Bundeswehr have been eased. In addition, a stronger financial and military engagement of Germany can be expected. Intensified military counterinsurgency operations might confront both Germany and the Bundeswehr with severe political and ethical dilemmas though.

As the history of counterinsurgency demonstrates, it is the oldest and most brutal form of violent conflicts. Human civilisation has witnessed a multitude of insurgencies of various kinds. Armed forces of the ruling elite almost always had the task to keep in check opposing groups and to suppress insurgencies. Before modernity counterinsurgency was usually characterized by excessive use of force. This became less with the beginning of modernity and the Age of Enlightenment, the related humanitarian norms and the differentiation of internal and external security during the rise of nation states. Nevertheless, successful insurgencies remained exceptional. Only after 1945 the pendulum changed in favour of insurgency movements, as shown by their successes against the colonial powers. Even counterinsurgency operations using the most brutal tactics such as torture, systematic terror and massacres such as in Algeria, Vietnam and Afghanistan resulted in the defeat of the great and superpowers involved. There are plenty of reasons for this: from the insurgent's embeddedness in the local population and a more developed international law all the way to the aversion of postmodern societies against the excessive use of force.

A democratic state seems almost always to be at a disadvantage in an armed conflict with insurgents. If the democratic state respects its own ethical principles and basic national and international norms, it could be difficult to defeat insurgents who do not care about these ethics and norms and follow their own "rationality". If –the democratic state adapts itself to the methods of the opponent, it not only undermines the moral of the own armed forces, but also the ethical fundament of the whole society. Today's concepts of counterinsurgency suggest in fact that there

might exist an acceptable solution by defining the right combination of offensive, defensive and stability measures. Actual and historic experiences demonstrate that the contrary is true however. This has less to do with a lack of good will or even with bad will of the interveners, but more with structural dilemmas of military backed stability operations in weak states while at the same time being confronted with an insurgency.

Time is working in favour of the insurgents as are the difficulties of external actors to coordinate more effectively their various civilian and military activities due to different interests and operational approaches while facing a very volatile security environment. While one side only has to destroy something, the other side has to rebuild a state or even an entire society. While one party of the conflict will inevitably stay in the country, the external interveners have to leave it one day. This will be the case at the latest if they lose public support at home and if being perceived as occupation forces in Afghanistan. While the insurgents can freely choose time and the means of attack, their opponents have to react and by this run the risk of causing unwanted side effects with potentially huge negative effects. The problem becomes shear insoluble if the insurgents dispose of a save-haven across the border and of sufficient supplies in finances, fighters and weapons. In such a case, the alternative is either to escalate horizontally, that is to extend military operations beyond the border, or to deescalate within the country, that is to reduce military engagement.

Essential factors why Western engagement in Afghanistan probably is doomed to fail are cultural differences, limited resources and the impossibility to change the social fabric and culture of an entire society from outside. There is a real danger that Germany is increasingly slipping in a dirty war for which it has to pay a high prize – politically, ethically, financially, and, above all, in human lives. Hence, Germany and the international community should forge a strategy primarily and gradually focused on stabilising Afghanistan with civilian means while concentrating on the following aspects:

– More modest objectives instead of social engineering of a whole society
– Afghanisation of security instead of military surge
– Decentralised approach to governance instead of supporting centralism
– Local development instead of financing corruption
– Built-up of regional cooperation structures instead of horizontal escalation

In the end, the German government has to answer the question whether and how to engage in counterinsurgency operations. If it does not want an involvement in this kind of non-international violent conflict, the logical conclusion is to disengage militarily in the short run.

If it wants to continue its military engagement in a mid- or even long-term perspective, good political reasons and a plausible strategy must be presented. In other words, the question has to be answered convincingly why Germany should bear those costs.

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