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Reshaping towards covered operations and extrajudicial killing

The method of Osama bin Laden's killing confirms a development in the US counter-terrorism approach that could be called the "Obama doctrine". This doctrine increasingly focuses on covert operations and extrajudicial killings. The internal quarrel in Washington over the right policy towards the AFPAK region (Afghanistan and Pakistan) has been won by the proponents of a stronger counter-terrorism approach.

Only in 2009/10 the protagonists of a modern counterinsurgency (COIN) approach seemed to prevail. Their idea was to win back the initiative in Afghanistan with an increased military and civilian engagement, the so called „surge“. At the same time increased drone attacks in Pakistan were supposed to disrupt the Taliban and defeat Al Qaida. The COINistas in the US military such as General David H. Petraeus argued a long-term engagement in Afghanistan to be necessary, including occasional extrajudicial killings in Pakistan (COIN plus). The opponents led by Vice-President Joe Biden pleaded in favour of an intensified antiterrorism policy and much less COIN (antiterrorism plus).

On 29 November 2009 President Barack H. Obama issued an order written by his own hand in which he stated that there is going to be a surge albeit limited to 30.000 additional forces (instead of 40.000 or 80.000 as proposed by other options). In addition he defined July 2011 as the date when US forces are going to begin to transfer lead security responsibility to the Afghan Security Forces and to reduce U.S. forces. Yearly costs of 100 billion U.S. Dollars for 100.000 U.S. soldiers are not acceptable for Obama for both domestic and financial reasons. Hence the concentration on the fight against Al Qaida by means of covered operations and extrajudicial killings. This strategy change is not only valid for the AFPAK region as U.S. activities in Yemen or elsewhere indicate. This is all the more demonstrated by the recently implemented and the planned reshaping in the security apparatus.

The acting Afghanistan commander Petraeus will become director of the CIA. The former head of regional command CENTCOM is one of the fathers of modern COIN doctrine. He was responsible for the Iraq surge and the parallel covert operations against „Al Qaida in Mesopotamia“. Petraeus had to take over the post of commander in Afghanistan from his inferior General Stanley A. McChrystal who had to resign following unflattering remarks about Vice President Joe Biden. What looked like degradation at first glance is turning out to be a jump in his career – from commander U.S. forces in Afghanistan to CIA director. With this move one of the main COIN proponents has been politically integrated and the connection between the military and the CIA has been strengthened.

This is also valid for another promotion. Director of CIA Leon E. Panetta has been nominated to succeed Minister of Defence Robert M. Gates. The CIA is directing the drone attacks in Pakistan. It is also exerting command over a 3.000 men strong Afghan special task force which is chasing and killing Taliban commanders. This special force is supposed to have killed 339 mid-level commanders and 949 foot soldiers within three months in 2010. This is the dirty part of the Afghanistan war taking place in the shadows.

Fitting in this picture is the nomination of Lieutenant General John R. Allen from the Marine Corps as Commander US Forces in Afghanistan and commander ISAF. Before that he acted as interim commander CENTCOM following Petraeus. In October 2010 General James N. Mattis also from the U.S. Marine Corps became commander CENTCOM. Vice admiral Robert S. Howard from the Navy SEALs will be is deputy.

Most of the Special Forces' operations take place in this regional command. Vice admiral William McRaven who planned the Navy SEALs operation against Bin Laden will assume the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). SOCOM is specialised among others in anti-terrorism activities. It directs more than 50.000 forces, is active in 75 countries and has a budget of its own of 10 billion U.S. Dollars. The continuous growth of the special forces and the 80 billion budget for the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies in 2010 indicate the direction of the American anti-terrorism approach: Away from huge military operations towards more covert operations, including extrajudicial killing.

The question for Germany is how the Federal Government is going to deal with the U.S. logic of action of "unconventional warfare" that some observers see also to be at work in the attacks against Gaddafi and his family? After all, the U.S. Special Forces are active in Afghanistan's RC North headed by Germany. Following the judicial conception of the Obama administration extrajudicial killing is legal whereas Germany defends the opposite view. In the past changes in the American doctrine have mostly been influencing the NATO doctrine. So the U.S. COIN concept has become the blueprint for the related NATO doctrine. This will not officially be the case when it comes to the highly sensitive topic of covert operations. However, some pressure could be built up on the bigger NATO allies to do more in this realm. Hence, what is the position of the German Government following the American shift of emphasis from COIN plus to anti-terrorism plus, i.e. covert operations, including extrajudicial killing? The joy expressed by Chancellor Angela Merkel after the killing of Osama bin Laden leaves (too) much room for speculation.



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