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A never ending story

Mirco Günther in Kabul on Germany's continued engagement in Afghanistan

The German army's mission in Afghanistan is going into its 18th year and the country is still not at peace. The German Parliament is counting on perseverance to do the trick and extends its mandate every year. Does that still make sense?

Afghanistan is the longest, most expensive civilian-military mission in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. It has also cost the most lives. This year's extension of the mandate was accompanied by raising the upper limit of our contribution to NATO's 'Resolute Support' mission from 980 to 1,300 German soldiers.

That was a pragmatic and necessary step. It's generally agreed that the withdrawal of most of the international troops in 2014 and the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghans was too abrupt and did not suit the reality on the ground. After that, NATO didn't have enough staff to fulfil its education and training mandate. Only the highest level of Afghan security forces could be trained – not the middle and lower ranks. In addition, there was a lack of capacity to protect the trainers themselves.

What kind of signal does the increase in German troops send?

Politically, a troop increase sends a mixed signal. We do not need to repeatedly draw troop numbers up and down, but instead should take stock of the whole situation and discuss where we stand in the country. For years, German and international politics have been noticeably weary of Afghanistan. But the people in Afghanistan need our continued solidarity. We have to be patient – not with an uncritical 'more of the same' approach, but one that is carefully thought through and grounded in a sober assessment of our successes and failures.

What has Germany's engagement achieved?

Germany's involvement in Afghanistan is very broad and extends well

beyond the German army's mission – which is often the focus of attention. It also has police, diplomatic, humanitarian and civil dimensions. Germany has committed more funds to development cooperation in Afghanistan than in any other country. There are recognisable improvements, for example in literacy, medical care and health, as well as in military and police training, despite massive challenges. Afghanistan has an active civil society and media world – at least in the large cities. Of course the capital Kabul looks quite different today than after the Taliban were toppled in 2001.

At the same time, the drastic deterioration of the security situation in many northern provinces and the numerous attacks in Kabul dramatically show that areas we once considered safe are not any longer. Progress has not been sustainable, achievements have remained tenuous and there have also been setbacks. The poverty rate has dropped to the level of 2003. More than half of the Afghan population lives in poverty. Particularly in rural areas, fewer and fewer children go to school. Since the growth bubble – created by the international 'intervention economy' in the years before 2014 – burst, the economy is recovering in baby steps. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

Furthermore, there's a complex military situation between the government and insurgents. Many observers describe this situation as a 'stalemate' but I believe that the Taliban is gaining momentum. Terrorist groups like the 'Islamic State', which seriously sabotages any form of rapprochement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, continue to stage terrible attacks. It will be a success if the current situation doesn't get any worse.

The security situation on the ground has also deteriorated. According to the UN, suicide bombings and explosive devices have killed more civilians this year than ever before. You have been there now for two years: how's your work going?

The worsening security situation has definitely made our working conditions difficult. The space for civil and humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan is shrinking. In recent years, aid organisations have been repeatedly targeted for attacks. Now we are witnessing international development cooperation pulling back from certain areas to concentrate on urban centres. We have to adapt to the new situation.

We have had an office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Kabul for more than 16 years. Perhaps because of the many challenges in our day-to-day work routine, the past two years have been professionally, and even more, personally, enriching for the FES Kabul team and

myself. We see the importance of our work every day: often we can immediately see where and how we make a difference. One example of this is our FES Afghanistan Young Leaders Forum, whose nearly 300 graduates have become leaders in government, diplomacy, civil society, media and academia, and are assuming responsibility for Afghanistan.

What role can Germany play in solving the conflict?

Germany continues to be the second largest donor nation in Afghanistan and chairs the International Contact Group on Afghanistan. In 2001 and 2011, Germany hosted the important 'Petersberg' conferences. Many sides in the conflict continue to see Berlin as a kind of 'honest broker'. I believe that German foreign policy could do more in this regard, perhaps with another international conference at an advanced stage of possible peace talks.

At the same time, we must note that Germany is only one of many actors in Afghanistan. We have a good reputation but limited influence. The US, Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia are particularly relevant. One of the reasons the Afghan conflict is so hard to resolve is because it's enormously regionalised. The various international mediation efforts, like those of the US, which is conducting direct talks with the Taliban in Doha, the recent meeting in Moscow and the initiatives of Peking and Tashkent, are rarely coordinated and are shaped by different interests. They should not anticipate a peace process for which Afghans themselves are responsible and which they shape. International efforts can at best be complementary and must not undermine the Afghan government.

The interview as conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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