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Das internationale Engagement in Afghanistan in der Sackgasse?

Eine politisch-ethische Auseinandersetzung

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The International Approach to Afghanistan. Could We Have Done Better?

Fouzieh Melanie Alamir¹

Afghanistan is the most prominent international crisis management scenario that has been occupying debates and binding civilian and military resources for almost a decade now without a foreseeable exit. It has long replaced the Balkans and Iraq in terms of international attention and it will probably shape future approaches to international crisis management. This may seem surprising if we recall that Afghanistan had almost been forgotten during the 1990s after Soviet withdrawal and that distinct interests of international donors or troop contributing countries are hard to detect. What then made us become mired in a country which to date has remained strange and not understood in many ways? Were faults avoidable? Could we have done better? For answering these questions, we will take an in-depth look at the genesis of current international engagement in Afghanistan.

Before going into the historical background, however, a few preliminary terminological remarks should be made. It has become a custom to use the term ‘the international community’ in the context of international politics. International conflict and crisis management is driven by nation states and their willingness to engage, their perceptions, interests, and political or financial capacities, while it lacks a binding framework of rules and regulations as to who engages where, why, with what, how, and for how long. In contrast, the term ‘community’ implies not only a clear understanding who is part of it and who isn’t, but also a common set of rules and regulations as well as mechanisms of controlling the adherence to these rules and sanctions on non-compliance. All these features do not apply to ‘the international community’. Nevertheless, the term will be used in the following text as a short form for describing the sum of all those states and actors that have become practically involved in the current Afghan reconstruction process.

Historical background

Any attempt to assess whether the international engagement in Afghanistan since 2001 has reached an impasse, as the title of this book suggests, needs to go back to the trigger event, namely the terrorist attacks in the United States (US) on 11

¹ The author’s views are her own and do not per se constitute the official policy of the represented organization.

September 2001, and the historical background conditions at that time. Only if we take account of the starting point, we can trace back how we came to where we currently are in Afghanistan and why. This perspective will allow us to understand the complex dynamics of the Afghan reconstruction process, distinguish structural conditions from political decisions, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the international approach.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the country drowned in a longstanding civil war and with the successive takeover of the Taliban in the mid-1990s almost disappeared out of international sight and attention with the exception of incidental reports on atrocities. It was only the assaults of 09/11 that catapulted Afghanistan back on the stage of international politics because Osama Bin Laden, head of the network Al Qaida, had been granted a safe haven and operational base in the Eastern Afghan mountains close to Pakistan. On 12 September 2001, the US declared the 'War on Terror' with then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell underlining that "it isn't going to be solved with a single counter-attack against one individual, it's going to be a long term conflict." On the same day, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (collective defence clause) and major European allies expressed their solidarity.

It is necessary to recall the historical and perceptual setting in late 2001 because it decisively shaped the preferences and conditions of the international engagement in Afghanistan. The identity crisis of NATO in the aftermath of the Cold War and especially the negative Balkan experiences regarding decisiveness and unity in the Alliance had stirred controversial debates on the rationale and future of NATO and the transatlantic security partnership. Against the background of a perceived rift between the US and Europe, 09 11 set a European impulse for closing ranks with the US, hoping to bring NATO back in. Seen through this lens, the decision by some European nations to engage in Afghanistan was mainly due to Alliance policy considerations.

However, apart from European concerns to reawaken US interests in NATO, many European nations, and Germany in particular, were occupied with large-scale and long-term civil and military engagements in the Balkans, and had neither much capacities left nor zeal to engage in a parallel scenario far away. In addition, the optimism of the early post Cold War period in Europe had vanished as the Balkan wars had brought war back on European soil. Moreover, although there was a general tendency of decline of interstate wars since the end of the Cold War, many new intrastate armed conflicts had emerged between 1990 and 2001 not only in Europe but also Africa, the Middle East, Central and East Asia. United Nations (UN) peacekeeping was facing a deep crisis after the catastrophe in Ruanda, and traditional formats of international crisis management and peace building in general had

undergone a considerable disenchantment. In Germany, the strategic culture of self-restraint versus the virtue of military means in solving crises and conflicts were a much debated issue in the political and public discourse of the 1990s. Concepts that stemmed from the international development debate, such as good governance or security system reform (SSR), had not found their way into the international security policy discourse and the evidence of their relevance had not been provided for in practical examples by that time. All these factors resulted in a certain – though never openly displayed – reluctance on the part of many European nations to open a "new front" in a region considered not to be of immediate interest. Thus, it can be concluded that the European position on engaging in Afghanistan was ambivalent. On the one hand, the impetus driven by Alliance policy considerations was strong, particularly in Germany. On the other hand, 09/11 did not cause the same sense of being immediately affected by terrorist threats as in the US. Besides, there was only little enthusiasm to get involved in a mission that suffered from a military problem-solving bias from the beginning. The United Kingdom with her traditionally special relationship to the US was an exception in this regard.

Unlike in Europe, the shock of 09/11 had spurred a focus on a long-term campaign against terrorism in primarily military terms in the United States. It had strengthened a conception of US foreign and security policy that had been developed under the Clinton administration already: "When our national security interests are threatened, we will act with others if we can, but alone if we must. We will use diplomacy when we can, but force if we must".² In the light of the terrorist attacks and the wide-spread sense of having been ripped into the very heart, this conception gained momentum; especially the second part of the statement tended to be emphasised after 2001. The shift in focus on anti-terrorism in US foreign and security policy was attended by a constriction of perspectives in many respects: by a focus on pre-emption, based on the belief that the best defence is a good offense;³ by an equalisation of terrorist organisations and those who harbour them;⁴ by conceptualising the anti-terrorism campaign as a mainly military campaign, neglecting long-term considerations of the political future of Afghanistan and the region; and last but not least by reducing the threat of terrorism to organised militant groups. Although there has been considerable adjustment to this approach in recent years, it is important to keep in mind that this was the mainstream of thought in the US by 2001.

In sum, it can be concluded that in terms of historical background conditions, Afghanistan is a unique case. The terrorist attacks of 2001 and the revelation of

2 Address by President Clinton at the 49th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 26, 1994.

3 The White House 2002, 6.

4 »We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them«, in: The White House 2001.

Afghanistan as a safe haven and operational base for Al Qaida were not only the immediate but also the only cause for the coalition intervention and the subsequent reconstruction and development efforts. The US were the only nation with high stakes, but a rather narrow anti-terror agenda in Afghanistan, whereas the allies in the military coalition campaign and ISAF were mainly driven by motives of alliance solidarity and coherence and had little vested interests in Afghanistan. In stark contrast to their rather indirect interests, European allies showed a comparably strong willingness to engage in Afghanistan. The refusal of most European NATO allies to follow suit in Iraq and the negative effects it entailed on US-European relations has probably been a factor that boosted readiness to engage in Afghanistan after 2003 and to take over more responsibility by bringing NATO in as a form of political compensation for Iraq.

As for the question whether the narrow focus on anti-terrorism and the one-dimensional interest setting could have been avoided, one should remain realistic. The overwhelming power of the images, sentiments and political atmosphere after 09/11 did not leave space for cool and anticipatory analyses and cautious weighing of goals, means, and intended effects against political imponderabilities and not intended effects. Structural conditions in the international system combined with a specific constellation of historical/situational factors limited the scope for alternative political decisions.

General approach of the international community

The specific profile of international engagement in the Afghan reconstruction process induced many subsequent problems which we are still facing today. The following paragraph will outline this profile with regard to selected issues, without claiming to comprehensively describe the international activities in Afghanistan since 2001 or to make a comprehensive assessment of the international approach.

The above depicted particular perceptual and political setting in America and Europe in late 2001 had dramatic consequences for the international approach to Afghanistan. Firstly, it led to a coalition of the willing format for the military interventions in Afghanistan in October 2001 in the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in December 2001 instead of recurring to NATO. Secondly, there was an implicit caveat in the international engagement at the outset: By pointing out Afghan ownership, it was concealed that the international community was not ready for a decisive commitment in Afghanistan such as in Kosovo or later the-US in Iraq. This was both mirrored by the initial ISAF area of operations (AOR) restricted to Kabul and surroundings, as well as the initial ISAF force strength of less than 5.000 in

early 2002. Also OEF consisted of only 5.500 troops approx. in early 2002. The build-up of an Afghan National Police (ANP) under German lead was set up in early 2002 with roundabout 40 police officers in Kabul. Large scale civilian engagement was not foreseen at all in the early years. Thirdly, it promoted a short-term perspective of the international engagement in the beginning and mirrored the relative vagueness of political objectives of those who got involved. The Petersberg framework foresaw a perspective of two and a half years without a blueprint for the process after the Loya Jirga and Presidential elections in 2003 or any long-term donor strategy. The time horizon of international thinking and engagement was only successively extended.

International engagement was from the beginning Kabul-centred, and despite a shift of focus on selected provinces, regions, and districts in recent years, an imbalance has prevailed to date. This allowed for non-compliant actors and insurgents to reconsolidate in some Eastern and Southern provinces after 2003 and to extend their influence successively. The Petersberg process was not a traditional peace settlement or agreement, because major conflict parties were not involved. As a consequence, these groups remained outside and hostile from the beginning, finding a recruitment basis and lever in vulnerable social groups that did not benefit from the reconstruction process and by playing the ethnic card. Hamid Karzai, although Pashtun, did not have a strong political power base in Afghanistan in the beginning, therefore he was forced into early compromises with powerful war lords and province chiefs, thus undermining the credibility of the Government. In other words, post conflict conditions were never really given in Afghanistan.

However, most international activities in the context of the Petersberg process have widely ignored this fact. This applied in particular to the process of the build-up of the Afghan police with its focus on strengthening civilian law and order capacities in the early years, neglecting the growing requirement for more robust counter insurgency capacities on the one hand, and good governance issues on the other. But it also included military engagement in the framework of ISAF in the early years which originally had been designed as a mere stabilisation force, despite the fact that stabilisation was to be conducted in a highly precarious and to a growing extent hostile environment, requiring also offensive capacities.

Historical legacies and lessons, cultural specificities, and perceptions of the local population have not sufficiently been taken into consideration. As a result, the loss of the Afghan population's faith and sympathy poses one of the main threats to the success of the whole reconstruction process today.

Neighbouring states or countries with strong interests in Afghanistan such as Pakistan, India, Iran, but also the Central Asian neighbours and China, were not involved in the Petersberg process. This disregarded not only the strategic importance of Afghanistan to its neighbours, especially to Pakistan, but also missed the

opportunity to work on a regional solution and to find more regional support. Another negative consequence of this aspect is the lack of international military contributions from Muslim countries in Afghanistan which may have fed perceptions of Afghanistan as a terrain of a religious struggle between Islam and the Western world.

It is doubtful whether the international community in 2001 was and could be fully aware of the challenges of the Afghanistan endeavour. Since activities and donor contributions were initially planned on a rather short term and focussed on the original ISAF AOR, the dimension of the needs and the required engagement over time and in terms of resources was hardly foreseeable and thus could have only been anticipated on the basis of thorough analyses and the courage to take political decisions that would not have been opportune at that time. Both requirements - knowledge based and courageous political decisions – can be easily called for, but can seldom be expected in international crisis and conflict management.

The profile of international contributions in the early phase of the engagement was largely coined by what nations were willing or able to provide rather than what realities on the ground demanded. The international community also failed to learn from previous missions in the Balkans and did not provide adequate donor coordination. At the Tokyo conference in January 2002, the lead nation concept for security system reform in Afghanistan was successful in winning nations to commit themselves, but at the same time it did not encourage attempts to create a common and comprehensive understanding of what kind of security system was to be built. As a consequence, the pace and contents of the build-up of the Afghan National Army (ANA) under US lead, the Afghan National Police under German lead, the judicial reform under Italian lead, the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration efforts under Japanese lead and the counter narcotics efforts under British lead, lacked overall coordination and harmonisation. In addition, they were not coordinated with civilian activities for institution and capacity building, anti-corruption, etc. - hence lacking any systematic orientation towards improving governance. Furthermore, civil-military coordination and cooperation among major international actors (ISAF, UNAMA - United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, EU) was poor at the beginning. Over time, a dense network of coordinating mechanisms grew bottom-up, but they have remained largely ad hoc and highly dependent on personal links, despite efforts to better coordinate donor and Afghan policies at the overall politico-strategic level since early 2006. It was not before 2009 that strong attempts for improved co-ordination have been made by ISAF under General McChrystal, at a time where conditions for work on civilian reconstruction were already worsening.

The lack of coordination does not only refer to the politico-strategic level or civil-military activities onsite, but applies to civil-civil activities as well. There has

in fact been no lead organisation for civilian reconstruction activities; UNAMA has in practice mainly been coordinating UN activities. This created a diffuse side-by-side of efforts by numerous civilian actors at the outset which made civil-military coordination all the harder. Attempts of setting up more systematic coordination mechanisms came late, and efforts to involve the Afghans have to date been only partially successful. It was only with the endorsement of the Afghanistan Compact in February 2006 that a common conceptual and (relatively weak) organisational umbrella was created. Coordination is still widely confined to Kabul (central level), while at level of the provinces and more so the districts, parallel activities are still common practice. Good exceptions are efforts in the framework of the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT).

The international community also suffered from difficulties regarding its communication strategy. In the beginning, engagement in Afghanistan was justified with reference to 09/11 and the war on terror. But today, Al Qaida seems to have shifted actions away from Afghanistan and Taliban strongholds have moved to Pakistan, while the Afghan insurgency is conducted by a complex variety of local groups, some of them with external support by the Taliban in Pakistan. Therefore, the original formula has lost some credibility. It has become increasingly difficult to explain to the Western public why to engage in Afghanistan and what for as demands for withdrawal have risen in many countries. Insurgents in Afghanistan can be expected to keep an eye on this erosion of political acceptance at the home front as it poses a welcome lever.

Another deficit of the international approach has been the continuing gap between high attention for security issues and relatively low attention for civilian reconstruction. Although there have been strong attempts to create a better balance between civilian and military activities in the context of the Obama Administration's new strategy on Afghanistan,⁵ the gap has to date not been overcome. On the contrary, it has increased in some areas with the deteriorating security situation since many non-governmental organisations (NGO) had to reduce or cease their work due to security conditions in recent years.

Finally, the adaptability of international engagement in Afghanistan has been limited. The worsening security situation since 2004 has only reluctantly been addressed in public due to political reasons, while practical responses have long remained reactive and incremental by nature, lacking the will to take stock and revise activities according to the needs on the ground. The changing nature of ISAF engagement has only reluctantly been discussed in public and to date not consequently and sufficiently accounted for in terms of force strength and composition. Deficits in donor coordination have, as indicated, been acknowledged late and reactions

5 The White House 2009.

have been incremental. Ironically, the political readiness to engage militarily is – contrary to the needs on the ground – rather decreasing than increasing since several troop contributing nations have been under severe pressure to withdraw. On the other hand, NATO – and particularly the Alliance’s military pillar - has shown remarkable flexibility and eagerness to adapt to the challenges in Afghanistan, as far as the political limits set by NATO capitals have permitted.

In sum, the approach of the international community in Afghanistan since 2001 is highly characteristic and unique. There is no other international military engagement where stabilisation, civilian reconstruction and counter terrorism have been pursued simultaneously. The sheer number of international governmental and non-governmental actors in combination with their lack of common interests, lack of unity of effort, and lack of coordination lend a specific quality with specific challenges to Afghanistan. Another particular feature is the successive expansion of international engagement from the capital to the whole country without anticipation of this process at the beginning. The major troop contributing nations had no interests directly related to Afghanistan with the exception of the US in the anti-terror context. The profound lack of understanding and knowledge of the cultural environment and nature of conflicts was another characteristic feature of engagement in Afghanistan.

With regard to the question of whether faults could have been avoided or whether alternative options were conceivable, the general incrementalism as a result of the early short-sightedness and hastiness could have been rectified and there have in fact been strong international efforts to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the international engagement in Afghanistan, particularly after 2006. However, adjustments came late and their implementation on the ground remained piecemeal. Due to the political dynamics of the process and the high stakes that had been created, an open ended and thorough evaluation did never take place. Questions such as »Were our assumptions valid?«, »Do our reasons for being there still apply?«, »Did we use the right approaches?«, »Where are we now measured against the original goals?«, and last but not least »How long can we sustain our engagement and what are we willing to invest at which price in order to be successful?« were never raised. Therefore it can be concluded that structural factors stemming from the very nature of the international system as well as procedural dynamics were responsible for most of the shortfalls of the international approach to Afghanistan depicted in this chapter. But it must be pointed out that the adherence to this approach in the face of a deteriorating situation on the ground can be seen mainly as a result of political timidity to tackle and pronounce unpleasant truths. Although unlikely, since structural conditions do not favour alternative approaches to international crisis management, the reluctance to consequently evaluate and revise policies in Afghanistan, could have in principle been overcome.

Genesis and type of international military engagement

Since military engagement in Afghanistan underwent considerable changes over the years, it is useful to subdivide the engagement into phases and regard them separately. The first phase took from December 2001, when ISAF was first deployed under British lead, until August 2003, when NATO took over the command of the mission. This phase was characterised by the establishment of ISAF and a clear division of labour between ISAF as a stabilisation mission and OEF as a counter terrorism mission. The change in ISAF’s leadership format was an answer to the challenge of a continual search for successor lead nations and the difficulties of setting up a new onsite headquarter every six months. Although NATO had supported ISAF earlier on, a NATO-led operation offered several advantages. It did not only provide a stable headquarter structure, but also more opportunities for troop contributions as smaller countries would find it easier to make contributions within a NATO-led operation. In addition, it was in the interest of European NATO members to bring the Alliance in. ISAF had initially been designed as an UN-mandated international force to assist the newly established Afghan Transitional Authority. Its task was to create a secure environment and support the reconstruction of Afghanistan in and around Kabul. Even though the UN mandate did not include any provisions that limited civilian activities to Kabul and surroundings, the AOR of ISAF in fact also shaped the area of civilian development and reconstruction activities. Hence, the international engagement was confined to Kabul at the outset. However, it soon became clear that sustainable peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan required more military engagement and civilian aid all over the country, but at the same time the international community was reluctant to extend commitments beyond ISAF AOR. It was therefore not before the US had begun to install the first Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in December 2002 under OEF mandate, that an extension of the international military engagement became a thinkable option for other nations. The PRT aimed to have a positive impact on the security situation by providing an enabling environment also in those areas where large scale military presence was not possible. As such, they were a compromise solution in the face of a lack of political will and a lack of capacities to establish area-wide military presence. In August 2003, NATO took over full command and coordination of ISAF.

The second phase lasted from October 2003 until late 2005. This phase was characterised by ISAF’s further expansion, the accomplishment of some benchmarks of the political reconstruction process and a successively deteriorating security situation which led to readjustments of the ISAF mission. It was in this phase that a creeping overlap between OEF and ISAF activities, mainly in the field of security system reform, but also incidentally in fighting insurgents, took place. In

October 2003, the United Nations had extended ISAF's mandate to cover the whole of Afghanistan by UNSCR (UN Security Council Resolution) 1510, thus paving the way for an expansion of the mission across the country. Shortly afterwards, in December 2003, ISAF assumed command of the Kunduz PRT, previously led by Germany, and began to establish additional PRT under ISAF mandate and command during 2004, led by single nations. It was also in this phase that the initial Petersberg objectives of establishing new governmental structures in Afghanistan were accomplished with the adoption of a new constitution in January 2004, the first Presidential elections in October 2004, and the first Parliamentary elections in September 2005. But in the same vein it had become obvious that Afghanistan required more, more coherent, and better coordinated civil-military engagement. Despite progress in some reconstruction areas, the security situation was beginning to worsen in some parts of the country during 2004. Against this background, NATO Foreign Ministers endorsed a revised operational plan for the expansion of ISAF to the South and had agreed to develop a programme that focussed on defence reform, defence institution building and military aspects of SSR. In parallel, the US had begun to extend their bilateral engagement in the field of SSR. In addition to their activities as a lead nation for the build-up of the Afghan National Army, they attributed considerable means and personnel to the development of the Afghan National Police.

The London Conference and the adoption of the Afghanistan Compact in February 2006 marked the beginning of the third phase of military engagement in Afghanistan. With the help of the Afghanistan Compact, the international community and the Afghan Government took efforts for a more coherent and better coordinated civil-military approach. Controversial debates on the right proportion of international civilian and military engagement in Afghanistan arose in 2007 and 2008, reflecting the growing gaps between reconstruction needs and achievements on the one hand, and between the high attention on military aspects of security and the worsening security situation on the other. With the implementation of stage 3 and 4 of ISAF expansion to the South and East in October 2006, ISAF took over command of the international military forces in Eastern Afghanistan from the US-led Coalition. This induced a further amalgamation of OEF and ISAF operations. On the ground, counter terrorism and counter insurgency (COIN) activities have since to a growing extent become hard to differentiate and the dividing line between stabilisation and counter insurgency has been increasingly blurred. This tendency was boosted by a certain "Americanisation" of ISAF after US General McKiernan assumed command for both coalition forces and ISAF in personal union in June 2008. This trend has continued under General McCrystal and his successor General David H. Petraeus. Due to the deteriorating security situation, this phase was characterised by a growing focus of ISAF on COIN operations, while at the same time

the demand for the supporting functions of ISAF increased due to stagnation or even decrease of civilian reconstruction activities.

To date by mid April 2011, it is not yet clear whether the characteristics of the third phase still apply, or whether the announcement of the new US Afghanistan strategy; accompanied by the announcement of 30.000 more US troops in Afghanistan in December 2009 justify the definition of a fourth phase. ISAF force strength increased steadily from approx. 5.000 in 2002 to 33.250 in January 2007, 41.000 in July 2007, 52.900 in June 2008, 61.130 in June 2009, rising to 102.500 in February 2010, to 130.430 in October 2010 and reaching approx. 132.200 as of March 2011.⁶

Today, ISAF missions cover four main lines of operation in accordance with the mandate:

1. Security: security and stability operations; support of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police; disarmament of illegally armed groups; facilitation of ammunition depots management; post-operation assistance;
2. Reconstruction and development: provision of security to permit reconstruction and humanitarian assistance;
3. Governance: support of Afghan governance institutions through PRT;
4. Counter-narcotics: support of Afghan counter-narcotics efforts; training assistance of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in counter-narcotics related issues.

In terms of the mission statement, this reads as follows: »ISAF, in support of GIRoA (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan), conducts operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces, and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population.«⁷

As depicted above, ISAF's missions have undergone considerable shifts over time both in quality and quantity. These shifts have been induced by three factors: the above mentioned extension of ISAF AOR, altering conditions and circumstances in the operational environment, and the evolution of the security situation. The successive extension of ISAF AOR confronted ISAF with a growing diversity of local operational environments and hence with the need to adapt more region-specific mission profiles. The growing number of civilian reconstruction and development activities in some areas increased the demand for more ISAF support activities on the one hand. On the other, in those areas where little or no recon-

6 ISAF (b).

7 ISAF (a).

struction and development was being delivered, ISAF was required to fill the gap to the possible extent. The worsening security situation implied an increase of insurgent threats, including a dramatic increase of threats by improvised explosive devices (IED), bombings etc. It implied also a growing threat to ANA and ANP.

The mission shifts had several implications. The first implication was the changed role of the military. In the course of developments described above, the military was compelled to take over a number of originally civilian tasks due to a lack of presence and/or capacities of civilian actors. Examples range from training of ANP to election support or humanitarian aid. This was not only a mission creep, but in some areas and periods it transformed ISAF's supposedly supporting role to non-security areas into an enabling or sometimes even initiating role. Closely linked to the changed role of the military was the growing awareness that the improvement of the capabilities of the ANSF was crucial to the success of the overall international effort in Afghanistan. In the overall composition of ISAF missions, the support to the ANSF has increasingly gained in importance which was also reflected in the mandate. The third implication refers to the growing focus of ISAF on counter insurgency operations. It is important to keep in mind that originally the insurgency has not been the central challenge in Afghanistan and that it is an effect of the international community's deficits in approaching Afghanistan rather than a cause sui generis. We also need to take into account that the prominence and intensity of insurgent threats vary across the country. However, there is a widespread agreement that COIN is essential for the international endeavour to succeed in Afghanistan. ISAF under McChrystal has put further emphasis on COIN. At the same time, there has been an increasing awareness, that COIN is less about kinetically fighting the insurgents than about protecting and helping the population, as highlighted in the McChrystal Report (August 2009). Having this said means that the task to provide security and stability has after roughly a decade of military engagement in Afghanistan not decreased in importance, but increased.

In a nutshell, the evolution of military engagement over time is entirely unique in Afghanistan. From 2001 to date, ISAF underwent continuous alterations of the AOR, the command and control structure, and the actual character of the mission. This is neither a historical predecessor nor comparison. Although mission creep has been an often experienced and well known peril to many previous international stabilisation missions, the changes that ISAF has been undergoing are more fundamental and by far exceed previous examples, where the basic frameworks of the missions remained unaltered. It therefore seems justified to state that ISAF of the year 2001/2 has in fact not much in common anymore with ISAF of the year 2011. Another feature that distinguishes Afghanistan from the other reference cases is the parallelism of stabilisation, counter-terrorism, and COIN operations, while on

the ground the differences and dividing lines between the latter begin to get more and more blurred.

Coming back to the question whether we could have done better or avoided faults, the evolution of military engagement in Afghanistan is one of the fields that can be attributed high adaptability, flexibility, and needs-orientation. The shift from a solely kinetic approach of counter-terrorism (OEF) paralleled by a trimmed approach to stabilisation (ISAF) in the early years to a comprehensive mission under ISAF, covering a population-centred approach to COIN as well as a broad scale of stabilisation tasks, is remarkable. Avoidable shortfalls or faults of the international military engagement in Afghanistan are not so much rooted in the military approach itself, but rather in the imbalance of civilian and military contributions and the lack of political will and guidance.

Legal framework

International civil and military engagement in Afghanistan since late 2001 has been legitimised by the UNSC. UNSCR 1368(2001) condemned the attacks of 09/11 and declared them a threat to world peace and security, while UNSCR 1373(2001) emphasised the right to self-defence according to the UN Charter and directed measures to be taken against terrorist activities and networks. These resolutions served as the legitimacy basis for Operation Enduring Freedom. ISAF has been separately mandated by UNSCR 1386(2001) with reference to UNSCR 1383(2001) which endorsed the Petersberg agreement and its provisions.

The mandate of ISAF has never been generally questioned to date. As regards the mandate for OEF, there is a growing scepticism among experts as to whether OEF can still be justified with reference to self-defence almost ten years after the attacks of 09/11. The duality of two separate operations with two mandates originally implied two completely different force compositions and profiles at the beginning of international military engagement in Afghanistan. While OEF was composed and equipped to conduct anti-terrorism, mainly in the East and South of Afghanistan, ISAF was designed as a stabilisation force under chapter VII of the UN Charter, operating in and around Kabul.

The setting of two mandates for two separate, but in the course of the years increasingly indistinguishable missions is characteristic to Afghanistan. It can be directly traced back to the historical starting point of late 2001, when due to political reasons anti-terrorism and stabilisation in Afghanistan were handled as two separate issues. The different force compositions and profiles for OEF and ISAF which this framework entailed, coined many of the later problems and challenges of ISAF

as it expanded its area of responsibility and tasks. But given the initial political situation, it seems to have been unavoidable in hindsight.

Objectives

It proves to be difficult to find concrete formulations of strategic political objectives or envisioned end states with view to current stabilisation and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The main reference document, the Petersberg accord, signed in Bonn on 5 December 2001, remained very vague in this regard. In the preamble, the signatories declared to be »...Determined to end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country«. The only passage that can be read as a delineation of a political objective, states »interim arrangements are intended as a first step toward the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government«.

Closely linked to the lack of clear objectives was a lack of exit criteria. The duration of the intended international engagement was not defined and as the international community had no criteria for success it also lacked an exit strategy.

Also the Afghanistan Compact remained relatively vague regarding the description of strategic political objectives. In the preamble, we find numerous circumscriptions such as »improve the lives of Afghan people, and to contribute to national, regional, and global peace and security; (...) stable and prosperous Afghanistan, with good governance and human rights protection for all under the rule of law; (...) democratic, peaceful, pluralistic and prosperous state based on the principles of Islam; (...) sustainable economic growth and development; strengthening state institutions and civil society; removing remaining terrorist threats; meeting the challenge of counter-narcotics; rebuilding capacity and infrastructure; reducing poverty; and meeting basic human needs«.

This reflects that the interests of the international donor countries have remained highly diverse. Neither the international community nor the Afghan partners had clear common objectives that could provide a strategic political framework or statements on priorities at the outset. And it was not before the endorsement of the Afghanistan Compact that all major actors agreed on a common framework of activities and benchmarks, i.e. five years after international engagement had been set up. At the same time, the objectives were far reaching and ambitious and stirred hopes and expectations in the Afghan population.

The Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan for achieving enduring progress in Afghanistan (CSPMP), endorsed at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, is the international document with the most specific and concrete de-

lineation of strategic objectives pertaining to Afghanistan. It summarizes the overarching objectives of the international community: The Afghan Government is able to exercise authority independently and throughout the country; significant progress on national and provincial rule of law has been achieved and issues of corruption and influence of the narcotics trade have been successfully tackled; (licit) economic and social development and basic civil infrastructure have been accomplished; regional cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours has developed. According to the CSPMP, security objectives of ISAF can be outlined as follows: the Afghan Government is able to effectively exercise its security responsibilities across the country; the Afghan National Security Forces are self-sufficient, being in lead of security operations; there is no threat to stability by opposing military forces anymore. This has been the most concrete formulation of international political objectives in Afghanistan since 2001. However, we again lack clear criteria to measure the indicators and nobody has to date clarified, which level of achievement will be the minimum allowing the international community to reduce its presence.

In the light of developments over almost a decade in Afghanistan, it seems that the political objectives of the international community have in fact been dramatically downsized. Apart from wordily communiqués,⁸ they can be reduced to enabling the Afghan Government to stay in power, countering the insurgency and preventing a further destabilisation of the whole region, particularly Pakistan. It may seem that the rationale of avoiding further damage and losing face or credibility has subtly replaced hopes for achieving a positive end state of international engagement in Afghanistan.

Could this have been avoided, could we have done better in this respect? The stumbling into a long-term mission without a clear end state and criteria of success has been no unique feature of international engagement in Afghanistan, but rather the rule than the exception since the end of the Cold War. To a certain extent, political end states and strategies in Afghanistan could not be anticipated in 2001. We will have to live with contingencies in international crisis management; therefore goals and strategies will need to remain flexible and highly adaptable at all stages. However, having this said does not relieve decision makers from careful considerations of risks and possible outcomes of own activities in advance. The risks we took in Afghanistan could have and should have been known better, thereby being better prepared for the consequences they implied. This holds true not only for the risks stemming from the imponderabilities of onsite activities over time, but also the risks of political dynamics back home, i.e. levels of political acceptance, sustainability of political will, resources, etc.

Conclusion

The international approach to Afghanistan since 2001 has been a unique case. It can be generically characterised as a multinational engagement with the following features:

- side-by-side of counter terrorism, stabilisation, civilian reconstruction, and counter-insurgency with a dominance of military engagement;
- multiple international actors with highly diverse interests, while interests were not related directly to the country or region (only the US had vested interests in the context of fighting terrorism);
- highly ambitious, civil-military engagement covering almost every dimension of nation building with an indefinite duration and without clearly defined objectives;
in contrast: no political will to temporarily assume governmental authorities and reluctance to engage decisively, i.e. according to the needs on the ground, be it by military or civilian means;
- engagement starting in the capital area without a blueprint whether and how to reach out to the whole country, followed by a successive expansion;
- exceptionally high degree of involvement of international organisations, especially NGO, without clear division of roles and responsibilities;
- a lack of understanding and knowledge of the cultural environment and nature of conflicts.

Against the backdrop of structural conditions of an international system driven by the interests of its most powerful players, the specific historical background situation and strong situational dynamics in the face of 09/11 were the main drivers for the initial international engagement in Afghanistan and the specific approach that was taken. This approach framed not only the actual path of activities and developments, but for many years also the political and conceptual mindset and premises of donors and troop contributors. And it created facts on the ground which would have needed a readjustment when developments were beginning to change for the worse. In a nutshell, the international approach to Afghanistan was too reluctant in the beginning, too incremental and reactive in tackling the challenges that called for a consequent adaptation, and - despite serious efforts in recent years - was not able to overcome the »too little too late«. As depicted, this approach resulted from a complex coincidence of structural conditions, situational dynamics, and political decisions.

Structural conditions can hardly be altered in the short or medium term; situational dynamics can only partly be influenced in a controllable fashion. Therefore the findings of this article call for more attention on the factor of deliberate political

decisions and raise the question, whether international conflict and crisis management policies can be »better« in the sense of being more knowledge-based and anticipatory, more strategy-driven and systematic, more goal- and needs-oriented, more coherent, more accompanied by continuous evaluation. The answer suggested is that »good« policies will not be able to overcome the structural conditions of the international system which are not conducive to »good« policy making. International conflict and crisis management will to a certain extent always remain a building the ship at sea, due to dealing with complex social systems.

However, we do have the options and instruments to base political decisions on whether to engage and how on thorough and systemic analyses. We do have the choice to design more far-reaching, goal- and needs-oriented strategies and to implement policies more coherently. We do have the tools at hand to evaluate our actions and to readjust them. The international approach to Afghanistan could have been »better« in this sense, though we cannot foretell whether Afghanistan would be better off.

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