

ISAF Lessons Learned

A German Perspective

BY RAINER GLATZ

Following several largely futile attempts to gain control over Afghanistan, the British Empire granted independence to the country in 1919. Seventy years later, Russian forces withdrew having failed to establish control through a pro-Russian government. Today, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) struggles to establish a stable political system in order to prevent the country from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists. The question is: Will the Alliance prevail or will it join the club of losers? The answer is open, and it is up to NATO and the international community to sustain the positive momentum gained in 2010. The difficulty of nation-building in this remote, but nevertheless strategically important, part of the world can be seen in daily media coverage of the setbacks and losses, progress and success.

When Germany deployed military forces to Kabul in 2002, its limited expertise in the subject of nation-building was based on its experience in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the German-hosted Petersberg Conference showed early in the operation that only a broad approach, which encompassed diplomatic, social, economic, and military means, could pave the road to success.

Germany's military operation focuses on the northern part of Afghanistan, where it is the lead nation for Regional Command–North (RC–N). In addition, the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) support their partners and allies within the whole International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) area of operations by providing air reconnaissance pictures, tactical air transport and medical evacuation, staff personnel for the ISAF headquarters, ISAF Joint Command headquarters, NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, and medical treatment facilities in Kabul together with communication specialists in Kandahar and Bagram. Germany's overall mandate currently permits the deployment of up to 5,350 personnel to Afghanistan.

Today, Afghanistan is Germany's top priority in its international peace-making and nation-building commitments. The guideline for the German course of action is the Comprehensive Approach in which Germany balances its efforts in the domains of security, economic aid, and social development. This article stems from a speech that I delivered in September 2010 at a NATO conference where I was asked to elaborate on ISAF lessons learned from a German perspective. The article reflects my personal opinion and is meant to give some, possibly controversial, food for thought regarding the question of

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how to commit a highly complex nation-building operation successfully.

Lessons Learned at the Strategic Level

When talking about the ISAF mission today, a key term often used is *Comprehensive Approach*. There are, of course, a variety of different philosophies, theories, and practices that lead to a diverse perception of the concept. But all these various schools return to the fundamental question: How can we assure that diplomacy, development, and defense work efficiently and effectively together toward the same endstate?

It is important to note that the German philosophy of networked security is comprised of crisis management, stabilization, and security and should ideally always be embedded in a multinational effort. The German national position and possible contributions to solve the Afghanistan conflict will always be discussed within the framework of international organizations and national contributions. Nevertheless, Germany's contribution will depend on its own interests, capabilities, and constitutional principles.

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The ISAF mission has proven to be a tremendous challenge so far. NATO troops and their allies cope with a highly complex mission in a country that is far away from home bases and depots, far removed from our understanding of how to do politics, and far removed from our social and economic standards. Afghanistan is a country that was devastated in numerous conflicts over a period of roughly 25 years and has a population that has suffered for

generations from terror, destruction, atrocities, and uncertainty in every facet of life. Is there really a reasonable way ahead to stabilize such a country, and if so, what steps should be taken on this path?

The international community had to start from scratch when it began its job after the defeat of the Taliban. The Afghan infrastructure was largely destroyed and governmental institutions were nonexistent. However, the people were tired of fighting and struggling for life. Of course, they were cautious and hesitant, too, but they were open-minded toward fundamental changes to improve their daily lives. This leads to the following thesis: At the beginning of a stability operation, strength is decisive. This applies not only militarily, but also to the civilian side. The international community should not waste time searching for a pro forma government, but proactively establish an administration. Local governance should begin at an appropriately low level. With regard to Afghanistan, the local population decides who is trustworthy at the village and district levels. Later on, the Afghan people, with assistance from the international community, should select and elect higher political echelons.

In the beginning, security forces are immediately needed in large numbers. Quantity is more important than quality in this phase. In 2002, the Taliban and al Qaeda were on the retreat, hunted down by the coalition forces under the mandate of Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Back then, no effective military resistance existed in most parts of the country, and this provided an ideal opportunity for the international community to build up the Afghan security forces; and while these forces may not have met high standards in terms of quality, they could have filled a dangerous security vacuum. Creating and training local police forces on the village and district levels would have been the means of choice in the early stages of the mission.

The Afghan population sought an improvement in security and economic matters. What the ISAF commander tries to establish under the key phrase *unity of effort* today must be incorporated in the security structure from the beginning. Developing security and the economy are not separate steps, but two intermingled processes.

One key point in this structure is the build-up of strong host country security forces as an indispensable partner for providing security. Doing so is a prerequisite for the transition phase. However, besides security, it ensures that a sufficient number of capable civil servants and technocrats are retained. Security and the capability to govern are preconditions to build a functioning political system.

This underlines the need for bringing together all the actors from various organizations—governmental as well as nongovernmental—to create a sound and coherent plan. Winning the support of the people can only be achieved by placing the population at the center of all thoughts about how things should develop. The situation is much more complex and requires the active involvement of more actors than just the military.

One key experience relates directly to the beginning of the ISAF mission: the strategic objective reflected in the political mandate. To contribute military capabilities effectively to the overarching commitment, it is essential to formulate a clear and concise endstate. The endstate has to be specified in a way that it becomes measurable, as this defines the circumstances to be created, which in turn determine the way ahead. The international community needs to be able to develop the ISAF mission's criteria for success geared toward its endstate, as this enables measurement of progress. This also puts a scale to the effort and assistance provided.

Attempting to introduce scales and measurements or benchmarks into complex operations

such as nation-building in Afghanistan is difficult; nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary. An endstate creates distinctiveness for the military and for civil development projects alike. This also prevents overambitious political and military aims and counters effects such as mission creep.

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This is a recurring symptom where the main purpose of a mission is unclear due to the fact that the endstate fails to precisely describe a desired condition. We need to be aware of the fact that strategic aims such as democracy and freedom need some qualifiers for the follow-on planning process and actions to be purposeful.

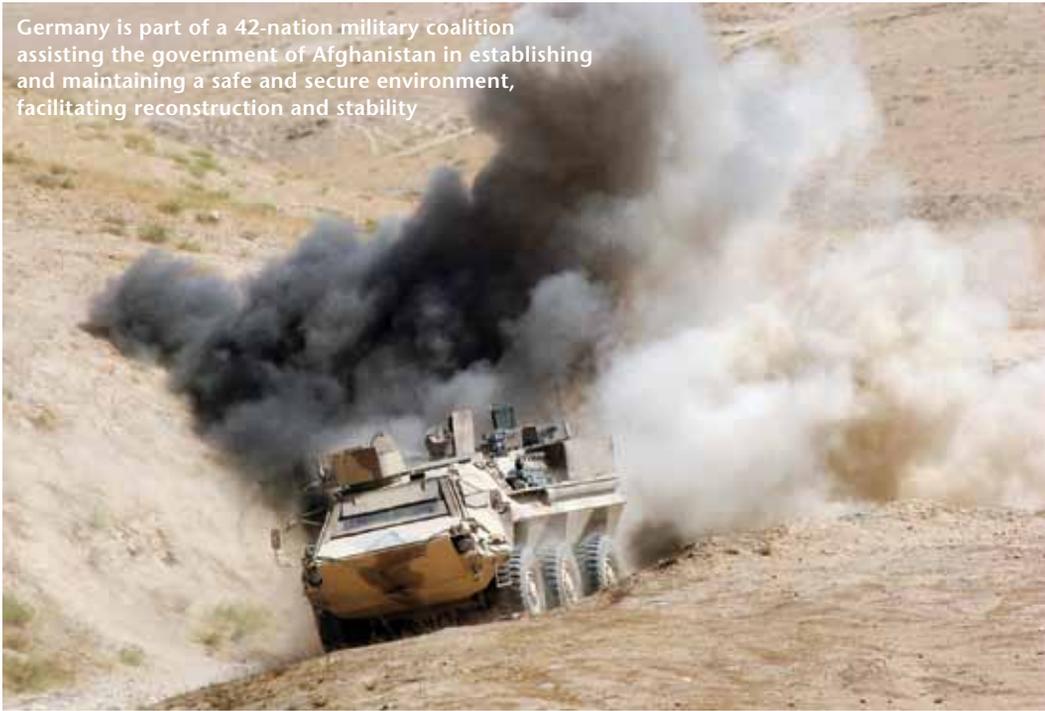
From today's perspective, the international community failed to develop the necessary benchmarks for the measurement of success when debating the endstate. Currently, we are trying to make up this default by defining benchmarks to evaluate the transition process.

The international community would perhaps have enjoyed greater success in Afghanistan had it ensured sufficient integration of the whole population and a better degree of institutional coordination and unity of effort together with a clear vision of what to achieve with increased effort on security at the start of the mission. To summarize my thoughts on the strategic-level lessons learned, I would like to ask some maybe provocative questions.

With regard to the start of the mission, was it right to exclude some Afghan key players in the Petersberg process? Would it not have been better if we had integrated the Taliban at the

Germany is part of a 42-nation military coalition assisting the government of Afghanistan in establishing and maintaining a safe and secure environment, facilitating reconstruction and stability

Bundeswehr (Dajana Mann)



outset instead of starting today—nearly 10 years later—in the attempt to foster reconciliation at the strategic and the reintegration process at the tactical level?

If we agree that success in Afghanistan cannot rely on the use of military means only, then we have to ask: Was the Comprehensive Approach—unity of effort—really established in the early stages of the ISAF mission?

Talking about the availability of intelligence at the strategic level, we can see that there is a large amount of information available. Nevertheless, we failed to develop efficient mechanisms to exchange this information among the different organizations dealing with the Afghanistan challenge.

And finally, regarding the ongoing discussion about transition in Afghanistan, I would suggest that it is crucial to develop an endstate and benchmarks as soon as possible before proceeding to timelines for withdrawal.

Lessons Learned at the Operational Level

Moving from the strategic to the operational level, this leads to the next thesis: Gain momentum by being strong and decisive and keep this momentum going.

From the German perspective, the step out of Kabul and into the provinces was made late in the process, but hopefully not too late. Improvements in living conditions, which include security, economic, social, and political developments, should not and cannot be limited to the capital for such a long time as it creates an opportunity for insurgents to reorganize and regain control over the population.

At the beginning of a mission, we gain momentum by military force. Modern armed forces are organized to operate worldwide on a wide scale and on short notice. Those who are tasked to support governance or reconstruction and development require more time to prepare themselves and to become effective in theater. However, the military can only buy time for a certain period. Thereafter, it is up to the civilian side of the mission to reinforce the joint effort as a first step and later to assume the lead role as a second step. This leads to the next thesis: The military can buy time, but only the well-timed Comprehensive Approach will lead to success.

Participation in a military operation is a tough decision for any nation. This decision requires careful evaluation of many factors in order not to overstretch the military and available financial resources, but to gain indispensable public support. NATO nations are reluctant to risk the lives of their soldiers, which at first glance appears to be a good policy. But the creation of a long list of national caveats aiming to minimize risk for the national military contribution is bound to undermine the military effectiveness in theater.

Despite the diversity of organizations and subdivision of ISAF's area of responsibility into regional commands and the individual ideas of the lead nations in charge, all players have recognized that they will have to follow a common strategy based on the same principles to win the hearts and minds of the people, to provide long-term security, and to allow Afghanistan to return to a level of self-sustainability.

To meet this goal, Germany has restructured the headquarters at Regional Command–North, which is now led by a German two-star general. With this new command and control structure, Germany is able to cope with the significant augmentation of forces in the northern region. Furthermore, Germany has established a senior

civilian representative (equivalent to the military commander) to foster the Comprehensive Approach in the north. This senior representative is a German official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is not subordinate to the RC–N commander. Indeed, he works at the same level, and both the commander and senior representative coordinate all activities in close cooperation. The task of this public official is to harmonize the efforts of all the civilian actors within RC–N, especially the governmental organizations.

Lessons Learned at the Tactical Level

Intelligence. The intelligence business in a counterinsurgency (or COIN) environment, as in Afghanistan, differs significantly from intelligence-gathering in a conventional scenario. Today, a balanced variety of intelligence assets is required to collect and analyze information at the grassroots level to provide actionable—close to real-time—intelligence to operational units on the battlefield. Next to technical assets, providing specific signal

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intelligence and imagery intelligence data, human assets have taken on a significantly greater importance in today's COIN environment.

Consequently, part of the experience is that the number of intelligence personnel available at the tactical level—from human intelligence sources and collectors and analysts to distributors—needs to be considerably strengthened. Similarly, such an augmented pool of intelligence personnel—apart from having purely military skills—needs to possess a wide array of

expertise. The requirements range from linguists to regional and sociocultural specialists, economists and development professionals, and legal and political experts.

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Germany's current adjustments to its force posture within RC-N will result in relocation of intelligence assets—both human and technical—from brigade to battalion level. This will be an initial step toward implementing some of the lessons identified so far.

Simultaneously, such an enhanced, COIN-centric effort requires an improved and closely knit coordination among all intelligence assets, analysts, targeting, and respective operators on the battlefield. However, above all this (at the strategic level), the need for extensive intelligence-sharing, including sharing with nonmilitary actors for which mechanisms have yet to be developed—along with a reduction of national restrictions—must be acknowledged as a key to success in future missions.

Civil-military Cooperation. During the last few years, it has become apparent that a focus on the security situation was not enough to provide military leaders with a comprehensive view. The important area of civil affairs was to a large extent unexplored terrain. We have to recognize that a military focus only on tactical operations would be as wrong as the exclusive concentration on improving the civil actors to transform the political conditions. The common approach has to be directed against the further empowerment of the insurgents and extremists. Integrated and successful civil-military operations are absolutely

necessary to bring lasting security and stability, which is the base for a postconflict reconstruction.

Nevertheless, we did not know much about the people around us or the atmosphere among them. Neither did we know much about our ability to influence these factors. Hence, ISAF established institutions to foster a better understanding of the population and to improve the cooperation between military and civil actors. Fusion Centers—now being integrated in RC-N—and senior civil representatives are excellent examples of this trend toward the Comprehensive Approach. In RC-N, the Provincial Development Fund integrated Afghan communities into the development process. Moreover, the new COIN strategy accelerated these changes both in structure and mindset. Notwithstanding these excellent approaches, many problems remain, and we must consider if and how both civil and military actors can work together to succeed.

This process has to start at home. We need to educate our soldiers in advance about the cultural environment in Afghanistan and the vast implications of the civil situation. But most importantly, we have to integrate the civil situation and all the actors involved into our military decision process so as to adapt the lessons learned from ISAF. This idea is directly linked with our concept of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which are the core elements of the Comprehensive Approach.

PRTs. The NATO PRT concept complies with the required measures to be taken in counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. The line of operations in counterinsurgency results from the analysis of an insurgency environment. Security, economic, and social development as well as governance require an interlinked approach involving capabilities and forces of which the military is but one of the key figures needed.

U.S. Army (Sean Harriman)



German soldier scans horizon while securing 4th Combat Aviation Brigade, 4th Infantry Division CH-47 Chinook in northern Afghanistan

In the two German PRTs in Kunduz and Feyzabad provinces, four of our Federal Ministries—the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of the Interior, Foreign Office, and Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development—cooperate and coordinate their measures, mainly emphasized in the security sector, but with a certain focus on economic and social development. Thus, the Bundeswehr concentrates on the security sector and supports the Afghan security forces in their efforts toward a safe environment in which reconstruction and development can take place. Although the security

situation in Afghanistan is affected by several factors, the necessity to deal with the effects of insurgency is one of the prime challenges because it is a major threat to stability and security.

To be effective, counterinsurgency requires comprehensive measures and adherence to some fundamental guidelines:

- ❖ legitimacy
- ❖ unity of effort
- ❖ political factors
- ❖ understanding of environments
- ❖ intelligence-driven operations
- ❖ isolation of insurgents from their cause and support
- ❖ establishment of security under the rule of law
- ❖ preparation for a long-term commitment.

The key to success in a counterinsurgency is the population, as the people are the environment and every action affects this environment directly. The ultimate need for connecting military and civil measures is therefore obvious.

The ISAF PRTs have brought much improvement to the overall situation in the provinces. Local ownership and small steps in the direction of self-sustainability often had a longer lasting effect than big and highly visible projects.

Conclusion

Unity of effort in the ISAF mission requires military, governmental, and nongovernmental efforts in a synchronized manner.

The military alone cannot solve conflicts. Soldiers open a window of opportunity for politics to additionally employ mainly political, diplomatic, and economic means that focus on the deeper causes of the conflict to achieve a solution. Nevertheless, each stability operation has to have a strong military footprint at the beginning to restore security nationwide. By defining a clear endstate, one is able to identify milestones and to communicate these to the people. Thereafter, it should be much easier to gain their support, which is the indispensable prerequisite to preventing the insurgency's reemergence.

The challenge to restore a stable and politically reliable Afghanistan was underestimated at the beginning. Too little effort was spent on building up the legal system or security forces. These shortfalls provided the insurgents in Afghanistan with an opportunity to reorganize, and, due to a fundamental lack of trust in the Afghan government, the insurgency was able to spread again. Today, the Alliance has clearly analyzed what went wrong in recent years and has taken adequate measures to bring the ISAF mission to a successful conclusion. Therefore, I am confident that NATO will prevail. **PRISM**