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BUNDESWEHR UNDER PRESSURE

## Germany Faces Taliban Pincer in Afghanistan

By Alexander Szandar and Susanne Koelbl

The mission in Afghanistan is becoming more and more dangerous for members of Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr. As large numbers of Taliban fighters move northward, NATO officials expect the situation to become increasingly precarious.



DDP

NATO has so far failed to persuade the Bundeswehr to fight the Taliban in the south. But now the Taliban is heading north.

The guest from Afghanistan charmed his German audience with his measured words and soft voice. Asadullah Khalid, the 37-year-old governor of Kandahar Province in southern Afghanistan, praised the Germans for helping develop Afghanistan shortly after the end of British colonial rule in 1919. Six years ago, after the fall of the Taliban regime, the "traditional friendship" became "even deeper," Khalid, clearly in an attempt to flatter the Germans. "Your soldiers are now fighting for freedom and democracy in Afghanistan," he said.

But the praise Khalid was heaping on Germany last Wednesday in speeches to foreign policy experts in the German parliament, the Bundestag, at the Foreign Office and to journalists in Berlin was merely a polite introduction to a series of concrete requests. The Taliban are "not as strong as they were last year" in their former stronghold of Kandahar, the governor said. But, he added, "coping with" the enemy will require more civilian reconstruction helpers, additional ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops and "especially more German troops."

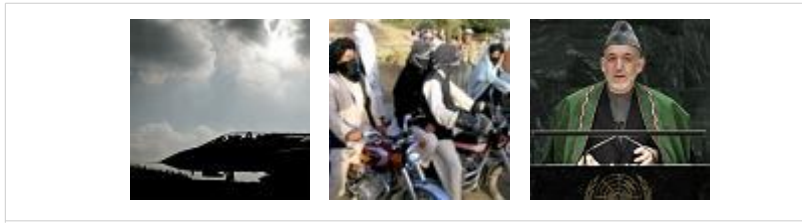
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Khalid's requests had been orchestrated elsewhere. The US government arranged his trip, which also took him to the NATO headquarters in Brussels, and US diplomats accompanied him every step of the way. Meanwhile in Washington, almost concurrently with the Afghan's visit to Berlin, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates fired a broadside against his country's European allies. According to Gates, the Europeans' contributions, in terms of troops and materiel, to the war against the Taliban and terrorists are "inadequate." "I am not ready to let NATO off the hook in Afghanistan at this point," he added.

Washington has long criticized the Bundeswehr for remaining in the relatively calm north, while the United States and allies like Great Britain, Canada and the Netherlands face high casualties in the more volatile south. New British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called several times for a fair "distribution of the burden," a reference to both troop strength (London, with close to 7,800 troops, has the second-largest contingent in Afghanistan next to the United States) and casualties. The British have lost 42 soldiers in fighting and attacks in Afghanistan this year alone. Meanwhile the Germans, who, with their roughly 3,200 troops, have the third-largest contingent in the country, have lost only 3 soldiers in 2007.

**PHOTO GALLERY: THE BUNDESWEHR IN AFGHANISTAN**

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Could German soldiers soon find themselves fighting in the embattled south and east of the country, in explosive provinces like Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand? So far the government in Berlin has successfully managed to avoid sending the Bundeswehr on combat missions in the Taliban's strongholds.

"We are concentrating on the north, and that's how we plan to keep it," said German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a brief visit to Kabul in November. Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung, a member of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), has also stood his ground when confronted with the demands of Germany's allies and Khalid's recent requests. "The question as to whether we will have to expand our Bundeswehr contingent is not an issue at this time," Jung said.



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But it could become an issue sooner than the minister would like. Allies like the Czech Republic, Denmark and Norway are withdrawing their units from northern Afghanistan. Because the troops, close to 400 in number, are unlikely to be replaced anytime soon, the Bundeswehr's troops will have to shoulder their responsibilities themselves.

According to senior military officials in Berlin, the maximum troop strength of 3,500 soldiers approved by the Bundestag is already "pushing the limits" and is in fact too low.

The Taliban is on the move.

To make matters worse, the Taliban is upping the pressure on northern Afghanistan. The group's Islamist holy warriors have begun to march northward and are already practically at the Bundeswehr's doorstep.

Western intelligence agents have noticed that the Taliban is advancing in two directions in a pincer movement. Some Taliban groups are moving north from Helmand Province, Afghanistan's center of opium poppy cultivation, toward the capital Kabul. Other Taliban units are moving away from Helmand and Kandahar and sweeping up westwards through provinces like Herat and Badghis, and toward Kunduz, where the Bundeswehr maintains a reconstruction team of 400 troops. The Germans, as it turns out, are being wedged in on both sides.

### Taliban Repeats its 1990s Strategy

The Taliban's strategy reminds military officials of the early 1990s. That was when the Taliban movement began in southern Afghanistan, almost exclusively home to ethnic Pashtuns. The group's army of religious warriors began its campaign in Kandahar in 1994. Three years later it was positioned just outside Mazar-i-Sharif, where, at Camp Marmal, the Germans now maintain their central command headquarters for nine provinces.

Mazar-i-Sharif is the main city in the north. It is home to Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Turkmen, all traditional enemies of the Taliban. But Pashtuns have also settled in Kunduz Province, enabling the Taliban to gain a foothold there in the 1990s. In the interplay of relations among Afghans, clan membership has traditionally been the strongest binding force.

In 1997, with the support of Kunduz's Pashtuns, the Taliban launched a successful attack on Mazar-i-Sharif. They captured the city's downtown, lost it again for a brief period, but then eventually took the city and held it until the Americans and their Afghan allies arrived in November 2001.

It appears that the Taliban now plan to repeat their 1990s strategy. In October, close to 300 fighters gathered in the border region in Faryab and Badghis provinces, both on the western edge of the German zone. They overran police stations, occupied several districts and blocked the "Ring Road," the country's main road

connecting Kabul with other cities. They received support from Pashtun settlers and poor refugees from the civil war who had returned from Pakistan and Iran.

The counteroffensive began in late October. Under the command of German General Dieter Warnecke, roughly 900 Afghan soldiers, accompanied by about 300 Germans and a rapid intervention force of more than 200 Norwegians, set out into Badghis Province.

For the first time since they joined the mission in Afghanistan, the Germans, in an operation known as "Harekate Yolo-2," requested air support from allied fighter jets. More than a dozen Taliban fighters were killed in the bombing attacks, while Afghan forces took many others prisoner. But most of the Taliban fighters managed to escape into the countryside.

The intelligence agencies believe that the Taliban plans to recapture its old base at Kunduz, using tactics that would presumably resemble its strategy in the south. It promises poor farmers money and protection for their poppy fields, intimidates the local population with brutal attacks on supposed ISAF collaborators and attempts to weaken the NATO forces with attacks and force them to retreat to their fortified military bases.

The suicide attack on a German patrol in the market at Kunduz on May 19, 2007 may have represented the first step in a strategy meant to destabilize the region, which had been relatively quiet until then. Three German soldiers and five Afghans were killed in the attack.

The Taliban has since ramped up its attacks, routinely shooting at Bundeswehr vehicles and firing rockets and rocket-propelled grenades into camps and threatening German soldiers with booby traps and mines. Reconnaissance photos reveal that the Taliban fighters have no qualms about disguising themselves and their weapons under burkas, the traditional women's clothing.

The tension in Afghanistan could become even worse if the situation in neighboring Pakistan, the hub for ISAF's logistics operations, spins out of control. In the wake of the confusion Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf triggered by imposing a state of emergency, senior NATO military leaders now fear that the country could very well descend into total chaos after the elections scheduled for January. If US ally Musharraf does not manage to retain his hold on power, the already half-hearted efforts by the Pakistani military leadership, permeated with Islamists, to stem Taliban and al-Qaida activities in the Pashtun tribal regions could fail completely.



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German Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung (CDU) has called on NATO to draw up a plan of campaigns for the next few years.

NATO military leaders are already considering a number of worst-case scenarios. According to one model, if the ISAF's adversaries in Pakistan are given free rein, the NATO Response Force (NRF), which will include about 5,700 German troops beginning in January, could be brought in as reinforcements. The military officials are also examining the extreme worst-case scenario -- purely as a theory and only in the form of a computer simulation -- the withdrawal of ISAF forces that have been cut off from supplies.

Nevertheless, these strategy games are merely a secondary pursuit for a handful of selected officers, instructed to maintain absolute secrecy, in Kabul, at NATO's Allied Joint Force Command Headquarters in Brunssum, the Netherlands, and at NATO military headquarters in Mons, Belgium. The overwhelming majority of the organization's senior military personnel are involved in the ongoing operations against the Taliban.

But the allies seriously disagree over what should come next after the winter offensive.

NATO must finally "define the goals of its commitment precisely," German Defense Minister Jung wrote in a classified document he presented to his counterparts at a meeting in the Dutch town of Noordwijk in October. According to Jung, NATO needs a "plan of campaigns" for the next few years and clear "criteria to define and measure success and failure." Besides, he added, "closer coordination" with civilian aid organizations, as well as with the United Nations, the European Union and the Afghan government in Kabul is needed to advance the approach of "networked security" with civilian-military reconstruction teams.

But the allies chose to ignore Jung's suggestions. Instead, the NATO Council reverted to its usual method of addressing differences of opinion and assembled a project group.

But US Defense Secretary Gates, on behalf of the United States, the dominant NATO power, has already determined where the organization should be headed. In a hearing before the US House Armed Services Committee, Gates said that the alliance's focus in the coming years should be "to counter terrorist networks and triumph over insurgencies." To defeat the Taliban, Gates said, the US's European allies will need to provide more troops, helicopters and other weaponry.

### Public Mood Is Shifting

But the allies are not exactly inclined to heed Gates's words. Only a few small nations like Croatia, Albania and Georgia offered significant numbers of troops, hoping this would improve their chances of swift admittance to NATO.

In many other countries, however, a heated public debate has erupted over how long the alliance's troops should continue to support a country in which drug production continues to reach new record highs and corruption has eaten its way into the highest levels of government.

In Germany, at any rate, the mood has already shifted. According to recent opinion polls, half of all Germans no longer support the country's Afghanistan mission and favor withdrawing the Bundeswehr from the country.

Public opinion is similar in Canada, which has more than 1,700 troops fighting in southern Afghanistan and has already lost 29 soldiers this year. According to an official who Peter Struck, the floor leader of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), recently sent to Canada to sound out the political mood there, the government in Ottawa is coming under increasing pressure. According to the official, if the current opposition wins next year's election, its first move will be to "announce the withdrawal of troops."

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The Dutch have already taken that step. After losing eight soldiers in Afghanistan this year, the cabinet ended a series of heated debates with a clear resolution. The government in The Hague announced that it had reached an irrevocable decision to begin withdrawing its troops, stationed primarily in war-torn Uruzgan Province, in August 2010. Under the resolution, the last of the Dutch soldiers will be home by Christmas 2010.

The Dutch decision may have set a precedent, raising concerns among NATO military leaders over a possible domino effect. If only one major NATO country yields to domestic pressure and decides to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, it could set off an avalanche, a Norwegian general recently told Wolfgang Schneiderhan, the inspector general of the Bundeswehr. "It would be a strategic defeat for the alliance."

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*

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