

October 25, 2007

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Time for the Bundesmacht

By ROGER COHEN

KABUL, Afghanistan

Remember the Wehrmacht? It was a formidable fighting force. The modern German army, the Bundeswehr, is also very effective. Thing is, it is reluctant to fight or even place itself in danger.

Given history, that may seem just fine. The United States helped frame the institutions of today's Germany precisely to guarantee peace over war. But in Afghanistan, where 3,200 Germans serve in a hard-pressed NATO force, a touch of "Bundesmacht" would be welcome.

Afghanistan is a divided country. The south and east are dangerous because Taliban forces are resurgent there; NATO casualties have been significant. The north and west are quieter; peacekeeping prevails. Tensions have grown between front-line alliance states fighting a war and those that are not.

The former group, battling the Taliban in Helmand Province and elsewhere, includes the United States, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands. The latter is dominated by Germany, Spain and Italy. The split gives a rough guide to parts of the world that still see military force as inextricable from international security and others that are now functionally pacifist.

"In Afghanistan, NATO solidarity collapses at the point of danger," said Julian Lindley-French, a military expert at the Netherlands Defense Academy. "There's no point planning robust operations worldwide if the burden is not shared. A lot of the German troops are little more than heavily armed traffic cops."

Canada, with about 2,500 soldiers in Afghanistan, has seen 71 killed. That is about three times the German losses and seven times the Italian. Britain has more than 80 dead, and the United States almost 450. These are eloquent numbers.

The Afghan mission has evolved. The United Nations mandate for the 40,000 NATO troops there speaks of the “maintenance of security” in the interests of “reconstruction and humanitarian efforts.” Nowhere does it mention counterinsurgency or counterterrorism.

But with the Taliban regrouping, and support for it still arriving from Pakistani border areas, security has become inseparable from eliminating insurgents. Gen. Dan K. McNeill, the American commander of the NATO force, said “thousands” of Taliban had been killed this year; other officers put the figure around 5,000.

Some of this counterinsurgency toll is the work of U.S. and other special forces in the separate American-run Operation Enduring Freedom — the more secret of the Afghan campaigns. Still, NATO is at war here.

That, however, is a fact Europeans are reluctant to accept, just as the link between slaughter in Madrid, London or Amsterdam and the Afghan-Pakistani terror nexus seems unconvincing to many Europeans floating on an Iraq-comforted wave of moral smugness.

This month, the German Bundestag approved the extension of the mission for another year. But Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has not visited Afghanistan, prefers talk of trendy eco-problems. Tenuous German support for deployment here is tied to maintaining the caveats with which the mission began: the army is here to help with security, reconstruction and good governance from a northern base. Building schools should be more central than killing Taliban. Soft power trumps hard.

General McNeill would not argue with some of that. “There is no solely military solution,” he said. Afghanistan, six years after the toppling of the Taliban, stands at a tipping point: only improved governance, a less corrupt police force and material progress will marginalize the back-to-the-past brigade.

But this underresourced mission, on which NATO’s future hinges, needs switch-hitters. Rigid interpretation of mandates ill serves a changing situation.

William Wood, the U.S. ambassador in Kabul, said, “The commitment to Afghanistan should be a full commitment,” and “some of the caveats should be removed.” He continued, “It would certainly be better if we could all cooperate together on precisely the same missions.”

NATO defense ministers, meeting in the Netherlands, are being pressed this week by the U.S. defense secretary, Robert Gates, to provide more troops and helicopters. Those are needed. But at a deeper level, NATO members must decide whether they are in this

together with an equal readiness to face danger.

If, for example, Germany, Italy and Spain were more flexible, some of their troops could be detached to provide a strategic reserve for the stormy south.

One German retort I've heard is that it's no good having the United States demand that its allies fight and die in southern Afghanistan when Washington refuses debate over the role of its pampered friend, Pakistan, in the violence.

That's a fair point. Still, it's time to bring on the Bundesmacht and past time for continental Europe to overcome its pacifist mirage and accept that these are dangerous times demanding serious defense budgets and sacrifice.

-

Blog: www.iht.com/passages.

Nicholas D. Kristof is on book leave.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
