

German Parliamentary Debates and Decision-Making on Afghanistan

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Abstract

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 marked the end of 20 years of German civilian and military engagement in Afghanistan. Over this time, more than 90,000 Bundeswehr soldiers were deployed in Afghanistan, 59 of whom died there. At a cost of about EUR 12.3 bn, the engagement in the Afghanistan missions amounted to the largest and most costly military operation in the history of the Bundeswehr. This contribution reflects upon parliamentary involvement throughout this period, placing emphasis on the initial political decisions and turning points of the Afghanistan engagement.

Short biography

Patrick A. Mello is Privatdozent at the Technical University of Munich and Research Associate at the Chair of European and Global Governance at the Hochschule für Politik München. His research focuses on questions related to international security and foreign policy, especially concerning the influence of parliaments, the impact of party politics, and multinational military coalitions. His book *Democratic Participation in Armed Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan) received the 2015 Dissertation Award of the German Political Science Association.

I. Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan's capital Kabul. Two days later, the Bundeswehr initiated an evacuation mission, which was retroactively approved by the Bundestag on 25 August 2021. The fall of Kabul marked the end of nearly 20 years of German civilian and military engagement in the country.¹ In line with the constitutional courts' conception of the Bundeswehr as a "parliamentary army", the Bundestag was centrally involved in decision-making processes on the Afghanistan mandates throughout these years.² Germany's involvement in Afghanistan began in November 2001, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September in the United States, when the coalition government of SPD and The Greens decided to contribute militarily to the US-led anti-terrorist mission Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). A month later, participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was agreed upon, initially as an ad hoc coalition limited to Kabul and later expanded across the country under NATO auspices. Formally, parliament approved the OEF and ISAF mission mandates and their yearly renewal. More substantively, members of parliament deliberated on the benefits and drawbacks of the increasingly unpopular Afghanistan missions. Participation in OEF was ended in 2008, while ISAF was prolonged until the end of 2014. Subsequently, Germany contributed to the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM), which ended in 2021. At a cost of about EUR 12.3 bn, the Afghanistan engagement was the largest and most costly military operation in the history of the Bundeswehr. Over 90,000 individual soldiers were deployed in Afghanistan over these years, 59 of whom died there.³

Against this backdrop, this contribution reflects upon Germany's involvement in Afghanistan, with a focus on parliamentary debates and decision-making in the Bundestag. While a comprehensive treatment is beyond the article's scope, emphasis is placed on the initial decisions that led to the involvement as well as turning points throughout the Afghanistan engagement.⁴ The focus is on the ISAF and OEF missions, as these were revisited and renewed

¹ At the time of writing, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) remains active in Kabul. Between 2004 and 2017, Germany contributed 13 officers to UNAMA on a basis of yearly rotation. On UNAMA, see also Koenigs, *Machen wir Frieden oder haben wir Krieg? Auf UN-Mission in Afghanistan*, 2011.

² See Wagner, *The Bundestag as a Champion of Parliamentary Control of Military Missions*, 2017; Brummer, *Die begrenzten 'war powers' des Bundestags*, 2014; Mello and Peters, *Parlamente in der Friedens- und Sicherheitspolitik: Parlamentarische Kontrolle von Streitkräfteeinsätzen im Licht der Forschung*, 2017.

³ See the federal government's responses to parliamentary enquiries by the FDP: Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 19/1630 (13.04.2018) and Drucksache 19/32643 (04.10.2021).

⁴ See also Brummer and Fröhlich, *Zehn Jahre Deutschland in Afghanistan*, 2011, Harnisch, *Deutschlands Rolle in Afghanistan: State-Building-Dilemmata einer Zivilmacht*, 2011, Krause, *Die*

by the Bundestag on a regular basis. However, though attention has often centred on the military element of the Afghanistan engagement, it should be noted that the missions were multidimensional in character, comprising civilian and military components in line with the “networked security” approach of the Bundeswehr, and involving a multitude of international organisations, non-state actors and multinational partners.⁵

II. Increased engagement and expanding mandates

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder declared Germany’s “unconditional solidarity” with the US. It soon became evident that this entailed a conception of solidarity that involved German participation in the fight against terrorism and, especially, participation in the US-led anti-terrorist OEF mission in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa. However, heated deliberations and parliamentary debates on OEF nearly tore apart the red-green coalition, as a sizeable number of MPs from the Greens and SPD voiced pacifist and anti-militarist concerns over the OEF mandate.⁶ In the end, it came down to a ten-vote difference in favour of OEF, a result that was attained also because Chancellor Schröder linked the substantive decision on the mandate with a parliamentary vote of confidence. To this date, it remains the only decision on the use of military force that was merged with a vote of confidence. Notably, all subsequent mandate decisions on OEF, ISAF and RSM, which amounted to a total of 28 parliamentary votes between 2001 and 2021, received overwhelming majorities in the Bundestag, with at least 70% of MPs voting in favour of the mandates and often much higher shares of political support.⁷ This reflects a characteristic pattern of consensual decision-making in foreign and security policy in Germany, where parliamentary preferences are anticipated and infused in the formulation of the mission mandates in order to achieve broad parliamentary majorities.⁸

Afghanistaneinsätze der Bundeswehr: Politischer Entscheidungsprozess mit Eskalationsdynamik, 2011, and Schröder, *Lessons Learned? German Security Policy and the War in Afghanistan*, 2014.

⁵ On the development perspective in the context of German foreign policy, see, for instance, Gravingholt, *Entwicklungspolitik im Gefüge einer ‚neuen deutschen Außenpolitik‘*, 2016. Various dimensions of the Afghanistan missions are explored in two special issues of *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (39/2007 and 21-22/2010).

⁶ See Lagassé and Mello, *The Unintended Consequences of Parliamentary Involvement: Elite Collusion and Afghanistan Deployments in Canada and Germany*, 2018.

⁷ For comparative data on deployment votes, see Ostermann et al., *Constructing a Parliamentary Deployment Votes Database: Challenges of Data Collection, Classification, and Indexing*, 2020.

⁸ Mello, *German Foreign Policy*, 2021. On German engagement in military missions, see Geis, *Burdens of the Past, Shadows of the Future: The Use of Military Force as a Challenge for the German ‘Civilian Power’*, 2013; Mello, *Von der Bonner zur Berliner Republik: Die ‘Zivilmacht’ Deutschland im Spiegel parlamentarischer Debatten zu Auslandseinsätzen der Bundeswehr, 1990 bis 2018*, 2019.

The ISAF mission was originally limited to the city of Kabul and its surrounding areas, aimed at the establishment of political institutions and an interim government in line with the objectives of the Bonn agreement and UN Resolutions 1383 and 1386. While initially a multilateral ad hoc coalition under the command of the United Kingdom as the first ISAF “lead nation”, NATO assumed control over ISAF in August 2003 and the mandate was successively expanded beyond Kabul to cover the entire country of Afghanistan.⁹ Subsequent years saw a gradual expansion of the mission and further increases in the deployed number of personnel. What had initially been a light footprint mission with a narrow focus steadily increased in size and complexity. This can also be seen in the number of US troops in Afghanistan, which rose from a mere 2,500 soldiers in 2001 to a peak level of 90,000 soldiers in 2011.¹⁰ In the case of Germany, the initial ISAF mandate had been limited to 1,200 soldiers, but the deployment had increased to 5,500 soldiers by 2011. One particularity of the German involvement in Afghanistan was the strict separation of the ISAF and OEF mandates. While the former was widely perceived as a “peace operation”, the latter was the politically unpopular “combat mission”, mostly sidelined by decision-makers in Berlin.¹¹ In hindsight, the inherent conflict between the competing goals of state-building and combatting terrorism was seen as one of the principal reasons for the ultimate failure of Western involvement in Afghanistan.

III. A growing disconnect between politics and the public

Another notable feature of the Afghanistan missions was the growing disconnect between parliamentary decision-making and public perception. While mandates expanded and the military footprint became larger, coinciding with mounting civilian and military casualties, political communication in Berlin for a long time failed to acknowledge realities on the ground. Indicative of this was the refusal by decision-makers to concede that the Bundeswehr was engaged in a “war” and “warfighting” in Afghanistan. Until 2009, German politicians mostly referred to the engagement in Afghanistan as a “stabilisation” or “reconstruction” mission. This changed throughout the summer of 2009, when several security incidents and increasing

⁹ The initiative for NATO to formally adopt the mission came from Germany and the Netherlands after the two countries had started to jointly lead ISAF from February 2003 onward.

¹⁰ On US troop deployment data, see the Brookings Afghanistan Index (August 2020), <https://tinyurl.com/ymzfy5t>.

¹¹ See Lagassé and Mello, *The Unintended Consequences of Parliamentary Involvement: Elite Collusion and Afghanistan Deployments in Canada and Germany*, 2018. The comparison with Canada is informative; see also Saideman, *Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada's War in Afghanistan*, 2016.

fatalities forced defence minister Franz Josef Jung to acknowledge that the Bundeswehr was indeed engaged in a “Kampfeinsatz” (combat engagement) in Afghanistan.¹²

The disconnect also shows in public opinion. At the time of the initial mandate decisions on OEF and ISAF, a majority of the public (about 56%) still supported the military engagement in Afghanistan. However, public support decreased continuously as the missions wore on. From about 2006 onward, a plurality of respondents was opposed to the German involvement in ISAF.¹³ This is also reflected in the media coverage and the public salience of the Afghanistan missions. As observers remarked upon Germany’s withdrawal in 2021, in the years that preceded the dramatic events that unfolded throughout the summer of 2021 and the fall of Kabul, the broader public hardly took note any longer of what went on in Afghanistan. An exception occurred in 2009, when the German commanding officer of the Provincial Reconstruction Team Kunduz requested a US-led airstrike against abducted gasoline trucks. This caused the death of insurgents but also killed civilians and many underage boys who had been forced to syphon gasoline from the stranded trucks. Extensive parliamentary investigations concluded that between 99 and 125 people died because of the airstrikes ordered by the German commanding officer. The publicly available 551-page report of the parliamentary committee of enquiry provides an unadorned look into the political-military dynamics of the ISAF mission and the multilateral decision-making within it.¹⁴ The Kunduz incident also marked a high point of media coverage on Afghanistan, with about three times as many newspaper articles on the topic compared with the average across the ISAF engagement.¹⁵

Whether the public perception of the Afghanistan engagement could have been improved with better political communication remains an open question. What is evident is that decision-makers repeatedly attempted to shield the mission from public scrutiny. For instance, in October 2008 the major parties in the Bundestag agreed to extend the mandate for an additional three months to shift the Afghanistan issue away from the upcoming electoral campaign. A

¹² Rid and Zapfe, *Mission Command without a Mission: German Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, 2013. On German army operations and tactics in Afghanistan, see Friesendorf, *How Western Soldiers Fight: Organizational Routines in Multinational Missions*, 2018. On discursive change in German security policy, see Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force: Antimilitarism, Ideational Change, and Post-Cold War German Security Discourse*, 2020.

¹³ Lagassé and Mello, *The Unintended Consequences of Parliamentary Involvement: Elite Collusion and Afghanistan Deployments in Canada and Germany*, 2018; see also Mader, *Öffentliche Meinung zu Auslandseinsätzen der Bundeswehr*, 2017.

¹⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, *Beschlussempfehlung und Bericht des Verteidigungsausschusses als 1. Untersuchungsausschuss*, Drucksache 17/7400, 25.10.2011.

¹⁵ Lagassé and Mello, *The Unintended Consequences of Parliamentary Involvement: Elite Collusion and Afghanistan Deployments in Canada and Germany*, 2018.

similar case occurred two years later, when the ISAF renewal was initiated six weeks earlier than originally planned, arguably to keep the topic away from regional elections.¹⁶

IV. Conclusion

The Afghanistan missions have occupied the Bundestag like no other military involvement in the history of the Bundeswehr. Apart from discussing and voting upon the initial mandates for OEF, ISAF and RSM, parliament regularly revisited the missions and decided upon their renewal. In 2009-2010, the defence committee of the Bundestag constituted itself as a parliamentary committee of enquiry to investigate the Kunduz airstrikes. These investigations led to a reassessment of the Afghanistan policy and to changes in the way German military conducted missions. In 2021, the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban and the dramatic circumstances surrounding the withdrawal of Western forces and the evacuation mission of the Bundeswehr prompted calls for parliamentary enquiries into the matter. In their coalition agreement, the SPD, Greens and FDP declared their intention to establish such a parliamentary committee to examine the evacuation mission and to form an *Enquête-Kommission* to draw broader lessons from the Afghanistan engagement. Meanwhile, several of the involved ministries have announced their own investigations. It remains to be seen whether these will identify valuable lessons for future military engagements or merely help to legitimise previous actions.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Ibid.

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