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Never Again? Germany's Lessons from the War in Afghanistan

Philipp Münch

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ABSTRACT: Defense officials and politicians claimed to learn lessons from Germany's involvement in Afghanistan. Practitioners asserted a successful mission would have required more time and resources. Politicians developed a preference for training missions instead of combat missions. While both concluded interventions intended to transform foreign societies still made sense in principle, the most logical lesson is quite the opposite: Germany must avoid such engagements.

Germany's participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (2002–14) did not have a unified goal. Instead, German military, diplomats, and politicians worked toward diverse and often implicit goals that did not relate to Afghanistan. This situation makes it impossible to identify general lessons learned. Military and diplomatic practitioners concluded more resources and time would be required in future interventions, and politicians implicitly concluded the country should avoid intensive combat missions—referring to what occurred in the later stage of ISAF—and instead support smaller enhancing and enabling missions. Yet practitioners and politicians both believe interventions intended to transform foreign societies make sense in principle. This article refutes this shared conclusion, arguing instead that the most logical lesson is to avoid such engagements in the future.

Background

Germany's participation in ISAF in Afghanistan from 2002 until 2014 was the most costly—over €9 billion—and intensive military mission in its history.¹ In 2010 when participation in ISAF peaked, well over 5,000 soldiers were serving in Afghanistan. By June 30, 2014, approximately 132,500 soldiers had been deployed at some point, including 30,140 who had been deployed several times.² From 2006—the year the security situation started to deteriorate significantly in the German main area

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1. [Parliamentary document: government response to opposition inquiry] Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten, Andrej Hunko, Alexander S. Neu, Michel Brandt, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE*, Drucksache 19/6011 (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, November 26, 2018), 6.

2. Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Große Anfrage der Abgeordneten Wolfgang Gehrke, Jan Korte, Jan van Aken, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE*, Drucksache 18/4168 (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, February 27, 2015), 6, 76.

of responsibility—to 2014, German soldiers were attacked at least 380 times and participated in at least 150 firefights.³

Since 2010 over 5,700 soldiers have received the combat medal.⁴ Though casualties are lower than those of some other major ISAF nations, 54 soldiers lost their lives in Afghanistan—35 through direct enemy action. More than 260 soldiers were physically wounded and an unaccounted number suffered psychological wounds.⁵ Drastically falling approval rates among voters and intensifying parliamentary debate attest that participation in ISAF became one of the most controversial foreign policy enterprises.

In light of these considerable costs and political developments, what strategic lessons did Germany learn from its participation in ISAF? First the necessary questions: did the government achieve its intended goals? If so, how completely? These questions highlight a significant shortcoming in obtaining an adequate assessment of lessons learned—the government’s goals in Afghanistan were only broadly defined and therefore cannot be clearly measured. Further, lessons learned always depend on the perspectives and interests of those who draw them. Accordingly, this article considers lessons learned by civilian and military practitioners and politicians and contrasts them with an academic perspective.

To assess informal lessons learned, this article reviews contributions by former or active senior practitioners published as private opinions. The article also looks at the major steps decision makers took in recent years with regard to interventions and assumes these decisions were (unconsciously) informed by lessons learned from ISAF. In particular, the article scrutinizes the two most crucial strategic aspects of the German contribution to ISAF—strategy making and transformation of Afghan society; it examines the goals of decision makers related to these two aspects and evaluates the level of success toward achieving these goals.

The article also highlights lessons politicians and more junior practitioners drew from the mission. The article concludes by contrasting the author’s lessons learned from the ISAF contribution with those drawn by politicians and practitioners, arguing the lessons learned by the latter were shaped by their positions in the state apparatus.

Theory

According to bureaucratic politics theory, states are not unified actors with an overarching rationality. Instead, states are constituted by representatives who try to maximize their autonomy by accumulating

3. [Parliamentary report, no author, publisher or date given] *Bericht der Kommission zur Untersuchung des Einsatzes des G36-Sturmgewehres in Gefechtsituationen*, 24–25.

4. Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage des Abgeordneten, René Springer, Gerold Otten, Martin Hess, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion der AfD, Drucksache 19/5825* (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, November 19, 2018), 4.

5. *Bericht der Kommission*, 25.

resources and competencies and influencing state policy. As a result, state policy becomes a compromise of diverging interests. Interests are position driven; in the case of German politicians and national security practitioners, their respective positions in the state apparatus shape their perspectives on policy issues like lessons learned from an intervention.⁶

According to the bureaucratic politics model, politicians seek to create a distinctive political heritage and ensure re-election. Practitioners tasked with conducting interventions, such as diplomats who serve as special representatives for an intervention or military commanders in charge, strive for more resources for such a mission and do not doubt its usefulness.⁷ Members of the armed services at home, however, tend to resist interventions that could endanger force readiness.⁸

In the case of the German participation in ISAF, lessons learned by practitioners should be differentiated into mostly explicit—published or classified—official reports and informal, mostly implicit lessons practitioners have internalized subsequently manifested as experience or communication. Despite public and parliamentary pressure, to date neither the federal government nor the parliament (*Bundestag*) has commissioned a comprehensive independent assessment of the ISAF contribution—based on access to classified sources—that draws lessons learned.⁹ Therefore the major formal document is the November 2014 final report on progress in Afghanistan, written by the federal government’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Michael Koch. This report also served as an ISAF final report.

In typical diplomatic fashion, the report often avoids clear statements or cushions judgments in mild diplomatic language.¹⁰ Though written for the entire government, the report tends to emphasize the position of the Federal Foreign Office. At the same time, the federal ministers responsible for Afghanistan published brief public statements in which they referred to lessons learned, which align closely with Koch’s report.¹¹

Also during this time, the armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) produced a comprehensive collection of mostly operational and tactical lessons-learned reports on its ISAF mission. The reports are classified, but the strategic report was leaked to the press, which published some of the

6. See Marc R. DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Press, June 2015).

7. Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla A. Clapp, and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Second Edition (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

8. Kevin P. Marsh, “The Intersection of War and Politics: The Iraq War Troop Surge and Bureaucratic Politics,” *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 3 (2012): 425–26.

9. Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten*, Marcus Faber, Alexander Müller, Christian Sauter, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion der FDP, Drucksache 19/1630 (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, April, 13 2018), 2–3.

10. Bundesregierung, *2014 Progress Report on Afghanistan Including an Assessment of the Engagement in Afghanistan* (Berlin: Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, November 2014), 19, 45–47.

11. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Meine Lehren aus Afghanistan,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, October 12, 2014; Ursula von der Leyen, “Die Fortschritte sind greifbar,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.fr.de/meinung/fortschritte-sind-greifbar-11188124.html>.

report's conclusions.¹² For this contribution, an excerpt of the army's lessons-learned report was declassified.¹³ Since ISAF was primarily a land operation, this is the most comprehensive and significant of the Bundeswehr's reports. To assess informal lessons learned, this article reviews contributions by former or active senior practitioners published as private opinions.¹⁴

The practitioners' and politicians' lessons learned will be contrasted with the most comprehensive academic assessment of the German ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) contributions. This study is based on numerous interviews, field research in Afghanistan, and the largest number of open or leaked documents. Its core argument is the engagement was largely self-referential and did not primarily aim at achieving anything in Afghanistan but tried to reach diverse goals, depending on the position of the actors involved.¹⁵

Creating National Strategy

In accordance with their position in the state apparatus, the most senior foreign policy makers tried to achieve two goals with the contribution to ISAF. First, they sought to establish a political legacy—improving the country's position in international relations through participation in the US-led engagement in Afghanistan following 9/11 and later through ISAF. Second, to ensure reelection, however, they tried to avoid undue public attention focused on the nation's involvement in a major war effort.

Four years after leaving office, former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder outlined the political backdrop of his decision to go to Afghanistan:

The Bundestag's decision [on a military intervention in Afghanistan] put an end to the chapter of Germany's limited sovereignty after World War II. It made us an equal partner in the international community of nations, one that had obligations to meet, such as those that have arisen from the NATO alliance in the case of Afghanistan. . . . In other words, the deployment of the Bundeswehr in the Hindu Kush is an expression of Germany's complete sovereignty over its foreign and security policy.¹⁶

Indeed, nothing points to any geopolitical or other strategic aims foreign policy makers tried to realize in Afghanistan. As Michael Steiner, a foreign policy adviser to Schröder observed, the decision to join the intervention “had zero percent to do with Afghanistan and

12. Konstantin von Hammerstein, “‘Strategisches Vakuum’ Bundeswehr kritisiert mangelhafte Zielsetzung bei Militärmission,” *Der Spiegel*, September 3, 2016.

13. Kommando Heer I 1 (4) EinsAuswH, *Dokumentation 13 Jahre ISAF, hier: Exzerpt / Zusammenfassung* (Strausberg, Deutschland: Kommando Heer I 1 (4) EinsAuswH, March 3, 2015).

14. Roderich Kiesewetter and Stefan Scheller, “Mission erfüllt? ISAF-Verstanden und Dazugelehrt,” *Politische Studien* 67, no. 467 (2016): 72–73; Rainer Glatz, “ISAF Lessons Learned: A German Perspective,” *PRISM* 2, no. 2 (2011), 171–72; and Hans-Peter Bartels, Klaus Wittmann, and André Wüstner, “Was wir aus Afghanistan lernen müssen,” RP Online, September 21, 2016.

15. Philipp Münch, *Die Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. Militärische Handlungslogik in internationalen Interventionen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2015).

16. Gerhard Schröder, “The Way Forward in Afghanistan,” *Spiegel Online International*, February 12, 2009.

hundred percent with the U.S.”¹⁷ It is therefore not surprising Germany failed to develop clearly defined national goals for its engagement in Afghanistan.

The concept papers from 2003 to 2010 only included a wide range of operational tasks that helped the involved ministries highlight their expertise, thereby serving their institutional interests. Vague umbrella terms like stability or development held these tasks together. Foreign policy makers emphasized the importance of a civil-military intra-governmental approach they termed “networked security” and confused this operational concept with strategy.¹⁸ Politicians wanted Afghan society to improve in general, envisioning a reduction in or elimination of widespread human rights violations, mass violence, and apparent corruption, but decision makers were unable to articulate clear goals for post-conflict Afghanistan.

In contrast, the commitments and structural/operational achievements that helped give Germany a significant and visible share of ISAF were much more concrete. Throughout its existence, policy makers successfully maintained the country’s position as the third biggest troop contributor for the mission. Military members also secured major posts at the ISAF headquarters, from commander to spokesman—the public faces of the mission. Policy makers also established a leading presence in northern Afghanistan when Germany became the permanent lead nation for Regional Command North, led by a brigadier general. As large US reinforcements arrived in early 2010, Regional Command North became a German major general–led headquarters.¹⁹

The fact that the nation’s contribution to ISAF occurred in a multinational context, however, did not help the strategy become more focused. First, like Germany, most non-US contributors to ISAF hoped to improve their global reputation rather than achieve anything specific.²⁰ Furthermore contributors often could not agree on ISAF mission goals. In this debate, policy makers sided with policy makers from other continental European nations who endorsed a peacekeeping mission instead of one more counterterrorism-oriented, resisting attempts to merge the more heavy-handed, US-led Operation Enduring Freedom with ISAF.²¹ Eventually as a compromise, ISAF contributors agreed on a rather vague desired end state of the mission, “a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government . . . able to exercise its authority” without ISAF security assistance.²²

17. Nico Fried, Christoph Hickmann, and Tobias Matern, “Krieg im toten Winkel,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 17, 2017.

18. Münch, *Bundeswehr in Afghanistan*, 169–70.

19. Münch, *Bundeswehr in Afghanistan*, 207, 214.

20. See the contributions on the subject in this and the two previous issues of *Parameters*.

21. Münch, *Bundeswehr in Afghanistan*, 166.

22. United Nations Security Council, S/2003/970, October 8, 2003, 3, <https://undocs.org/S/2003/970>.

To ensure reelection, senior foreign policy makers tried to avoid tasks in ISAF that could pull soldiers into combat. In 2003 Germany only reluctantly took the temporary command together with The Netherlands and supported by NATO. The same year policy makers also authorized a presence in the north because they assumed the forces would be spared combat.²³ To protect their forces from combat, German policy makers—like those of other troop contributors—imposed (informal) caveats on the strategic NATO operational plan for ISAF. These caveats restricted forces from regularly leaving Regional Command North and Kabul, precluded them from participating in counternarcotics operations, and ruled out some provisions of the rules of engagement that allowed German troops to take offensive action.²⁴

Lessons Learned

To find lessons learned, one should ask whether policy makers achieved the largely implicit strategic goals identified above. At least since the late 2000s, policy makers failed to create or maintain the perception in large parts of the domestic public that Afghanistan was improving and that the country's ISAF engagement was a peaceful enterprise. The abstract question, whether the nation improved its international standing, is much harder to answer. One indicator is the acquisition of key positions in NATO and the UN: Germany did not gain any new key posts in the Alliance, and it did not come closer to the goal of gaining a permanent UN Security Council seat. One may argue Germany was only able to maintain its position in these organizations because of its participation in ISAF, but France—a NATO member state of roughly comparable size—did not seem to have suffered from its much more reluctant ISAF involvement.

These negative and neutral outcomes suggest involvement in ISAF did not pay off in the ways senior policy makers had hoped. Instead, policy makers lost control over this foreign engagement. Germany's experience with ISAF demonstrates foreign policy with unclear or implicit goals is unlikely to benefit a state's position in international relations and should be avoided at all costs.

Incidentally, the authors of the formal and published lessons-learned contributions drew very different conclusions. First, none saw a problem in terms of unclear goals or strategy. The reports only conceded the government and the international community unintentionally raised unrealistically high expectations among the Afghan population and the domestic German audience although their goals actually were quite limited from the beginning.²⁵

23. Lutz Holländer, *Die politischen Entscheidungsprozesse bei Auslandseinsätzen der Bundeswehr 1999–2003* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 106–7.

24. Münch, *Bundeswehr in Afghanistan*, 274–75.

25. Frank-Walter Steinmeier et al., “Open letter” on the completion of the ISAF mission, Joint press release of the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Ministry of Defence and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/141229-offener-brief-isaf/267898>; and Bundesregierung, 2014 Report on Afghanistan, 57.

Praising the high level of contributions, the reports also hinted this participation played a significant role. The minister of defense even stated the lead-nation role in the north demonstrated Germany would be “determined to take more responsibility in the alliance.”²⁶ Secondly, the authors concluded rather generally that only the goal of destroying terrorist safe havens (not an ISAF goal) was completely achieved and determined development and democratic state building in Afghanistan made great progress, but not to a satisfactory degree. In terms of strategy formation, they drew no lessons learned.²⁷

In contrast to the formal and published lessons-learned contributions, some of the classified military and private publications heavily criticized ISAF strategy making. According to *Der Spiegel* magazine, the Bundeswehr strategic lessons-learned report concluded the strategic vacuum which persisted for most of the country’s participation in ISAF had to be avoided in future conflicts.²⁸ Unofficial publications by the then commander of the Bundeswehr Joint Forces Operations Command, Lieutenant General Rainer Glatz and Member of Parliament Roderich Kiesewetter and the joint report organized by Parliamentary Commissioner Hans-Peter Bartels also concluded ISAF strategy was not clear or measurable and would have to change in order to secure success in future engagements. Yet all the critiques depicted the strategic deficit as a technical deficit and did not ask why policy makers failed to define an explicit strategy.²⁹

Transforming Afghan Society

NATO’s desired end state for Afghanistan effectively demanded ISAF should influence the behavior of two groups of Afghans at odds with one another: representatives of the Afghan state who ISAF could enable to exert control over Afghanistan and all nonstate actors who defied attempts by these representatives to control the country. Though difficult to distinguish in Afghan reality, ISAF mostly divided this latter group of nonstate actors into local power brokers who maintained autonomy through nonstate sources of political power and insurgents who fought the government militarily. The desired end state promulgated by NATO coincided with German goals vaguely aimed at creating a peaceful country with a capable liberal state.

In accordance with the implicit goal of senior policy makers to avoid creating warlike conditions, in working with local Afghans, soldiers generally followed a cautious, legalistic approach. Information collection on and analysis of local political conditions was persistently deficient, seriously hampering all related efforts. German soldiers preferred to work with Afghan officials—except those who overtly

26. Von der Leyen, “Die Fortschritte sind greifbar.”

27. Bundesregierung, *2014 Report on Afghanistan*, 39–50; and Von der Leyen, “Die Fortschritte sind greifbar.”

28. Von Hammerstein, “Strategisches Vakuum,” 20.

29. Glatz, “ISAF Lessons Learned,” 173; Kiesewetter and Scheller, “Mission erfüllt?,” 72–73; and Bartels, Wittmann, and Wüstner, “Afghanistan lernen müssen.”

did not comply with formal structures—and abstained from trying too strongly to change the local power structure by removing officials such as provincial governors, as the United States and the United Kingdom did. Despite attempts to support officials who complied with formal rules, the local power structure in the areas of the two German provincial reconstruction teams in Kunduz (2003–13) and Badakhshan (2004–12) provinces remained much the same as it was in late 2001.³⁰

Faulty analysis of the conflict situation in Kunduz proved the most disastrous.³¹ Ignoring the very recent history of this embattled Afghan province, in 2003 policy makers selected it as the first location of a German-led provincial reconstruction team mostly on the basis of the then low number of security incidents.³² Yet like in most other parts of Afghanistan, the main driver of the insurgency was the distribution of local political power, not ideological conviction.³³ As recent research demonstrates, even allegedly hard-core Taliban leaders like Jalaluddin Haqqani tried to negotiate a power-sharing agreement with the new Western-backed regime in late 2001 and in 2002.³⁴

After the 2001 intervention as reconciliation was ignored and the Afghan winners took it all, political positions were dramatically reshuffled, pushing the disgruntled into the insurgency.³⁵ The upsurge of the insurgency in Kunduz since the mid-2000s, which caught German ISAF forces by surprise, resulted from the same logic—local power distribution outweighed considerations of ideology.³⁶

Beginning in 2007 German ISAF forces tried to oppose the insurgency with increasingly offensive tactics. Trained to counter a massive Soviet/Russian conventional attack during and after the Cold War, the Bundeswehr tried to maintain this capability in Afghanistan. The military interpretation of the broad counterinsurgency concept therefore focused on fighting a combined arms battle involving mechanized vehicles like the Marder, Dachs, Biber, and PzH 2000 armored SP howitzer to take or hold decisive terrain. Since this approach ignored the human terrain—the insurgent networks that operated without being overly bound to actual terrain—it failed to reduce insurgent violence.³⁷

In order to enable the Afghan government to exert control over its territory, German ISAF forces focused their training and advising

30. Philipp Münch, *Local Afghan Power Structures and the International Military Intervention: A Review of Developments in Badakhshan and Kunduz Provinces* (Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 2013).

31. Nils Wörmer, *The Networks of Kunduz: A History of Conflict and Their Actors, from 1992 to 2001* (Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 2012), 3.

32. Holländer, *Entscheidungsprozesse bei Auslandseinsätzen*, 112–13.

33. Münch, *Afghan Power Structures*.

34. Anand Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan. Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2010), 8.

35. Mike Martin, *An Intimate War. An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978–2012* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2014), 112, 251; Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 80–86, 105; Münch, *Afghan Power Structures*, 14–15; and International Crisis Group, *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland* (Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group, June 2011), 6–7.

36. Münch, *Afghan Power Structures*, 34–35.

37. Münch, *Afghan Power Structures*, 51–62.

efforts on the 209th Afghan National Army (ANA) Corps, based in the north. Due to unrenewed contracts, casualties, and desertions, the exact effects of training and advice through ISAF is hard to measure. Yet as the temporary fall of Kunduz City in October 2015—the first loss of a provincial capital to the Taliban—and again in October 2016, as well as the devastating attack on the 209th ANA Corps headquarters on April 21, 2017, that killed at least 140 persons demonstrated, ISAF training and advising apparently did not sustainably improve the quality of the ANA.

In the spectrum of counterinsurgency approaches, forces cautiously engaged local leaders, trying to focus on rewards instead of punishments, and fought insurgents very conventionally. The German approach differed from the approach of the United States, the United Kingdom, and even The Netherlands, all of which forced Afghan governors of important provinces out of office. The unconventional US “carrot and stick” approach practiced in the same area of operations in northeastern Afghanistan from about late 2009 until 2011 also proved to be more successful in reducing insurgent violence. US Special Forces captured and killed numerous insurgent commanders and coopted even more by making them US-paid local security forces.³⁸

Lessons Learned

Still, the more forceful policy adopted by some allies toward local leaders apparently did not lead to markedly different outcomes since ousted governors continued to exert power informally.³⁹ As funding for local security forces in northeastern Afghanistan was reduced and finally eliminated in 2012, the violence increased again and continued in the long term. Given the dire results of different national approaches to move Afghan society in a desired direction, the lesson learned is any kind of long-term social engineering will fail and should not be attempted. These experiences demonstrate as long as people are paid, it is possible to influence their behavior to some degree. But when the overall goal is to create a self-sustainable political order, this approach is ineffective. In light of its totally aid-dependent economy, Afghanistan is far from achieving this outcome.

The official lessons-learned report and statements account for the many deficits mentioned above, including the lack of economic self-sustainability, but they identify more positive impacts from efforts to transform Afghan society as well. Yet Ambassador Koch also noted the problems of gathering detailed information on local conditions and advised against being too intervention eager. Finally, he drew the lesson that assisting a foreign society in transformation requires the support of that society in such efforts. Oddly, he countered the argument that intervention in such a case would be unnecessary by stating that even then security forces would need to be provided “to ensure domestic order.”⁴⁰

38. Münch, *Afghan Power Structures*, 39–40.

39. Martin, *Intimate War*.

40. Bundesregierung, *2014 Report on Afghanistan*, 43–44, 47–50.

This position contradicts his lesson drawn that for success, society in question has to support the international transformation effort—in that case, suppressing significant resistance would be unnecessary.

Official and private lessons-learned reports from senior military officers also accounted for—sometimes implicitly by formulating the lessons as implications—the extreme difficulties generating useful intelligence on Afghanistan.⁴¹ The army report characterized “acting upon key leaders” as a “new challenge.”⁴² In contrast to the official report, the Glatz report and the army report concluded a future engagement should involve more capable military forces from the beginning and demonstrate strength vis-à-vis the local population.⁴³

Despite the meager results of conventional style or mechanized counterinsurgency operations, the authors of the army report were eager to point out the (traditional) German concept of maneuver warfare “was confirmed as a core capability/leadership culture for the army.” They also concluded ISAF “is not a blueprint for other missions!”⁴⁴ This perspective suggests a main concern for the army was to preserve its traditional expertise in conventional warfighting.

Reflecting on ISAF

Given the evidence presented here, the generally applicable lesson learned from the German ISAF contribution is a similar engagement should be avoided at all costs. If the most senior policy makers cannot clearly articulate a common goal for a mission and why it matters, they should abstain from such a foreign policy endeavor. Implicit goals do not substitute for explicit ones. Ensuring strategic coherence and consistency is difficult when policy makers cannot or do not want to articulate goals.

Implicit goals for costly long-term projects are also undemocratic since they cannot be debated among the electorate. Reflecting upon implicit goals is difficult, which contributes to prolonging them even if they do not make sense anymore. Finally, implicit goals help nurture conspiracy theories about hidden agendas like a secret geopolitical NATO plan to maintain a strategic position in Afghanistan vis-à-vis Russia or China.

Other lessons learned more specific to the ISAF contribution emerge. First, Germany’s engagement in Afghanistan demonstrated in the long run it was impossible for practitioners to conduct combat operations and sell the activity to the domestic public as a quasi-peacekeeping mission. A major lesson, therefore, is controlling the course of a military intervention is an illusion. In addition, applying the principles of the

41. Glatz, “ISAF Lessons Learned,” 172–74; and Kommando Heer I 1 (4), EinsAuswH, *Dokumentation*, 4.

42. Kommando Heer I 1 (4), EinsAuswH, *Dokumentation*, 5.

43. Glatz, “ISAF Lessons Learned,” 174; and Kommando Heer I 1 (4), EinsAuswH, *Dokumentation*, 4.

44. Kommando Heer I 1 (4), EinsAuswH, *Dokumentation*, 6.

German approach to maneuver warfare, as cultivated in the army, to operations in Afghanistan clearly failed. Though to date there is no absolutely convincing Western concept of counterinsurgency, it appears much more promising to employ more unconventional approaches with a stronger role for intelligence.

The official and, even more so, the private lessons learned by practitioners concluded relatively unanimously that the goals of the ISAF mission had not (yet) been achieved and were too ambitious or even too vague. Yet practitioners never questioned the assumption foreign societies might be transformed according to Western standards. They only concluded it would be much harder than previously thought. Despite the dire results, practitioners did not draw the lesson such missions should be abandoned. To the contrary, they advocated increased funding for these missions. Former military or defense representatives especially demanded that initially, dramatically more forces should be employed in interventions. Others like Koch asked for more “strategic patience” and stated such missions needed a “generational time scale.”⁴⁵

The key difference between the major lessons learned by practitioners and those advocated for in this article is the former suggest interventions intended to transform foreign societies require a more substantial military commitment, while the latter question their utility. The main argument throughout this article has been this difference in assessment can be most comprehensively understood by referring to the strong institutional interests associated with interventions like ISAF. These interests prevent practitioners from changing their premises—like the general utility of interventions for transforming foreign societies—but instead compel them to ask for more resources.

Practitioners apparently convinced senior foreign policy makers that interventions aiming to transform foreign societies might work in principle. Yet policy makers’ dominant lesson learned was to avoid participating in another large-scale combat mission like ISAF. They did not support the implication that even more robust forces would be necessary, and therefore did not include any combat ground forces with maneuver tasks in following interventions.

Except for observer missions, after the troop-level zenith of ISAF, Germany (almost) only participated in smaller enhancement missions: EU Training Mission Somalia (2010 until 2018, up to 20 soldiers), EU Training Mission Mali (since 2013, up to 350 soldiers), training support for Iraq/Kurdistan (2015 until 2018, up to 150 soldiers), and train, advise, assist mission Resolute Support in Afghanistan (since 2015, up to 1,300 soldiers). The only exception is the contribution to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (2016, up to 1,100 soldiers), which also includes reconnaissance forces and some security forces for base protection.

45. Bundesregierung, *2014 Report on Afghanistan*, 47–48.

Also it appears that as part of its framework-nation concept, the country tries to outsource more dangerous military tasks to other nations under its command. Already in ISAF Regional Command North, the Bundeswehr trained and equipped Albanian, Georgian, and Mongolian forces to perform infantry tasks. For the follow-up mission to ISAF, Resolute Support, the country delegated the quick-reaction force for the north to Georgia and trained and equipped those soldiers in Germany.⁴⁶

Finally, as form followed function, the major policy documents that guide interventions reflect the policy shift to less dangerous and smaller training missions. The 2016 *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* positions “enhancing and enabling” missions more prominently than traditional stabilization operations.⁴⁷ Also, the *Federal Government of Germany Guidelines on Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace* of the following year emphasize “local ownership” and a more careful and indirect approach to the transformation of fragile states. They do not mention the term “stabilization operations” at all.⁴⁸

46. Silvia Stöber, “Georgische Streitkräfte in Afghanistan. Hohes Risiko für ein bisschen NATO,” tagesschau.de, June 10, 2016, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/afghanistan-nato-georgien-101.html>.

47. Federal Government of Germany, *White Paper 2016: On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Berlin: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016).

48. Federal Government of Germany, *Federal Government of Germany Guidelines on Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, 2017), 52.