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## **Extract of Interim Report**

**Study Commission on Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's  
Comprehensive International Engagement in the Future**

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<sup>1</sup> The content of dissenting opinions and citation of sources is the sole responsibility of the submitting parties.

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## **Foreword from the Chairperson**

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Readers,

In 2001, when the German Bundestag adopted a motion for participation in the operation in Afghanistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union and reunification lay just a decade in the past, China was about to join the WTO and the US-dominated global order was at its zenith. In agreeing to declare a state of NATO collective defence the day after the attacks in New York, Germany, with numerous other countries, expressed its solidarity with the United States and took part in the operation in Afghanistan alongside its partners until the withdrawal in 2021.

The attack planned and carried out by al-Qaeda was the trigger for George W. Bush's "global war on terror" and caused a change in US foreign policy that began with Afghanistan and was furthered in the subsequent years by the intervention in Iraq and military operations in Asia and the Middle East.

Although Germany rightly did not participate in all operations, it is certainly important to bring to mind the situation in the years following 2001. The attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center did not remain a one-off incident. Over many years, there were attacks in major European cities. Attacks in Madrid, Paris and London, as well as failed attempts in Germany and finally the terrorist attack on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin in 2016, demonstrated the threat of Islamist groups and made political action essential. The decision to be involved in Afghanistan at the United States' side for 20 years was thus not solely based on the transatlantic partnership; it was also undertaken with the aim of depriving terrorist groups of their safe havens. Added to that was the objective, once the Taliban government had been toppled, to build a democratic state.

Over the course of the 20-year operation, which is unique in German post-war history, the situation in global politics and many of the parameters have moved on. Germany's role on the international stage has changed and is still evolving. Especially given that the operation was ultimately unsuccessful, with the Taliban back in power, reviewing it and learning its lessons is of great significance to Germany's future conduct in foreign affairs.

With the cross-party establishment of the Study Commission, which is particularly constructive in nature as a result of the involvement of permanent experts, our Parliament is confronting the task, both difficult and vital, of learning from the decisions of the past in order to avoid mistakes in the future.

Considering the current state of the world, the numerous conflict hotspots and the huge potential for escalation in various regions and between various stakeholders, we have to assume that Germany will have more, rather than less, to deal with in future. Recently or soon to be ended operations, like those in Mali and Niger, also demonstrate that our tools need to be adapted if we are to make our contribution to a more peaceful and prosperous world in future.

As Europe's largest economy and an internationally respected stakeholder, we are rightly expected to engage at the diplomatic, humanitarian, development and military levels. The comprehensive or integrated approach will remain the fundamental principle of Germany's engagement in international crisis and conflict management.

The age of growing multipolarity is going to be more unstable and prone to crises. That makes it all the more important for Germany to be prepared and, learning from past experience, to position itself in alignment with its own interests and values.

In this interim report, the Study Commission is looking back on 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan. The findings from that will form the basis of the second phase, during which it will draw specific conclusions and formulate recommendations.

**Michael Müller, Member of the Bundestag**

Chairperson of the Study Commission on Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's Comprehensive International Engagement in the Future

### **Message of thanks to the women and men of Germany's Afghanistan operation**

For almost 20 years, civilian and military personnel – women and men in the Bundeswehr, the foreign service, humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and the police – supported by local staff, were working in Afghanistan for stability, security and reconstruction. Their service for the Federal Republic of Germany cost many of them their physical and mental integrity. More than a few are dealing with the consequences to this day. We owe them all a debt of gratitude for their dedication.

Each year from 2001 on, the Bundestag mandated the deployment of, in total, 93,000 military personnel to Afghanistan, who served in 76 contingents. They performed their duties at great personal risk and in extremely difficult conditions, far from their homeland and their families. For that, we owe them our thanks.

We remember the 59 German servicemen who fell or lost their lives in the performance of their duties. Afghanistan claimed more casualties than any other operation in the history of the Federal Republic. The lives of three federal police officers and four members of German aid and development organisations were also lost. We grieve too for the many casualties and the many fallen among our allies, our Afghan partners and the civilian population.

The onus is on all of us to learn from the experiences of the Afghanistan operation and draw the necessary conclusions for the future. This Study Commission intends to contribute to that endeavour.

## 1. Introduction

On 11 September 2001, attackers from the jihadist terrorist organisation al-Qaeda hijacked four aeroplanes and steered them into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington; the fourth aircraft was crashed by the passengers. The hijackers killed 2,977 people from 92 countries.

The world responded immediately. In a resolution passed on 12 September 2001, the United Nations Security Council unanimously condemned the attacks as a threat to international peace and reaffirmed the “inherent right” of all states to individual or collective self-defence. Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder issued a policy statement in the Bundestag that same day, assuring the United States of Germany’s unlimited solidarity. He described the attacks as a declaration of war on the entire civilised world. The North Atlantic Council on 12 September 2001 declared a state of collective defence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, on condition that the attack had originated abroad. In Congress on 20 September 2001, US President George W. Bush declared a “war on terror”.

After the Taliban failed to extradite al-Qaeda terrorists, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda just short of four weeks later, on 7 October 2001.

On 16 November 2001, the German Bundestag adopted a motion for the Bundeswehr to take part in the anti-terrorist Operation Enduring Freedom. That was followed on 22 December 2001 by the motion on participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a mission mandated by the United Nations on 20 December 2001 to support security and reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Not even three months later, from 27 November to 5 December 2001, the Petersberg Conference discussed security in Afghanistan and the transition to a democratically elected government. Two weeks after that, an interim government took office under Hamid Karzai.

For the German Government, the Bundestag and numerous civil-society organisations, it was clear from very early on that they would also help Afghanistan with its reconstruction.

Over a period of 20 years, Germany remained engaged through military and civilian support. Its engagement was closely integrated at the international level, by means of United Nations structures, on the basis of UN resolutions and within the framework of the NATO-led operations, in which numerous other states besides NATO members took part.

The end was marked by the withdrawal of all forces, culminating in an evacuation operation, in August 2021. The Taliban returned to power. Key strategic objectives of the international and German involvement were not fulfilled.

Against that backdrop, the German Bundestag has instituted two bodies: a Committee of Inquiry (Bundestag printed paper 20/2352) concerning itself with the period between the conclusion of the Doha Agreement on 29 February 2020 and the end of the mandate of German armed forces for evacuation on 30 September 2021 and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and a Study Commission on the Afghanistan operation (Bundestag printed paper 20/2570).

The Study Commission, composed of Members of the Bundestag and experts, is tasked with examining all of Germany's foreign, security and development policy actions in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 and identifying lessons to be learned for future comprehensive engagement in foreign and security policy. What is meant by this is the dovetailing of military, police, diplomatic, development, humanitarian and economic instruments in the context of international crisis management and peace missions.

One of the tasks of the Study Commission is to create a comprehensive overview and assessment of, in particular, all German activities in Afghanistan.

In the first phase of its work, it undertook a taking stock and critical analysis. It investigated what had been done, what mistakes had been made, but also what assistance had reached the people of Afghanistan and to what extent the country's structures had been improved. From this, the Commission has drawn initial conclusions to inform Germany's future comprehensive engagement in international operations. It has produced the present interim report on those findings.

In public and livestreamed hearings, numerous external experts were consulted. The recordings and minutes of those hearings are available on the Bundestag website.

In non-public hearings, the Commission analysed the operation in three topic-specific project groups. Here, the Commission's Bundestag representatives and expert members shone a light on Germany's activities in relation to security and stabilisation, civil development and peacebuilding, and state building and government structures in Afghanistan. They questioned the relevant decision-makers and responsible parties, experts and eye-witnesses, held background briefings and evaluated documents from the German Government as well as from international organisations, associations and NGOs. Above all, to ensure confidentiality for the above-mentioned experts, those hearings were not open to the public.

The Commission's ongoing work, in accordance with the Bundestag decision establishing it, will address two further topics which obstructed positive social and economic development in Afghanistan: corruption and the drug trade. The Commission has decided to request an expert report on each of these topics.

In the second phase, the Commission will relinquish its focus on Afghanistan and forge the lessons it has derived during the first phase into specific recommendations for Germany's comprehensive international engagement in the future. It will present its final report in spring 2025.

## 2. Executive summary

In the first phase of its work, the Study Commission, in accordance with its mandate, concerned itself with Germany's almost 20-year engagement in Afghanistan and with reviewing that period. The text below summarises the key findings from the hearings and the work of the project groups as well as the expertise contributed by the members of the Commission, experts and Members of the Bundestag.

The starting point for Germany's participation in the Afghanistan operations was solidarity and a sense of security-policy allegiance with the United States following the attacks of 11 September 2001. Germany proved itself a reliable ally within its remit, contributed one of the largest numbers of troops throughout the length of the operation and assumed leadership responsibilities. German servicemen and women, police officers and civilian personnel in the foreign service, in development cooperation and in humanitarian assistance demonstrated a high degree of professionalism in the performance of the duties assigned to them.

Nevertheless, with the withdrawal and the take-over of power by the Taliban in 2021, Germany and its international partners failed at a strategic level to secure the achievements and established objectives for the long term.

Alongside the military duty of stabilising the situation and combating international terrorism, Germany pursued the aim of state-building, with institutions dedicated to the rule of law and far-reaching social transformation. The international community lacked a coherent long-term strategy, which was realistically possible to implement with the available capabilities and resources, to advance a stable Afghanistan with its own autonomous security, reliable statehood, and economic and social prospects.

Continuous, self-critical stock taking in relation to the very ambitious objectives, their feasibility and the resources they would require did not take place to a sufficient degree. Although knowledge and detailed, unvarnished situation reports were made available through various information channels, they were not systematically collated into a realistic overview.

The personnel provided, particularly civilian and police personnel, were also insufficient in relation to the scale of the state-building objective. The equipment and capabilities of the Bundeswehr were, in part, not adapted dynamically enough to the threat level in Afghanistan.

Regarding the distribution of funds, especially for projects set up at short notice, the receptiveness and capacities of Afghan partners were sometimes overestimated, to the detriment of durability. Assessments of the situation and evaluation of progress too often concentrated on the large cities, meaning that the situation in the country as a whole could not be extrapolated from them.

Although interministerial cooperation was improved over the course of the operation, strategic coordination between the ministries in Germany and on the ground was insufficient overall. Formats like the meetings of state secretaries were unable to overcome ministry-centric attitudes. At the parliamentary level too, efforts were coordinated to an insufficient degree. Control was prioritised. In debates about mandate extensions, the focus was usually on military aspects.

At the international level, finding agreement was complicated by the large number of stakeholders with sometimes competing interests, which made it difficult to set joint objectives and allocate resources in a coordinated manner.

Germany was no exception in respect of the inadequate degree of engagement with the culture, history and traditions of Afghanistan. Knowledge of the region that did exist was hardly taken into consideration, especially in the early days. For state-building, our understanding and incorporation of traditional hierarchies and social structures, regional distinctions and local power dynamics were insufficient. The newly founded Republic of Afghanistan increasingly lacked legitimacy and the capacity to assert its authority across the breadth of the country. At the same time, the growing influence of the Taliban and support for them in parts of Afghan society were underestimated, and the pursuit of political conflict resolution began too late and lacked the required consistency.

Although the operation in Afghanistan was in retrospect unsuccessful as a whole, there were partial successes which contributed to improved living standards and to progress on infrastructure and in the healthcare and education sectors before the Taliban resumed power in summer 2021. Women and girls in particular benefited from the international presence in Afghanistan during that time. Civilian and military personnel from Germany on the ground handled a difficult task with a great deal of dedication, thereby contributing to improvements in many areas for Afghan women and men.

The operation in Afghanistan was and remains the trigger to a learning process which has led to evolution and adaptation in the Bundeswehr and the participating ministries. In this interim report, the Study Commission presents an extensive review and critical analysis of the operation as a whole, on the basis of which, in the course of its ongoing work, it will draw up recommendations for the German Government and the Bundestag in respect of future operations.

## **2.1 Dissenting opinion of Members of the Bundestag Jan Nolte (AfD) and Joachim Wundrak (AfD) and the expert Reiner Haunreiter on section 2<sup>3</sup>**

On 30 June 2021, the 20-year engagement, which cost more casualties than any other Bundeswehr operation, ended with the landing of the last 264 personnel in Wunstorf.<sup>4</sup> As recently as 25 March 2021, the Bundestag had voted by 432 votes to 176, with 21 abstentions, to extend the NATO operation in Afghanistan in line with the position of the German Government.<sup>5</sup> The AfD parliamentary group had voted unanimously against the motion,<sup>6</sup> having repeatedly advocated for ending the Afghanistan operation since it entered the Bundestag in 2017.<sup>7</sup> For example, an AfD motion in Bundestag printed paper 19/27199 entitled “*Germany is not being defended in the Hindu Kush – start withdrawal of German servicemen from Afghanistan without delay*” was rejected by all other parliamentary groups.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The content of dissenting opinions and citation of sources is the sole responsibility of the submitting parties.

<sup>4</sup> See (in German) <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/abgeschlossene-einsaetze-der-bundeswehr/afghanistan-resolute-support/resolute-support-beendet-rueckverlegung-abgeschlossen-5101254> (retrieved on 1 February 2024)

<sup>5</sup> See minutes of plenary proceedings 19/218, debate on p. 27563 et seq., result on pp. 27581-27584

<sup>6</sup> See minutes of plenary proceedings 19/218, p. 27583

<sup>7</sup> E.g. with the motion to “*End Germany’s engagement in Afghanistan*” of 20 February 2019 in Bundestag printed paper 19/7937

<sup>8</sup> See minutes of plenary proceedings 19/218, p. 27571

Making the case for the mandate extension, the then Federal Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, said it was necessary because “*we’d like to safeguard the achievements of recent years*”.<sup>9</sup> According to the text of the mandate, the operation had led not only to “*the emergence of a democratically controlled state committed to upholding universal human rights*” but had also helped “*reinforce women’s and children’s rights*”.<sup>10</sup> It said Germany, in cooperation with other nations, had “*built up an Afghan army*” which conducted “*95% of hazardous operations against the Taliban autonomously*”.<sup>11</sup> Then, however, to the surprise of those in positions of responsibility at the time, things changed very quickly: it was only 14 April 2021 when the North Atlantic Council decided to end the mission. Not two months after the last German servicemen had returned, the Taliban were back in power in Afghanistan.

The motion by the parliamentary groups of the governing traffic light coalition and the CDU/CSU to set up a Study Commission on Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany’s Comprehensive International Engagement in the Future was adopted on 8 July 2022. As well as reviewing the Afghanistan operation, the Commission was given the task of developing lessons for future comprehensive approaches. Thus, all the parties responsible, in various coalitions, for the 20-year, ultimately unsuccessful Afghanistan operation have also prescribed a certain direction for the evaluation to take. For instance, the question whether there would even be much promise of success in German military interventions abroad that took the comprehensive approach in future, particularly in regions outside our culture, is not even asked.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative that the Bundeswehr was defending Germany in the Hindu Kush ceased to apply at the latest when the al-Qaeda structures in Afghanistan had been destroyed. The Taliban’s objectives were national, at most cross-border, extending to Pakistan. They were never a terrorist organisation operating internationally that we needed to fight in Afghanistan to prevent them carrying out attacks in Germany. As former minister Joschka Fischer<sup>13</sup> and former ambassador Michael Steiner<sup>14</sup> noted in the public hearings held by the Study Commission, the focus was instead almost exclusively on proving to the United States that we were reliable allies. This also explains why the Afghanistan operation was maintained even though the objectives set out in the mandate text could never be achieved and other states, such as the Netherlands, Canada and France, withdrew early.<sup>15</sup>

In the view of the AfD parliamentary group, the outcome of this interim report cannot be, especially in light of the various public hearings, that we just need to identify one or two “tweaks” to make in future for engagements like the Afghanistan operation to be successful. State- and nation-building in areas outside our culture with the aim of extrinsically implementing a different political system, as well as replacing traditions, customs and values, has once again proven an unrealistic approach. A comprehensive approach does nonetheless make sense in the interests of better liaison and coordination between different ministries on questions of strategy. However, in the view of the AfD, as the Commission

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<sup>9</sup> Minutes of plenary proceedings 19/215, p. 27121

<sup>10</sup> Bundestag printed paper 19/26916, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of plenary proceedings 19/215, p. 27127

<sup>12</sup> The brief introduction to the Study Commission on the Bundestag website reflects what we would wish to see in this respect in its second-last sentence, but it contradicts both actual practice within the Study Commission and the mandate establishing it, in which the comprehensive approach is likewise not questioned.

See [https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees/bodies/study/study\\_afghanistan](https://www.bundestag.de/en/committees/bodies/study/study_afghanistan) (retrieved on 1 February 2024)

<sup>13</sup> See transcript of the 24th session of the Study Commission, 3 July 2023, (in German) [https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/975832/c88e95ae0af1f488f04fb77911f1c418/Wortprotokoll\\_Anhoerung-am-03-07-2023-data.pdf](https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/975832/c88e95ae0af1f488f04fb77911f1c418/Wortprotokoll_Anhoerung-am-03-07-2023-data.pdf) (retrieved on 1 February 2024), pp. 5 and 26

<sup>14</sup> See transcript of the 5th session of the Study Commission, 21 November 2022, (in German) [https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/927700/13727d76e165d018764975944b2a965d/Wortprotokoll\\_21-11-2022-data.pdf](https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/927700/13727d76e165d018764975944b2a965d/Wortprotokoll_21-11-2022-data.pdf) (retrieved on 1 February 2024), p. 9

<sup>15</sup> See (in German) <https://www.nzz.ch/international/frankreich-hat-schon-frueh-am-afghanistan-einsatz-gezweifelt-id.1642483>, <https://taz.de/Ende-des-Afghanistan-Mandats/!5148508/> and <https://www.tagesschau.de/nachrichten/ausland/niederlande-beginnen-abzug-aus-afghanistan-96543462/> (each retrieved on 1 February 2024)

continues its work the key will be to specify in more concrete terms how that can be guaranteed. After all, even with the best comprehensive approach, states and societies outside our culture cannot simply be remodelled.

The NATO members unanimously categorised the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 as an attack on the United States, and Germany accordingly took part in the operation in Afghanistan as a member of the Alliance fulfilling its obligation. Another important reason for Germany's involvement in Afghanistan was to compensate for not having taken part in the Iraq war. At the time, that could not be avoided. But the politically induced demand for rapid decisions came at the cost of thorough analysis of the situation in Afghanistan. And it was not until two years after the start of the operation that the SPD-Greens coalition of the time presented a first German Government Afghanistan policy paper. Yet that was not a cross-ministerial strategy clearly setting out objectives and timescales and allocating the appropriate civilian and military means. The deficit was not subsequently rectified by any German Government in 20 years.

The allies' differing objectives and interests were not adequately coordinated, and Germany did not formulate its own national interests.

Another subject that the Study Commission has not addressed, despite the stipulation in the motion establishing it that it take stock of the entire 20-year operation, is the resettlement programme for former local employees, which was introduced back in 2013.<sup>16</sup> The Afghan Government under former President Hamid Karzai criticised it at the time as weakening the "morale of the Afghan people", saying that well-qualified skilled workers, of all people, were needed in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Brain drain, an effect this did not just exacerbate, and above all the general immigration pressure on Germany were further heightened, moreover, when the definition of "local employees" was watered down and the applicable timeframe expanded in summer 2021 and when the federal admission programme began with 44,146 accepted applications in October 2022.<sup>18</sup>

What is more, not one syllable of the mandate establishing the Commission mentions the geopolitical situation for the world and for Germany being completely altered since the start of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Under these conditions the AfD parliamentary group is more strongly focused than ever on getting back to national and alliance defence and to manning and equipping the Bundeswehr for full operational readiness. Also, given the ongoing war in Ukraine within Europe and developments in global security, a greater degree of far-sightedness would have been desirable. That is what the AfD will be pushing for during the second phase of the Commission's work.

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<sup>16</sup> Also jointly established by the governing coalition and the CDU/CSU during this 20th legislative term, the 1st Committee of Inquiry on Afghanistan only covers the period from 29 February 2020 (conclusion of the Doha Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan) to 30 September 2021 (end of the mandate to deploy German armed forces for the military evacuation); Bundestag printed paper 20/2352, p. 3; alternatively, see the motion previously tabled by the AfD in Bundestag printed paper 20/1867

<sup>17</sup> See (in German) <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/afghanistan-abzug-karzai-protestiert-gegen-asyl-fuer-bundeswehr-helfer-a-895071.html> (retrieved on 1 February 2024)

<sup>18</sup> See Bundestag printed paper 20/8322, p. 3

### **3. Assessments and lessons from the operation/Looking ahead to the second phase**

Analysis and assessments were undertaken in three topic-specific project groups (security and stabilisation; civil development and peacebuilding; state-building and government structures). The outcomes of their work are presented in accordance with the following four themes, which proved in all project groups to be of central importance and in need of improvement.

1. Knowledge, context and analysis
2. Motives, objectives and strategies
3. Implementation, capabilities, impact, lasting effect
4. Oversight, monitoring and evaluation

#### **3.1 Knowledge, context and analysis**

##### **Afghan context**

Afghanistan's cultural reality, traditional hierarchies, fragmented social structures, political power dynamics and the multilayered complex of conflicting interests – such as between stakeholders in the city and those in rural areas, or between former civil-war parties (militias) – were not adequately taken into account by the German side in decision-making, especially in relation to state-building, or in operational implementation. This, in turn, hampered public approval and readiness to assume ownership on the Afghan side. The prioritisation of centralised governance exemplifies how Western preconceptions differed from deeply rooted Afghan interests and governing practice. This begins with the fact that the way Afghan society works is shaped less by state institutions than by interpersonal relationships and traditional norms; Afghans feel a bond and a duty rather to their families, tribes and ethnic or religious groups than to a nation state to which only a limited number of remits is ascribed. There have always been several centres of power in Afghanistan, with regional distinctions and indirect rule through systems of patronage. In disputes, for instance, many Afghans still ask their local councils of elders and tribal councils for mediation and face-saving arbitration instead of relying on the centralised system of criminal and civil law. While attempts were made to combine different legal cultures, they were without lasting success. The unifying role of religion was altogether insufficiently examined as well, even though many Afghans believed that a state should above all establish a political order under the precepts of Islam.

##### **Taliban**

The international community, including Germany, paid too little attention to the Taliban as part of society and a key stakeholder in conflicts, consequently underestimating their growing influence and not taking their chances of success seriously. Instead, the Taliban were initially seen as a homogeneous unit and erroneously equated with al-Qaeda and the latter's transnational jihadist orientation, which were to be fought. The increasing public approval of the Taliban in various parts of Afghan society, not only among Pashtuns but particularly among rural populations, was underestimated. Categorically excluding the Taliban hindered considerations about their inclusion in the political process and ultimately promoted the image in the eyes of many Afghans of the Taliban as the legitimate opposition to a corrupt and foreign-ruled government. At the same time, a number of former warlords occupied high positions within the government, and war crimes and

crimes against humanity which had been perpetrated were not investigated. This took an additional toll on the credibility of the Afghan state and the representatives and institutions of the international community working in Afghanistan in the eyes of the Afghan people.

#### **Available knowledge and situation assessment**

At the beginning of the operation, the complex situation was underestimated in Germany and on the international stage, in part because available knowledge was not adequately utilised to, for example, compile a comprehensive situation assessment. After decades of violence, displacement and war, the country's state and economy were minimally developed and its people were fragmented in terms of politics, culture, religion and geography. Levels of education and life expectancy were low; women and minorities had hardly any rights. Within Germany's university and non-university research landscape, expertise on Afghanistan did exist, but it was not called on to a sufficient extent and therefore not enough of it fed into considerations about Germany's overall involvement. In addition, Germany had close ties to Afghanistan, particularly in the 1960s and 70s, in the area of police and development cooperation – which were not systematically evaluated at the beginning of the operation in 2001-2002. All in all, systematic incorporation of the findings of academic research on Afghanistan into the planning process did not take place on an adequate scale. At a structural level, the required knowledge was not adequately fostered.

There was no comprehensive and integrated situation assessment in place on the basis of which strategy and measures could be adapted. The ministries relied on various sources of information, including intelligence services, military reconnaissance, local staff and NGOs. However, that information was not adequately collated on an interministerial and systematic basis into a holistic overview from which conclusions relevant to the operation could be drawn. Moreover, the gathering of information with the aid of local contacts was hampered by the fact that Germany's personnel, like those of other international stakeholders, often stayed in the country for just a few months, which made long-term knowledge management difficult.

#### **Critical feedback**

Until the end, the German Government stuck with the operation as a whole, even though the reality fell short of expectations in many respects. Right from the start, the Afghan state was unable to fulfil its core functions without international assistance. Political and economic reforms failed. The government progressively lost the pre-emptive trust that had been placed in it; this was part of what led large swathes of the population to turn to the Taliban. The security situation worsened appreciably and deteriorated further in 2014, when ISAF ended. Germany's ministries did pass on information gathered from Afghanistan to the civil, military and political decision-making forums, but critical feedback and warnings from the ground were not adequately taken into account within the government. No objective cross-ministry oversight of Germany's federal involvement or operation in Afghanistan took place. Nevertheless there was and still is an obligation for all departments of government operating abroad to coordinate their activities with the Federal Foreign Office. Conversely, there is no reciprocal obligation, not even in respect of information about its own activities.

Continuous and honest situation assessment is absolutely essential. This would have required not only critical feedback and a better culture of addressing mistakes within the

ministries but also independent analysis and evaluations, not least in order to incorporate undesirable developments into a realistic overview.

### **3.2 Motives, objectives and strategies**

#### **Motives**

When the US Administration saw itself obliged to take action following 11 September 2001 and NATO declared a state of collective defence, Germany did not ask itself whether to stand by the United States but how it could most effectively support the United States. Germany's assumption of partial responsibility, e.g. for security in the north of Afghanistan, does not alter the fact that, in the context of multilateral action, the United States remained in charge throughout the duration of the Afghanistan operation. A possible role for Europe remained underdeveloped. Successive German Governments did not formulate and communicate Germany's interests clearly enough. Doing so would have been essential, however, for the setting of priorities and the formulation of implementation strategies.

#### **Strategies and objectives**

Germany's involvement as a whole lacked strategic leadership and vision as well as clearly assigned responsibility and coordination. There were operational objectives within individual ministries. The identification of objectives at a national level, however, was not cohesive. No cross-ministerial overall objective at the political-strategy level had been defined. For that reason, it was not possible to discern and communicate national strategy development as a "roadmap to our goal".

The shaping of political will in the matter of Germany's Afghanistan operation was characterised by several factors:

1. The shortage of time to prepare for the operation presented the German Government and Parliament with major challenges. With the benefit of hindsight, perceptions of what could be achieved increasingly proved inflated and overburdened.
2. From August 2003 on, Germany largely operated as part of NATO and was accordingly bound by its operational objectives in military matters and law enforcement. At the same time, however, Germany was interested in not only aligning the operation with military and security-policy requirements but also grounding it in a holistic strategic and policy approach. Stabilisation served as a framing concept here, but it was understood in various ways, and the different ministries put into practice in various ways. The concept was not explained in more detail until the 2016 white paper and the 2017 Federal Government guidelines on crisis prevention ("Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace"). No cross-ministerial German strategy was formulated at any point while Germany was engaged in Afghanistan.
3. To implement objectives, Germany – primarily because of limited operational capabilities and resources, but also as a result of self-imposed restrictions – was dependent on its partners (especially the United States).
4. The comprehensive approach reflected interdependencies between the objectives of national ministries, which were mutually contingent. For example, there can be no development without security and no security without development.

As a matter of conviction, Germany from the beginning chose an ambitious path seeking a state structure intended above all to enable people to live in safety and freedom. On the international stage, Germany should from the very start have more strongly communicated its aim of helping to combat terrorism indirectly by improving living standards. A lack of clarity about objectives at the political-strategy level resulted in inconsistent communication.

Although there was consensus among the allies that Afghanistan should be supported in state-building and improving living standards and the country should be rendered capable of operating independently within a foreseeable timeframe, there was disagreement about how those objectives were to be achieved. Military action to create a secure environment and combat terrorism, and projects for civil reconstruction and the establishment of state structures, were regarded in theory as separate phases. In practice, however, they had to be implemented simultaneously and proved to be sometimes competing pursuits. Internationally, conceptions about what measures were needed for responsibility in all areas of state and society to be put into Afghan hands were variously defined. Different interests and state-building visions played an important role here. Potential points of contact that already existed within Afghan society were, in retrospect, insufficiently utilised as a strategic basis for reconstruction efforts. As a result of these mistakes, the state and the international community lost public approval.

### **Coordination**

Objectives and strategies have to be translated into executive action at the national and international levels. Especially the cross-overs between ministries in Germany and between the various stakeholders at the international level brought the greatest challenges. On the national scale, in spite of the meetings of state secretaries, a lack of strategy and policy coordination between the ministries resulted in a variety of priorities and implementation approaches. Instructions pertaining to the operation were issued in parallel in the different ministries and were not coordinated. Although the German Government's Afghanistan policy papers rounded up developments on a cross-ministerial basis, they stayed rather vague. There was no cross-ministerial conflict analysis or cross-ministerial country strategy which would have been required for ministries to act jointly. Not were such documents developed at a later stage.

The comprehensive approach was an attempt to make it clear that not only military means and approaches were relevant to the Afghanistan engagement but also humanitarian assistance, economic support, development cooperation and security sector reform. Within the German Government, the comprehensive approach did lead, in the course of the engagement, to improved dialogue between the ministries particularly at the tactical level. However, there was no joint development of strategy and objectives. An attempt to solve the cross-over problem at the operational level was undertaken in the form of the civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). They made it possible to improve interministerial cooperation on the ground, but this did not eliminate the strategy and staffing gaps between the ministries. The PRTs did not have enough personnel from the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of the Interior in particular.

An additional aspect is political responsibility. The lead ministry for the operation as a whole was the Federal Foreign Office. However, there was no cross-ministerial coordination able to guarantee effective and efficient treatment of resources. Especially in Berlin, ministry-centric attitudes and interests predominated.

Those circumstances were reflected at the international level, as a large number of external stakeholders were involved in Afghanistan who saw themselves, in part, as competing with one another. The variety of strategic priorities among the allies, particularly between the United States, NATO and the UN, hampered effective coordination at the international level although coordination was called for by all parties. Moreover, stakeholders can only coordinate usefully if joint objectives are in place. There was also, however, a lack of joint objectives, liaison, and balanced and adjusted use of resources between NATO and the UN.

In that context, the German Government's means of influencing matters in the face of the clout of the United States proved limited. Although Germany did seek coordination and consensus in the various formats, its own lack of coordinated cross-ministerial strategy/strategies undermined its capacity to assert its position, so that initiatives often failed to have the desired effect and generally fell short of high expectations.

### **3.3 Implementation, capabilities, impact, lasting effect**

#### **Implementation**

Afghanistan's needs and its various stakeholders were not adequately researched and not cohesively coordinated with either German or international objectives and approaches. The failure of German and international stakeholders to understand the context resulted in the manifold interests, goals and needs of the Afghan people being inadequately reflected in the planning and implementation of civil development. The consequence of this was that the Afghans' sense of ownership remained limited.

In Germany, the military mandates and civilian overall missions were not broken down into specific and verifiable interim goals by which the degree of mission fulfilment could be measured. Effective and efficient cross-ministerial coordination was lacking at the operational level as elsewhere. As a result, the operation had no coordination of interim goals between the different departments of government.

The Afghanistan operation was in many respects a formative experience for Germany and has triggered learning processes, especially at the implementation level. Over the 20 years, above all at the level of civilian and military seconded personnel, a lot of instructive experience was gathered in the field of international crisis management.

The institutions of foreign and security policy have evolved since the beginning of Germany's engagement in Afghanistan. In the Federal Foreign Office, for example, the Directorate-General for Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation, Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Assistance has been established. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has introduced monitoring and evaluations for projects and particular programmes. GIZ has been further expanded. The Bundeswehr has evolved, structurally and culturally, into an armed force geared towards operations abroad. Special benefits and pensions for servicemen and women sent on foreign assignments have also been improved. Regular meetings of state secretaries from the ministries involved with Afghanistan have been established as central coordination forums. Civilian crisis prevention for international engagements has become more firmly established through the relevant guidelines and the Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding.

## **Resources and capabilities for the operation**

The human resources that Germany made available for security, state-building and development, including for the political process, were too few for its ambitious goals. For too long, the Bundeswehr's operation planning, commitment of forces and capabilities were not adjusted in line with the rising threat level. This affected the diplomatic, development and police components of the operation. There was insufficient availability, for example, of specialists with intercultural training, knowledge of the language, experience of contexts sensitive to conflict, and access to local stakeholders. Having civilian personnel stay for longer periods and fewer short secondments could have contributed more effectively to the long-term formation of sound relationships with local stakeholders. Furthermore, specialists with intercultural training, language skills, conflict sensitivity and access to local stakeholders should be fostered more strongly at a structural level. Despite insufficient resources, there were diplomatic initiatives, such as the 2019 intra-Afghan dialogue conference in Doha jointly organised with Qatar, with involvement from the government, political parties, the Taliban and civil society.

## **Impact**

Whether it was effective to combat terrorism militarily within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is a question that no German Government answered. For years, the fact that the reality of OEF contradicted the stabilisation approach of ISAF, sometimes doing more to incite than to curb hatred and violence, was ignored. There was hardly any discussion on Germany's part on how the stakeholders of terrorist networks could be combated effectively. The strategy preferences and priorities of our allies inevitably directed the course of operations. The cross-ministerial PRT approach made sense, but it was impeded at the international level by inconsistent implementation and at the national level by a lack of set objectives, weak capabilities and a shortfall in coordination between the ministries. Operations intended to bring about stabilisation need a flexible and overarching plan which sets out interim goals and capabilities. Only the attainment of goals can form the basis of decisions on subsequent phases. That was not the situation in Afghanistan. Withdrawal announcements led to strategic changes of direction – but this often came too late.

Within the framework of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, Bundeswehr servicemen and women were in a situation of all-out war for the first time – although that term was long avoided in the political discourse in Germany.

The servicemen and women of the Bundeswehr reliably fulfilled the missions they were assigned and proved themselves both in the stabilisation phase and in the counterinsurgency phase.

Despite all the efforts and casualties of the operation, the overarching international objectives of creating a safe environment in Afghanistan and establishing a legitimate and efficient army and police force were not achieved. Especially in the early years, partial progress was made on infrastructure and in the healthcare and education sectors. Compared to the time before the international operation in 2001, living standards had in any event improved in many respects during the years of international engagement, especially for women and girls. Wide-ranging objectives relating to the rule of law, democracy and gender equality were not achieved to the intended degree.

The means deployed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Foreign Office in pursuit of stabilisation in Afghanistan, with the objectives

of a reduction in violence and improved governance as well as more efficient administrative structures, did not have the intended effects. In the context of a conflict-ridden society, development cooperation projects can primarily achieve something if they are implemented on a local scale, in small steps and in a context-sensitive manner and were designed from the start to have the host society assume ownership. These are chiefly measures to combat poverty, provide places to live, basic education and better access to healthcare, and enhance food security.

It must be said that the means deployed in the civilian and military areas of the international intervention also had unintended negative impacts. Among the most tragic are the many civilian casualties claimed by international military strikes. Inadequate impact monitoring in respect of the means deployed was conducive to the creation or exacerbation of dependencies, structures of clientelism and patronage, and corruption, and to the development of conflicts over the distribution of resources between groups that had access to international funding and those people who remained excluded. The “do no harm” principle postulated to guide the conduct of Germany’s development cooperation, to avoid and reduce unintended negative impacts, met its limits in many areas of the intervention.

When it came to fostering statehood, the international allies largely proceeded on the assumption of Western-style institutions to uphold the rule of law and sociocultural conditions that did not exist in Afghanistan.

### **Lasting effect**

The lasting effect of the German Government’s projects was limited. As the security situation worsened and more was demanded of contributors, so the pressure grew to make rapid progress. This caused contributors to reach for short-term solutions such as boosting troops numbers, funds and resources – often without adequately taking into account the requisite capacities and capabilities, the Afghan Government’s sense of ownership or the utility of those projects for the people of Afghanistan. German stakeholders underestimated the time and resources required in Afghanistan. A lack of strategic patience and stamina, as well as a lack of ownership and accountability on the part of the host government, impeded the success of the comprehensive approach.

The concentration on conflict-ridden regions in Afghanistan undermined efforts for successful reconstruction. It unintentionally created false incentives and fostered instability and corruption. Development cooperation as an instrument is primarily effective when it operates in safe regions of a host country and its efforts are concentrated there. In contrast, projects aiming for quick impact in regions embroiled in conflict had hardly any lasting effect in terms of development.

The consequences of the operation and its abrupt end are borne primarily by the devastated civilian population of Afghanistan, but also by the military and civilian operation personnel who have to live with psychological or physical wounds.

## **3.4 Oversight, monitoring and evaluation, public perceptions and communication**

### **Parliamentary consideration of the mandates and the operation as a whole**

The work of Parliament on developments in Afghanistan was insufficiently interconnected, mostly incident related and focused on Germany’s remit. That approach was inadequate for honest and reputable situation analysis. In the minds of the public and

in parliamentary debates, the military component of international engagement was often in the foreground. This led to the civil component being neglected. One lesson to be learned from this is that civil aspects must be taken into account in debates and in discussions about mandates.

The Bundestag debates were often dominated by discourse about the justification of the military operation, with too little attention paid to discourse about the impacts. Parliament's chief focus in relation to the operation was on discussing matters of detail, while oversight at the political-strategy level was largely omitted. Adopting the Parliamentary Participation Act (*Parlamentsbeteiligungsgesetz*) formalised parliamentary oversight and involvement but ultimately did little to develop them further. However, the complexity of the Afghanistan operation increasingly left Parliament overwhelmed. Parliament must be better able to fulfil its duties of oversight at the political-strategy level, and the German Government must be better able to fulfil its duty of systematically evaluating the impact of an operation.

Another aspect was the propensity to think in terms of committee remits within the parliamentary sphere, which meant that discussion of cross-ministerial topic areas by various committees hardly ever occurred. The comprehensive approach was practised little in Parliament, which hampered adequate oversight of the executive in respect of the implementation of that approach.

This is further evidenced by the fact that two committees of inquiry and the regular mandate extensions were an expression of sporadic, ad-hoc and military-fixated parliamentary consideration.

### **Public perceptions and communication**

The Afghanistan operation was far too little perceived as a comprehensive civil-military operation among the German public.

With operations abroad, there is particular pressure to provide reasons and justification. Successive German Governments, and parliamentary majorities too, were inclined to highlight state-building and development projects and gloss over negative developments. When Germany's ISAF operation unmistakably became a combat operation with constant battles, the effect was a loss of credibility for government communications and a drop in public approval of the operation.

Crisis operations mandated by the Bundestag and supposed to have a chance of success depend on realistic, unvarnished and credible communication on the part of ministries, at all levels from strategy to implementation, and honest expectation management. The potential of the wealth of operational experience commanded by both civilian and military specialists was not systematically utilised to inform public perceptions of the Afghanistan operation.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

The federal ministries often assessed the situation too positively (in the style of progress reports), which underlines the importance of independent monitoring and evaluation.

In all areas of Germany's engagement, there was a lack of systematic impact analysis and far from enough regular strategic evaluation of the operation. This prevented lessons being learned from mistakes in a timely manner. An operation must be evaluated early, regularly and independently so that mistakes can be recognised and counteracted in good time and

unintended effects can be kept to a minimum. On the civilian side, this should include consideration and involvement of local voices. Capacities for analysis and strategic foresight should be used in close cooperation with allies and local partners. Intercultural operation advisers and personal contacts on the ground could contribute, alongside the intelligence services, to realistic situation assessments.

In Parliament, the necessity of short-term successes was emphasised vis-à-vis the stabilisation of violent conflicts. Parliamentary scrutiny of the government and the operation focused on details of implementation. Regular and systematic scrutiny of policy did not take place. Regular evaluation of mandates, civil means and impacts is indispensable if resources are to be used efficiently and political debate adapted to the circumstances is to be possible. Overall, however, it must also be noted that there was no broader discussion of Germany's actual national interests in Afghanistan, neither in Parliament nor in the ministries responsible, in the media or among the general public.

### **3.5 Dissenting opinion of experts Professor Carlo-Antonio Masala, Egon Ramms and Jörg Vollmer on section 3.3<sup>19</sup>**

We disagree with the current representation of the relationship between OEF and ISAF in section 3.3: Impact. The claim that OEF incited hatred and violence and thereby made ISAF's mission more difficult seems an over-simplistic view. It is important to take into account the fact that OEF, which began in October 2001 as a response to the 11 September attacks, was primarily geared towards direct hostilities against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In contrast, ISAF was set up in December 2001 under NATO leadership with the goal of stabilising and reconstructing Afghanistan. These differing mandates and strategies led to tensions and challenges which affected ISAF's work, but it can scarcely be proved empirically that OEF directly incited hatred and violence towards ISAF. A more nuanced view, which recognises that the actions of OEF unintentionally made ISAF operations more difficult, would be more appropriate than direct causality of hatred and violence.

#### **3.5.1 Reply of experts Winfried Nachtwei, Dr Katja Mielke and Professor Ursula Schröder to the dissenting opinion of experts Professor Carlo-Antonio Masala, Egon Ramms and Jörg Vollmer on section 3.3<sup>20</sup>**

Operation Enduring Freedom was essential for years to fight al-Qaeda and other terrorist networks as well as to protect the growing ISAF operation. For Members of the Bundestag who had voted repeatedly in favour of the OEF mandate, on-the-ground meetings with German ISAF officers, civilian Afghanistan experts and Afghan parliamentarians over the years revealed increasingly frequent indications that OEF – as a result of attitudes shown to the civilian population (lack of respect for local values) and the manner in which operations were conducted (often excessive use of weaponry and little consideration for civilian casualties) – was in part more of an encouragement than a curb to the insurgency. This was also noted in the public sphere. SWP Afghanistan expert Dr Citha Maaß gave this analysis in 2007: “The OEF combat mission being aggressively pursued in the south and south-east and in eastern border regions since the end of 2001 has caused alienation among the Pashtun population. Marked by attacks on the civilian population, the US-led Operation Mountain Thrust between May and July 2006 also deepened the alienation, as did Medusa, the ISAF operation that followed. [...] The confusing and sometimes contradictory mandates and approaches of the international military units prevented them being widely accepted. As they have, to a degree, forfeited the image of neutral military

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<sup>19</sup> The content of dissenting opinions is the sole responsibility of the submitting parties.

<sup>20</sup> The content of replies and citation of sources is the sole responsibility of the submitting parties.

forces, military setbacks or attacks on the civilian population are ascribed to them too.”<sup>21</sup> She also said, “In the south, we have the problem that ISAF has stepped into the difficult legacy of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) [...]. OEF conducted a war on terrorism. [...] The very harsh conduct of the US-led coalition forces insulted the honour of the tribal elders there. That led to very strong distrust, in part to hatred, vis-à-vis the Western military presence.”<sup>22</sup>

US General Stanley McChrystal, ISAF Commander from 2009 to 2010, talked about “COIN mathematics” in 2009, referring to the high risk that operations to kill insurgents would generate ever-more insurgents among their brothers, fathers and friends.<sup>23</sup>

If the above counterproductive impacts of OEF operations “can scarcely be proved empirically” despite many reports from operation forces, that was fostered by the fact that various German Governments refused to say anything and the topic was taboo across large parts of the political sphere.

### **3.5.2 Reply of Members of the Bundestag Jan Nolte (AfD) and Joachim Wundrak (AfD) and the expert Reiner Haunreiter to the dissenting opinion of experts Professor Carlo-Antonio Masala, Egon Ramms and Jörg Vollmer on section 3.3<sup>24</sup>**

While it can hardly be proved empirically how the OEF operations and the recurring collateral damage caused by killing or injuring non-terrorists affected the reputation and public approval of ISAF nationwide, there are demonstrably many voices which stated that, as the duration of OEF and ISAF increased, the mood among Afghans veered to undifferentiated opposition to foreign armed forces.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Citha Maaß, “Staatsaufbau ohne Staat?” in *SWP-Studie*, February 2007, p. 27, (in German) [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/studien/2007\\_S04\\_mss\\_ks.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/studien/2007_S04_mss_ks.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Citha Maaß, interview in *Tagesschau*, 24 July 2007, (in German) <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/meldung-ts-5454.html>

<sup>23</sup> Trevor Thrall, Erik Goepner, *Counterinsurgency Math Revisited*, Cato Institute, 2018. <https://www.cato.org/blog/counterinsurgency-math-revisited>

<sup>24</sup> The content of replies and citation of sources is the sole responsibility of the submitting parties.

<sup>25</sup> See Ulf von Krause, *Die Afghanistaneinsätze der Bundeswehr – Politischer Entscheidungsprozess mit Eskalationsdynamik*, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 170 et seq.