

Cultural Diplomacy as “Soft Power” and the Need for Cultural Knowledge in Germany's Mission in Afghanistan

by Niels Klabunde

Calls for a stronger military involvement in Afghanistan from Germany are getting louder. With the Norwegian Quick Reaction Force (QRF) retreating in the summer of 2008, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is pressing Germany to replace the Norwegian QRF and to take up a larger share in the multilateral military mission in Afghanistan. From the beginning of Germany's involvement in Afghanistan, the German government has had a hard time defending its policy to the general public.¹ Germany's justification for troop deployments was therefore premised on conflict reduction and reconstruction, rather than on military combat. Despite this, Germany's non-combat approach proved to be very successful. The German government successfully defended its actions to the general public, and the German troops in Afghanistan were equally successful in their stated goals of conflict reduction and reconstruction.² The German approach was heavily based on building understanding and trust among cooperating partners in order to improve security and reconstruction efforts in the region.

In a broad sense the German non-combat approach can be seen within the framework of cultural diplomacy. This more cultural diplomatic approach shows how useful and successful soft power (cooperation, reconstruction) can be in comparison to hard power (military force) conflict resolution. However, in order for this approach to be successful, soldiers must be aware of the cultural challenges and skills that are essential components to this success. In sending troop units into Afghanistan, Germany's exclusively non-combat and cultural diplomacy approach is coming to an end.³ It is therefore time to review the German non-combat approach, critically highlight the role of cultural knowledge and skills in their achievements, and comment on the possible future implications of the policy

¹ Chancellor Schröder called for a vote of confidence to send troops to Afghanistan, see: Ein Sieg für Schröder?, collection of newspaper articles, in: <http://www.uni-kassel.de/fb5/frieden/themen/Aussenpolitik/kommentare.html>; Verteidigung Deutschlands am Hindukusch; according to ngo-online most Germans were against sending Tornado (airplane) fighters into Afghanistan, in: http://www.ngo-online.de/ganze_nachricht.php?Nr=15280, 2/7/08, based on Forsa and Emnid polls, in the survey of Forschungsgruppe Wahlen from Feb. 2008 46% oppose German military involvement, 80% oppose sending troupes into southern Afghanistan

² see Schmunk, Michael (2005): Die Deutschen Provincial Reconstruction Teams, SWP-Studie, Berlin.

³ see Damir, Fris (January 17th, 2008): Ein falsches Signal für Afghanistan, in: Berliner Zeitung, p. 4

change.

According to the Petersberg conferences⁴ and following United Nations (UN) resolution 1386, the German parliament decided to send 1,200 soldiers to Kabul to protect the Afghan government and inhabitants of Kabul. The parliamentary mandate authorized military force only in the case of an attack. Combat missions were not allowed.⁵ Since their arrival in the spring of 2002, German troops have been patrolling their distinctive operation area in the north of Kabul following the directive of “wave and smile”⁶. Indeed, the German approach can be seen as an approach of establishing trust and understanding. The German military has founded two radio stations that broadcast 24 hours in the Afghan languages Dari and Pashtu. The radio stations play Afghan and Indian music, and also inform the Afghan people that the military has come to help not to occupy the country. Additional info booths throughout Kabul help to spread this information. Until 2007 the German military conducted over 316 projects in Kabul with the purpose of being able to react on a short-term basis to the needs of the Afghan people and to deliver fast results.⁷ These include such projects as the equipment for a girl's school in Kabul with material for their arts classes, building wells or the reconstruction of bridges.⁸ This can truly be seen as an example of cultural diplomacy, working at the basis of the society and in direct contact with the people in order to establish dialogue, understanding and trust.⁹

This cultural diplomacy approach was gradually extended with the decision of the German parliament in 2003 to extend German involvement to outside of Kabul. Taking over the United States (US) founded *Provincial Reconstruction Teams* (PRTs), Germany managed to turn the more military character of the teams - which were at first supposed to fight al-Qaida¹⁰ - into a more civil reconstruction approach. In comparison to the US and United

⁴ see Baraki, Martin (2007): Nation-Building in Afghanistan, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 39, 11-17.

⁵ Kopp, Thomas (2005): Der Aktuelle Begriff, in: *Wissenschaftliche Dienste des deutschen Bundestages*, 67/05, vom 23.09.2005, in: http://www.bundestag.de/bic/analysen/2005/2005_09_23.pdf

⁶ Sommer, Theo (2002): Auf nach Kabul? Nur mit Schutzweste, *Die Zeit*, 40, in: http://www.zeit.de/2002/40/200240_afghanistan.xml?page=4 2/11/08

⁷ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung: *Unsere Bundeswehr in Afghanistan*, information brochure, last edited December 2007

⁸ Beraten, koordinieren, vermitteln, in: www.bundeswehr.de > Bilanz in Kabul

⁹ Milton C. Cummings (2003): *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: a Survey*. Center for Arts and Culture, 2003, p.1.

¹⁰ as cited in: Schmunk, Michael (2005), p.13.; Collin Powell, guidance cable: “Afghanistan: Deployment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, SECSTATE, #29380, unclassified, section 3

Kingdom (UK) led PRTs, Germany's PRTs are not exclusively led by military personnel, but rather operate in unison with a civil affair officer of the German foreign ministry. In addition officers of the German Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (BMI) are involved in the program decisions of the PRTs. The broad involvement of different government branches is quite unique in comparison to other PRTs. With the expertise of the different ministries, the German PRTs can more effectively fulfill their mission, stated in the German Afghanistan Concept¹¹. The mission objectives reflect the German cultural approach very well. The PRTs should strengthen the Afghan civil society through dialogue and cooperation. They should support security reforms and conduct reconstruction and development projects together with international governmental and non-governmental partners.¹² In this way, the German PRTs can be seen more as an extended arm of the German government and foreign ministry than a military lead operation. The focus has shifted from the military perspective to a more civil, cultural and diplomatic perspective.

These objectives call for high intercultural knowledge and competence of soldiers and civil officers in the field. With the main objective on civil cooperation and reconstruction, soldiers are in the unusual situation of having close and frequent contact with ordinary local people that mostly lack foreign language skills. Although translators often ease and mediate communication, soldiers have to make their own decisions in the communication process. The acceptance or denial of an invitation from an Afghani, for example, will be the decision of the soldier. It is the soldier who has to make, and should make, most of the decisions in order to become a real communication partner rather than a distant observer that gives orders to the translator.¹³ Trust can only be achieved if soldiers play an active part of the communication process. Of course, it is not possible for soldiers to study one or even two of the most widely used Afghan languages Pashtu or Dari in depth. However, basic language skills that help to establish trust should be acquired. Language skills for security purposes should be acquired as well. However, they should not be the only

¹¹ see Deutscher Bundestag, 15.10.2003: Drucksache 15/1700. Antrag der Bundesregierung. Fortsetzung und Erweiterung der Beteiligung bewaffneter deutscher Streitkräfte an dem Einsatz einer Internationalen Sicherheitsunterstützungstruppe in Afghanistan auf Grundlage der Resolutionen 1386 (2001) vom 20. Dezember 2001, 1413 (2002) vom 23. Mai 2002, 1444 (2003) vom 27. November 2002 und 1510 (2003) vom 13. Oktober 2003 des Sicherheitsrates der Vereinten Nationen.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Blascovich, James, Hartel, Christine R. (eds.) (2008): Human Behavior in Military Contexts, Committee on Opportunities in Basic Research in the Behavioral and Social Sciences for the U.S. Military, National Research Council.

means of communication. Exchanging words of respect can often ease difficult or precarious situations and eventually make the use of harsh words unnecessary. Another important part of the communication process is nonverbal communication.¹⁴ This becomes even more important if a soldier has little time to study basic language skills. According to Burgoon (1994)¹⁵ over 60–65% of social meanings are derived from nonverbal communication. Since nonverbal communication is usually used unconsciously¹⁶, soldiers have to be aware of their nonverbal communication and be sensitive while using it in the field: “Competent conflict management tactics appear to be those that increase the mindfulness of conflict behavior by bringing unstated assumptions under scrutiny, more clearly articulating the positions of self and other” (Burgoon et al. 2000; 119).

Apart from intercultural verbal and non-verbal communication skills, other forms of intercultural knowledge are necessary to fulfill the German mission. Knowledge of certain values and norms helps to conduct successful communication, ease information gathering and finally, to protect and save the lives of soldiers, Afghans and international partners. Some of the values of the Pashtu ethnic group, one of the two bigger ethnic groups in Afghanistan, are, for example hospitality (*aql*), honor and heroism (*tura*).¹⁷ Honor and hospitality also exist as values in the German culture. According to Bühler¹⁸ honor and hospitality are basic psycho-social needs. Honor can be seen in the scope of respect and acceptance for each other. Hospitality can be seen in a similar context, the respect of a guest and his or her need for food and shelter. Although these two concepts exist both in the Pashtu and German culture, the behaviors associated with the concept of that value might differ. For example, with the concept of honor, there are norms and rules that go along with it. They regulate when and to whom one shows respect and in what ways. We make assumptions that may lead us to believe that our ways of showing respect and honor are universal when in actuality it is the value itself that is universal and the ways in which it is shown that are more culturally specific. The lack of ability to differentiate between

¹⁴ for a general introduction to nonverbal communication see Burgoon, J. K., Buller, D. B., & Woodall, W. G. (1989/1994): *Nonverbal communication: The unspoken dialogue*. New York: HarperCollins/Greyden Press..

¹⁵ Burgoon, J.K. (1994). Nonverbal signals, in: Knapp, M.L. , Miller, G.R. (eds.): *Handbook of interpersonal communication*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 229-285.

¹⁶ Burgoon, J.K., Berger, C.R., and Waldron, V.R. (2000): Mindfulness and interpersonal communication. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(1), 105-127.

¹⁷ Glatzer, Bernt (2000): Zum Paschtunwali als ethnischen Selbstportrait, in: Best, Günter, Köbler, Reinhart [eds.]: *Subjekte und Systeme: Soziologische und anthropologische Annäherungen*, Festschrift für Christian Sigrüst zum 65. Geburtstag, IKO Verlag, Frankfurt.

¹⁸ Bühler, Hans: *Einheit und Vielfalt – Ein kulturtheoretischer Versuch*, Friedenspädagogik e.V., in: <http://www.friedenspaedagogik.de/content/pdf/1693> , p. 9.

universal values and culture specific behavioral rules can lead to misunderstandings, cause anger and could eventually lead to dangerous situations which could have been otherwise avoided if soldiers had the cultural knowledge of certain values and norms.

In the context of Afghanistan, with its tribal culture, there are also other aspects that are important for intercultural knowledge. Within the tribal culture of Afghanistan power relationships play a great role.¹⁹ It is important for soldiers who work with people on non-combat terms and reconstruction to acknowledge tribal hierarchy and adjust their tactics and strategy of cooperation to the power context. Geert Hofstede's (1984)²⁰ pragmatic typology of four different cultural dimensions can be of help when attempting to understand the tribal system and to make soldiers sensitive to intercultural differences.

Power distance is Hofstede's first dimension. It helps to describe how power is distributed and describes the beliefs of the people that have equal access to it. The knowledge of power distance as a cultural dimension can help to describe the role of tribal leaders and its constituents²¹. In consequence it can help to identify persons of influence, religious leaders, or people who might enable better security and/or greater and faster cooperation on provincial projects. Since the tribal system is also a factor of stability, it is advisable to support this structure and make use of cultural knowledge to successfully carry out provincial reconstruction projects. In retrospect it was therefore a wise decision of the German government²² not to rival warlords or tribal leaders (often the same²³). The destruction of opium plantations can also be seen as interference in the power and social relation between and within tribes. Especially since there is a lack of alternatives, the destruction causes instability in the social and economic sphere.

Since a tribe is also a collective entity, there is also use of Hofstede's second dimension, which relates to individualism and collectivism and measures the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Because group integration is high, the destruction

¹⁹ see Glatzer, Bernd (2002): The Pashtun Tribal System, in Pfeffer, G., Behera, D. K.(eds.): Concepts of Tribal Society, Concept Publisher, New Dehli, 265 – 282.

²⁰ see Geert Hofstede (1984): Cultures Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, Calif.

²¹ about the ambiguities of local warlord and tribal power see Schetter, Conrad (2007): Lokale Macht- und Gewaltstrukturen in Afghanistan, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, 39, 3-10.

²² Maaß, Citha (2007): Afghanistan: Staatsaufbau ohne Staat, SWP Studie, Berlin, p. 28.

²³ Burke, Jason: Tribal leader's family suspected over Kabul hotel attack, in: The Guardian, in: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jan/15/afghanistan>

of the means of existence, in this case opium fields, the challenge of tribal leadership and power or the violation of honor or hospitality will not only affect one or a few persons but call for the whole tribe to defend itself. According to Blascovich and Hartel (2008)²⁴ violations of honor and the possible resulting loss of face can be a great source of conflict within collectivist cultures. In comparison, within individualistic cultures conflict is often surged by violation of personal rights. In addition, in collectivist cultures Gelfand, Bell, and Shteynberg (2005)²⁵ found that violations of honor spread quickly among the group and often lead to revenge quicker than in individualistic cultures.

The influence of Islam in Afghanistan also calls attention to the relation of gender, which Hofstede calls the masculinity/femininity dimension. Differences in gender roles should also be taken into account in reconstruction projects, especially where women are involved. Although Hofstede's typology could be extended to other dimensions and relations that might be important in the Afghan context, the dimensions presented here should only be an example to illustrate how useful and important cultural knowledge can be for the success of the German reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

Other countries, such as the United States, also rely on cultural knowledge and ethnographic intelligence and apply it to great effect in their operations. The situation in Iraq that American troops have been facing never seemed to improve over time. Nevertheless, when US General David H. Petraeus took command of the American troops in Iraq in February 2007, he took a big step to change the military strategy towards the counterinsurgency. In sharp contrast to Donald Rumsfeld's harsh approach to counterinsurgency, which relied heavily on aggressive military tactics, General Petraeus opted for a more gentle approach that highlighted efforts to understand the culture and societies in the field. Already in 2004 General Robert Scales Jr. opposed the prevalent strategy of hard power by saying that Iraq required that US soldiers have the exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivations.²⁶

Since the changing of the counterinsurgency strategy, military academies have introduced new classes on cultural awareness, society and history. The American military has not

²⁴ Blascovich and Hartel (eds.) (2008), 28.

²⁵ Gelfand, M. J., Bell, C., & Shteynberg, G. (2005, August): Culture, shame, and revenge, Paper presented at the annual conference of the Academy of Management, Hawaii.

²⁶ Major General Robert H. Scales, "Culture-Centric Warfare," Proceedings, October 2004, p. 21.

only employed anthropologists and other cultural and intercultural experts to teach classes but also deployed them to combat zones, where they accompanying a brigade of soldiers and counsel officers and soldiers on intercultural understanding and other related matters in so called human terrain systems (HTS) or human terrain teams (HTT).²⁷ Indeed the new strategy emphasizes human relationships and the cultural diplomatic approach: “To be successful, you must understand the Iraqi perspective. Building trust, showing respect, cultivating relationships, building a team, and maintaining patience are all central features of the human terrain system which emphasize the power of people - friendship, trust, understanding—the most decisive factor in winning the war in Iraq.”²⁸

The American example shows the extent to which cultural knowledge can be used in military operations. It furthermore strengthens the need for proper education in intercultural matters, such as cultural theory, cultural awareness, society and history. The idea of bringing in outside experts to combat zones should be worth considering also for the German model. In general, all soldiers and officers in the field should benefit from cultural knowledge. The examples mentioned above make it clear that not only officers should be aware of the importance of intercultural knowledge, as General Robert Bergmann mentioned in an interview with the news station NTV.²⁹ In concurrence with Andreas Berns and Roland Wöhrle-Chon (2006)³⁰ it is important that not only leading officers or special groups of soldiers benefit from intercultural training and knowledge, but personnel on all levels and areas of the forces. Since it has become more likely that the German military will take part in international missions overseas in the future, care should be taken to recruit soldiers that possess the ability to function in multiple cultures. Following General Naumann’s remarks in the early 1990s, the aims of the Bundeswehr in the new century is to “protect, help and rescue” (“schützen, helfen, retten” Naumann 1994, 203)³¹. Within the framework of these aims and multicultural environments, soldiers now have to become soldier-diplomats, soldier-scholars, soldier-policeman and soldier-street-worker³².

²⁷ Sheila Miyoshi Jager (2007): On the uses of cultural knowledge, Strategic Studies Institute, p. 6, 10

²⁸ cited in Jager (2007), p. 11

²⁹ in an interview with General Robert Bergmann on ntv, the General mentioned that only officers should be trained in intercultural knowledge, in: Schnelle Eingreiftruppe: Aus NRW nach Afghanistan, in: <http://www.ntv.de/916702.html>

³⁰ Berns, Andreas, Wöhrle-Chon, Roland (2006): Interkulturelles Konfliktmanagement, in: Gareis, Sven, Klein, Paul (2006): Handbuch Militär und Sozialwissenschaft, VS- Verlag, Wiesbaden, 322 – 332.

³¹ Naumann, Klaus (1994): Die Bundeswehr in einer Welt im Umbruch, Berlin.

³² Bredow, Wilfried von (2006): Kämpfer und Sozialarbeiter, in: (2006): Handbuch Militär und Sozialwissenschaften, VS-Verlag, Wiesbaden, 287-295.

The German military therefore should focus on implementing more intercultural training strategies and monitor further developments in the field of intercultural training. Training exercises suggested by Alexander Thomas³³ could be specifically applied to Afghanistan and to other missions in the future. Further research in the field of intercultural training and intercultural communication should be of interest to the German military. Although the German military strategy of cultural diplomacy in Afghanistan has proved successful, more effort should be taken to prepare soldiers and officers in the field. Especially in non-combat missions this knowledge is a great asset to the troops, and can determine the success or failure of a mission or operation. Security can be strengthened and lives can be saved. Especially when Germany takes part in more combat missions, such as the QRF, the lessons learned in the non-combat operation should not be forgotten. Moreover, the knowledge should be secured and extended. As the example of the American mission in Iraq shows, “soft power” can sometimes even be more powerful than “hard power”. Therefore “soft power” like “hard power” should be an equal partner in the German military strategy. Since Germany has established itself as a well-respected partner in mediating conflict situations, it should – as a country of diplomacy – further develop its “soft power” methods to help in conflicts and further foster international understanding and trust among nations.

³³ Thomas, A., Kamhuber, S. & Layes G. (1997): Interkulturelle Kompetenz - Ein Handbuch für internationale Einsätze der Bundeswehr, in: Untersuchungen des Psychologischen Dienstes der Bundeswehr, Bd. 32, Verlag der Wehrwissenschaften, München.