

1.4.7 GERMANY'S COMBAT REVIVAL

The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com

The Bundeswehr's recent offensive in Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountains is too timid for Washington, yet too bold for many in Germany.

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Engelholm, Sweden —

Today's Germans have not yet fully reconciled their post-Hitler conscience with the use of military force for anything beyond narrow homeland defense. But Berlin has just tiptoed over another red line, in the Hindu Kush mountains.

To be sure, Germany's recent first use of heavy weapons and tank-like vehicles in a two-week offensive against insurgents will hardly satisfy the American hope for more German combat action in southern Afghanistan. Yet the new German assertiveness does augur a certain convergence. Just as Berlin is getting drawn into easing national restrictions and letting its troops engage in American-style firefights to repulse Taliban intimidation of Afghan villagers, so is the Obama administration shifting American priorities toward German-style emphasis on local civilian development.

After World War II the (West) Germans recoiled against Hitler's violent conquests and renounced possession of armed forces altogether. Only after a decade – and a fierce controversy – did they acquiesce in forming a new, democratic Army called the Bundeswehr. Legally they confined it to defense of NATO territory alone and subordinated it to the Western alliance's command.

Even after the cold war ended in 1989 and Moscow withdrew the 20 Soviet divisions surrounding Berlin a thousand miles to the east – and the United States redefined NATO's mission as global export of stability – the Germans moved gingerly. A few Bundeswehr medics joined international monitors in Cambodia in 1992; then rather more medics and soldiers went to Bosnia to set up clinics in 1994; then German troops joined the NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Kosovo after the 1999 war there.

Only after the provocation of 9/11 did Germans overcome their lingering aversion to participating in combat and send troops to an actual war zone outside the European homeland, dispatching special forces to fight alongside US troops in Afghanistan. Seven years later, the 4,300 German forces guarding the north Afghan sector constitute the third-largest foreign contingent in the country, after Britain's 9,000 and America's dominant 55,000.

Until now the Tajik northern sector has been far more peaceful than the Pashtun east and south, where US combat forces are concentrated. In their sector, the Germans could afford to focus on training Afghan troops and police on the one hand and building bridges and schools on the other (while taking fewer casualties than their American and British allies).

But lately the Taliban have reinfiltred the north and threaten to disrupt this month's election there, too. That's why 300 German Quick Reaction Force troops recently reinforced the anti-Taliban offensive of 1,000 Afghan soldiers and policemen around Kunduz.

This new Bundeswehr posture is still too timid for Washington's taste, but too bold for many German parliamentarians and voters. Left Bundestag members and a rising 69 percent of citizens now say they want German soldiers to withdraw from Afghanistan, fast.

Yet at heart, as the new US counterinsurgency doctrine of last December stresses, US-style war fighting and German-style development are both essential. Mobile infantry sweeps can never win the war if Afghan teenagers with no future prospects constantly replace killed insurgents. And young Afghans can never imagine a peaceful future for themselves if the Taliban are not blocked from repeatedly blowing up those new schools and bridges.

Surely, transatlantic convergence is called for.