

**How do International Actors React When Their Universalistic Project is challenged?
An Evaluation of Western Policies in Afghanistan under Conditions of a Drawdown***

By Thomas Kieschnick

In 2014 Western combat troops will leave Afghanistan after 13 years of engagement. In the wake of this caesura certain policy changes of actors of the international community have taken place. The author traces these changes in the cases of (I) the negotiations with the Taliban and (II) German governmental development cooperation. It is examined how the concerned actors make sense of the policy changes to counter the reproach of failure of the international engagement in Afghanistan.

1. Introduction - Or How to Make Sense of an Intervention

When it came to the intervention in Afghanistan by an actor labeled and self-conceived as the *international community*, the motives and aims of this concerted action seemed to be pretty clear. In reaction to a violent attack on the Western civilization and hence humanity itself, security in the international system had to be restored – the enemies of the peace-loving nations of the world had to be defeated. What followed was a globally fought war against terrorism with its first local embodiment in the attacks against al-Qaida and its host, the Afghan state and its Taliban government.

Given the public shock in the aftermath of the events of 9/11, the call for an immediate military reaction might be understandable. But the threat originating from Afghanistan seemed to be not sufficient to justify an enormous civilian and military engagement under the pretext of a state-, nation-, and peace building project as we see it today. Fragile statehood has been invoked as a greater danger to global peace than aggressive, but stable states – and therefore state building was depicted as a necessary condition for global security. But one should not forget that Afghanistan was and still is subject to the Western universalistic project of liberal democracy and human rights (Jabri 2010: 34). In the context of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the decrease of public attention for the American war in Iraq in the years 2004 and 2005, the international community began to engage massively in aid and civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan. These civil efforts might be read as part of a strategy to broaden the international alliance for the project in Afghanistan. Hence, it can be stated that next to security concerns – or as one element to address

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security concerns -, it was the ambition to build a sustainable democratic system of Western standards in the global and – in this case – Islamic periphery that endowed the international intervention with legitimacy in its military but especially in its political and civilian dimension.

In 2011 it is obvious that ten years of international engagement have not created the expected outcomes/successes. Far away from meeting so called Western standards in any public or private domain the situation in Afghanistan today is rather approaching the civil war realities of the pre-Taliban era. In this context changes and adjustments within the agenda and policies of international actors, whether civilian or military, towards Afghanistan can be observed. As the military side of the international engagement has already agreed upon a massive drawdown of combat troops and a transition of responsibility to Afghan security forces until 2014, the civilian actors are negotiating both their ambitions and aspirations for Afghanistan's future. It seems that under the impression of the current dynamics the international community departs from its initial vision for Afghanistan. It is this supposed departure that is central to this paper.

Thereby the leading question is: Concerning the changes and adjustments in the agendas and policies of the intervening actors, is the West resigning from its universalistic aspiration in/for Afghanistan? Is the aim of the liberal democratic blueprint replaced by a more realistic approach leading to a 'second best solution'? And, if so, how are these shifts articulated and justified in the discourse of the international community?

With the aim of finding appropriate answers to these questions I will focus my analysis in the following on two recent developments, which I will read in the context of the aforementioned agenda adjustments: (I) the call of actors of the international community for negotiations with, and therefore inclusion of the Taliban into the political system of Afghanistan, and (II) the reframing of German development policy since the 2010 London Conference which is read in the context of the planned withdrawal of international combat troops in 2014.

2. The Taliban Question - Or Why to Negotiate with the Enemy

Given the fact that the Taliban and so called armed opposition groups (AOGs) have had a permanent presence in more than 50 percent of Afghanistan since 2007 (ICOS 2008) and enjoy legitimacy in substantial parts of the Afghan population (Gates 2010) it might seem quite surprising today that it has not been thought thoroughly how to deal with these forces and potentially engage them as a potential political force in Afghan politics for a post-intervention regime. Quite the contrary the dominant actors within the international community have for a long time perceived the Taliban not as part of the solution but as part of the Afghan problem, if not as the problem *per se*. Since the beginning of the intervention in 2001 the discourse of international actors have produced a wide

range of Taliban images that broadly rely on assumptions since public statements and policy papers of this movement are quite rare. However most of these images have in common the ideas of backwardness, traditionalism, misogyny, violence, radicalism and Islamism which are merged under the label of 'Taliban ideology'. To put it briefly: The presumed ideology of the Taliban and therefore the Taliban themselves are presented as anti-modern and therefore diametrically opposed to the universalistic ambitions of *the West*. Both projects seem to be irreconcilable so the conflict in Afghanistan will not be settled unless one of the opponents surrenders or is defeated. As long as there are Taliban in Afghanistan – as repeatedly uttered by ISAF officials – the country will neither have security, nor peace, democracy, and human rights (Jabri 2010: 16).

These assessments have produced a stalemate in the Afghan political arena as the Taliban have gained strength all over the country from 2007 onwards and the ISAF proclaimed to pass the baton on security issues to the Afghans and drawdown its troops until 2014. What followed were reevaluations and reformulations on the side of the intervention concerning the Taliban issue. The former ISAF-spokesman, German general Josef Blotz asserts that "[t]his conflict will not be solved on the battlefield. It will find an end at the bargaining table" (author's interview 2011). Furthermore he demands the reconciliation with and the reintegration of former, "*moderate*" Taliban combatants. With this attitude Blotz is not a maverick. Emphasizing the necessity of negotiations between international actors, its national allies and the Taliban has become common sense among the international community in Afghanistan at least since 2010.

But how is this agenda change justified? The inclusion of every major political actor into the political system of Afghanistan might be considered necessary in hindsight. But are we actually witnessing then the resignation of the West from its universalistic project as its enemy per se would be integrated into Afghanistan's political system?

Firstly it has to be stated that the Western image of the Taliban has changed. The problem of Afghanistan's stability are not just the Taliban but a phenomena that is labeled 'insurgency of armed opposition groups' of which the Taliban are definitely part. But even the Taliban are no longer seen as a coherent movement. A distinction has been made between a hard core of radicals – the true believers -, coming from Pakistan to pursue their fundamentalist vision, and their followers, who are presumed to have moderate mindsets. The Taliban are discursively split into two parts whereby one part – the radicals – still constitute the enemy of the West, whereas the other part – the moderates – tend to be seen as possible negotiating partners. But, as Crews states, "[t]he term *moderate* is so difficult to define, after all, because it belongs to a vocabulary of polemics" (2008: 241). Beyond that it has to be recognized, that the categories of radical and moderate are far away from being more or less objective valuations. Such as "[i]n American political discourse, the terms *moderate* and *radical*

signal political affiliations: the former are 'good' because they assent to Washington's policies, while the latter are 'bad' because they do not" (ibid: 242).*

Due to these definitional difficulties or in order to de-demonize the Taliban, it is observable that the label 'Taliban' is increasingly avoided in policy documents of international governmental actors in Afghanistan. It is incrementally replaced by the more depoliticized terms 'insurgents' and 'AOGs' which makes negotiations with those groups more feasible as the negotiators do not need to justify themselves for talking with an actor formerly only known as 'Taliban-enemy'.

By introducing the figures of 'moderate Taliban', 'AOGs' and 'insurgents', international actors in Afghanistan are in the position to move towards a dialogue with an actor that formerly was only conceived as the enemy. Whereas the radical Taliban still embody an illegitimate actor that has to be obliterated, those viewed as moderate Taliban or insurgents appear – at least partly – to represent the political will of Afghans legitimately. Hence it seems desirable to include them into the negotiation process for the future of the Afghan state.

The decision to consider negotiations with the Taliban necessary for a sustainable solution for Afghanistan has allegedly not been a result of a political break in the Afghanistan agenda of the international community. On the contrary: structural and temporal constraints to the international state- and peace building mission have been invoked to justify a change in the international agenda setting. Given those constraints it seems to be without any alternative for the international community to acknowledge the Taliban –as a major military and political force in the country -, at least partly as a part of the solution. How far these policies are followed coherently is debatable. Talks between Westerners and presumed Taliban representatives are taking place clandestinely and it seems disputable if these talks can produce any valuable outcome as "[e]verybody in the West is talking with his own Talib" (Interview with Shorish 2011).

After the assassination of the head of the High Peace Council – the Afghan institution in charge of preparing negotiations with the Taliban -, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in September 2011 Afghan president Karzai declared his government was no longer willing to enter negotiations at a political level with Taliban forces. It is these incidents that reveal a deep mismatch between Afghan facts on the ground and Western valuations as international actors adhere to the idea of desirable outcomes in negotiations. As Bente Scheller, director of the Heinrich-Boell-Foundation in Kabul states: "Rarely it has been more obvious that the international community tries to achieve its aims without considering what might be desirable and feasible for Afghans" (author's interview 2011).

As we see, the aforementioned binarism between the modern and the anti-modern that averted political contacts on an equal footing between the interventionists and the Taliban has neither been

* The strategy of the German government to distinguish between Taliban with an ideological motivation and an economic one may be seen as a resembling discursive mechanism to draw a line between those who are favorable negotiation partners (the latter) and those who are not (the former) (German Government 2010: 8).

dissolved nor reconciled. The image of the Taliban as a backward and violent Islamist movement in Afghanistan prevails although distinctions have been redrawn. It is not “the Taliban” anymore but its “radical elements” that are presented as the enemy of development supported by the international community. The contradiction between the call for negotiations with the Taliban and the self-conception of international actors challenges the latter. But after the former seemed to be inevitable in context of the intended drawdown in 2014 discursive shifts took place that are redefining the Taliban in a way that make their partial political inclusion tolerable.

3. Development Assistance in the North – Or Why Stability Shall be more Suitable than Democracy

The international community pursues its goal of developing Afghanistan on two tracks. Although the military ISAF mission enjoys far more attention in the Western public than civil projects, there is a massive presence of external civilian actors of governmental and non governmental origin. A large number of different organizations is participating in the project of state building and democratization with a wide array of agendas. Despite the fact that projects and actions of those organizations are diverse in their aims and ways of implementation – depending on the national origin and the source of funding – and follow different, if not contradictory or even irreconcilable logics, the international engagement in Afghanistan is mostly presented as coherent. Especially German governmental development organizations emphasize this view, revealing a deep belief in the axiom of modernization theory where “all good things come together” (Auhor’s interview with department official Germany 2011). It seems that every project is contributing to the aim of a stable and democratic Afghanistan. Furthermore, coherency is not just emphasized in the cooperation between civilian actors but also between civilian and military actors. In this context international engagement in Afghanistan is conceiving itself as pursuing a *holistic* or *comprehensive* approach. Hence, the cooperation between civilian organizations and ISAF troops (CIMIC) –as decisive part of this approach – is a result of the conviction that development and security are inseparably linked for the democratization of Afghanistan.

For a better of understanding of the impact of this holistic approach to the realities in Afghanistan it is necessary to distinguish between two different dimensions of CIMIC (Brand 2011: 230). On the one hand there is a direct cooperation on the structural and institutional level between civilian actors and the military. In Afghanistan this cooperation is elaborated in the so called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Soldiers and civilian development experts work together on a project-related basis whereby the interpretation of the relationship between civilians and the military varies and depends on the nation having the military command. On the other hand CIMIC can also be considered in its wider sense as what is called the securitization of development policy. In this view the merging of the

military and the civilian sector is not just taking place on an institutional level. Rather military considerations are supposed to be sustainably influential to the agenda setting of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. It is this process that shall be central to this chapter.

That the merging of military and civilian premises in the agendas of German governmental organizations is not taking place on an equal footing is observable in the German contribution on the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2010 at latest. Instead of a complementary cooperation, agendas of developmental organizations are modified in a way that reveals the subordination of civilian engagement in Afghanistan to military premises. In London, development policy is labeled in military terms (“development offensive” – “*Entwicklungsoffensive*”) and directly connected to the military goal of a complete drawdown of troops and a transition of responsibility to Afghan security forces in 2014. The logic is quite simple: The earlier achievements of civilian and military efforts in the realm of stability are visible, the earlier a Western drawdown from the security sector is possible. Underlining a deep belief in this hypothesis, the German government doubled the financial resources for civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan (policy paper German government 2010: 7)*. Then, *holistic approach* in this context means that military and civilian actors work toward the same goal, indeed. But this goal, on the short run, is stability which should enable a secure withdrawal of German forces from its role of a security provider in Afghanistan.

The increasing focus on stability as the leading maxim of German development projects is thereby accompanied by a marginalization of terms like democratization, empowerment of civil society or sustainability. Thomas Herzberg, project coordinator of the German state-owned bank for development KfW Group (Reconstruction Loan Cooperation – *Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau*) indicates that a stronger focus on stabilizing development projects is leading to a decreasing sustainability of its impacts (author’s interview 2011). However, the official position of German governmental development actors is not yet clear and differs in its valuations concerning the challenge of 2014.

Anyhow, the supposed disappearance or retreat from projects that are exerted under the banner of democratization and sustainability can be detected in three recent developments within the remit of German governmental development organizations:

First, there is a stronger emphasis on infrastructure projects since London 2010 by the KfW in particular, as for the BMZ in general. These projects should foster the enforcement of the state monopoly on legitimate violence by the Afghan government before and after 2014. Infrastructure as a realm of development aid is in this context not primarily guided by the needs of the civilian

* Policy Paper of the German Government – Contribution to the International London Conference on Afghanistan. (2010): “Auf dem Weg zur Übergabe der Verantwortung: Das deutsche Afghanistan-Engagement nach der Londoner Konferenz.” (*Towards the Transition of Responsibility: The German Engagement in Afghanistan after the London Conference*).

population – as could be supposed concerning the self-conception of the development policy - but increasingly read within a security framework. In this case it can be said that development projects do never have just a technical dimension but are always political to a certain degree. It is not just that German development assistance is giving up its ambition to be nonpartisan by supporting the (legitimate or illegitimate) power structures of the Afghan government – that has been the case since the beginning of the intervention in 2001. In its contribution to the London Conference in 2010 the German government directly links its efforts in Afghan infrastructure to security issues (policy paper German government 2010: 5). The main goal of these projects is to facilitate the control of the Afghan government and its security forces over the Afghan population in the Northern provinces. With an Afghan government that is far away from being democratic in any Western sense it remains at least a questionable enterprise that endows a repressive regime with legitimacy and an infrastructure to control (Schultz 2011: 307). By putting a strong focus on the Afghan government's urge to control its territory, a development policy that is guided by the needs and grievances of the civilian population is eclipsed. That suggests the assumption that for German governmental developmental organizations security and stability have a higher value than democratization and empowerment.

A similar development is observable in the realm of cooperation between the German agents and the civilian population. Under the label of 'Afghan ownership' and by claiming to consider cultural facts on the ground, cooperation with tribal elders and local elites as Afghan counterparts for development projects is the preferred modus for the implementation of projects and the communication with the civilian population. The hope is that resorting to existing power structures on the local level is the fastest way to achieve stability. But local power structures have nothing to do with democracy. Rather than being a facilitator they can be considered an impediment for democratic developments in the countryside as they are characterized by kinship, nepotism and patriarchy. It is therefore not just the empowerment of women that is blocked by the reproduction of those structures but of citizenship agency itself.

Thirdly, the engagement in Afghanistan is gradually retreating from sustainability as a major component of its efforts. By stating that German aid has to be "visible and palpable" (policy paper German government 2010: 4) on the short run to achieve satisfying results until 2014, the German government is justifying the increasing funding for Quick Impact Projects (QIPs).^{*} Nowhere is the retreat from sustainability as a central column of development cooperation more visible than here (Zdunek; Zitelmann 2011: 188). German development aid is picking up the military idea of winning the hearts and minds of the subject population by making 'success' tangible quickly. Thereby the

^{*} For German development policy QIPs, which are exerted by most of the ISAF nations, are labelled as Entwicklungsorientierte Not- und Übergangshilfe (ENÜH) (development assistance in emergency and transition) (GTZ strategy paper 2010: 2).

ostensible purpose of those QIPs is to pull the civilian population over to the side of the intervention (in its civilian as well as military dimension) and gain legitimacy for the intervening actors. De facto achievements for a democratization and empowerment process are at most of secondary concern. Given the dependency of the QIPs on international funding it can be assumed that after the withdrawal of Western QIPs are followed by a quick collapse (ibid: 202).

As we see, certain changes in the agenda of German governmental development policies in Afghanistan have taken place. What is labeled a holistic approach or civilian military cooperation is de facto a subordination of German development policy to the logics and purposes of the military intervention, namely the ISAF troops. Certainly, there have been similar tendencies before the London Conference and the proclamation of 2014 as the date for the final drawdown of foreign troops from Afghanistan. But what we witness today is a frank commitment of the concerned development actors to security and stability as the leading premises of their actions towards an at least stable Afghanistan until 2014.

In the pursuit of this aim we witness the emergence of contradictions between initially postulated ambitions of making Afghanistan subject to the universalistic project of liberal democracy and human rights and current efforts of elaborating development strategies within a military framework. As we see in the aforementioned developments exemplarily, a process towards democratization is not just pushed in the background of development policies but the current development agendas even present an obstacle to such transformations. Together with the fact that German development policy aligns with military logics regarding the caesura of 2014 – which would probably coincide with a withdrawal of civilian actors from Afghanistan – the question again suggests itself, if the West is retreating from its universalistic ambitions in the country.

Unsurprisingly, none of the concerned actors would officially affirm this view as it would equal an avowal of failure. The agenda shifts taking place are justified with arguments different from those mentioned above by the author. Although the impression might arise that Afghanistan will have been given up after 2014, the German government cherishes the vision of a democratic Afghanistan in the not too distant future. The current agenda changes are still interpreted within the prevalent universalistic framework whereas this one got extended. Admittedly, it is possible (if not obvious) to link the current agenda shifts to the plans for a military drawdown and therefore suspect the German development aid of also leaving the country until this date. But official statements of German government try to draw a different picture as the promise of a long term engagement is uttered repeatedly in the phrase of “We stay committed,” as stressed most recently by German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle on his visit to Kabul in November 2011.

The agency for the realization or – more euphemistic – accomplishment of the universalistic project is now transferred to the Afghan government. The current actions of German development organizations are read as a shaping of the preconditions for a successful democratization process in Afghanistan's future (author's interview with Brigadier General Joseph Blotz 2011). What follows lies in Afghan hands and is labeled as 'Afghan ownership'. Thus, responsibility is going to be transferred to the Afghans not just in the realm of security but in the sphere of politics as well. It is Afghans who are going to be responsible for the fulfillment of the universalistic project. Furthermore, expectations for the near Afghan future are not only wound down but at the same time those who are responsible for that try to mitigate the scale to which this is happening as indicated in the weird, but often quoted comparison of "Afghanistan won't become a second Switzerland". Success on the road towards an Afghan democracy should also be measured in adjusted timeframes (ibid). According to statements of German government officials there is still a deep conviction in a democratization process and therefore a successful ending of the efforts of the interventionists, whereas measurable successes will occur only after 10 to 25 years.

4. Conclusion - Or How to Make Sense of an Intervention ... again

Given the deteriorating security situation and the present societal and political realities in Afghanistan it seems to be obvious that the universalistic project of liberal democracy and human rights after ten years of international engagement has not been achieved. This argument gains strength if we consider the fact that while Westerners still try to draw an optimistic picture – and if admitting shortcomings, avoid taking responsibility for those – public criticism of the intervention is increasing, in Afghanistan and in the West. But the diagnosis of a failure would not just have consequences for the future of the Afghan state. As the pursuit of a universalistic project was and still is a strong issue that endows the intervention with legitimacy, a failure of this project would affect on future interventions – conducted in its name – as well. Being confronted with an unsuccessful performance in Afghanistan, the legitimacy for further steps of this global project would decrease since the people – on the side of the interveners as well as on the side of the intervened in – would doubt the enforceability of these Western policies.

However, the purpose of this paper was not to declare a failed intervention in Afghanistan, but to show how actors that pursue the universalistic project, react when they are challenged. As I have shown in the examples, shifts of meaning occurred in the discourse of the concerned actors of the international community that relocate their agenda changes within the idea of a universalistic project. In both cases boundaries have been redrawn. In the case of the Taliban the initial concept of the enemy of the West was revalued by the distinction between radical and moderate Taliban,

whereas the first are still presented to be an enemy and the latter are considered as a potential negotiation partners. In the second case the enforceability of the universalistic project by development cooperation was revalued by a broadening of the concept, changing timeframes and a transmission of ownership from international to Afghan hands. It seems that facing severe challenges, short-term stability has been favored over long-term democratization. It is these revaluations that reopen the possibility for the universalistic project to prevail discursively. If the initial frameworks of the intervention would persist, the diagnosis of a failure would be inevitable.

What we see is that at least within the official discourse of the concerned actors the reproach of a failure of the international project could be disproved. We will see in future if these revaluations will be accepted by a broader public. Given that those in power also have the power of interpretation, one should keep in mind that even if they and their projects are challenged, they will presumably be able to read the realities of the global sphere in their favor.

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