



Costly Neglect: The German Political Scene Grapples with Afghanistan

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An incorrect assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and the delayed evacuation of German personnel and their associates have contributed to the decline in CDU/CSU ratings. The Christian Democrats' standing is also made more difficult by the prospect of restarting the debate on migration policy, which is still controversial within the party. Criticism of the government's actions by the opposition during the campaign and the low popularity of Armin Laschet, the leader of the Christian Democrats, may jeopardise the party's victory in the Bundestag elections in September.

Two weeks before Germany's federal election (26 September), public opinion polls indicate a decline in support for the CDU/CSU: according to INSA, the Christian Democrats can count on 20-23% of votes (7-8 percentage points less than in July this year). The turning point for the ruling party were the response to the floods that hit the western federal states of Germany in July: 57% of respondents negatively assessed CDU chairman and candidate for Chancellor Laschet actions to deal with the cataclysm. Then, the destabilisation of Afghanistan returned the topic of German foreign policy and its revision after the end of Angela Merkel's time in office to the election campaign.

Recap of the German Operation in Afghanistan. Germany first was involved in Afghanistan as part of the ISAF mission in 2001-2014, followed by *Resolute Support* in 2015-2021, during with a total of 160,000 German troops (recently 1,300) served. Of those, 59 lost their lives in that period. Afghanistan was also Germany's most expensive foreign mission, costing about €12 billion. Considering the personnel losses and financial costs incurred by Germany since 2001, the manner in which the evacuation mission was carried out was criticised by media and experts. One accusation was of a lack of coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by Heiko Maas (SPD) and the Ministry of Defence headed by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) and of shifting responsibility between the politicians. That delayed the start of the evacuation until

16 August. Another problem in inter-ministerial cooperation was a change in visa procedures for local employees in Afghanistan. According to the government's plans, after the Bundeswehr withdrew from the Mazar-i Sharif base in June this year, its local associates could apply for a visa to stay in Germany after arriving in Germany, but not on the spot in Afghanistan. However, the procedure was not simplified, which made it impossible for this group of Afghans to get to Germany efficiently. The criticism further concerns the lack of information about the situation in Afghanistan from the German special services. In a report presented two days before the Taliban entered Kabul, the Federal Intelligence Agency (BND) assessed that the group's occupation of the Afghan capital in the near future was "rather unlikely", citing in part a lack of military resources.

In view of the approaching date of departure from the airport in Kabul by U.S. troops at the end of August this year, Maas travelled to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Turkey, and Qatar to ensure the possibility of further evacuation of German citizens and their associates from Afghanistan. According to the assumptions of the German authorities, these people would cross the border of Afghanistan by land and then be transported to Germany from an airport in a neighbouring country. Germany would monitor their flow, thus avoiding an uncontrolled influx of migrants to countries bordering Afghanistan. Additionally, in Qatar, Maas expressed his

readiness to start talks with the Taliban and to return German diplomats to Kabul after the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

Influence of the Events in Afghanistan on the Bundestag Campaigns. Although the discussion about the German evacuation from Afghanistan is not the main topic of the campaign, just two weeks before the federal election, it has become one factor weakening, above all, the ruling Christian Democrats. First, the end of the German presence in Afghanistan is indirectly a burden on Laschet, the Christian Democrat leader who is identified as the successor to Merkel. Second, following the flood response and [the problems associated with managing the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic](#), the mistakes related to the evacuation from Afghanistan weaken the CDU/CSU's image as a crisis-management grouping. Third, the prospect of an increasing number of refugees arriving in Germany shortly before the elections has again raised the topic of migration policy, which arouses discussions among Christian Democrats. In response, the CDU chairman declared that "2015 cannot happen again", referencing that year's migration-management crisis. Laschet opposes reopening Germany's borders, rather supporting aid for those entitled to seek refuge outside Afghanistan. At the same time, the chairman of the Christian Democrats aims to put the focus on the government's actions aimed at eliminating the causes of migration. They hope to retain voters critical of the government's actions in the 2015 crisis and keep them from moving to Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the Free Democratic Party (FDP), as well as hold onto those who support the liberalisation of asylum policy as proposed by the Greens.

The situation in Afghanistan has had little impact on the support for the co-ruling SPD (23-25%), giving the party the lead. The maintenance of the SPD's high polling is the result of the focus of media criticism on the SPD-led diplomatic corps, and not on the entire party. In addition, the SPD's candidate for Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, said CDU/CSU was to blame for the mistakes made during the evacuation from Afghanistan, including during its coalition with the FDP in 2009-2013 when it reduced the Bundeswehr's budget, inhibiting modernisation. Scholz opposed this position when he managed the Ministry of Finance, which sought an annual increase in the budget for the German military.

The situation in Afghanistan has not affected the Greens' polling numbers, creating an opportunity for the party to present itself as competent in the field of foreign policy. The

Greens reminded that in April this year, they presented to the Bundestag a motion to evacuate Afghans to Germany who had collaborated with the military, but the proposal was rejected by the CDU/CSU, the SPD and the AfD. Party leader Annalena Baerbock has called for the establishment of a commission of inquiry to investigate the evacuation process and the appointment of a body of experts to evaluate all of the Bundeswehr's foreign missions.

Conclusions. The rapid destabilisation of Afghanistan, coupled with Laschet's already low popularity and the lack of a dynamic campaign, threaten the Christian Democrats' hold on power. If SPD wins the elections, the party may attempt to form a left-wing coalition with the Greens and Die Linke, or with the Greens and [FDP](#). In the first scenario, the parties' differences would mainly be in foreign and security policy, above all relations with Russia and China. [The Greens](#), unlike SPD and Die Linke, support tighter relations with those countries. In the second case, with the liberals, the differences would extend to social, financial, and security policies, which could hinder both the negotiations and the subsequent functioning of the government. The prospect of a coalition with Die Linke also would be used by the Christian Democrats to mobilise their voters and by centre-left voters concerned about the entry into government of an extreme left group.

The takeover of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan has triggered a debate on the goals, methods of implementation, and funds allocated to the Bundeswehr's foreign missions. This is especially true of the largest mission to Mali where German troops are participating in the UN MINSUMA and EUTM Mali operations. Less public support can be expected for both the current missions and new ones in the wake of the Taliban seizing power: an August YouGov poll shows that only 23% of respondents support keeping German forces in Mali (down from 49% in June 2013). That may discourage the authorities from deciding on greater military involvement outside Germany. A reduction in the number of German personnel in these missions would adversely affect Germany's relations with France, which wants the presence of other EU countries in the Sahel to enable it to reduce its own involvement. Such a scenario would also be unfavourable from the point of view of Poland. Also, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the focusing of attention on the rivalry with China strengthens supporters of expanding the EU's defence potential.