



CIA Red Cell

A Red Cell Special Memorandum

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Afghanistan: Sustaining West European Support for the NATO-led Mission—Why Counting on Apathy Might Not Be Enough (C//NF)

The fall of the Dutch Government over its troop commitment to Afghanistan demonstrates the fragility of European support for the NATO-led ISAF mission. Some NATO states, notably France and Germany, have counted on public apathy about Afghanistan to increase their contributions to the mission, but indifference might turn into active hostility if spring and summer fighting results in an upsurge in military or Afghan civilian casualties and if a Dutch-style debate spills over into other states contributing troops. The Red Cell invited a CIA expert on strategic communication and analysts following public opinion at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) to consider information approaches that might better link the Afghan mission to the priorities of French, German, and other Western European publics. (C//NF)

Public Apathy Enables Leaders To Ignore Voters. . . (C//NF)

The Afghanistan mission's low public salience has allowed French and German leaders to disregard popular opposition and steadily increase their troop contributions to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Berlin and Paris currently maintain the third and fourth highest ISAF troop levels, despite the opposition of 80 percent of German and French respondents to increased ISAF deployments, according to INR polling in fall 2009.

- Only a fraction (0.1-1.3 percent) of French and German respondents identified "Afghanistan" as the most urgent issue facing their nation in an open-ended question, according to the same polling. These publics ranked "stabilizing Afghanistan" as among the lowest priorities for US and European leaders, according to polls by the German Marshall Fund (GMF) over the past two years.
- According to INR polling in the fall of 2009, the view that the Afghanistan mission is a waste of resources and "not our problem" was cited as the most common reason for opposing ISAF by German respondents and was the second most common reason by French respondents. But the "not our problem" sentiment also suggests that, so far, sending troops to Afghanistan is not yet on most voters' radar. (C//NF)

. . . But Casualties Could Precipitate Backlash (C//NF)

If some forecasts of a bloody summer in Afghanistan come to pass, passive French and German dislike of their troop presence could turn into active and politically potent hostility. The tone of previous debate suggests that a spike in French or German casualties or in Afghan civilian casualties could become a tipping point in converting passive opposition into active calls for immediate withdrawal. (C//NF)

French and German commitments to NATO are a safeguard against a precipitous departure, but leaders fearing a backlash ahead of spring regional elections might become unwilling to pay a political price for increasing troop levels or extending deployments. If

This memo was prepared by the CIA Red Cell, which has been charged by the Director of Intelligence with taking a pronounced "out-of-the-box" approach that will provoke thought and offer an alternative viewpoint on the full range of analytic issues. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the CIA Red Cell at (703) 482-6918 / 482-0169 or 44462/50127, secure. (C)

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domestic politics forces the Dutch to depart, politicians elsewhere might cite a precedent for “listening to the voters.” French and German leaders have over the past two years taken steps to preempt an upsurge of opposition but their vulnerability may be higher now:

- To strengthen support, President Sarkozy called on the National Assembly—whose approval is not required for ISAF—to affirm the French mission after the combat deaths of 10 soldiers in August 2008. The government won the vote handily, defusing a potential crisis and giving Sarkozy cover to deploy approximately 3,000 additional troops. Sarkozy, however, may now be more vulnerable to an upsurge in casualties because his party faces key regional elections this March and the already low support for ISAF has fallen by one-third since March 2009, according to INR polling in the fall of 2009.
- Political fallout from the German-ordered Kunduz airstrike in September 2009 which killed dozens of Afghan civilians, demonstrated the potential pressure on the German Government when Afghanistan issues come up on the public radar. Concern about the potential effects of Afghanistan issues on the state-level election in North Rhine-Westphalia in May 2010 could make Chancellor Merkel—who has shown an unwillingness to expend political capital on Afghanistan—more hesitant about increasing or even sustaining Germany’s ISAF contributions. (C//NF)

Tailoring Messaging Could Forestall or At Least Contain Backlash (C//NF)

Western European publics might be better prepared to tolerate a spring and summer of greater military and civilian casualties if they perceive clear connections between outcomes in Afghanistan and their own priorities. A consistent and iterative strategic communication program across NATO troop contributors that taps into the key concerns of specific Western European audiences could provide a buffer if today’s apathy becomes tomorrow’s opposition to ISAF, giving politicians greater scope to support deployments to Afghanistan. (C//NF)

French Focused On Civilians and Refugees. Focusing on a message that ISAF benefits Afghan civilians and citing examples of concrete gains could limit and perhaps even reverse opposition to the mission. Such tailored messages could tap into acute French concern for civilians and refugees. Those who support ISAF in INR surveys from fall 2009 most frequently cited their perception that the mission helps Afghan civilians, while opponents most commonly argued that the mission hurts civilians. Contradicting the “ISAF does more harm than good” perception is clearly important, particularly for France’s Muslim minority:

- Highlighting Afghans’ broad support for ISAF could underscore the mission’s positive impact on civilians. About two-thirds of Afghans support the presence of ISAF forces in Afghanistan, according to a reliable ABC/BBC/ADR poll conducted in December 2009. According to INR polling in fall 2009, those French and German respondents who believed that the Afghan people oppose ISAF—48 percent and 52 percent, respectively—were more likely than others to oppose participation in the mission.
- Conversely, messaging that dramatizes the potential adverse consequences of an ISAF defeat for Afghan civilians could leverage French (and other European) guilt for abandoning them. The prospect of the Taliban rolling back hard-won progress on girls’ education could provoke French indignation, become a rallying point for France’s largely secular public, and give voters a reason to support a good and necessary cause despite casualties.

- The media controversy generated by Paris's decision to expel 12 Afghan refugees in late 2009 suggests that stories about the plight of Afghan refugees are likely to resonate with French audiences. The French government has already made combating Afghan human trafficking networks a priority and would probably support an information campaign that a NATO defeat in Afghanistan could precipitate a refugee crisis. (C//NF)

Germans Worried About Price And Principle Of ISAF Mission. German opponents of ISAF worry that a war in Afghanistan is a waste of resources, not a German problem, and objectionable in principle, judging from an INR poll in the fall of 2009. Some German opposition to ISAF might be muted by proof of progress on the ground, warnings about the potential consequences for Germany of a defeat, and reassurances that Germany is a valued partner in a necessary NATO-led mission.

- Underscoring the contradiction between German pessimism about ISAF and Afghan optimism about the mission's progress could challenge skeptics' assertions that the mission is a waste of resources. The same ABC/BBC/ADR poll revealed that 70 percent of Afghans thought their country was heading in the right direction and would improve in 2010, while a 2009 GMF poll showed that about the same proportion of German respondents were pessimistic about ever stabilizing Afghanistan.
- Messages that dramatize the consequences of a NATO defeat for specific German interests could counter the widely held perception that Afghanistan is not Germany's problem. For example, messages that illustrate how a defeat in Afghanistan could heighten Germany's exposure to terrorism, opium, and refugees might help to make the war more salient to skeptics.
- Emphasis on the mission's multilateral and humanitarian aspects could help ease Germans' concerns about waging any kind of war while appealing to their desire to support multilateral efforts. Despite their allergy to armed conflict, Germans were willing to break precedent and use force in the Balkans in the 1990s to show commitment to their NATO allies. German respondents cited helping their allies as one of the most compelling reasons for supporting ISAF, according to an INR poll in the fall of 2009. (C//NF)

Appeals by President Obama and Afghan Women Might Gain Traction (C//NF)

The confidence of the French and German publics in President Obama's ability to handle foreign affairs in general and Afghanistan in particular suggest that they would be receptive to his direct affirmation of their importance to the ISAF mission—and sensitive to direct expressions of disappointment in allies who do not help.¹

- According to a GMF poll conducted in June 2009, about 90 percent of French and German respondents were confident in the President's ability to handle foreign policies. The same poll revealed that 82 percent of French and 74 percent of German respondents were confident in the President's ability to stabilize Afghanistan, although the subsequent wait for the US surge strategy may have eroded some of this confidence.

¹ European hand wringing about the President's lack of attendance at a EU summit and commentary that his absence showed that Europe counted for less suggests that worry about European standing with Washington might provide at least some leverage for sustaining contributions to ISAF. (C//NF)

- The same poll also found that, when respondents were reminded that President Obama himself had asked for increased deployments to Afghanistan, their support for granting this request increased dramatically, from 4 to 15 percent among French respondents and from 7 to 13 percent among Germans. The total percentages may be small but they suggest significant sensitivity to disappointing a president seen as broadly in sync with European concerns. (C//NF)

Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory. Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories with French, German, and other European women could help to overcome pervasive skepticism among women in Western Europe toward the ISAF mission.

- According to INR polling in the fall of 2009, French women are 8 percentage points less likely to support the mission than are men, and German women are 22 percentage points less likely to support the war than are men.
- Media events that feature testimonials by Afghan women would probably be most effective if broadcast on programs that have large and disproportionately female audiences. (C//NF)