

A CERTAIN KIND OF NORMAL: GERMANY'S MILITARY OPERATIONS ABROAD

**BY STEPHEN WATTS
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Eight German naval vessels have recently deployed off the coast of Lebanon in order to help prevent unauthorized shipments of weapons into the country. The deployment marks the first time postwar Germany has participated in a significant military operation in the Middle East – the latest in a long line of “firsts” since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Germany is also leading a military operation in Africa for the first time (the EUFOR peace operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo). At various times it has been the single largest contributor to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and it has contributed special forces to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan – the first time postwar Germany has participated in combat operations outside of Europe. Altogether Germany has some 9,000 military personnel deployed in various missions overseas.

Many commentators have read these deployments as a progression towards German normalcy – its participation as an ordinary country in the work of the international community. Many of Germany's allies welcome such indications of “normalcy” and the burden-sharing that it implies. Germans themselves, however, are often more ambivalent, feeling both proud of their country's contributions and simultaneously apprehensive about the possible consequences.

Germany is indeed becoming a “normal” state, but it is normalcy of a particular sort. Germany is increasingly coming to face the conflict between resource constraints and ideals that all major powers active in the global arena confront, and this conflict is provoking talk of “national interests” that many Germans still find uncomfortable. At the same time, Germany is not becoming just like Britain or France. While Germany's military forces are among the world's best in terms of training and equipment, Germany retains a national aversion to the use of force more reminiscent of Italy than of the major military actors in the EU.

Such an instinctual aversion to the use of force has in many cases served Germany well: The Federal Republic refused to participate in the disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq, and it has in many areas been a leader in developing civilian capacities for peace operations. But there is a more problematic side to Germany's status as a “civilian power,” one that continues to trouble Germany's participation in military operations abroad. When Foday Sankoh's paramilitary bands threatened to undermine the fragile peace in Sierra Leone, British forces fought back, defeating his fighters and setting in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to the capture of Sankoh himself and the restoration of stability to Sierra Leone. Germany has

thus far never placed itself in a position where it will have to act like Britain or back down. By moving into territory like the Congo, Germany may no longer be able to avoid such dilemmas.

Dare We Say “National Interests”?

In the years since unification, Germany has increasingly been called upon to contribute to the dizzying number of military operations around the world. Hesitantly at first, but with increasing confidence, Germany has deployed troops to hotspots including Somalia, Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Macedonia, and the Congo, as well as maritime operations in the Adriatic, the Indian Ocean, and now most recently off the coast of Lebanon. Nor have these been only symbolic contributions deployed to relative garden spots; Germany has offered the largest single contingent for missions such as KFOR (Kosovo), ISAF (Afghanistan), and the EUFOR mission in the Congo.

While these deployments have made significant contributions to peace around the world, they have not come without a cost. Although Germany has a large number of men and women in uniform, relatively few of these are deployable overseas. Moreover, military budgets have been declining since the end of the Cold War, and active military operations abroad are always expensive. Now that Germany has accepted a leading role in peace operations, German discourse on these questions will turn increasingly from debates over pure principle to ones concerning the “national interest” and the need to balance a more expansive vision of Germany’s global role with more parochial concerns such as balanced budgets and casualty aversion.

When ideals must be balanced against national interests, compromises emerge that produce peculiar policy outcomes. Such compromises were particularly visible in the decision to deploy the Bundeswehr to the Congo. Germany agreed to accept the leadership of the EUFOR mission to the Congo, but it did so with three caveats: The majority of its forces would not be deployed in the Congo itself; they would be deployed for a specific period of time pegged to the holding of elections in the Congo; and there would be no public discussion of what Germany would do in the eventuality that elections turned violent and led to renewed chaos. Here, in a single mission, Germany replicated a number of policies for which the United States has been harshly criticized in other contexts. Germany pinned its Congo policy to elections rather than to a broader process of institutionalizing democracy. It set an “end date” for its military deployment rather than an “end state” (i.e., the creation of a peaceful, self-sustaining, and at least minimally accountable government). It emphasized force protection over mission accomplishment by deploying most of its troops “over the horizon” in Gabon or in Germany itself, while leaving the riskiest missions in the Congo primarily to its allies. And there are no indications that German officials (at least at policy levels) have had serious discussions about what to do if the elections turn violent and the EUFOR mission becomes untenable at the force levels currently available.

These four weaknesses of German policy in the Congo – an over-emphasis on elections, specifying an “end date” rather than an “end state,” an obsession with force protection, and a failure to plan in advance for anything other than a best-case scenario – have been the hallmarks of American policy in the Balkans and elsewhere. Germany, in other words, is becoming a more

“normal” country in bad ways as well as good ones. The same tension between ideals and interests that causes the United States and other major powers to adopt dysfunctional policies is now at play in German military deployments.

The Limits of Normality

There is another issue that is central to Germany’s development into a “normal” power: its willingness not only to deploy troops but also to use force. The issue has arisen repeatedly during German deployments around the world, and always German officials have good reasons for not wanting to engage the Bundeswehr in violent confrontations with local forces. In Afghanistan, German officials repeat the mantra that Germany emphasizes the word “assistance” in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in which they are participating. German troops do not intervene in disputes between rival warlords, and they do not engage in counter-narcotics operations. Nor do they deploy to the south or southeastern regions of the country, where American, British, Canadian, and Czech forces are taking considerable casualties. In the case of Kosovo, when the Bundeswehr failed to protect Serbian civilians and monuments from rampaging Kosovo Albanian mobs during the March 2004 riots, German forces earned the epithet “the rabbits of the Field of Blackbirds” in some German media outlets. (German officials angrily responded that the Bundeswehr’s only possible means of confronting these mobs was to shoot into crowds of civilians.) In the Congo, observers fear the possibility of German soldiers confronting child soldiers. In the Lebanese maritime mission, Germany dreads possible confrontation with Israeli forces.

In every one of these instances Germany has reasons for wanting to avoid confrontation, and usually they are eminently reasonable. And yet this more general avoidance of confrontation continues to set Germany apart from many of its allies. A recent Spiegel Online article pointed out that German soldiers have only shot two people in all of their military deployments. Muttering about Germany’s reluctance to deploy to more dangerous regions of Afghanistan can be heard from Canada and Britain. Recent figures show that the French have taken more fatalities from hostile actions in Afghanistan than the Germans, despite the fact that the Germans have more than twice as many soldiers deployed and the French operate only in the Kabul region. In the Congo, until recently German forces acted primarily as logistical support and rapid reaction reserves rather than as front-line peace enforcement units (a role that was devolved onto allies such as the Spanish).

Thus far Germany has mostly avoided placing itself in a position where it will have to either confront local armed actors directly or back down. As it expands its military role, however, such confrontations may not always be avoidable. In Sierra Leone, Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces were marching on Freetown and the UN peacekeeping mission in that country was rapidly becoming untenable – until British troops, backed up with considerable offshore firepower, fought back. Sierra Leone is now hardly a model of stability, but it is in a much better position than it has been in years. No one has been willing to discuss a similar scenario in the Congo – on the contrary, top German officials have gone out of their way to emphasize that the Bundeswehr will return from their mission by the end of November. The EUFOR presence may turn out to be sufficient to usher the Congo through the current presidential elections. But the fact that one of the two primary presidential contenders recently took delivery of large

numbers of tanks and other weaponry – with EUFOR knowledge and consent – has left many unsettled. If EUFOR under German leadership creates sufficient stability for presidential elections to be held, but the country returns to war within months of EUFOR's departure, will this have been a success?

What kind of “Normal” Power – and With What Consequences?

Many German policymakers are rightfully proud of the contribution they have made to international peace and security in the past decade. They point to the large numbers of Bundeswehr soldiers deployed abroad and the leadership roles that Germany has undertaken. They emphasize the primacy of the civilian aspects of peacebuilding, and argue (with considerable reason) that the United States would do well to pay more attention to these non-military aspects of its state-building projects.

Despite Germany's undeniable contributions, it is important to look behind the numbers of troops deployed and ask what these numbers mean. Bundeswehr deployments simply do not mean the same thing as British deployments – a consideration that must be factored into operational planning by Germany's allies. Perhaps this is to be expected, considering Germany's history. But as the EU develops its own military capacities, introspection is needed about the limitations as well as the strengths of Germany's approach to peace and stability operations. The Federal Republic is highly unlikely to produce debacles like the American performance in Somalia. But it is also unlikely to accomplish remarkable achievements such as the Dayton accords or Britain's defeat of marauding militias in Sierra Leone. Perhaps the UNTAC mission in Cambodia is a more likely model: The UN helped to bring peace to the country, but it also essentially legitimated a state coup that negated the elections that the UN itself had organized. Germany's successes and failures are both likely to be more subtle and more limited than those of countries like the United States and Great Britain.

Stephen Watts is a post-doctoral fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. As a Guido Goldman Fellow in 2006, he traveled to Germany, Brussels, and Rome to continue his research on the role of Germany and other European actors in peace and stability operations in the post-Cold War era.
