

State-building light won't work. The path of reconstructing Afghanistan

by Tom Koenigs, former UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Member of the German Bundestag since 2009

The path of reconstructing Afghanistan is paved with international conferences. Despite the common and generally accurate remark that conferences do not advance change on their own, some of these international conferences have had an extraordinary symbolic relevance. For example, the meetings in Petersburg in 2001 and 2002 set the agenda for international engagement in Afghanistan.

At these meetings, representatives of Afghanistan and the international community agreed to create a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan. Nonetheless, those good intentions were not followed by a coherent and transparent approach to reconstructing Afghanistan in the subsequent years. Europeans talked about civil reconstruction and state-building, but they did not mobilize sufficient financial resources to bring about a sustainable and far reaching impact on Afghanistan. The US mainly focused on arresting terrorists, eliminating the threat of al-Qaida-camps and fighting the Taliban instead of helping the Afghan people. Former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, viewed the mission in Afghanistan as a distinctively military affair and a matter of international policing.

Consequently, a massive state-building effort was not a substantial part of the former US strategy. This was evidently at odds with the intentions of the UN mandate and the majority of the other states engaged in Afghanistan. None of the international conferences on Afghanistan were able to change this unbalanced situation. The mismatch between mandate and actual performance of the major players did not simplify my job as the leading representative of the UN-Mission to Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007.

This rather historical excursus is not intended as a blame game. The numerous lost opportunities during the 'Golden Hour' after the ousting of the Taliban in 2002 cannot be attributed solely to the failure of US policy. Only in hindsight, the importance of the conference in London in January 2010 becomes clearly visible: The delegates of the biggest donor countries agreed, at least on paper and in principle, on the new state-building approach, which had formerly been articulated by Barack Obama and the US forces.

The US is dominating the international efforts in Afghanistan by the sheer amount of the resources being spent. Hence, the US strategy is of utmost importance in Afghanistan. In any case, the actions of the US in Afghanistan are always more important than any international conference and its inevitably wordy communiqués. Nevertheless, the conference in London is crucial because the major allies of the US were forced to revise their strategy in order to keep up with the last remaining superpower.

Since Obama's inauguration, the focus of the US engagement in Afghanistan has shifted from hunting terrorists to protecting and helping the Afghan people. Of course, this approach has not been invented by Obama; a new generation of generals and leaders within the military played its part as well. Regardless of who holds the copyright, this new approach was long overdue.

From my point of view, Obama and General McChrystal rectified the gravest mistakes of the previous administration. The mission in Afghanistan cannot be successful when it is conducted as 'state-building light'. I am aware that this assessment is not in line with the 'light footprint' approach as advised by the renowned Brahimi-Report. However, in a country as demolished

as Afghanistan, the removal of the main agitators (e.g. Taliban, al-Qaida) is not sufficient. Instead, every military step has to be accompanied by a massive program of civilian assistance, aimed at state-building, capacity-building and society-building. For the first time since the beginning of the intervention, the US is acting in accordance to the needs of the Afghan people.

From a German perspective, this is a curious twist, since Germany used to position itself as the champion of a civil reconstruction and a population-centric military approach. However, nowadays the more the US emphasizes the necessity of civil state-building the more Germany seems to bolster the military elements of their efforts. Rather unexpectedly, even the population-centric angle was gradually lost along the way in Germany. In the last few months, the mission in Afghanistan was perceived as a 'war' rather than as a 'stabilization and reconstruction operation'. Fearing their own casualties, the German troops were ordered either to stay inside their camps or to leave only when heavily armed. This in turn is a recipe for losing the support of the local population.

With regards to civil reconstruction, it is difficult for Germany to "walk the walk" after "talking the talk". In general, the administration's announcements sounded good on paper but were not supported by sufficient resources. The failure to deliver as the lead nation for police training is only the most striking example. Even today, the resources that were so dearly needed for civilian projects in the early years of the intervention were used for military contributions. In 2010, Germany plans to spend € 821 million on its military in Afghanistan compared to only € 252 Million on civil reconstruction in 2009.

Nevertheless, Germany's newly elected government more or less adopted Obama's strategy prior to the London conference. Germany will send slightly more troops to Afghanistan and will boost its efforts on the civilian side as well. According to Germany's minister of defense, Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, German troops will be more visible in the future, spreading out into the Afghan hinterland in order to protect rural Afghanistan. Moreover, he announced that from now on Germany will apply the "partnering-approach" in training the Afghan security forces. In addition to the significant increase of civilian assistance from € 252 million in 2009 to € 430 million in 2010 (pledged), this amounts to an emulation of the Obama and McChrystal strategy - albeit on a much smaller scale. Additionally, Germany will support the reconciliation process in Afghanistan with annually € 10 million over a period of five years.

From an Afghan point of view, the new US strategy seems to be a step into the right direction. Consequently it is good to hear that Germany will adopt its main elements. Of course, this change of approach might be a case of 'too little too late'. For instance, given the situation on the ground, it is hard to believe that the money pledged for civilian assistance can be applied in a meaningful way since there is a lack of social structures and civilian projects one could finance. You simply cannot buy social progress with money.

From my point of view, four points are crucial for any success in Afghanistan after the London Conference:

1. Afghans should be the focus of our attention, not terrorists or the Taliban. Hence, the new American approach seems to be a long overdue but laudable correction of the former strategy. The international community should continue to support this new course. The London Conference and its overtures were an auspicious beginning. Now it is time to put words into action.
2. Germany's amount of assistance is still rather small. Even so, it is good to see Germany's increased involvement. Nevertheless, quality is still as important as quantity. With regard to the military, Germany's administration has announced some meaningful changes. Sadly, we cannot state the same in the field of civil assistance and reconstruction.
3. Everyone is finally supporting a reconciliation process in Afghanistan, yet Afghans have got to do the talking. Since normative concerns have a tendency to overrule pragmatic solutions in Germany, we have to keep a close eye on the administration here.

4. Germany's new conservative administration is not very supportive of multilateral approaches. Moreover, Angela Merkel and her cabinet are not on the same page with Barack Obama on most global issues. In the case of Afghanistan, Germany is more or less supporting Obama's approach. However, without strong transatlantic collaboration, none of the pressing global problems can be addressed in a meaningful way. The German opposition should be very concerned about strengthening multilateral and transatlantic initiatives - in Afghanistan as well as elsewhere.