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The Beginning of The End Of Afghanistan

An Editorial by Olaf Ihlau

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More and more, it seems the West will have to negotiate with moderate elements of the Taliban if they want to get out of Afghanistan. Germany's defense minister was against it in the past. But now he's changed his tune. And rightfully so, since that is the only way to start a German exit strategy off.

Two years ago, when Kurt Beck was still the head of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), he suggested that one way to solve the conflict in Afghanistan would be to "sound out ... moderate" elements of the Taliban. The response was a flood of derision and ridicule. His political opponents and commentators -- the majority of whom had never even been to the Hindu Kush -- went on about Beck's supposed naïveté.

At the time, one of the members of this choir of critics was Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, at the time a rising political star, and now Germany's defense minister. Guttenberg had sharp words for Beck, saying, for example, that he had never known "anyone who had met a level-headed member of the Taliban."

Unfortunately for Guttenberg, that little rhetorical flourish has backfired on him. Even back then there clearly were some moderate members of the Taliban. That included those that President Hamid Karzai was trying to get to join his government in order to better isolate extremists in the insurgent camp.

Beck might be surprised to learn that a German defense minister by the name of Guttenberg is now resurrecting his suggestion of talking to moderate elements of the Taliban. As Guttenberg said recently, "not every insurgent is of equal danger to Western society." And it's still an explosive suggestion -- but this time it might actually become German policy.

Of course, many suspect that Guttenberg's recommendation is also just a tactic for turning attention away from the Kunduz affair, which has him under fire for uttering alleged untruths about the Sept. 4 **German-ordered bombing** of two tanker trucks in Kunduz, Afghanistan -- an attack which killed up to 142 people, many of them civilians. That may very well be the case -- but is it in any way possible that he is seriously contemplating a change in strategy? Let's hope so -- because it's long overdue.

For the West, it is just as impossible to win the conflict in Afghanistan by military means as it was for the Soviets two decades ago. And it's highly unlikely that a political solution for the conflict can be found without involving the Taliban, or at least the moderate Taliban elements willing to negotiate. These sorts of elements exist in Kabul. They are centered around Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the former Taliban foreign minister, and Abdul Salam Saif, both of whom serve as intermediaries when President Karzai wants to confer with more hard-line elements.

Looking for an Exit Strategy

With his courageous and justified push, Guttenberg is drawing closer to the issue that will form the crux of debate in the coming months. That issue, of course, is that the West is looking for an exit strategy that will allow it to extricate itself from the Afghanistan quagmire as quickly as possible and with as little loss of face as possible.

In doing so, the international community will have to bid adieu to its much-flaunted sense of superiority as well as its claim that it wants to inculcate Western values and erect democratic beacons in a society that continues to be deeply rooted in patriarchal tribal structures.

The new generation of Taliban are the sons and grandsons of the mujahedeen, or holy warriors, drawn from the Pashtun tribes that the West first celebrated as the champions of freedom in their battle against the Soviets. And these also include Islamic fundamentalists, such as the still-feared warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Since the days of battling the Soviets, these people have barely changed their political or religious credo. The only really difference is that, this time around, instead of fighting the godless communists, they're fighting Western foreigners. As a result, Westerners have stopped calling them freedom fighters and now call them insurgents and terrorists instead.

It's worth taking a moment to ponder which side has been more dishonest. And it's also well worth taking a moment to contemplate who is more willing to suffer -- and who has more time.

One of the things that never changes about Afghan politics is that there are constantly shifting alliances and coalitions of one-time mortal enemies. It might be too difficult to imagine that extremists like Hekmatyar or even former Taliban leader Mullah Omar could soon be back in political office in Kabul. Indeed, it's much more likely that these two are exiled to Saudi Arabia, where they could hang out with their Wahhabi sponsors. Still, almost all other arrangements are conceivable as well -- as long as a large, traditional gathering of tribal elders, a so-called loya jirga, can appoint a government of national unity.

Sliding Back into a Conservative Islamic Regime

This government would first have to agree upon a schedule for the withdrawal of NATO troops, who would be replaced by peacekeepers drawn from Muslim countries. Likewise, this government would have to be able to guarantee to the West the one thing that it considers to be of paramount importance: namely, that Afghan territory would no longer present any type of threat to the rest of the world.

The fact is that al-Qaida no longer needs a place like the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where US satellites and drones can detect every mouse, to train would-be jihadis. Indeed, the recruiting pool for "Terror International" long ago spread into other Muslim states, everywhere from Malaysia to the Maghreb.

Afghanistan itself would most likely devolve once again into a conservative Islamic area. But the rigid Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia doesn't really seem to bother its allies in the West too much -- except, perhaps, when it occasionally expresses itself in the form of human rights violations.

What's more, the fact that you can actually speak with the Taliban and you can actually hammer out agreements on development projects is shown by the admirable example of Reinhard Erös, the German military physician whose persistence meant his "Kinderhilfe Afghanistan" ("Help for Afghan Children") project has been able to build schools for girls in the heart of Pashtun territory.

With his push for this policy, Guttenberg might help people realize two things. Firstly, that the Afghans must ultimately be allowed to decide their own fate; And, secondly, that they need to do this in the context of a system of government that reflects cultural traditions that are their own -- not ours.