More Crisis Prevention: Germany can do more to live up to its reputation as a “civilian power”

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Germany has come a long way since its first cautious participation in an international peace operation in 1992. Two decades on, more than 6,200 German soldiers, police and civilian experts are serving in peace missions. But there is room for improvement in the targeting and balancing of deployed capacities.

There is a yawning gap between ambition and reality in the field of crisis prevention. This impression may partly stem from the language of German foreign policy, where activities in this field are mostly described as “civilian crisis prevention”. Whilst this partly reflects economy of language – as the relevant documents speak of “civilian crisis prevention, conflict resolution and peace consolidation,” and thus explicitly cover the entire conflict cycle – the names of the structures created to implement them (interministerial steering group and advisory committee for “civilian crisis prevention”) clearly emphasize the aspect of prevention. But the most visible aspects of German foreign policy tend to focus more on resolving existing conflicts and post-conflict peacebuilding than on avoiding the problem in the first place.

Of course this state of affairs is by no means a purely German phenomenon. Neglect of crisis prevention is a worldwide phenomenon, as recent examples demonstrate. In Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, the border region between Sudan and South Sudan, eastern DR Congo and Mali active international conflict management only began after hostilities had escalated into violence costing thousands of lives – even though in some of these cases an international presence was already on the ground. Early intervention would have saved lives and preserved local infrastructure and social cohesion, as well as sparing increasingly hard-pressed international budgets.

While there is certainly nothing new in the idea that prevention makes more efficient, more economic and mostly also more consensual security policy than intervention, conflict prevention remains a concept that is discussed much more often than it is practiced. The explanation for this obvious contradiction lies in the political economy of prevention. In conflict management as elsewhere, addressing problems that are below the public radar is risky and mostly without reward. Success is uncertain, difficult to prove and not visible at home. Only failure makes headlines. So civilian and preventive peace work has a political acceptance problem – and an image problem.

That is why we repeatedly intervene at a late juncture in conflicts that have already turned violent, in spite of the fact that they had been predicted long beforehand and their causes were widely known. The current situation in Mali is a case in point: The conflict had been smoldering at least since early 2012, as the north declared secession and violent Islamist groups penetrated ever further south, but only when the capital Bamako was directly threatened did French forces intervene.

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1 This translation is based on an article first published in the May/June 2013 issue of “Internationale Politik” (IP).
2 About 150 German army paramedics were deployed to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC); Germany also participated in the UN Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) at the end of 1991.
5 “Thereby it is the priority goal to prevent the outbreak of violent conflicts in advance and thus to counteract escalation. Germany also contributes to resolving conflicts and dealing with their aftermath” (emphasis added). Translated from http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_D94D31DB0FB5A82334CBE95652D4115A/DE/Aussenpolitik/Friedenspolitik/Krisenpraevention/Grundlagen/Ueberblick_node.html, accessed March 22, 2013.
At an earlier point a wide range of international conflict management instruments would have been available. Applied quickly and creatively, preventive diplomacy and political mediation might have been successful. A comparable situation in neighboring Guinea in 2009/10 was defused in this manner. But unfortunately the international community’s engagement in Mali did not follow the Guinea template, and is much more reminiscent of the post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan.

The comprehensive approach

Because existing political instruments for prevention are not put into use, the military usually ends up occupying the most prominent place in both the German and the international crisis response toolbox. Of course, the threat or use of military force is necessary in certain situations, but the military often becomes the first choice because of its rapid availability, organizational prominence and consequent familiarity to the political elites. However – again not an original insight – military force is seldom sufficient on its own.

It is often only after the military “victory” that the true problems begin. A conventionally defeated adversary deserts the battlefield, withdraws to inaccessible redoubts and melds into the civilian population. From this new position they switch to asymmetric warfare. Where the caves of Tora Bora became world famous as a hiding place of the Afghan Taliban, the Adrar Mountains in Mali are now the bastion of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Alongside local knowledge these local “spoilers” also possess a much more valuable resource whose importance is often underestimated: time. From the very outset a peace operation is a, if rather slow, race against the clock. Sooner or later the acceptance of a foreign military presence that usually exists initially among local elites and the civilian population will inevitably disappear. The political will of the states supporting the peace operation will also wane, not least because of the considerable costs involved.

This race can only be won if the deeper causes of violence can be addressed through sustainable conflict transformation. Given that the causes will always be highly complex, locally specific and difficult for outsiders to comprehend, it is clear that they are too much for the military to tackle alone. No one knows this better than the military themselves. The armed forces certainly have a critical role to play in ensuring a (tolerably) secure environment, but they need support by other actors.

The German government’s Action Plan states: “An armed intervention cannot substitute civilian conflict response measures and the tackling of structural causes of crisis.” This need for coordination and cooperation is one aspect of the widely demanded “comprehensive approach” (which also features prominently in all relevant German government documents). This approach “seeks to direct civilian, police and military resources towards the shared objective of security,” thus naming the two other vital actors (alongside the central local partners).

International police deployments can ensure security in situations, such as violent demonstrations, for which the military lacks the requisite equipment and training. They can also build their local colleagues’ capacity to take over responsibility for security themselves. Police have therefore been part of most of the peace operations conducted since the end of the 1990s by the United Nations and various regional organizations. The European Union in particular has developed globally acknowledged capabilities, with a significant German contribution.⁹
Underrated, but ready and willing

The third ingredient, especially for a self-professed “civilian power”, is the civilian experts. Their responsibilities in peace operations are extraordinarily diverse, ranging from judges and prosecutors through political advisers and human rights monitors to experts for setting up independent media or reintegrating ex-combatants. They are responsible for laying the foundations for lasting peace, for example by establishing democratic institutions such as an independent judiciary or supporting the holding of elections. They may also conduct political mediation between hostile parties or serve as border monitors.

The growing specialization of posts advertised for international peace operations represents a particular challenge. Today, missions are looking for experienced, multilingual, interculturally sensitive lawyers, logistics experts and engineers. Finding such exceptionally versatile all-rounders is no easy task, convincing them to exchange a secure job in Germany for a dusty container in South Sudan harder still.

Despite their importance, civilian experts tend to remain out of the public eye, and sometimes also neglected by politicians. This is partly because their tasks are relatively unknown, but also because “civilian expert in peace missions” is not a profession in the same sense as soldier or police officer. Civilian experts, unlike their counterparts in uniform, long lacked stand-by capacities and accessible contact lists. But that state of affairs changed in 2002 with the founding of the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF) which gave Germany the capacity to implement the “comprehensive approach” in its national capacities.¹⁰

But does that actually happen? While Germany describes itself as a “civilian power”, the military option continues to dominate the public debate on international crisis management. Whereas the German defense minister demands a security dialogue including civil society, churches and other non-military actors, discussions reflected in the media concentrate on where and whether German soldiers should be deployed. This occurs because German politicians neither fully exploit the possibilities of the civilian instruments, nor effectively communicate them in public.

It’s all in the mix

The primacy of civilian conflict response asserted by German foreign policy thus demands a rebalancing of the lopsided relationship between Germany’s military and civilian contributions to international conflict management. And rebalancing means strengthening the civilian elements. Germany could then play a pioneering role, also and especially in the European context. As seven parliamentarians from all parties represented in the Bundestag recently demanded in a joint opinion piece on “More European Foreign Policy”: “Europe can and must be a power for peace; Europe’s peace-promoting abilities must be expanded and strengthened.”¹²

To avoid misunderstandings: there is no contradiction in a civilian power for peace possessing mission-capable armed forces. This is not a case of either/or, it is the mixture that is crucial. And Germany has all the ingredients to hand. In the field of civilian expertise it possesses an internationally renowned product in the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF). Its successes are measurable, with German civilian experts and leaders serving in more than forty multilateral peace missions. ZIF also trains and recruits election observers for international deployments, produces analyses and information products and works on the conceptual development of peace operations.

¹⁰ The founding in April 2010 of the German Bundestag subcommittee for civilian crisis prevention and integrated conflict management must also be mentioned as a positive development in this regard.
¹² Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, March 7, 2013. Autors: Reinhard Brandl (Christian Social Union), Agnieszka Brugger, Viola von Cramon (both Green Party), Bijan Djir-Sarai (Free Democratic Party), Roderich Kiesewetter (Christian Democratic Union), Lars Klingbeil (Social Democratic Party), Stefan Liebich (Left Party).
Europe as a “power for peace”

The situation after returning from a deployment also represents a great challenge to the “civilian veterans.” With the experience and skills of civilian returnees given too little credit by many German employers, one of the main political tasks is to make the significance of their work better known in order to ease their reintegration into the labor market.

Symbolic recognition of the contribution of German civilian experts is also important. The military has a long tradition of awarding decorations and medals, and the police followed suit some years ago. In 2012 the foreign ministry and ZIF introduced a special certificate of recognition for civilian experts, and in June 2013 soldiers, police and civilian experts will for the first time receive awards for their deployment at a joint ceremony attended by the responsible ministers. This recognition will underline the breadth of the German engagement in international peace operations and crisis management.

Yes, Germany is a “civilian power” – but with a lot of room for improvement. Preventive crisis management is still too rare, and the potential of the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU is far from exhausted. At this point Germany can and should deliver: at the national level and especially in the European context. The “civilian power” of Germany only makes sense in lockstep with the “peace power” of Europe.

ZIF’s pool of trained and motivated civilian experts ready for deployment represents a starting point, as multilateral organizations are urgently seeking such personnel for slim (and therefore low-cost) civilians-only mission formats.

But as in Berlin, unused capacities slumber in Brussels too. As the aforementioned group of seven noted: “The EU possesses a unique mix of different instruments for crisis management in the European neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the political will to use them promptly and consistently has often been lacking in the European capitals.” That is unfortunately true, but can be changed. The instruments are ready and waiting.

March 2013 | Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF) | Berlin, Germany | www.zif-berlin.org