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In Afghanistan, Germany is the Weakest Link

Josef Joffe

Germany is in the crosshairs of international terrorism," the country's interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, said last month. Too bad his boss, Chancellor Angela Merkel, isn't making his job any easier with her equivocal support for the war in Afghanistan.

The Institute of Terrorism Research and Response recently intercepted jihadist communications threatening an attack against Germany that would be "much more shocking than that of 9/11/2001." With the jihadi "chatter" against Berlin intensifying less than three weeks before general elections, the fear is that Islamists bent on driving NATO forces out of Afghanistan will "attack the supposedly weakest link in the chain of Western nations," as Mr. Schäuble's top official, August Harming, put it recently.

The mood in many NATO countries--including the U.S.-- has turned sour on the Afghan mission, but nowhere as much as in Germany, where the public was never sold on the war to begin with. About two-thirds of Germans want to pull out the country's 4,200 troops. This, despite the fact that the Bundeswehr's role is mostly non-combat-- a constant cause of irritation for their Anglo-Saxon allies, who are left to do most of the fighting and dying. A premature German pullout-- particularly if carried out in response to a terror attack-- would be a considerable political blow to the Alliance. It would also be a victory for al Qaeda and the Taliban, bringing them

closer to their goal of pushing NATO out of Afghanistan. Germans would not be safer for it.

Spain is a sobering case in point. Al Qaeda timed the 2004 Madrid train bombings three days before national elections. Socialist leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero was promptly swept into power on his promise to pull out of Iraq-- a promise he kept when he became prime minister. But Mr. Zapatero's election did not prevent jihadists from planning attacks-- foiled by Spanish antiterror squads-- against the country's supreme court and Real Madrid football stadium in the wake of the train bombings.

Jihadists are also well-entrenched in Germany, where intelligence services believe that dozens of graduates from terror camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Yemen-- many of them German converts to Islam--are now back home. A combination of good luck and good intelligence have prevented a number of terror attacks in recent years. Two Lebanese terrorists in 2006, for instance, planted suitcase bombs on German trains, which would have killed hundreds of travelers had the bombs failed to explode.

All of this argues for continued-- and strengthened-- German participation in Afghanistan, not only because Germans are as much in al Qaeda's crosshairs as Americans, but also because, as Mr. Harming understands, the perception of German softness makes it an

inviting target.

Yet Mrs. Merkel is only now making a belated case for Germany's continued role in Afghanistan, using the occasion of a U.S. air strike Friday against suspected Taliban fighters-- called in by a German commander, and possibly resulting in numerous civilian casualties-- to make her case. In parliament, Mrs. Merkel noted that the Bundeswehr's mission is a reaction to terrorism, not vice versa, and that "the consequences of non-action will be held against us in the same measure as the consequences of action."

That's right. Which makes it all the more odd that the Chancellor should also be reiterating calls for an internationally coordinated "transition period," which suggests a timetable for withdrawal. This kind of equivocation may be what Mrs. Merkel needs, politically, as she faces voters in national elections later this month. It has escaped nobody's notice in Germany that the Left Party, the only strictly antiwar party in the country, saw its support tick upward by four percentage points since Friday's air strike, to as high as 14% in one poll. But the Chancellor also shoulders larger responsibilities than her own political future, the most important of which is the safety and security of Germans. Mixed messages about the Bundeswehr's future in Afghanistan are not the way to meet them.

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