

THE AFGHANISTAN CHALLENGE: HARD REALITIES AND STRATEGIC CHOICES

HANS-GEORG EHRHART AND CHARLES C. PENTLAND, EDITORS
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REVIEW BY DUANE BRATT*

The Afghanistan Challenge brings together academics and practitioners (soldiers, journalists, diplomats) from Germany and Canada. Its origins lie in a December 2007 conference in Hamburg. Part one assesses different aspects of the Afghanistan mission: a mid-term report card of the Bonn Agreement and the Afghanistan Compact by Citha D. Maass; the Afghan tradition of warlords is described by Conrad Schetter and Rainer Glassner; Florian P. Kühn uses a political economy approach to describe the Afghan “rentier” state; Lara Olson and Andrea Charron examine NGOs efforts at development; the security situation is assessed by Mihai P. Carp; and there are two chapters on the influence of Afghanistan’s neighbours, Pakistan (Christian Wagner) and Iran (Janet Kursawe). Hans-Georg Ehrhart and Roland Kaestner conclude this first section by providing a strategic assessment of the mission. They evaluate the current security, governance, and development situations, and looking forward, offer a set of policy options. Ehrhart and Kaestner make five recommendations: “more modest strategic objectives; “Afghanisation” of security; decentralization of governance structures; more local administration of development assistance; and more involvement of regional actors in the management of the Afghan conflict” (6).

Part two examines the differing Canadian and German “perceptions, debates, and strategies” of the Afghanistan mission (6). Chapters include: Kim Richard Nossal’s discussion of Canada’s decision to end its military role by December 2011; the effect of Afghanistan on German-Canadian bilateral relations, by David G. Haglund; an evaluation of Canada’s “whole of government” approach, by Mike Capstick; Christoph Reuter describes the artificiality of dividing Afghan combatants into good guys and bad guys; and two discussions on security sector reform from a Canadian (David M. Law) and then a German (Michael Brzoska) perspective. Surprisingly, there is neither a concluding chapter to part two, nor a final conclusion to the book. Even the introduction does not attempt to identify any overarching themes or divisions between the authors; instead it provides thumbnail sketches of each chapter and offers a two-page update on the Afghan mission.

Canada and Germany, despite being two of the largest contributors to the NATO mission, have taken on starkly different roles in Afghanistan. The Canadians, operating in the dangerous southern region, have engaged the Taliban in firefights and hunted down insurgents. As a consequence, Canadians have suffered disproportionate casualty rates, mostly from improvised explosion devices, when compared with the other participating countries. This has led many Canadian commentators, including the authors of the 2007 Manley Report, to complain about the burden sharing of its European, especially Germany,

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allies. Meanwhile the Germans, operating in the more relatively peaceful north, have focused on development efforts. Their military contingent, while nominally large, has been restricted by Berlin from performing more dangerous tasks. For their part, German commentators have been critical of the emphasis on fighting, as opposed to reconstruction, by the Americans, British, and Canadians. The back cover advertising for *The Afghanistan Challenge* promises a sustained evaluation of these contrasting views of the Afghan mission.

Unfortunately, readers expecting a sustained analysis of this Canadian-German policy debate have been misled. The first half of the book does not even try, as it simply describes the current situation in Afghanistan. The second half, which was intended to compare Canadian and German policy, fails to deliver. Even the competing chapters on security sector reform do not offer a comparison: Law focuses solely on Canada and Brzoska on Germany. Adding insult to injury, when Brzoska does offer a comparison on Germany's approach to police training it is with the United States. The absence of a Canadian-German comparison is even more surprising, because many of the chapters (Olson and Charron, Carp, Capstick, Law) specifically address the security vs. development dynamic, which is at the heart of the Canadian-German debate. Only Haglund's brief chapter explicitly compares Canadian-German perceptions and policy towards the Afghan mission. Despite the duality of the book's authors, Haglund's contribution is not matched by a German writer offering the perspective from the other side of the Atlantic.

There is still some value in the book as it does provide a good overview of the Afghan mission. Maass successfully compiles quantitative evaluation of the security, governance, and development benchmarks contained in the Afghanistan Compact. Similarly strong was Kursawe's chapter showing how Iran publicly supports the Karzai government, but behind the scenes it is trying to destabilize the country in order to keep Afghanistan weak, and to thwart the United States. Still, there remain further weaknesses. The chapter by Ehrhart and Kaestner largely duplicates what Maass had written. In addition, Wagner's chapter on Pakistan was more about its relationship with India and the disputed Kashmir territory, than the battle with Taliban insurgents along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Finally, there was no specific chapter on United States policy in Afghanistan. How could the editors allow the leader of the Afghan mission to be omitted?

If you want a comprehensive book on the Afghan mission, this is one is not bad, although there are better choices. If you want a comparative book on Canadian-German strategies towards Afghanistan, it is still to be written.
