



BONN INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CONVERSION

B · I · C · C

BONN INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CONVERSION • INTERNATIONALES KONVERSIONSZENTRUM BONN



Putting the cart before the horse:

AWACs and fundamental
policy objectives in
Afghanistan

POLICY PAPER

Putting the cart before the horse:

AWACs and Fundamental Policy Objectives in Afghanistan

Policy Paper

Dr. Michael Ashkenazi
BICC, August 2008

In recent months, NATO has approached member states with a request to redeploy several AWACs (Airborne Warning and Control) planes, currently based in Geilenkirchen, Germany, in support of air operations in Afghanistan. BICC, building on previous experience in Afghanistan, addresses two issues in this Concept Paper:

1. An assessment of the need for NATO AWACs deployment in Afghanistan.
2. The need to think about the framework within which the discussion about AWACs deployment can be carried out.

In principle, our argument is that while the question of deploying AWACs is important, a prerequisite to answering this question is a clear Afghanistan strategy with derived concrete objectives. Without such a strategy, decisions about deploying AWACs or other German forces cannot be made sensibly.

Background

The war on terror in Afghanistan has been proceeding for the past six years, since the 2002 defeat of the Taliban government. Taliban (and, presumably, al Qaeda) holdouts have been waging a terror/guerilla campaign, mainly in Pashtun areas to the Southeast.

Coalition forces are divided between ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) responsible for stabilization and security throughout 'peaceful' Afghanistan (Kabul, the north, and parts of western Afghanistan), and OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom), which is attempting to suppress Taliban resurgence. Commanders in Afghanistan have been calling for more support and more troops in order to finish the war successfully. In the recent twelve months, a number of NATO nations have responded to the call by contributing air assets, including fighter bombers, to prosecute the war.

Germany has supported the war in Afghanistan largely under ISAF, in the form of two Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Kunduz and Badakhshan, heavy participation in the Multinational Brigade in Kabul, and air assets.

German air assets are based in Mazar-i-Sharif, in the supposedly peaceful North of the country. They include a squadron of Tornado fighters used for aerial reconnaissance, and a squadron of 9 heavy helicopters.

AWACs

The AWACs (Airborne Early Warning and Control) requested are US-built planes intended to:

- Identify and track multiple aircraft to a range of about 400km (250NM);
- Coordinate air-traffic control between friendly aircraft;
- Serve as a flying command post for aerial war;
- Serve as a relay between friendly air assets in the air and on the ground;
- Provide electronic intelligence about enemy airborne assets.

AWACs measurably increase the effectiveness and lethality of attack craft, improve airborne safety and control. AWACs cannot assist much in pinpointing targets on the ground, nor in distinguishing ground-based friends from foes. Use of AWACs *may* help increase accuracy of bombing operations, though much of that is dependent on pilot skills.

NATO has purchased 17 AWACs, which are currently based in Geilenkirchen, Germany, and are heavily supported in personnel and logistics by the German Airforce. NATO is contemplating either purchasing (from the United States) or developing its own Airborne Ground Surveillance (AGS) aircraft. These craft are intended to provide real-time command, control, communication and intelligence assets for land warfare, similar to what the AWACs do for air warfare.

The Technical Issues: AWACs and Coalition Air Assets in Afghanistan

Technically speaking, AWACs can serve two significant functions in Afghanistan: Air-traffic control and airborne ground attack control.

Air-traffic control. Afghan airspace is relatively crowded, requiring a high degree of air-traffic control. Five major airports and additional smaller strips provide air services. In addition to purely military flights, there are also flights operated in support of the military by civilian contractors. Five civilian companies are involved, and their activities have already led to at least one fatal accident.¹ International flights fly into Kabul, and the poor state of Kabul's air control, which must contend with both civilian and military traffic is a safety concern.

Ground attack. The number of ground attacks by coalition aircraft has increased significantly, and is due to increase still further. The attacks are carried out by fighter aircraft flying out of Afghan and occasionally other airspaces (mainly for larger strategic bombers). All of these require coordination in the air, and, more importantly, help on identifying targets, IFF (Identify Friend/Foe), and post-bombing assessment. AWACs are designed to control and provide intelligence on aircraft in the air. They are useless for the other two roles since they cannot distinguish ground targets.

Some Unspoken Considerations

At least two other *technical* considerations must be kept in mind:

- AWACs can be used to gather airborne intelligence on neighboring countries, most notably Iran, but also Pakistan, China (which maintains strong ties with the Pakistan air force) and possibly Russian allies in Central Asia.
- Using AWACs in Afghanistan represents an opportunity for NATO air forces to train, under near-war conditions, in inter-forces cooperation and coordination using AWACs. From the military planner's viewpoint, this has the advantage that their use is paid for out of an emergency, rather than a training budget.

Summary

1. On the face of it, the major (and perhaps, only) benefit of deploying AWACs in Afghanistan is to improve flight safety and coordination for Coalition (ISAF and OEF) and other aircraft, civilian included, flying in Afghan airspace.
2. In the absence of a Taliban air force, AWACs have severely limited capabilities to affect the ground war directly (except for point 1)
3. Other considerations may well be assisting the drive to request NATO AWACs use.

¹ "2004 Crash in Afghanistan Highlights Gaps in U.S. Control Over Flights" *New York Times*, 28 May 2007. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/28/washington/28crash.html?pagewanted=all>.

German Diplomatic Aims and the AWACs Issue

Pressure by the German public has, so far, limited German direct involvement with OEF (with the exception of some special forces troops²). German contributions to Afghanistan have consisted of supporting ISAF in 'safe' provinces to the north. A great deal of pressure has been exerted by the United States, most recently in presidential hopeful Obama's call for more input from Germany. The request for AWACs can be seen in this light. However, other considerations need to be kept in mind.

The air war in Afghanistan has included bombings, with HE (High Explosives), cluster bombs (in the past) and, more recently, thermobaric bombs³. Cluster bombs are in the process of being banned by treaty, and thermobaric bombs are considered inhumane by many. It is not certain to what degree German troops flying or supporting AWACs will be considered complicit in using these weapons (even if used by other forces, and only supported by NATO AWACs).

The demand for the use of German-based NATO AWACs can also be interpreted as a gambit, whose actual aims are more complex. These varied scenarios are not necessarily exclusive. One scenario may be that their use is intended to prepare the ground for budgetary requests, and deployment of NATO AGS (Airborne Ground Control) aircraft⁴ in Afghanistan. AGS, whether the planned NATO variant or the existing US JSTARS have many weaknesses in the Afghan war (they cannot, for instance, easily identify individuals or groups of individuals, though they can easily identify trucks). Another scenario could be that the reluctance to support the AWACs deployment request is used as a lever to pressure for more German ground involvement. The *single major demand by all coalition commanders is for more ground troops in major conflict provinces*.

Critically, the request once again raises a question that has not been discussed fully, and, in fact, has generally been avoided in the technical exigencies of the war in Afghanistan. This question, one every field commander should ask, and from which answers to the AWACs question should be derived, has not been addressed in sufficient clarity, depth, or skepticism: the 'final state' desired in Afghanistan.

Summary

The request for AWACs, may be something of a sideshow or a gambit. There are military, budgetary, and legal ambiguities which imply that the request can be exploited as the opening of a broader campaign to involve Germany more deeply in an unpopular distant war.

² In fact, the extensive use of special forces troops from many nations not otherwise involved in OEF leads one to suspect that Afghanistan is viewed, at least partly, by some commanders as an excellent 'live' training ground to hone the skills of their special troops. Special forces troops are notoriously restive, and letting, for example, German and Danish special forces troops loose in Afghanistan has all the advantages of keeping them occupied, honing their skills, ensuring they stay in their enlistment, and budgeting their training under operations. The risk of getting killed in Afghanistan is less of a deterrent to most such troops than a challenge.

³ Richard Norton-Taylor, "Army gets new 'enhanced blast' weapon to fight Taliban." *Guardian*, 23 August 2007. Available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/aug/23/afghanistan.world>>.

⁴ AGS are the ground forces equivalent of AWACs. They are intended to provide targeting, Friend/Foe identification, and command, control, communication and Intelligence for ground forces, thus enhancing their lethality and effectiveness. NATO is in the midst of a multi-billion US dollar procurement program to equip itself with AGS.

Policy Issues

The AWACs request raises a far more important, and far more fundamental issue: What are we trying to achieve in Afghanistan? Even if we all support the so-called 'War on Terror' as an agreed-upon good, it does not, in itself, represent a benefit to Afghanistan (ignoring the issue that not all involved agree that this is necessarily a 'war' nor that its object is necessarily 'terror'). Some potential conceptual frames for engaging in war in Afghanistan are discussed briefly below.

Democratization?

The Karzai government took shape as a projection of somewhat simplistic assumptions about governance and democracy by the Allies, most notably the United States. The governance system in Afghanistan was designed to replicate a 'democracy' that was familiar to the United States, less so to its allies (which use different variants of democracy), and completely alien to the vast mass of Afghans who are supposed to exercise this democracy in practice.

Three intersecting issues structure Afghan responses to governance, and must at all times be kept in mind:

Afghan traditional governance. A blend of grassroots consultation (which does *not* mean democracy) restricted, for instance, to 'respectable' adult male members of a community, with accepted authoritarian leadership which uses a mix of conspicuous consumption and naked force to govern.

Ethnicity. Four major groups—Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek—and numerous smaller ones have divergent interests, governance traditions, and cross-border relations.

Religion. Both Sunni and Shi'a Islam, which, among other things, can be interpreted to mean support for neighboring regimes (e.g. Iran), to oppose gender equality, and to restrict or redirect governance, economic, and associative patterns in Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and its neighbors.

Let's look at the high levels of corruption in Afghanistan as an example: A political leader leads by virtue of providing hospitality to his followers in acts of conspicuous public consumption, by offering alms as a religious duty, and by supporting his co-ethnics, who are the base of his power. For all these, he needs resources, and therefore *any* government appointment is *primarily* seen as a means towards these different, but mutually-supporting aims. Implication? For a leader, even a 'pro-democracy' leader to stay in power he *must* reward his followers, and is virtually forced into corruption.

Is 'democratization' the end-state desired in Afghanistan? If this is the case, some decision must be made as to what is meant here:

- Western style democracy is a non-starter, will likely take a century or more to achieve, and will require restructuring the whole of Afghan society.
- An Afghan-style democracy (whatever that means) will require abandoning some treasured assumptions Westerners hold about democracy, including 'one man—one vote' (women would probably not even be in the running) and acceptance of practices Europeans and Americans would not tolerate at home.

Defeating the Taliban?

An alternative goal might be to defeat the Taliban. This of course poses an empirical problem. What does 'defeat' mean?

The Taliban are largely a Pashtun movement. They are religiously and ethnically bigoted. They oppose the gender equality principles that are becoming enshrined in Western socio-political thought. They are clearly non-democratic in principle, and in fact view force as a legitimate and even necessary political and social tool. *In this they are no different from most Afghan political groups.* This is something the Western world needs to face: Afghan socio-political systems will not, and cannot be mirror images of Western pluralistic-democratic ones.

Conceivably, most Taliban leaders (alQuaida in Afghanistan is now little more than a Taliban adjunct) could be killed, and their sources of supply dismantled. This will not bring about a democratic, gendered, fair, peaceful Afghanistan. Moreover, it is not clear that this is what is meant by 'defeat', since a new generation, fueled by poverty, religion, injustice, and ethnic and power interests is likely to rise again. To add to the problem, the power of many regional leaders, and the variety of ethnic differences would bring about similar insurgencies elsewhere.

The Absence of an Afghanistan Strategy

The use of AWACs for traffic control purposes, illustrates the poverty of Coalition strategy in Afghanistan: Coalition forces leaders *invest far less in improving basic conditions in Afghanistan than they do in prosecuting 'their' war.* It also demonstrates a phenomenon, which BICC has documented from fieldwork (as have others): Coalition leaders and executives on the ground *do not appear to trust the ability of Afghans to run their own affairs.*

The AWACs case illustrates this clearly: Efforts to improve Afghan air traffic control have been in place since 2002.⁵ For Afghanistan to be successful industrially and economically, this is a must. Yet the AWACs request is in no way related to investment in improving the traffic control situation, which is almost as neglected as before. Similar absences of strategy (and failures of execution) can be seen in developing the Afghan National Police, infrastructure, and the heavy-handed emphasis on the misguided and destructive 'War on Drugs'.

Analytical Conclusions

1. NATO AWACs *will* improve a dire air traffic control situation in Afghan airspace.
2. AWACs *may* assist in routing fighter aircraft in bombing runs, but are unsuitable for other activities in the aerial bombing campaign. They cannot, however, solve the major problem of collateral damage of civilians.
3. German troops manning or supporting NATO AWACs *may be* involved in the use of weapons (cluster munitions and thermobaric weapons), which are viewed by many as inhumane or banned.

⁵ CASA report from web//REF//

4. Politically, the request for NATO AWACs *may*:
 - Serve as an opening wedge for further requests for frontline support by German troops;
 - If turned down, serve as the basis for a compensatory demand for ground troop or other frontline involvement;
 - If turned down, serve as the basis for requesting funding for AGS aircraft.
5. Most critically, the AWACs request *highlights the need* for an agreed-on, defined, empirical set of clear objectives for the war in Afghanistan, which cannot be divorced from the *developmental* and *political* objectives there.

Policy Implications

1. The AWACs request must be carefully scrutinized, and its relationship with the issues highlighted in the conclusions above carefully defined and coordinated. These include the uses the aircraft will be put to, the legal status of the munitions used, and the question of AGS.
2. It is not clear under which mandate the AWACs will operate, ISAF, OEF, or some other legal framework. This will affect the use and the consequences. For example, if the AWACs are under the ISAF mandate, they can legitimately be used in support of Afghanistan's air control program. It appears to us that in such a case, a rider needs to be attached in support of developing Afghanistan's indigenous air control capacity.
3. Germany should address the issue of the end goals in Afghanistan *without regard to political or ideological polemics*. These end goals must include concrete, achievable objectives in the realm of:
 - A viable Afghan political system which, even if not fully democratic in the Western European sense of the word, must still adhere to acceptable humanitarian and expressive bottom-lines.
 - Undertakings, by the Afghan government (supported if necessary by financial and other *committed* assistance by Coalition members) to achieve milestones in civilian infrastructure, low corruption, and political participation.
 - Ensuring security for all Afghans via reform of the security system, most notably the police and judiciary, *and providing resources for such achievements*.
 - The operatively-defined military end-point to be secured by OEF action and the means to achieve that.
4. The Coalition's and Germany's political leadership must ensure that actions undertaken by any Afghan government in pursuit of these (and other) concrete objectives will be supported politically and financially, *and* that actions which manifestly *do not support* these goals are penalized financially and politically.