

GERMANY: Beyond the Afghanistan disaster, a migration debate might loom

Amid Berlin's badly delayed evacuation mission for Afghanistan, centrist parties seem to have decided that looking ill-prepared is preferable to a conversation about Germany's foreign and migration policies of the last decades. In a somewhat nonchalant demeanor, Chancellor Angela Merkel pointed at "wrong assessments" regarding the changing situation on the ground in Afghanistan. Likewise, Foreign Affairs Minister Heiko Maas spoke of a collective failure to anticipate events correctly. But as widely reported, the German embassy in Kabul, for instance, had kept Berlin abreast of the rapid progress made by the insurgents ever since the American retreat. It is, therefore, an at least questionable claim that nobody in Germany foresaw the quick collapse of the Afghan government.

Instead, at least part of the explanation for the failure to act on the reports and plan an effective rescue mission is political. Such preparations would have required proactive direction and political ownership. These qualities have become relatively rare in Berlin during the 16 years of Angela Merkel's chancellorship. Moreover, it would have involved dealing with politically difficult issues such as a painful defeat for the liberal interventionist agenda backed consistently by all major parties and most public commentators over the last three decades, as well as the consequences potentially looming on the migration front. On such uncomfortable questions, the incentives for proactive political leadership were non-existent for senior decision-makers.

Among the parties currently represented in the Bundestag, only two could credibly claim limited responsibility for the Afghanistan disaster. The first is the post-communist Left Party which has consistently voted against military engagements abroad (a key reason for the pro-interventionist Greens and the Social Democrats to rule out a potential "red-red-green" coalition). The second party is the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), represented in the Bundestag only since 2017.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the as the main challenger party, the Greens have largely been mirroring the government's focus on organizational failures. Chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock has limited herself to criticizing the government's lack of an evacuation strategy – despite (or rather, given) the fact that the Bundestag election is now less than six weeks away. The AfD, meanwhile, surprised many by calling for Germany to offer asylum to Afghan personnel who worked at German military and diplomatic presences. But this move is primarily aimed at highlighting the collective failure of the German political center in Afghanistan over the last two decades. It will not translate into the AfD welcoming Afghan refugees and migrants, on the contrary.

When (and, given the delay to the rescue operation, if) former Afghan personnel will have been received in Germany, the AfD will likely switch to accusing the political center of risking yet another uncoordinated migration wave, as back in 2015. Commentators have been quick to point out that such a crisis is unlikely to materialize this time, given border closures along the route. But in the remaining weeks of the campaign, the AfD might still attempt to criticize the political center for trying to dodge the uncomfortable debate about a potential crisis. The mere prediction that a new migration wave will not materialize

Carsten Nickel

Deputy Director of Research
+44 20 7186 8873
carsten.nickel@teneo.com

may not be enough to prevent political debate – especially following the government’s own claims regarding its failure to anticipate events in Afghanistan correctly.

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Carsten Nickel
Deputy Director of Research
+44 20 7186 8873
carsten.nickel@teneo.com

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