

The Bundeswehr reform – what does Germany need a professional army for?

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On 18 May the German defence minister, Thomas de Maizière presented a new document issued by the Ministry of Defence, entitled “Defence Policy Guidelines”, and the main premises of the reform of Bundeswehr, which represents another stage in the transformation process of the German army ongoing since 2000. The reform is aimed at professionalising the Bundeswehr and developing its expeditionary capacities and at the same time reducing the number of armed forces personnel and making savings. According to the Ministry of Defence, Germany should become more involved in foreign military operations in order to consolidate Germany's position in the world, in relations with its NATO allies and the EU. While making decisions to send the army on overseas missions, German interests should be taken into account to a larger extent than at present. The position of the Ministry of Defence is important but one of many stances in the discussion over German security policy and the Bundeswehr's role in it, including decisions where, when and in what operations the army should participate.

The context of the reform and the new defence policy guidelines

The present reform is another stage in the transformation of the Bundeswehr, which consists in switching from an army focused on defending German territory to an expeditionary army that participates in foreign operations. The transformation has been ongoing since the end of the 1990s and has been initiated, among other factors, thanks to the conclusions drawn from Bundeswehr's involvement in operations in the Balkans and the analysis of asymmetrical threats to Germany's security (including the consequences of collapsing countries, combating international terrorism, threats posed to trading routes etc.). As shown by the Bundeswehr's experiences during the operation in Afghanistan, the transformation of the German army to date has not brought the expected results. The Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan revealed the ill-adjustment of the army to performing irregular actions (in soldiers' preparedness, equipment and partly command of operations). In summer 2010 the economic crisis and budget cuts became a pretext for putting forward the concept of the reform aimed in part at reducing the number of army personnel, orders for arms and an earlier withdrawal of older military equipment (in 2011-2015 the Ministry of Defence plans to save EUR 8.3 billion). The reform's essence lay in a profound change aiming at professionalising the Bundeswehr and increasing its expedition capacities. The

unexpected resignation of Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU), who initiated the current step of the transformation of the army, in March this year prolonged the decision making process but did not change the orientation the reform.

Under Guttenberg's supervision, in the Ministry of Defence work has been launched on a new strategic document intended to set the objectives and long-term interests of German security and defence policy and to define the role and tasks of the Bundeswehr. "Defence policy guidelines" and more detailed white papers geared towards public opinion are the main documents in Germany that define the country's security and defence policy and the Bundeswehr's role and mission, as in Germany there are no governmental strategies of national security. In 2003 the Ministry of Defence issued the penultimate guidelines which formed the basis for the reform of the Bundeswehr initiated by the then defence minister, Peter Struck (SPD).

New guidelines for security policy and the Bundeswehr's role according to the Ministry of Defence

Under current guidelines the Ministry of Defence still assesses an armed attack on German territory as quite unlikely and focuses on the analysis of asymmetrical threats while broadly defining the notion of Germany's security and interests (see Appendix 1). According to the guidelines, Germany's interests result from its location in the centre of Europe, its international political and economic interdependencies and – a new element – the German economy's dependence on the stable supply of natural resources. The UN, NATO and the EU remain the organisations within which Germany implements its policy of security and defence with the use of military force – in line with the Constitution and the verdict of the Federal Constitutional Court of 1994 which enable the Bundeswehr to run foreign operations. The Bundeswehr above all is set to defend the country and to support its NATO allies, to prevent international crises and conflicts and manage them and participate in military operations (Appendix 2).

The guidelines feature quite contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is Germany's growing assertiveness towards its allies. For the first time a document of this type states that decisions whether Germany should or should not participate in foreign (allied) military operations should be in the future considered from the angle of German interests. Furthermore, such decisions should be better advocated in the international arena so that German policy is not so severely criticised as it was the case of Germany's position on the intervention in Libya. On the other hand, it still seems important for the Ministry of Defence to strengthen trans-Atlantic and European partnership and security. If the foreseen political costs of Germany's refusal to take part in an allied operation were too high, the Bundeswehr should participate in such missions even despite the lack of their direct link with German interests. It also appears that these are the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the negative consequences on Germany's position at NATO after the Libyan crisis. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence is calling for a heightening of Germany's international profile by active involvement in crisis and conflict management also with the use of military force.

The debate over the Bundeswehr's involvement in foreign missions continues

The debate over the Bundeswehr's deployment overseas has been ongoing in the German political elite for over ten years. It is likely to be intensified by the next stage of the army's reform introduced now and recent discussions about the military intervention in Libya and Germany's stance on this. The Bundeswehr's more frequent involvement in foreign operations is being championed mainly by Christian Democratic circles as they aim to strengthen Germany's position in the world and in relations with its NATO and EU allies and a more offensive pressing for the realisation of German interests. Part of the Green party and SPD environment also believe that Germany's commitment – also in the military dimension – to global security policy should be larger. However, they justify it by the necessity of increasing Germany's involvement in stabilising conflicts and crises in the world within the framework of UN peace-keeping and stabilisation missions. Another section of the political elite argues that due to a dense network of international economic interdependencies, it is not in Germany's interests to use military force and that political and economic diplomacy are sufficient to secure German interests. In this context the reform and new guidelines of the Ministry of Defence constitute an important element of the discussion about German security policy.

After the reform the Bundeswehr will become an army largely oriented towards foreign operations, with increased expeditionary and intervention capacities, which is the result of the modifications introduced since the end of the 1990s. The question however remains open as to where, when and in what overseas operations it will take part as it is still the Bundestag that decides about the Bundeswehr's involvement in foreign missions. In German political culture, so far each government has deemed it necessary to reach a political consensus in parliament above party divisions in order to make such decisions. Reaching this consensus is also difficult due to the attitude of German society which is averse to German military involvement abroad. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the reform will become a vehicle for strategic and political changes which will enable the government to use the army more easily as an important element of foreign and security policies.

Appendix 1

The premises of the reform of the Bundeswehr and the Ministry of Defence

The reform is set to improve preparedness of the German armed forces for combating asymmetrical threats and undertaking actions of varied intensity. Despite the reduction in army personnel from 250,000 to 170,000-185,000 soldiers, the Ministry of Defence is determined to increase the possibilities of deploying the Bundeswehr outside the country from the current 7,000 to approximately 10,000 soldiers. The armed forces will consist of approximately 170,000 contracted and professional soldiers and an unspecified number (from 5,000 to 15,000) of volunteer soldiers that serve from 12 to 23 months. The earlier decision about a total suspension of conscription from 1 July 2011 has been upheld. Changes have been announced in the training system and command structures (duplicating command headquarters will be scrapped) and in the organisation of the armed services. Furthermore, the Ministry of Defence will be reorganised – the number of departments and personnel will be reduced and current command headquarters will be incorporated into Bundeswehr structures. The ministry will focus on strategic and political tasks. The competences of the Bundeswehr's General Inspector will be expanded and his rank elevated

to the rank of the commander of the armed forces who has the right to give orders to commanders of the armed services and the military aide to the federal government. The equipment purchase policy will be revised as it does not comply with the army's current needs.

Appendix 2

The premises of the political and defence guidelines

Risks and threats to Germany's security: the consequences of failed and failing states, international terrorism, threats to critical and information infrastructure, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change and related phenomena (migrations, lack of access to water etc.), threats to the free access to trade routes and the supply of raw materials.

The objectives of German security policy: the security and protection of German citizens, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Germany and its allies, the fulfilment of international responsibilities.

The interests of German security policy: preventing, mitigating and managing crises and conflicts that endanger the security of Germany and its allies, advocating and implementing positions on foreign and security policy in an assertive and credible way, strengthening transatlantic and European security and partnership, advocating the universality of human rights and principles of democracy, facilitating free and unrestricted world trade as well as free access to the high seas and to natural resources.

The Bundeswehr's mission: the protection of Germany and its citizens, securing Germany's capability to act in the field of foreign policy, contributing to the defence of allies, contributing to stability and partnership at an international level, supporting multinational cooperation and European integration.

The Bundeswehr's tasks: territorial defence as collective defence within NATO, the prevention of international conflicts and crisis management, including countering international terrorism, participation in military tasks within the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, homeland security contributions, rescue and evacuation operations, partnership and cooperation as a part of multinational integration and global security cooperation, humanitarian relief abroad.