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# Horizon of ambition: the military strategy and capability profile of the Bundeswehr

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On 22 April, Germany's Ministry of Defence published a public summary of two classified documents: the Military Strategy and the Bundeswehr Capability Profile. The first outlines Germany's security environment, the nature of contemporary conflicts, and the objectives and priorities of the Bundeswehr. The second sets targets for developing military capabilities.

These documents have been produced for the first time in the history of a unified Germany. Until now, the Bundeswehr Concept, last updated in 2018, served as the principal public strategy, setting out guidelines for the planning and modernisation of the Bundeswehr. The Military Strategy and the Capability Profile, the full versions of which remain classified, are derived primarily from NATO's defence planning process that outline a significant expansion of capability targets for European allies, including Germany, agreed at the 2025 NATO summit in the Hague. This was accompanied by a commitment to allocate 3.5% of GDP to defence and a further 1.5% to defence-related initiatives. In Germany, this has translated into a significant increase in both current and planned defence spending following exemption from the so-called debt brake: expenditure totalled €86 billion in 2025, with a planned increase to €108 billion in 2026, €120 billion in 2027, €136 billion in 2028, and €152 billion in 2029. At the same time, the modernisation of the Bundeswehr has accelerated, accompanied by reforms to military service and the reserve system.

The Military Strategy and the Capability Profile set out the ambitious goal for the Bundeswehr to develop the strongest conventional army in Europe. However, significant changes in terms of expanding its size and capabilities are not expected until after 2029, following the next parliamentary elections. On the one hand, this is understandable, given the limited scope for effecting rapid, large-scale changes in both recruitment and the procurement and deployment of new weapons and military equipment. However, the burden of implementing and financing these ambitious plans will fall on future governments. Efforts to reform and modernise the Bundeswehr have traditionally been hampered by excessive bureaucracy, which impedes rapid change, the limited attractiveness of military service, and protracted procurement timelines in the German defence industry, which is only beginning to expand its production capacity.

**Commentary**

- **The Military Strategy identifies Russia as the greatest direct threat to the security of Germany and the Euro-Atlantic area.** Russia's objective is to weaken the cohesion of NATO, achieve a strategic decoupling of the United States and Europe, and ultimately bring about the failure of the Alliance. Moscow also seeks to expand its sphere of influence to the Baltic states, Central Europe, and the eastern part of the Balkans. To advance these ambitions, Russia engages in actions below the threshold of war, such as hybrid attacks in NATO countries, including Germany. At the same time, Russia has an interest in creating a multi-faceted dilemma in this region in order to tie down US forces in the Indo-Pacific.
- **The German Ministry of Defence has drawn lessons from the war in Ukraine regarding the nature of future warfare.** According to its assessment, future armed conflict will blur the boundaries between military operations against armed forces and those targeting civilian populations, as well as between external and internal security. Future wars will be characterised by the transparency of military activities, long-range precision strikes, the growing autonomy and automation of the battlefield, and the predominance of lower-cost, quantitative solutions over more expensive, high-end systems. In response, Germany aims to pursue a comprehensive defence approach, which encompasses strengthening societal resilience and civil-military cooperation, ensuring continuous adaptation and innovation, securing information and intelligence superiority, developing multi-domain operational capabilities, expanding long-range strike capacity, strengthening air defence, increasing operational tempo, and integrating high-end technologies with lower-cost, scalable solutions.
- **In light of Washington's reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific, Germany recognises the need for itself and other allies to assume greater responsibility for defence and deterrence within NATO, emphasising its strategic role in the conventional domain.** It intends to focus on national and collective defence, countering hybrid threats, ensuring stability in Europe and its southern neighbourhood, and protecting maritime and transport routes. Germany views its role as that of an ally that enhances cohesion between Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, while maintaining strong ties with the United States. It also seeks to integrate the capabilities of smaller allies. Nearly all of the Bundeswehr's operational forces are subordinated to NATO's defence plans.
- **The Bundeswehr Capability Profile echoes the Merz government's narrative of building the strongest conventional army in Europe, a process expected to unfold in three stages.** By 2029, the aim is to expand deterrence and defence capabilities as rapidly as possible using available resources. Between 2029 and approximately 2035, these capabilities are expected to increase significantly as currently procured weapons and military equipment are deployed. This is intended to enable Germany to assume a European leadership role within the Alliance. Between 2035 and approximately 2039, the Bundeswehr is expected to become the most technologically advanced conventional army in Europe. However, achieving this objective will depend on sustaining the pace of growth in defence spending following the 2029 parliamentary elections.
- **The Bundeswehr will develop capability targets set within NATO's defence planning process, alongside national capabilities that Germany seeks to acquire.** The latter area includes long-range precision strike missile systems and air defence; information

superiority and an increased speed of information exchange; the full digitalisation and networking of the armed forces, while striving for digital sovereignty; and the establishment of a national capability to plan and conduct operations, including multi-domain operations incorporating Deep Precision Strike. All these capabilities will be underpinned by an efficient operational base on German territory and by domestic crisis response readiness.

- **The German Ministry of Defence intends to gradually increase the size of the Bundeswehr to 260,000 personnel by 2035, supported by a reserve of 200,000, although changes will remain limited until 2029.** The number of professional soldiers is set to rise to 204,000, from the current 186,000, thereby effectively filling existing vacancies and reaching the currently declared strength of the armed forces. By contrast, the number of reservists will more than double, reaching 140,000 from around 60,000 at present. The Ministry of Defense plans a significant increase between 2030 and 2035. By 2032, the Bundeswehr is expected to comprise 230,000 personnel, and 200,000 reservists. The reserve forces will operate under two models – assigned and unassigned to specific military structures – and will be fully equipped. A law reforming military service, passed in December 2025, obliges the Federal Ministry of Defence to submit a report to the Bundestag every six months on the implementation of annual targets for the number of active-duty personnel and trained reservists. If the Bundeswehr fails to meet personnel targets, or if Germany's 'defence situation' so requires, parliament may pass legislation introducing lottery-based compulsory conscription to address the shortfall (see: '*Germany's military service reform: voluntarism at its core*'). The need to reach political consensus on this issue may constrain the growth of the German armed forces.