

The Bundeswehr in 2014: Between Kabul and Crimea

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The Bundeswehr in 2014: Between Kabul and Crimea

The year 2014 marks a turning point for Germany's Bundeswehr. With the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the longest and most intense mission in the Bundeswehr's history will come to an end. Furthermore, as the conflict over Ukraine heats up, a threatening shadow once more looms over Europe. What does this mean for Bundeswehr reform?

Von Martin Zapfe

According to a military aphorism, every army plans for the last war. At the same time, any future mission is unlikely to accommodate the Bundeswehr by conforming exactly to its schematic plans. The Bundeswehr of the future must therefore primarily be flexible. In principle, the current state of Bundeswehr reform (*Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr*) meets this requirement and constitutes sound military planning.

However, the Ukraine crisis reveals an inherent tension that has characterized the reform effort from the start: By attempting to cover the entire spectrum of possible operations, the Bundeswehr runs the risk of not being optimally positioned to face any of the likely scenarios. Instead, it is liable to choose an underfunded "third way" that reduces operational readiness for many missions.

As a confounding factor, the parameters of multinational integration within the alliances will change fundamentally: The return of "symmetric" threats, reinforced by the Ukraine crisis, will expose inherent problems with the integrated cooperation models that have been attempted since 2000. In the near future, operations within the framework of Nato and the EU will likely be conducted on a principle that might be described as "ad-hoc plus": the spontaneous configuration of task forces,



A CH-53 helicopter of the Bundeswehr with Chancellor Angela Merkel on board arrives in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, escorted by two helicopter gunships «Tiger», 10 May 2013. Kay Nietfeld / Reuters

facilitated by a high degree of interoperability. In this way, multinational cooperation in Nato and the EU will resemble that of the 1990s more than that after 2000.

While the Bundeswehr reform affects all services, air and naval forces are governed by different parameters than armies, especially when it comes to multinational integration and operations. At the same time, most of the likely missions will evolve

around ground forces. Therefore, this analysis will concentrate on the German Army (*Heer*).

An Active Army

For historical reasons, the Bundeswehr has always been deeper integrated into its alliances than any other European army. Founded as a purely defensive army within Nato that lacked national operational command structures, operations are only con-

ceivable within a multinational framework. Apart from very few exceptions – in particular, the evacuation of citizens overseas – the Bundeswehr only carries out armed operations in the context of Nato, the EU, the OSCE, and the UN. Among these organizations, Nato with its integrated military structures is no doubt the most significant, followed by the EU with its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Since the end of the imminent territorial threat to the Federal Republic of Germany and its allies, the Bundeswehr has gradually oriented itself towards out-of-area operations. In the 1990s, the Balkans took center-stage, culminating in the air campaign over Kosovo in which Bundeswehr aircraft played a significant role. After 2001, the focus shifted to the operations in Afghanistan. The ISAF mission constitutes the longest deployment in the history of the Bundeswehr. What is more, the Hindu Kush saw the most intense ground combat operations conducted by German soldiers – initially, special operations forces, then thousands of regular troops – since the end of the Second World War. In short: In Afghanistan, the Bundeswehr learned to fight.

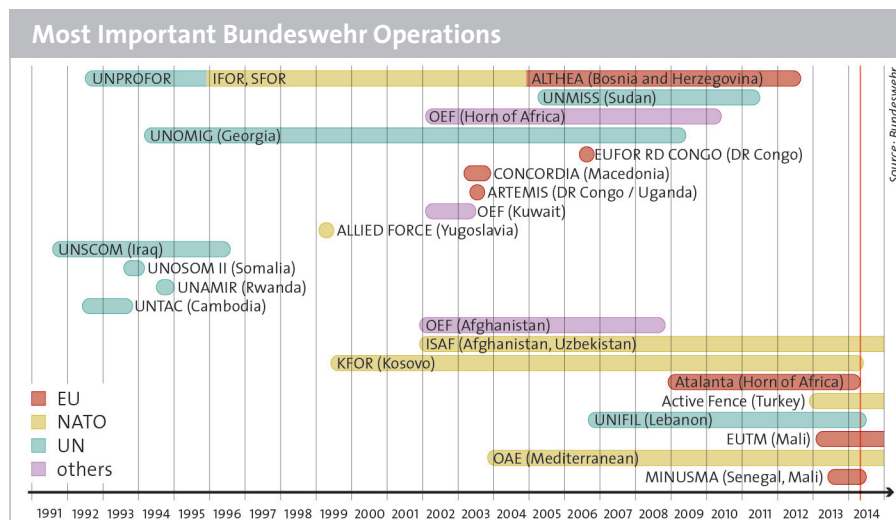
Beyond Afghanistan, the Bundeswehr's operations involve all its services. Most missions, particularly those within the framework of the EU, deliberately adopt an indirect approach, consisting of security

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force assistance and capacity building – i.e., enabling local actors to take on security tasks themselves. For instance, in Mali and Somalia, Bundeswehr soldiers train parts of the national armed forces. Taking into consideration the relatively low troop levels involved in these missions as well as the rather low risk for the deployed soldiers, such missions can be expected to increase in the future – however, large-scale operations such as in Afghanistan are unlikely for the time being.

The Bundeswehr's *Neuausrichtung*

As with most European armies after the Cold War, the Bundeswehr has experienced numerous reforms, often imposed in rapid succession. Each of these steps has diminished its size in order to better adapt to new threats and to generate a peace dividend. Moreover, most of these reforms in-



cluded a differentiation within the army in terms of operational readiness and capabilities, in order to be able to engage in both (likely) expeditionary operations and (unlikely) defensive wars against aggressors. This pattern was consciously broken when then-defense minister Thomas de Maizière introduced the latest reform package in 2011.

The political framework of the reform is staked out by the “Defense Policy Guidelines” of 2011, issued in the context of the financial crisis. In this document, de Maizière ordered a little noticed about-face: No longer would the Bundeswehr's first task be “international conflict prevention and crisis management”, as it had been defined since 2003 – essentially referring to deployments such as in Kosovo or Afghanistan – but “territorial defense as alliance defense”. The key military document of the reform, the “Conception of the Bundeswehr” published in 2013, states that international conflict prevention is seen as the most likely task while alliance defense is the most demanding task. The planning challenge for Germany's armed forces, now, is to live up to both tasks within narrow financial constraints.

Thus was the basic principle of the reform defined: The Bundeswehr is not to become a stabilization force, but should be able to carry out operations of any intensity – against the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as against military forces on the alliance's borders. To this end, all necessary capabilities should be at least rudimentarily avail-

able at the national level, as noted in the principle of “breadth before depth”.

The reform proposal for this realignment was only made feasible by the suspension of conscription in 2011. Only now could the foundation be laid for armed forces that were deployable in their entirety. The notion of a unified structure for all operations is the guiding principle of organizational planning in the army in particular.

The current reform is to be completed by 2017 – provided the new Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen allows the process to continue without alteration. The all-volunteer Bundeswehr will then comprise up to 185,000 soldiers. Based on this structure, the Bundeswehr is to contribute to stabilization operations as a framework nation and also to prepare for conventional challenges on the borders of the alliance.

In the *Heer*, this principle translates into a structure of three divisions: two practically identical armored divisions of three brigades each and the *Division Schnelle Kräfte* (DSK; “Rapid Forces Division”), which incorporates the army's airmobile and special operations forces. The *Heer* must have the capability to continuously sustain the equivalent of one brigade (of up to 6,000 soldiers) in stabilization operations or to deploy a division with two reinforced brigades for high-intensity operations.

No army would ever claim to have sufficient funding. Yet, while the Bundeswehr has suffered comparatively little during the budget crisis, compared to the forces of other European countries, the German de-

fense spending is probably too low to match the lofty aspirations of the realignment. Shrinking armed forces only become more effective if their equipment and training improve at the same time. However, an excessive share of the Bundeswehr's defense investments continues to be spent on long-term, occasionally decades-old procurement projects. And while efficient management is supposed to compensate for insufficient numbers of critical major weapons systems, this only goes so far.

The unified structure of the army only makes sense if it is based on effective training and full equipment throughout the brigades. If that is not the case, the armed forces will neither realize the promised benefits of the unified structure nor gain advantages from (so far rejected) specialization. The Bundeswehr would end up with the worst of both worlds.

Difficult "Third Way"

The future force structure of the army will be strongly influenced by the lessons of Afghanistan. However, the *Heer* will not be an "Afghanistan army", and this is where the quandary arises: The army is neither optimally geared towards stabilization operations, nor is it certain that it is sufficiently prepared for alliance defense. This dilemma is illustrated by the following three examples.

First of all, the army is running the risk of being too "light" for Crimea and too "heavy" for Kabul. Its two nominally armored divisions together will only field 225 main battle tanks. The remainder of the structure is dominated by mechanized infantry (*Panzergrenadier*) units with infantry fighting vehicles as well as the various types of infantry. This signals a disposition towards stabilization missions, which tend to be infantry-heavy and of longer duration. Against the background of the crisis in Ukraine this posture is increasingly regarded critically by political observers as well as a number of Bundeswehr generals, while others emphasize that the configuration towards stabilization operations still does not go far enough.

Contrary to habitually voiced concerns, the problem is not the quality of equipment. Overall, the Bundeswehr is exceptionally well equipped when it comes to expeditionary operations. However, frequently, the quantities are too low for adequate training, while a large part of the equipment is geared towards operations that rely on a protected presence in the theater of

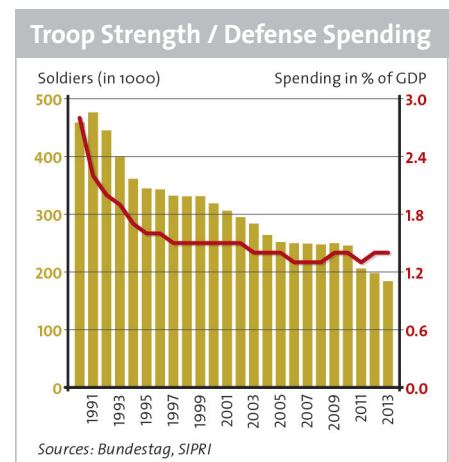
operations and against an opposing force with lower military capabilities. While not all of the capability gaps identified in Afghanistan have been closed yet, new shortcomings are arising now that potential alliance defense enters the picture.

Secondly, the *Heer* rightfully strives to better prepare for the increasingly likely task of training foreign security forces. In Afghanistan, the army has met difficulties finding enough personnel that is both available and suitable for this activity. As a remedy, peace time brigade staffs are now being expanded to deploy the additional personnel as instructors on the ground. While the purpose of this measure is laudable, it is also an example of a compromise solution whose implementation is liable to deliver less than optimal results. The Afghan model is working sufficiently well, yet it does not come close to exhausting the possibilities of security force assistance. Other Western armed forces assign these tasks primarily to special operations forces. As of now, the Bundeswehr chooses another path. In doing so, the effectiveness in these operations is sacrificed to the principle of a unified and comprehensive structure without, at the same time, significantly improving the capability for alliance defense.

Third, there are underlying tensions between the brigade structure and potential task forces. The army's structure is supposed to ensure that soldiers having spent four months in the field shall spend 20 months at home. The reasoning is a plausible one and is based on the assumption of long-term missions. However, every mission will necessarily break up the task force system. At the same time, the added value of the new army structure, if it is to cover the entire spectrum of operations, is to be found precisely in the brigades' enhanced operational autonomy and sustainability in conventional operations. In order to preserve these properties effectively, the task force system must necessarily be weakened. Prioritization is inevitable.

Overall, the Bundeswehr is implementing many critical and generalizable insights from ISAF. However, the new structure is not ideally suited for comparable missions, either. Instead, it attempts to find a "third way" that causes a dilemma in planning. This dilemma can, to a degree, be ameliorated by a strategic personnel policy.

Organizations learn and develop primarily by promoting the right personnel. Here, Afghanistan has left its mark. Among the



army's combat troops and key enablers, soldiers throughout the ranks have considerable operational or combat experience. Irrespective of structural and doctrinal decisions, constant promotion of these soldiers is essential. If combat experience in Afghanistan can be translated into continuous high-quality training and a high level of combat-readiness in all scenarios, weaknesses in the structure may be gradually balanced out. While initial indications are encouraging, success in the long run is far from certain. A return of conventional threats should not lead to disregard for the Afghan veterans among the troops.

Hitherto, planning challenges have furthermore been mitigated through multinational integration (cf. text box). However, in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, this may prove more difficult.

Changing Multinational Cooperation

The crisis in Ukraine will fundamentally change the political framework conditions of multinational integration, thereby making politically convenient solutions more difficult. First of all, multinational operations will once more be planned ad hoc in the framework of internal "coalitions of the willing" led by Nato or the EU. Secondly, models of integration such as Smart Defence within Nato or Pooling & Sharing (P&S) in the EU will likely become less relevant at the operational level.

Multilateralism "Ad-hoc-plus"

Before 1990, military integration of ground forces within Nato adhered to a simple principle: The alliance's command and control structures were integrated and included soldiers from most member states; below the operational level of the corps,

however, the forces were composed on a strictly national basis. While there were exceptions, the military requirements of conventional warfare, together with national reservations, made integration at lower levels essentially unpractical.

In order to save money while retaining combat-ready, modern military formations, Nato and the EU chose different ways. What they had in common, however, was the intention to achieve integration possibly down to battalion level by introducing multinational, rapidly deployable task forces and fixed planning cycles. Here, the concepts of the Nato Response Force (NRF) and the EU Battle Groups (EUBG) are still relevant today. However, neither of these formations has been deployed yet to date, and, due to both political and military considerations, any future deployment seems questionable.

Instead, these ambitious cooperation models will likely be replaced in the near-term by an “ad-hoc plus” model: Task forces will probably be formed at short notice in a brief consultation process between the participating states and then subordinated to the alliance structures. The EUBG and NRF will effectively be replaced by less ambitious cooperation models. The attachment of a Dutch airmobile brigade to the Bundeswehr’s airborne “Rapid Forces Division” could serve as a guiding paradigm. Through constant common training, the combat-readiness and interoperability of both the German and Dutch forces will be enhanced without one nation necessarily having to give up capabilities. While this procedure of force generation is unwieldy and deficient, encumbered by political and bureaucratic pitfalls, and constitutes a step backwards from the ambitious plans of the past 20 years, it functions sufficiently well. While the advantages of the NRF and EUBG can be retained, the pretense of their deployment can be dispensed with.

Less Smart Defence

In the face of the pressing double challenge of maintaining expeditionary forces and handling budgetary constraints after the financial crisis, Nato’s Lisbon Summit of

Military Integration Concepts in EU and NATO

Multinational military cooperation within the EU and Nato is guided by three concepts: “Pooling & Sharing”, “Smart Defence”, and the “Framework Nation Concept”.

- Pooling & Sharing within the EU and Smart Defence within Nato are concepts for economical and efficient defense planning. States may either pool their own capabilities or give them up altogether and rely on other allies (sharing). Smart Defence and Pooling & Sharing are bottom-up initiatives proposed by several allies as a way of saving money: Efficiency is consciously prioritized over effectiveness.
- By contrast, the Framework Nation Concept is a top-down concept consciously geared towards closing jointly identified capability gaps. As part of the Nato Defence Planning Process, select states are to cooperate in closing the gaps, and in doing so, rely on a framework nation. States are to retain their national autonomy and not necessarily give up capabilities.

Further reading: Daniel Möckli, *Smart Pooling: State of Play in European Defence and Armaments Cooperation*, CSS Analysis in Security Policy No. 126 (2012).

2010 introduced “Smart Defence” to promote enhanced cooperation among its military forces. The EU adopted a similar approach with its concept of Pooling & Sharing (see text box). Critically, both concepts were mainly geared towards efficiency, not effectiveness. They are particularly valuable for joint training, but even now their value added to operations is limited.

Two factors – one of them political, one military – will further diminish the usefulness of both concepts. Politically, in view of the crisis in Ukraine, the defense budgets of alliance members are less likely to shrink further. In certain areas, they may even see moderate increases. This reduces the economic incentive for cooperation, which is already of limited effect. If individual states should now increase their expenditures, such investments will be primarily funneled towards national capabilities. The huge political trust among states that is essential for the functioning of integration models is currently simply lacking. Militarily, “Smart Defence” models are existentially geared towards lower-intensity missions. Conventional operations of high intensity allow even less latitude for friction – thus the partial return of conventional scenarios in the wake of the Ukraine crisis imposes clear limitations on a modular composition of multinational combat units.

In the years ahead, multinational integration within Nato and the EU will look

more like 1990 than 2010. In the short term, this might even enhance the effectiveness of European defense – at the expense of efficiency. This will mainly benefit Nato with its tremendous institutional experience. While “Smart Defence” will face difficulties, the concept of the “Framework Nation” introduced by Germany – aiming primarily at closing the alliance’s capability gaps within a coordinated process – could remain valuable even under the new political auspices. In this regard, the Bundeswehr with its broad portfolio of military enablers is indeed a suitable military partner for other nations to “plug in”. However, the willingness among the allies to give up their own military capabilities, which has been unimpressive so far, is likely to diminish further.

For the time being, the illusion of military integration in Europe that is at the same time more effective and more efficient must be discarded. In view of the Crimean crisis, piecemeal integration will not lead to a sufficiently powerful European army – and in its pursuit of a “third way”, the Bundeswehr cannot take a simple European shortcut.

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