



Defence Matters: Recommendations Regarding Germany

by Jörg Wolf

Germans feel secure, and tend to take mid-term security for granted as well. The few security threats and risks that German decision-makers and opinion leaders do perceive are mainly conceptualized as problems that require a political solution or intelligence and police work. Many Germans believe that there are no military solutions to current security problems.

Long-term strategic thinking and planning are largely missing in politics, media and academia. Germany is not interested in power projection and does not have global ambitions. NATO's historical contributions to West Germany's security are remembered and appreciated, but people do not quite see what NATO's current operations do for their security.

NATO is valued as insurance with the main purpose being collective defence. Solidarity with allies in the case of an attack is an iron-clad commitment. Crisis management and cooperative security are considered less important. Strong opposition to combat missions outside of Europe can be assumed for the foreseeable future. With the drawdown in Afghanistan and Kosovo, defence spending levels are seen as appropriate and sufficient for more investment in capabilities.

Defence spending is likely to remain at current levels (1.3% of GDP). Economic growth is unlikely to convince Germany to increase defence spending to reach the 2% target, unless the security landscape changes dramatically. According to the 2013 Transatlantic Trends survey, the German public is evenly split between those who want to decrease and those who want to maintain current levels of spending (47% each); only 5% favour an increase.

The current defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP is considered to be similar to the French and British levels without their costs for nuclear weapons, which are seen as not that useful for today's defence. Many politicians, including the Defence Minister, point out that Germany is (together with Poland) the only bigger European country that has avoided significant defence cuts in the last five years.

In consequence there is not much awareness that defence spending is insufficient. Wasteful military duplications in Europe, uncoordinated drawdown of capabilities, and delays and cost-explosions in procurement projects are seen as bigger problems. Here is more potential for improvement. The governing Christian Democrats, the big winner in the parliamentary elections on September 22, is the party that is most committed to improving Germany's military capabilities.

NATO's narratives for "Defence matters" as outlined in the Cooperation Framework Concept and argued in various speeches by the Secretary General and other NATO leaders are mostly well-received and should be continued. The following recommendations are complementary and some might come across as not realistic, but I believe that that new policies need to be explored to tackle this old issue of insufficient defence spending.

1. Arguments which resonate in Germany

1.1. "Defence matters because security costs"

This central proposition from the Cooperation Framework Concept does not resonate much on an abstract level as Germans feel quite secure, as outlined in the introduction. It resonates much more, when made specific:

1.2. Maritime and energy security challenges

As an “export nation” and also one highly dependent on imports, NATO should continue to emphasise to Germany the risks and vulnerabilities in international trade and energy security, while emphasizing NATO’s contributions to maritime security and promoting confidence that NATO could indeed successfully respond to major international conflicts that result in the closure of the Strait of Hormuz or the Strait of Malacca or other important shipping lanes, if given more resources.

While Germans are increasingly aware of piracy and conflicts near key choke points in the worldwide energy network, there is little concern about deficiencies in security. Pirates are seen less as a threat and more as a nuisance that can be handled with current efforts with no increase in defence spending required.

1.3. “The economic benefits of defence”

While many Germans consider economic justifications for defence spending morally dubious (“military-industrial complex”) or consider such arguments to be inefficient economic policy, most parliamentarians are highly sensitive to jobs and the industrial base in their constituency. Thus this narrative should be used more in conversations with parliamentarians than with journalists or the public.

The Cooperation Framework Concept is correct in assuming that “the wider economic benefits associated with defence investment in terms of innovation, technological developments, international competitiveness and employment” are not much appreciated in Germany.

1.4. “Defence investments help us protect our values and strengthen international cooperation”

This central proposition is too abstract to resonate. The related argument “Defence capabilities underpin diplomacy” resonates in the context of Syria, but less so on Afghanistan, Kosovo, piracy and other challenges. The argument “to play a larger role in international crisis management by contributing as part of a team” convinces some, but most Germans (unfortunately) are not interested in playing a larger role in world affairs.

2. Policy recommendations to NATO's top management

2.1. Focus on collective defence and build on NATO’s reputation as “insurance”

While Germans by and large do not perceive short- and mid-term security threats and are critical of many NATO operations, solid majorities continue to consider NATO as “still essential” according to all Transatlantic Trends surveys. Deep down citizens know that they live in a dangerous, unpredictable world and need NATO as insurance. Thus German decision-makers are committed to keeping NATO strong and supporting even some missions whose merits they are not convinced of and/or that are deeply unpopular with the voters, like ISAF. The main reason for German combat contributions to the NATO missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan was not threat perception, but rather to support and please the United States and NATO. Defence spending should be framed in that matter as well in order to get more commitments from Germany.

2.2. Specify threats and security risks to NATO and its Members

NATO has many convincing narratives about why defence matters and how NATO is an important and efficient “service provider” to its members. NATO’s top management should put more emphasis on specifying the security risks and threats to the Alliance as well as to individual NATO members. To its credit, NATO has not participated in fear mongering and threat inflation in the past and should not do so in the future, but NATO should share more specific information about its threat analyses so that the press and think tanks can make the case for more defence spending. Long lists of vague or abstract potential future threats and

brilliant narratives are not sufficiently convincing. At the end of the day, Member states increase defence spending when they perceive threats. In consequence, specific security risks and threats to NATO members should be outlined as the main argument convincing Germany to increase defence spending and/or to get German support for NATO policies and missions.

2.3. Strengthen German understanding of and empathy with allies' threat perception

The above mentioned focus on specific threats and risks is important, even if NATO probably won't be able to convince many Germans of threats to their country truly existing at the moment. Berlin understands, however, that Germany's security (and wealth) depends on the security of its neighbours and is therefore committed to their security for national security, economic and also moral and historical reasons. German opinion-leaders and decision-makers should be, but do not seem to be convinced or indeed even aware of the Baltic and Visegrad concerns about Russia for instance.

Senior NATO representatives from these Member states could for instance write op-eds for German newspapers and participate in conferences in Germany, while at the same time German decision-makers should be encouraged more strongly to participate in NATO-sponsored conferences in the region.

2.4. Highlight lack of solidarity, responsibility and alliance cohesion

NATO's top management should continue to frame defence spending as a key concern of Alliance cohesion and be more outspoken and blunt about Germany's shortcomings. Defence spending has to turn into a matter of solidarity, crucial for allied security. It should not be any longer seen as about meeting some "arbitrary number" (2% guideline), as is currently the case in Berlin.

It is not sufficient to talk about the 2% target and highlight that Germany spends less than was agreed many years ago. Rather NATO leaders should point out that the Baltic republics, the Visegrad states and the Balkan countries in NATO in particular count on Germany and expect greater solidarity. It should be seen as irresponsible to spend less than 2% of GDP on defence and to spend less than 20% of defence budgets on major equipment. Only with this realisation will Germany significantly increase its defence spending. (Likewise, participation in military exercises like Steadfast Jazz should be framed as a matter of solidarity with lack of participation being irresponsible.) Germany likes to be seen as a good ally that shares the burden and is in solidarity with its European and American friends and is susceptible to such criticism.

Some US politicians and pundits have called Germany a free-rider, but such "shaming" has had little to no effect on German debates as this criticism was – rightly or wrongly -- often associated with far-away "out-of-area" military missions that Germany did not consider as contributing to allied security. Appealing to German sentiments of solidarity and burden-sharing has to be focused on Article 5.

2.5. Emphasize the European character of NATO

Despite the closure of US military bases in Germany and the US rebalancing towards Asia, NATO is still seen as a US-led Alliance. Germany's strongest NATO supporters appreciate that. To gain more support from others, however, NATO's top management should stress the European character of NATO. This could result in Germany taking on more responsibility in defence matters, as Germans tend to support European unity more than Atlanticism.

2.6. Smart Defence investments pay off in the long run

German parliamentarians and others are more likely to support increased defence spending, if it is framed as an investment that saves money in the long run. Thus NATO should continue to encourage and facilitate German participation in joint procurement projects as part of the Smart Defence initiative: Such projects require significant investments in the short term, but enable Germany to achieve security with less money in the long term. One of the main reasons why Germany's defence spending has not been cut that much during the financial crisis and in fact

was increased this year is the Bundeswehr Reform, which is seen as an investment that requires big funding now, but will lead to savings later. Smart Defence initiatives should be promoted similarly in Germany.

2.6. Stress the long procurement cycles

NATO should not tire pointing out that military procurement cycles are very long. Therefore Germany and other members have to invest in major equipment now so that they will be available in five, ten or twenty years when they might be crucial as the security landscape will be much different from today. Such a long-term view is an important argument for Germans, as they are not that convinced of the need for major investments at the moment due to the current threat perception. Another reason is that several recent procurement projects have been criticized as failures, so there is considerable reluctance and caution to commit to new major investments.

2.7. Argue that modern military capabilities save lives.

Risk-averse Germans concerned about casualties can be convinced of the need for increased defence spending by pointing out that investments in drones, theatre and ballistic missile defence, as well as in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities reduce the risks to allied soldiers as well as to civilians in conflict regions.

2.8. Increase education

NATO should raise awareness and contribute to better understanding of international security issues among parliamentarians, journalists and the public in general and broaden Germany's very small strategic community. NATO should also for instance help journalists and parliamentarians understand weapons systems and make the case that Germany's economic weight does not create enough leverage to compensate for lack of military capabilities.

3. Recommendations of institutional nature

3.1. Write more outspoken Deterrence and Defence Posture Reviews

Germans would be more supportive of defence spending increases, if there would be more debate about the Bundeswehr's lack of capabilities to meet specific security challenges. Formal NATO reviews of military capability shortfalls should be blunt and harsh in order to overcome the lethargy in Germany. A perception of significant problems is the prerequisite for any meaningful reform.

3.2. Attempt to formalize the 2% and 20% guidelines

While NATO leaders and many politicians and experts, especially from the US, are increasingly concerned that less and less NATO members spend a minimum of 2% of GDP on defence and 20% of defence expenditures on major equipment, these guidelines do not feature in the discourse in Germany. Budget negotiations focus on current spending levels and future needs for implementing the ambitious Bundeswehr reform, but not about these NATO guidelines.

In transatlantic debates these "guidelines" are sometimes called "rules" or "commitments" but often simply described as "benchmarks" or "targets". In Germany they are certainly not seen as "rules", but they would need to be elevated to this stature to be taken seriously. They should be at least as strong and as well known as the "Maastricht criteria". That's not a panacea either, but the respect for the Maastricht criteria is in Germany greater than for the NATO guidelines.

If NATO's top management and some Member governments are indeed very concerned by the level of defence spending in most parts of Europe, they should start a debate about formalizing these guidelines into (binding) rules or even membership criteria. While the chances of success for such an initiative are slim, the debate in itself would be important and highlight the importance and role of defence capabilities for Germany and for NATO.

Germany is unlikely to support 2% mandatory defence spending in general, but might commit to a slightly lower figure (1.5 or 1.75) for a specific period of time, especially if this figure is the result of an analysis of threats and of the needs for collective defence and is to be officially adopted by the heads of state and government at the North Atlantic Council. While this is very difficult to achieve, especially as it involves the prerogatives of the national parliaments, such a formal decision is the best – and perhaps the only way – to convince Germany to increase defence spending significantly.

Such decision-making would also upgrade NATO's institutional framework and strengthen NATO bonds. Germany's political class favours rules and regulatory policy, as evident in EU politics. As Alliance cohesion, solidarity and in fact our security depend on defence spending levels, NATO should at least explore possibilities to create more binding rules.

3.3. Strengthen NATO's political role

NATO should facilitate Member states' consensus on risks and threats. Member states will provide the necessary military capabilities when they see their or their allies' security at stake because NATO is primarily appreciated as a military alliance to deter any potential enemies and to defend its members in case of an attack. While this is true for most European members, the sentiment is particularly strong in Germany and our eastern neighbours.

The North Atlantic Council should therefore debate more international crises and important developments, even if NATO is not considering an involvement. (It's my understanding that the NAC avoids such debates on sensitive issues so that observers do not get the impression that NATO is considering a military involvement. This concern is overrated as the world knows that NATO members are not keen on more missions.) If NATO strengthens its role as a political forum, then more empathy (see 2.3.) is to be expected and in consequence more German defence commitments.

4. Clear concerns, prejudice, show-stoppers

4.1. Some Germans might think that it's not NATO's place or the task of NATO's international staff to try to convince Member states to spend more on defence. They see NATO HQ's role as serving its members. Demands for increased defence spending should come from individual allied governments or the North Atlantic Council, but not from international staff.

4.2. NATO's growing partnerships are appreciated and seen as a reason not to spend more on defence as allies and partners cooperate in burden-sharing.

4.3. Do not promote NATO, Smart Defence and spending increases as enabling Germany/Europe to become a global player, be "relevant" in world affairs and punch above its weight as most Germans (minus a few think tankers and journalists) lack such ambitions, but instead are concerned about military quagmires, which are more likely when governments overestimate their military capabilities. Focus instead on shortcomings that need to be fixed to meet treaty obligations and provide security to all NATO allies.

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