



Transforming Germanys Armed Forces

by Maxim Worcester

The current emotional debate surrounding the possible abolishment of national service is overshadowing the core problem faced by those wishing to reform the armed forces of the country.

Those clinging to the idea of national service believe that the establishment of a professional army would lower the standard of recruits as national service ensures that recruits come from a true cross section of the population. There is some truth in this, however higher motivation of volunteers and a longer period of service can more than compensate for this. Countries such as Belgium, France and Holland, who have recently abolished conscription, confirm that this is the case. Furthermore, a volunteer defence force would also mean that recruits can be selected on the basis of suitability for the job. Critics of a volunteer army also believe that the end of conscription would result in the armed forces losing their place in society; given the general lack of acceptance and relatively low standing of soldiers in German society this argument is weak and not truly convincing.

Germany's "baggage of history", 1933 – 1945, and the role the Armed Forces played during this period is also frequently cited as a reason to maintain a citizens army rather than a professional army, which might develop a momentum of its own and escape the control of Government. Given that Germany today is a model of democracy this argument too has little merit and is hardly a convincing argument for clinging to a conscript Armed Forces.

One argument for the retention of national service in Germany is the effect abolishment would have on social services in the country. Conscripts can make their case in front of a selection board to either opt for the Armed Forces or volunteer to work for little money in the social services. Such work involves working in hospitals, for the Red Cross or looking after the aged who are no longer able to care for themselves. In the case of abolishment, the Government would have to create a structure which would not impact on the social services, hardly an impossible task and not one which needs to stand in the way of abolishing conscription.

These debates overlook a key issue which is overshadowed by the debate surrounding conscription – the Government has no option than to reduce the amount of money it spends on its Armed Forces and at the same time must take steps to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its Forces. It also must adapt its Forces to the kind of external threats the country faces and is likely to face in the future.

The European trend towards professional and volunteer armies is driven by the changing security environment; Armed Forces are less likely to be called upon to defend the nation but more and more so to cope with global threats or peace missions far from home. In the years since the fall of Communism, European forces have been active in securing the peace in such countries as Former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Iraq and Afghanistan to name only a few. German Forces today are active in Afghanistan, the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Serbia and Sudan. The structure of her Armed Forces has, however, changed little since the end of the Cold War.

Germany today spends 1.28 % of its GDP on the Armed Forces, a lower proportion than her major European NATO allies, France, Italy and the UK. The NATO average spend, excluding the US, is 1.65 %. Putting this into perspective, Latin America spends 1.35 % of its GDP on Defence and Cameroon, hardly a benchmark for Germany, an identical 1.28 %.

Such statistics might be interesting to some but they do not address the real issue facing those who will have to tackle the thorny issue of reforming the Armed Forces. A revealing number is the sum spent by Germany on each of its non-reserve members of the Armed Forces in comparison to its major NATO partners:

- USA: \$443.000
 - UK : \$348.000
 - GER: \$187.000
 - FRA: \$190.000
 - ITA: \$106.000
- IISS, own calculations

These numbers need to be treated with caution and simply help to illustrate that Germany is spending too little on its armed forces. The numbers also make it clear that the German defence budget is too small for the current size of the German Armed Forces.

The low German spend per soldier also helps to explain why there is increasing criticism of German equipment in Afghanistan and the deficits in training prior to overseas deployment. There is simply too little money available. A further number underlines the deficits in training: According to Military Balance 2010, published by The International Institute for Strategic Studies, US forces took part in 43 exercises world-wide involving other nations in 2009. The number for the UK was 27, France 14, Germany 12 and Italy 5. The ranking closely follows the spend per soldier data above.

In order to improve the effectiveness of her armed forces Germany can either increase the Defence Budget or reduce the number of soldiers. An increase of the Defence Budget seems more than unlikely. Assuming that the expected budget cuts will result in a total of \$37 billion being available in the future, it would be necessary to cut the headcount to 150.000 soldiers in order to achieve a spend of \$246.000 per soldier, a huge improvement on the current spend of \$187.000. Such a number would allow for a gradual introduction of new equipment and more training with other partners, thus improving the effectiveness of the armed forces. Reducing the size of the armed forces to that comparable with Spain, a country which has recently done away with conscription and has 128.000 soldiers serving full time, would allow a spend of \$285.000 per soldier.

Given the increasing reluctance of the German population to endorse and support the overseas deployment of troops in areas of conflict such as Afghanistan, and the decision taken by previous Governments not to participate in both Iraq wars, one can indeed question if a standing Army of 150.000 is necessary. It could be argued, that a total of less than 100.000

professional troops would be sufficient for the protection of the homeland, projection of power and limited overseas deployment for the protection of trade routes, as stated in the recent Government White Paper

The Australian Armed Forces, highly regarded by all its allies, only has 55.000 troops. Australia spends 2.24 % of its GDP on the Military and \$403.000 on each member of the Armed Forces. In Australia's recent Defence White Paper the Government states that its Forces need both to defend the country against direct armed attack and that it must be able to ensure the security, stability and cohesion of the immediate neighbourhood. It furthermore needs to be able to project power and demonstrate strategic presence beyond this primary operational environment using strike capabilities which include combat aircraft, long-range missiles and Special Forces. It does not see land operations against heavily armed foes in the Middle East, Central and South Asia or Africa as a primary potential task but it does emphasise the current deployment of Special Forces and troops in Afghanistan as an important strategic move. Such operations remain an option, they are however not a strategic "must".

In order to achieve this aim, Australia plans to maintain current troop levels and at the same time double its fleet of submarines to 12 hulls and maintain a modern fleet of 8 new frigates, all, including the submarines, equipped with Land-attack cruise missiles. It will invest in a new fleet of around 20 offshore combat vessels, a new large strategic sealift ship to enhance amphibious capability, new long-range maritime patrol aircraft, UAVs, new armoured fighting vehicles, transport helicopters, improved Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR), and the establishment of a cyber-security operations centre.

Much of the Australian plan to reform and upgrade its Armed Forces applies to Germany and is worth studying closely. The White Paper clearly states the strategic circumstances on which the future force structure is based, even if some in the opposition would disagree. Above all, it excludes certain options such as involvement in large scale conflicts far from home and emphasises the need for power projection. Whatever form German reforms take, it will be very important to clearly communicate to the electorate what is being planned and why. Only if the plans to reform the Armed Forces are credible will they be accepted and will become politically feasible. The Australian plans are clear, understandable and remain within the budgetary possibilities.

Germany's main military ally is and remains the United States. This partnership can however only remain effective if Germany's Armed Forces are capable of fully operating with those of the US. Currently only the British Armed Forces are seen as fulfilling this operational requirement. Whatever reforms are undertaken it is crucial that they result in re-establishing full operability, much as it existed during the times of the Cold War. This will require spending more money on fewer soldiers and less, but more sophisticated equipment, mirroring that of the US.

It is ironic that Germany actually produces nearly all the equipment it needs to upgrade its Armed Forces. German submarines, corvettes, frigates, armoured fighting vehicles, military vehicles of all kind, military electronics, ammunition, missiles and numerous key components such as cannons, drive trains as well as small arms are much sought after by her allies and are regarded highly. Germany is, after all, the world's third largest exporter of weapons – in spite of strict export controls. The availability of suitable equipment to upgrade the Armed Forces is not a stumbling block.

What appears to be lacking is both a consensus view of the future structure of the Armed Forces, the tasks they should be able to perform, and the infrastructure at the political level to implement the necessary reforms. Germany lacks a National Security Council which could help identify the threats the country might face and coordinates the response. The establishment of such a body has in the past been hindered by political infighting between the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Chancellery and Parliament. This problem should be solved before any meaningful reforms at the level of the armed forces can be undertaken. At the same time the size of the Reserve Forces and their role in the defence architecture needs to be defined. The US and British Forces operating in Afghanistan are making good use of Reserve troops both in a combat and support role.

It would be possible for Germany to reform the armed forces and not abolish conscription. The Government could simply decide to put conscription on hold, much as the United States has done. At the same time the role of the Reserves could be upgraded and structured in such a manner that the Reserves fulfil a wider range of logistic and support roles than they undertake today, and play a more important part in homeland defence. There should be a possibility for career soldiers to change to the Reserves both during their period of service and after completion of their contract, and for soldiers in the Reserves to serve with the “core” armed forces. Such a flexible structure is practiced both by the US Home Guard and Britain’s Territorial Army. Such a move would reduce the need for support soldiers in the “core” armed forces resulting in a smaller, leaner and flexible force. It would result in downscaling and closures of military bases in Germany, a highly unpopular measure for some local communities. However, any such changes need to be driven by military necessity, not vote-catching motives.

What is not likely to happen is an increase in asset sharing with other NATO partners, as welcome such a step would be. When ISAF forces called for the use of NATO AWACs in Afghanistan last year, this request was hotly debated in Germany and ultimately turned down. No NATO partner would like to run the risk of pooled transport aircraft not being available due to political decisions in another NATO country. During Gulf War 1, the Belgian Government turned down an order for ammunition from Britain. A degree of sharing might be possible, but the major European countries will continue to duplicate assets for the foreseeable future in order to avoid such a situation. What will happen, and is already taking place, is pooling the production of weapon systems such as missiles, aircraft and armoured vehicles. The German arms industry and the producers of key systems components play a major role in the pan European arms industry and stand to profit from defence sector reforms both in Germany and in other European countries.

At the end of the tunnel there will be fewer Generals, Admirals and Civil Servants required, and they will have to understand that the best equipment does not have to be the most expensive; it needs to be the best equipment for the job. They will also have to understand that size is not everything. Above all, the future members of Germanys Armed Forces need to be professional and motivated volunteers, not conscripts serving for six months.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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