

German armed forces “reform” reflects growth of militarism

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The German defence ministry’s proposed restructuring of the country’s military forces represents the greatest change in the army since the founding of the German Federal Republic. It marks an important step toward the establishment of a standing army capable of worldwide deployment.

On September 1, the inspector general’s interim report was presented to the parliamentary defence committees. It had been commissioned in July to test the backing for a reform of the army in view of the fraught budgetary situation. The report contained five different models, of which only one was seriously considered by Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg of the Christian Social Union (CSU).

The main points in this recommendation concern a reduction of troop strength and the abolition of military conscription. The number of active soldiers is to be reduced from the current 252,000 to a minimum of 163,500. The number is calculated to include 7,500 volunteers who will be able to serve for a period up to 23 months.

According to the report, the recommendation is based on an “analysis of existing security policy challenges.” It is stated that although Germany is no longer faced with a direct threat to its territory, national defence nowadays also means maintenance of the country’s alliances.

This amounts to a de facto extension of the constitutional requirement of national defence to include the possibility of worldwide troop deployments provided they take place within the framework of existing alliances.

The document makes no secret of the fact that the army will be granted permission to operate far more frequently in the future than it has in the past. The call is for a “rapid-response professional army that can be

deployed in a wide variety of ways.”

The report mentions several concrete statistics. The 7,000 troops currently deployed abroad constitute the longest serving soldiers in the army. According to a white paper in 2006, however, a simultaneous deployment of up to 14,000 soldiers had already been planned. Consequently, “an anticipated force of at least 10,000 soldiers” would have to be available in the future. It was no longer a matter of “simply the total size of the army, but above all the actual number of forces able to be deployed”—a clear sign of a far more offensive orientation of German foreign policy in the future. In addition, forces for “evacuation operations to fulfil responsibilities at the national level” would have to be provided.

Until now, military conscription has been a major pillar of the German army. The federal government’s austerity programme now serves as a welcome pretext for its gradual termination and replacement with a professional army.

Defence Minister Guttenberg has always stressed that conscription would only slowly be abolished. Thus, he maintains the option of obliging young people to engage in military service in time of war without the necessity of an amendment to the constitution. In the meantime, the anticipated 7,500 volunteers will serve primarily to counteract the shortage of efficient new troops.

The cost-saving argument only partly conceals the real motive behind the reform of the military structure. Guttenberg has recently admitted several times that conscription is not a necessity for security policy—and, in this respect, the inspector general’s report soberly notes that soldiers involved in basic military service cannot be deployed in operations abroad.

A media offensive has been launched to counter anti-

military feeling within the population, some 70 percent of whom are against the war in Afghanistan. “Consistent measures to increase the attractiveness of military service in order to provide a sufficient number of newly qualified recruits” are to be implemented.

The army is already sending “youth officers” to schools to make a career in the army appear more appetising to potential soldiers. Only a few days ago, the army used a YouTube internet web site to open a video portal of its own, purporting to give a transparent insight into life in the armed forces.

The reform of the army will also entail new duties relating to its domestic operations. One sentence in the report about military deployment tersely notes that, despite the need for cost-cutting, “basic provisions for the country’s internal security will have to be guaranteed.” Until now, military deployment within Germany has been regarded as a tricky subject, because it is forbidden by the constitution and is widely opposed by the population.

Guttenberg’s plans at first met with disapproval primarily from the ranks of his own party. Politicians from the CSU and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) defend conscription for ideological reasons or for fear that barracks in their particular constituencies will be closed. In the meantime, however, the defence minister has apparently succeeded in winning the support of a large proportion of his parliamentary fraction. Above all, he is trying to provide assurances that no major closure of barracks in Bavaria is planned.

On the other hand, the defence minister is getting a great deal of political support from the Greens. The party that was once founded under the banner of pacifism has developed into the most consistent advocate of a worldwide deployable, professional army. The Greens see Guttenberg’s reform plans as the “first small steps in the right direction” and criticise them for “not going far enough.” Alex Bond, the Greens’ spokesman for budgetary policy, called last May for a reform “without taboos.”

Concerning the CDU/CSU armaments requisitions, the Greens complain only that they lack relevance to “security policy realities and actual needs.” This must be the basis for the whole reform, say the Greens. It should not be the result of “dictated austerity measures.” Thus, the Greens make it clear that the reform is not to be regarded as part of budgetary

consolidation, but as an offensive expansion of military operations throughout the world.

Criticism from the other opposition parties is also aimed at the planned financial savings and not the transformation of the army into a force capable of international deployment. Rainer Arnold, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) spokesman on defence policy, announced that “the capability of maintaining our alliances (has to be) preserved.” Indirectly, he is demanding that the army not be overly deprived of finance. It must not be allowed “to become a budgetary political football,” he maintains.

The Left Party also criticises the reform in a superficial and unprincipled way. It calls for a “non-aggressive role for the army”—something that would not prevent commitment to wars like the one in Afghanistan. Parliamentary delegate Jan van Aken has declared that the abolition of conscription should be undertaken only with regard to all its consequences—thus basically adopting the same line as the Greens.



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