

German military to acquire combat drones

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The German army (Bundeswehr) is planning to purchase and employ armed drones. This was confirmed to the media by the federal defence minister, Thomas de Maizière, earlier this month.

Currently the German military employs the reconnaissance drone “Heron 1” in Afghanistan. The army leased the drone from Israel with its lease due to expire in 2014. By that date, the German military plans to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that can conduct both reconnaissance missions and employ weapons. One likely choice is the American drone type “Predator B”. After 2020, Germany plans to deploy its own drone, currently being developed in collaboration with Britain and France.

The German army’s plans for the use of armed drones are much more advanced than previously known. This emerges from a 280-page report from the Office of Technology Assessment at the German parliament, analysed by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper. The report was issued last year, but has so far received little attention.

The report writes: “The Bundeswehr plans to use unmanned systems in the future far more extensively than before”. In the first place, the aim is to improve reconnaissance with drones, but in the medium term “the ability to use effective measures will also be pursued”.

The report then clarifies what is meant by such “effective measures”: “In particular the Air Force is considering a continuous expansion of the capacity of unmanned airborne systems, including, air transport, aerial load transfers and aerial combat”. Possible targets are “enemy airfields and their installations and associated aerial combat facilities” and “the combating of high-priority and time-critical targets on the ground”. This apparently refers to the assassination of selected victims.

The US has been using drones for some time to kill

its alleged political enemies. Such operations are taking place in countries with which the US is not at war or, in the case of Pakistan, that are supposed allies. As the *New York Times* recently reported, President Barack Obama personally takes part in the selection of victims who are then executed by drones without any due process.

Thousands of people have been killed in this way in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—the majority of them civilians. This is a clear violation of international law, an example of state-organized murder that is widely opposed internationally, and also by the German population.

The widespread rejection of such forms of warfare in Germany has prompted Defence Minister de Maizière to go on a public offensive to justify the use of drones. He has sought to dispel concerns by presenting the drones as a purely technical modernization.

“Ethically, a weapon must always be considered to be neutral”, he said. This aspect must be separated from the question of “who, when and how this weapon is used”. He continued: “Aircraft can carry weapons. So why should not the same apply to drones?” Torpedoes or missiles that seek their own goal are unmanned weapons, he argued.

De Maiziere also declared that such drones contributed to the protection of soldiers who can exercise their deadly work without any risk from a safe distance. “When I send an unmanned drone instead of a manned aircraft this then serves to protect our soldiers”.

De Maizière’s plans are supported not only by the federal government, but also by the opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens.

“This is a weapons system of the future”, SPD defence spokesman Rainer Arnold told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. “In the long term, there is no alternative to the purchase of armed drones”.

The security spokesman for the Greens in the Bundestag, Omnid Nouripour, also signalled his approval. “Each weapon has its practical advantages and disadvantages”, he said. “There is an extremely narrow grey zone in which targeted killings could be allowed, when a large group of people are in imminent danger. This is the same as the so-called rescue shot carried out by the police”.

The former left-liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* also attempted to highlight the benefits of the new weapon. A comment by Bettina Vestring on August 3, headlined “Revolution in warfare”, declared that objections to “the mysterious super weapon in the arsenal of the US superpower” were justified. At the same time, critics of drones “do a disservice to international law and world peace with their fundamental opposition” because there was no way of preventing this “revolution in warfare”.

The reason for “the triumph of the war machines” is “that their time has come. Our companies are technologically savvy, averse to risk and too old”, Vestring writes. In professional armies, “the work of soldiers was also much too expensive to be entrusted with reconnaissance, surveillance and transportation tasks that can be done by machines. And nothing lessens the already low public enthusiasm for military action than the death of soldiers”.

The defence ministry, government opposition parties and the media have largely avoided the question of what aims are to be pursued by the use of drones and where they should be employed. In fact, the acquisition of drones is part of a systematic upgrading of the Bundeswehr to enable it to advance the strategic and economic interests of Germany by military force.

German imperialism is not prepared to stand on the sidelines when it comes to the division of resources and strategic spheres of influence among the great powers. It is therefore demanding the types of modern weapon systems already employed by states such as the US, Britain and Italy.

Such drones are also to be employed in Germany. The European drone “Talarion”, being developed by Cassidian, a subsidiary of European aerospace and the EADS defence company, is to be used for both military and civilian purposes, such as monitoring the population.

Spiegel Online reported in February about plans to extend the use of drones. At that time the armed forces

and police possessed 331 drones for surveillance from the air. Police use of the drones included spying on environmental protests and football games. The federal police use their drones at Germany’s borders to prevent the crossing of refugees.

At the end of January, the Civil Aviation Act was amended to award manned and unmanned aviation equipment equal rights to participate in air traffic. The text of the law expressly states that in addition to their original military use, UAVs should “especially be used in the sphere of police danger prevention”. In this respect, the German situation closely resembles that in the United States.

Another reason for the development and acquisition of drones is to further Germany’s already powerful and profitable arms industry. Germany is the third-largest arms producer in the world.

On this basis, SPD defence spokesman Arnold supports the billion-dollar European Talarion project: “I hope that the development of European security policy will also contribute to strengthening the European economy”.

The previously mentioned German parliamentary report also cites economic benefits as a justification for the development and acquisition of UAVs. The report declares that a future technology with huge potential for civilian industries is at stake. The defence ministry has already promised the German armaments industry assistance in promoting the export of such weapons.



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