

German defence minister announces military expansion

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Two years after the German government signaled the end of military restraint and following this year's announcement of a dramatic increase to the defence budget, this week brought word of a so-called "personnel about-face."

In an order issued for the army on Tuesday, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) announced that the period of military personnel restrictions was over effective immediately and a gradual increase to personnel was to be introduced.

Her orders began with the words: "In the last 25 years, the military has undergone a continuous reduction of personnel. In light of developments in the security policy situation and the resulting demands placed on the armed forces, it is necessary to rethink and redirect."

The "strict personnel caps" which have been in place until now are to be lifted. In the future, the personnel requirements of the army will be set each year "according to a structured planning and prognosis model" of the army command. The goal is a "responsive body of personnel" oriented to the increasing responsibilities of the army.

A new personnel board "analogous to the equipment board" under the leadership of Chief of Staff (inspector general) Volker Wieker will be created to determine the personnel requirements in question. The new body will "not only illuminate the personnel requirements each year and provide clear justification for them, they will at the same time issue statements on implementation planning."

These military planning objectives "will subsequently be transferred to budget planning." In other words: until now, the number of troops was subject to political approval. In the future, the military command will

determine their number and demand the corresponding increase to appropriations from the budget.

"Beginning in 2017, we plan to use the personnel about turn in select areas of the military and civilian structure to increase the sustainability of the military, strengthen its robustness and establish new capabilities," von der Leyen stated.

The "about turn" includes a predicted requirement of around 14,300 soldiers and around 4,400 posts for civil employees. Around 7,000 new military positions will initially be established.

Altogether, 96 individual measures are planned to improve the performance of the military. Von der Leyen lists, among others: the establishment of new organizational areas in cyber and information spheres; the installation of a further company in the sea battalion; strengthening the special forces of the army and the marines; strengthening of management capacity for greater armament projects; and the expansion of medical capabilities.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which was informed about the changes ahead of time, the military turnaround initiated by von der Leyen is larger than it appears at first glance. They write that it brings "the quarter of a century long era of military shrinkage to an end."

Anti-war sentiment remains high and investing in the military will be "rather unpopular," the paper continued. Following the end of the Cold War, the need for a strong defensive army was no longer seen. "The number of soldiers dropped from around 600,000 on the day of German reunification in 1990 to not even half that number today. The cap lies in between at 185,000 soldiers, but only around 177,000 are actually serving."

The German Armed Forces Association welcomed

the personnel reform as a correct and courageous decision. “This turnaround actually represents a 180 degree turn in personnel policy,” said association head Lieutenant Colonel André Wüstner.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) offered express support for the military upgrade.

Hans-Peter Bartels (SPD), parliamentary commissioner of the German armed forces, both welcomed the personnel changes and criticized the defence minister because she had not gone far enough in his opinion. “Bartels sees the need for more personnel,” the *Tagesspiegel* wrote.

The SPD militarist told the newspaper it was “good and proper” that the defence minister took real problem analysis seriously and responded to it. It was also correct that not only soldiers but also civilian positions would be increased. It was doubtful, however, whether the “stated personnel numbers would be enough.”

Some units are extremely understaffed, said Bartels. That was true of air defence and aerial photography interpretation. The military has at its disposal only one squadron “that must cover three missions with Afghanistan, Turkey and soon Mali.” The marines were also supposedly partly strained past acceptable limits.

With the increase to personnel, only the most immediate and urgent problems would be addressed and troop sustainability improved. According to Bartels, future tasks, such as cyber defence and the specialists needed for it, required far greater measures.

Von der Leyen’s order on military personnel policy is part of a comprehensive program of military build-up. At the beginning of the year, von der Leyen announced that in the coming year 130 billion additional euros would be made available in the current defence budget for development and equipment.

The defence minister justifies the military upgrades with the “turn” in German foreign policy which President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), and she herself announced now more than two and a half years ago at the 2014 Munich Security Conference.

Germany was “too big to merely comment on foreign policy from the sidelines” and would have to “be prepared to intervene earlier, more decisively and more substantially in foreign and security policy,” they declared at the time.

This week Von der Leyen reasserted that Germany is

a country that “has great significance, politically and economically, and must take on responsibility and also wants to take it on.” She declared: “If we don’t take care of Syria and Iraq, if we don’t take care of Afghanistan and Africa [...], if we don’t do our part, then the problems will come to us and it will be even worse. That is exactly what we don’t want.” The size of its military will therefore have to be larger and it would have to be well equipped.

“Taking on global responsibility” is code for militarily pursuing the economic and geopolitical interests of German imperialism worldwide. For that, the German elite, as in the past, requires a well equipped and numerically strong army.



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