

High on reassurance, low on deterrence – Germany's stance on strengthening NATO's eastern flank

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Germany's stance on strengthening NATO's eastern flank has evolved over the last two years. Berlin agreed to make collective defence a priority for NATO once again and consented to a greater allied presence in Poland and the Baltic states. Germany continues however to express reservations and is attempting to limit the scope of NATO's engagement. The overall change in Germany's policy was due to several reasons. In the last two years Germany has ceased to perceive Russia as a partner and begun instead to view it as a challenge to the security of Europe. Germany has also been pressed hard by its allies – the USA, Poland and the Baltic states – to change its position within NATO and to increase its military engagement on the eastern flank. Berlin has thus gradually expanded its military presence in the region – also in part so it may maintain its credibility within the alliance. However, Germany still eyes its military involvement on the eastern flank more along the lines of reassuring its allies than of deterring Russia. In recent years, German politicians have openly spoken of Germany taking the lead in European security policy. Due to the American rebalance to Asia-Pacific and continued involvement in the Middle East, the administration of President Barack Obama would like to vest greater political and military responsibility for European security in Germany. Berlin's ability to play this role does, though, have real limitations. The political consensus between the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats over Germany's policy in NATO (strengthening the eastern flank) and in the EU (maintaining sanctions against Russia) is crumbling ahead of parliamentary elections in 2017. The increasing energy dependence on Russia intensified by the Nord Stream 2 project is not being debated in the security policy context in Berlin. And the relative weakness of the German military is likely to remain in the short – and mid-term perspective. The planned increases in defence spending and changes to the reform of the Bundeswehr, are insufficient, when compared with the needs.

Between reassurance, deterrence and dialogue with Russia

Before 2014, collective defence was NATO's most important task in Germany's rhetoric. In practice, however, Germany opposed or was sceptical towards any initiatives to bolster NATO's ability to defend the eastern flank states (such as updating contingency plans, military exercises based on a collective defence scenario) put forward by Poland and the Baltic states in the face of Rus-

sia's increased defence spending, military activity in the Nordic-Baltic region and exercises of an offensive nature¹. Within NATO, Germany wanted to strengthen the cooperative security pillar, i.e. political dialogue and cooperation in

¹ NATO's crisis management operations and Germany's participation in them were viewed as an ultimate solution – after the experiences connected with interventions in Afghanistan and in Libya. Collective defence, crisis response and cooperative security are NATO's three main tasks, according to the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the summit in Lisbon in 2010.

order to maintain regional and global security. Berlin was convinced that Germany and Europe should pursue a policy of dialogue and cooperation towards Moscow, because “security in Europe is possible only with Russia, not against it”².

Germany still views its involvement on the eastern flank in terms of reassuring its allies and maintaining credibility within NATO, rather than deterring Russia.

Berlin did not perceive any military threat from Moscow and believed that an increased NATO presence on the eastern flank would only confirm Russia in its claims of being encircled. Therefore, Berlin did not support or take part in any activity which Russia could present, and German society could interpret, as a return to Cold War confrontation³. Germany’s stance was best illustrated by the Bundeswehr’s minimal involvement in NATO’s exercise Steadfast Jazz 2013. Organised in Poland and the Baltic states, the exercise was of high importance for the eastern allies since it was the first NATO field exercise⁴ based on a collective defence scenario in the region since the end of the Cold War and NATO’s eastward enlargement.

However, Germany’s stance on strengthening NATO’s eastern flank has evolved over the last two years, i.e. since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Berlin agreed to make collective defence a priority for NATO and consented to a greater allied presence in Poland and the Baltic states. However, Germany continued to express reservations about the scope

of NATO’s engagement. On the one hand, in the last two years Germany has ceased to perceive Russia a partner and begun instead to view it as “a challenge to the security of Europe”⁵. On the other hand, pressure by the USA, Poland and the Baltic states forced Germany to change its position on, and its contribution to NATO’s presence on the eastern flank. Berlin has gradually expanded its military presence in Poland and the Baltic states also in order to maintain its credibility within the alliance. However, Germany continues to view its involvement as a reassurance to the allies and as a contribution to NATO’s coherence rather than a deterrence to Russia. Berlin still considers the possibility of Russia’s military attack on a NATO member state close to zero. Germany has not changed its conviction that “security in Europe is possible only with Russia, not against it” and that dialogue and cooperation with Moscow are necessary. The policy of “deterrence and dialogue” was adopted as a double-track approach modelled on NATO’s policy of the 1970s based on the Harmel Report⁶.

Germany’s support for strengthening NATO’s eastern flank is still limited by the fear of confrontation with Russia. The German paradigm differs radically from the Polish or the Baltic one, who view an insufficient NATO’s presence as an encouragement for Russia to take aggressive measures leading to a limited confrontation and aimed at a weak reaction by NATO or none at all. Germany considers the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the 2002 Rome Dec-

² Coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD, Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten [Shaping Germany’s future], 16 December 2013, <https://www.cdu.de/sites/default/files/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag.pdf>

³ Justyna Gotkowska, ‘A weak link? Germany in the Euro-Atlantic security system’, *OSW Point of View*, 15 January 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2015-01-15/a-weak-link-germany-euro-atlantic-security-system>

⁴ For more see: Wojciech Lorenz, “Steadfast Jazz 2013” – NATO odzyskuje równowagę, *Biuletyn PISM nr 62*, 11 June 2013, <http://www.pism.pl/publikacje/biuletyn/nr-62-1038>

⁵ These revolutionary – for German standards – provisions are included in the new strategic document on German security policy published in July 2016, See: The Federal Government, White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr, July 2016, <https://www.bmvg.de/portal/a/bmvg/en/>

⁶ The report supported the implementation of a strategy based on two pillars: deterrence and détente. On the one hand, it proposed maintaining relevant military power and political solidarity, which are necessary to deter aggression and defend NATO’s territory. On the other hand, it attached equal importance to NATO’s development of more stable political and economic relations with the USSR, which was intended to help resolve political problems. The opinion that military security and the policy of détente are not contradictory but complementary, was of key importance.

laration to be the instruments to limit NATO's deterrence policy. These two documents contain provisions limiting substantial permanent NATO forces in new eastern member states. Germany has used them as a quasi-legal argument in debates within NATO even though they are not legally binding and Russia has violated them thus significantly contributing to the deterioration of a change in European security.

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From Germany's perspective, the sine qua non of NATO's strategy towards Russia involves a policy fostering dialogue with Russia. Germany considers it necessary to maintain channels of political and military communication between NATO and Russia in order to avoid escalation of incidents, to support transparency and the predictability of actions by both sides and to ensure proper communication of NATO's intentions. Germany views the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) as a forum for this type of dialogue. It was on Germany's request that the Council's meeting was convened in April 2016 after a two year hiatus⁷. Germany intends to develop dialogue with Russia not only within NATO, but also within the OSCE and in international forums. Berlin considers it necessary to seek cooperation with Moscow in international security policy (a.o. Iran's nuclear program, conflict resolution and fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, preventing the disintegration of state structures in Libya). Germany tries to encourage Russia to take part in devising solutions to international security problems. This is intended

⁷ The meeting has brought no results. Topics discussed included the conflict in Ukraine, transparency in the field of military operations, and Afghanistan. Germany supported the idea of convening another meeting ahead of the NATO Warsaw summit or immediately afterwards.

to expand areas of cooperation and minimise areas of conflict and thereby to contribute to an improvement of NATO's relations with Russia also in the area of European security. By promoting the dialogue with Russia, Germany often refers to the Harmel Report and considers it the beginning of the Western policy of détente towards the USSR, which, from Berlin's perspective, triggered the end of the Cold War. Germany's interpretation of history differs radically from the prevailing view in the countries of NATO's eastern flank, according to which the Eastern Bloc's economic problems, additionally aggravated by the arms race with the USA, were at the root of the USSR's demise.

With its change of course within NATO, Germany's role in European security policy has been strengthened. The USA, which is in the process of rebalancing its policy to the Asia-Pacific and has been involved in military operations in the Middle East, wants its European allies to engage more resources to ensuring Europe's security. The administration of President Barack Obama views Germany as a forthcoming leader of the European security policy, which should assume greater political and military responsibility in the face of Russia's aggressive policy. The USA has withdrawn from playing a leading political role in the Russian-Ukrainian war and has delegated the task of conflict resolution to Germany. Berlin has also become the USA's main European partner in introducing and maintaining economic sanctions against Russia. The USA is also putting pressure on Germany for Berlin to lead the military engagement of the European allies on the eastern flank. This tendency may intensify due to a future Brexit – the UK will need to focus on domestic problems and a possible break-up of its union, which may have a negative impact on the British military potential and on the scope of Britain's involvement on the eastern flank⁸. During the more than 25 years following reunification Germa-

⁸ The United Kingdom is the second largest European ally in terms of the scale of involvement on the eastern flank.

ny's political and economic importance in Europe has increased, and the role of France and that of Britain have weakened. Berlin now also wishes to boost its influence in the area of European security policy⁹.

Considerable, non-controversial and quiet – the Bundeswehr's presence on NATO's eastern flank

Over the last two years, Germany's status has evolved from that of a "big absent one" on NATO's eastern flank to that of a state with major involvement in the Baltic Sea region. Regardless of the assessment of the political motivation behind Germany's actions, this is a major change, considering Berlin's domestic limitations.

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In 2014, Germany was only militarily involved in measures reassuring its allies on the eastern flank¹⁰. The year 2015, however, brought increased German involvement in the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) which was adopted at the NATO summit in Wales¹¹. In the process of adaptation of the NATO Response Force (NRF), in 2015 Germany became a framework nation in the newly created Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The Bundeswehr assumed command of the land component of the VJTF and set up its combat core

in the form of a mechanised infantry battalion. Germany will serve as one of the six VJTF framework nations again in 2019. Moreover, Germany, alongside Poland and Denmark, agreed to raise the rank of the headquarters of the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin (MNC NE) and to increase its readiness. In the future, this will enable MNC NE to assume command over VJTF forces deployed on the eastern flank in case of a conflict. Germany has also become involved in reassurance measures towards its eastern allies. Berlin began sending one company (150–200 soldiers) for rotational three-month presence to the Baltic states and Poland¹². During 2015 this type of involvement of other European allies was much more limited. According to data from the German ministry of defence, in 2015 a total of around 5,200 Bundeswehr soldiers took part in exercises organised in the region¹³, which – along with the United Kingdom – was the most substantial military involvement of the European members of NATO. In 2016, Germany continued to be militarily engaged on the eastern flank and will carry on this involvement in 2017. Bundeswehr companies rotate in the Baltic states and Poland¹⁴. For the first time, the German air force is to take part in a rotational presence on the eastern flank (aside from Baltic Air Policing, BAP) – it will deploy a deployable control and reporting centre in Latvia (July–September 2016). The Bundeswehr has also taken part in a series of exercises in Poland and the Baltic states ahead of the NATO summit in Warsaw (BALTOPS, Saber Strike, Anaconda) contributing around 1,750 soldiers (in terms of the number of soldiers involved it was ranked third after the USA – around 17,000 soldiers and the United Kingdom – around 1,850 soldiers).

⁹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's New Global Role – Berlin steps up, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2016, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Interviews/2016/160615_BM_ForeignAffairs.html

¹⁰ Germany became involved in NATO's extended Baltic Air Policing mission (4 Eurofighter jets, September–December 2014) and in the revived Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) operating in the Baltic Sea.

¹¹ NATO, Readiness Action Plan, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm#

¹² Lithuania: May–July 2015, Latvia: August–October 2015, Poland: October–December 2015.

¹³ Aside from the involvement of land troops, four German Eurofighter jets took part in Baltic Air Policing Mission (September–December 2015); moreover – similar to previous years – German warships operated in the Baltic Sea in the framework of the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) as well as in NATO, US, and multinational exercises.

¹⁴ Lithuania: April–June 2016, Estonia: July–October 2016, Poland: September–December 2016.

Germany (alongside the USA, the United Kingdom and Canada) will also become a framework nation responsible for forming one of the four battalion-sized battlegroups (each including

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800–1,000 soldiers) to be present on the eastern flank. Around 600 German soldiers along with the military equipment will be stationed in Lithuania on a rotational basis. Vilnius will thus become Germany's major partner on the eastern flank. This collaboration will be intensified by military-technical cooperation due to Lithuania's purchase of German military equipment (21 used PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers, 88 new Boxer infantry fighting vehicles).

Germany has pursued a special strategy in its military engagement on NATO's eastern flank. The involvement of the German air force has been the most limited (rotations within BAP and limited participation in exercises). The German army takes part in a large number of exercises, to which it contributes however rather smaller units (from 50 to 600 soldiers). Thus, the Bundeswehr marks its presence without emphasising it – unlike the United Kingdom or Denmark, which send large contingents of soldiers to selected exercises (over 1,000 soldiers). The German government is also sceptical about the organisation of large-scale land exercises on the eastern flank. It does not sidestep participation, but it does not emphasise its contribution either. From Berlin's perspective, this type of exercises is an unnecessary 'show of force' which may exacerbate the relations with Moscow and be interpreted in domestic debates Germany as NATO provocation. The German navy has been expanding its presence in the Baltic Sea, which was visible in this year's BALTOPS naval exer-

cise. The navy points to the Baltic Sea as one of its strategic areas of involvement (ahead of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean). From the German point of view, the maritime presence is the least controversial and the most obvious one since Germany has the largest naval potential in the region. Germany intends to combine its increased involvement in the Baltic Sea with development of cooperation with partners in the region. Germany has offered to be the framework nation for multilateral operations in the Baltic Sea and has proposed a joint maritime headquarters to be established in Rostock¹⁵.

The crumbling consensus, a weak Bundeswehr and energy dependency on Russia

Changes in the German have certain limitations. Firstly, it is uncertain whether the consensus reached by the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats regarding NATO's double track policy towards Russia will be sustained. In June 2016, the interview of the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for *Bild am Sonntag*, was widely understood as questioning the German government's policy in NATO as agreed between the CDU/CSU and the SPD¹⁶. The Social Democrats have already launched their campaign ahead of the elections to the Bundestag (autumn 2017), in which foreign and security policy will be the main topic. The SPD

¹⁵ Germany has proposed that a Baltic Maritime Coordination Centre is to be established on the basis of Maritime Operations Centre within the structures of the German navy, which would serve as the maritime component command for multilateral operations in the Baltic Sea. See: A speech by Andreas Krause, German Inspector of the Navy, Wilhelmshavener Erklärung zur Zukunft der Deutschen Marine [Wilhelmshaven declaration on the future of the German navy], 12 February 2016, http://www.marine.de/portal/a/marine/!ut/p/c4/NYq7DsIwDEX_yE4LUiW2RF3YEAuUzbRWZZF-HZbmw8PEkA_dIZzkXH1jJ9JaVTEqmiHecZjk9P5BIgV-62c4yMt_ZbGOaS2ZqNs0n1qmRFYStqsZVdtRaQBSfX-jcEN7r_u64dDuPj-2l_ncMUtJf8D119Zpg!!/

¹⁶ Interview with Frank-Walter Steinmeier, *Bild am Sonntag*, 19 June 2016, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2016/160619_BM_Bild_am_Sonntag_engl_version.html

will want to present itself as a party of “peace and dialogue” in contrast to the “confrontation-oriented” CDU. Emphasising the supremacy of dialogue and cooperation with Russia over NATO’s policy of deterrence and criticising military exercises on the eastern flank (which the Bundeswehr took part in), Steinmeier not only indirectly criticised defence minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) but also undermined the government’s strategy to slowly make German public opinion accustomed to the Bundeswehr’s involvement on NATO’s eastern flank.

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Moreover, statements by Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel, the SPD’s chairman and deputy chancellor, pave the way for a possible centre-left coalition composed of the SPD, the Green Party and the post-Communist Left Party to be formed after the elections in 2017¹⁷. The Greens are internally divided, although the majority – which promotes human rights and supports democratic changes in Eastern European states – supports the government’s policy within NATO, although it is rather demure in doing so. The Left Party however openly proposes the dissolution of NATO and the formation of a collective security system with Russia’s participation, or at least would like Germany to leave the military structures of NATO. It opposes the policy of strengthening the eastern flank and the Bundeswehr’s participation in foreign operations. Forming a centre-left coalition of this kind would not be tantamount to meeting the above-mentioned demands. However,

¹⁷ This was suggested by the leader of SPD and deputy chancellor in the present government. See Sigmar Gabriel, Im Schafspelz [In sheep’s clothing], *Spiegel* 25/2016, 18 June 2016, https://magazin.spiegel.de/SP/2016/25/145417418/index.html?utm_source=spon&utm_campaign=vorab

it would trigger certain limitations in the policy Germany has thus far pursued within NATO, in the Bundeswehr’s involvement on the eastern flank and in defence spending. If the CDU formed a government with the FDP and/or with the Green Party, continuation of the current policy would be guaranteed but hampered by sharp criticism from the centre-left opposition and the anti-establishment party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is critical of NATO and supports the idea of developing good relations with Russia. Despite the fierce electoral campaign, another grand coalition of the CDU and SPD would be a guarantee that the present policy would be more or less maintained.

Aside from domestic political issues, the relative weakness of the German military will be maintained in the short- and mid-term perspective, which reduces Germany’s credibility and ambitions to be a leader of European security policy, including on NATO’s eastern flank. The German armed forces in the last two years have been undergoing only minor changes to adapt to collective defence operations. The present structure of the military is a result of a wide-ranging reform which has been implemented since 2011. It aimed to create budget savings and to adjust the Bundeswehr to performing asymmetrical crisis management operations. The reform has resulted in major cuts in the number of troops and in a reduction of arms and military equipment mainly in the army and in the air force. Problems with military equipment were aggravated by intensive exploitation in foreign operations and by delays in the armaments projects. This causes limitations in the availability of equipment in full operational readiness. The best example of that were the problems with making one mechanised battalion as part of the land component of the VJTF in 2015 fully equipped and combat ready. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, combined with the destabilisation of Europe’s southern neighbourhood, resulted in plans to increase defence spending and to amend the ongoing reform. The financial framework

for 2017–2020 provides for a gradual defence budget increase – from 34.2 billion euros in 2016 to 39.1 billion euros in 2020. Despite this, Germany’s military spending will continue to oscillate between 1.1% and 1.3% of its GDP, and a portion of this spending will be earmarked for personnel costs which had previously been funded from a different budget line. By 2023, the ministry of defence plans to increase the number of soldiers by 7,000 and the number of civilian jobs by 4,400. It also plans to increase the number of armoured vehicles (for example, to increase the number of Leopard 2 tanks from 225 to 320). According to unofficial information, the ministry of defence itself has assessed the increased spending on arms and military equipment as being insufficient. This shortfall will not be compensated by Germany’s efforts to develop military cooperation under the concept of framework nations¹⁸ or in pooling & sharing projects (the joint acquisition and use of capabilities). Moreover, Germany’s energy dependence on Russia, to be intensified by the Nord Stream 2 project is not being debated in the security

policy context in Berlin. Germany perceives the extension of the Nord Stream project by a second gas pipeline (agreement signed in September 2015) mainly in economic terms – Germany wants to strengthen its position on the European gas market. For Berlin the Nord Stream 1 and 2 project support political cooperation with Russia and create interdependencies which exclude any confrontation between the two sides. For Moscow these projects serve as a foreign and security policy tool which may be used to apply pressure on Germany also in the case of a conflict between NATO and Russia. Nord Stream 2 will also cause a reduction of main supply routes of Russian gas to the EU – from three (the Baltic route via Nord Stream, the Yamal route via Poland, the Brotherhood route via Ukraine) to two. Ukraine will lose the status of a key transit state and will de facto become an end recipient of Russian gas, which will weaken its position in all formats of talks with Russia. After the completion of Nord Stream 2, it will be Germany, who becomes the main transit state and the main recipient of Russian gas in the EU. There is no debate in Germany on how this increased dependency on Russia may impact Germany’s security policy. From the perspective of the countries on NATO’s eastern flank, this may influence Germany’s credibility as an ally, and have an impact on Germany’s ambitions to play a leading role on NATO’s eastern flank, in European security policy and in military cooperation in Central and Northern Europe.

¹⁸ The concept provides for the development of military capabilities in Europe in multinational clusters in which smaller nations would develop their capabilities in cooperation and integration with a big framework nation. According to this concept, the Bundeswehr would be the core of regionally integrated military structures. For more see: Justyna Gotkowska, ‘Germany’s idea of a European army’, *OSW Analyses*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-03-25/germanys-idea-a-european-army>

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