

# Ambitious Framework Nation: Germany in NATO

**Bundeswehr Capability Planning and the “Framework Nations Concept”**

Rainer L. Glatz and Martin Zapfe

**Berlin is pursuing ambitious plans for security and defence, with significant potential for the *Bundeswehr* and European partner militaries. In the long-term, the *Bundeswehr* could well become Europe’s indispensable army, with Germany as a “framework nation” contributing decisively to NATO’s readiness. This will require the future German government to accept an unaccustomed politico-military leadership role. It will also be necessary to increase defence spending for the long term.**

A stronger German role within NATO, as envisioned by the Federal Government, ultimately requires increased military capabilities. Over the last months, the German Ministry of Defence (MoD) has made significant progress in its force and capability planning with fundamental implications for both Germany and NATO. First thoughts on how to operationalize the strategic aims of its 2016 White Paper were formulated in March 2017 by the MoD’s Director General for Planning, Lieutenant General Erhard Bühler (the so-called “Bühler-Paper”). In the absence of a new and comprehensive capstone “*Concept of the Bundeswehr*”, this document currently constitutes the effective planning basis for the armed forces.

In this process, the German and NATO perspective are inseparable. The aim for current *Bundeswehr* planning is twofold:

Together with the British and French armed forces, the *Bundeswehr* is to form the backbone of European defence within NATO. In addition, and primarily through the much-discussed *Framework Nations Concept* (FNC), the *Bundeswehr* is to contribute, directly and indirectly, to the future development of allied forces, and thus to Europe’s capacity to act as part of NATO.

The practical relevance of NATO policy guidance and capability planning targets is now the highest in decades and sets the basic parameters of Berlin’s capability planning.

## The Return of Collective Defence

Any attempt to understand current *Bundeswehr* planning must first start with a look backwards. For several years now, intense budgetary pressure and operational neces-

sities have forced the *Bundeswehr* to prioritize among the core tasks outlined by NATO in 2010: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security.

Since the end of the Cold War, the *Bundeswehr* had focused increasingly on international crisis management. In 2011 the MoD's "Defence Policy Guidelines" decisively set crisis management operations as its chief structural determinant. In the process, capabilities for collective defence – as extended national defence – suffered. In addition, following the financial crisis, budgetary pressure was immense. Significant savings were realised, inter alia, by not equipping army divisions fully according to the stated requirements. Where necessary to equip units for training and operations, the required equipment was to be made available through efficient management – meaning transferring it from other units supposedly less in need of it. This invariably created "hollow structures". The *Bundeswehr*'s brigades, squadrons, and flotillas should – and could – support those units on operations, but not deploy as organic formations. A scenario of collective defence was, after all, considered highly unlikely. This planning assumption became obsolete when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Consequently, the central tenets of current *Bundeswehr* planning are a return to collective defence as guiding paradigm and an energetic effort to fill up the forces' "hollow structures". While collective defence and crisis management officially remain of equal importance, this claim lacks credibility. Structurally, the *Bundeswehr* prioritizes high-intensity operations for collective defence. The same single set of forces will then have to provide troops for crisis management operations. That is consequential, yet also implies that future missions (like in northern Africa) might only be sustainable by contributing smaller contingents. This compromise is the de facto basis for current *Bundeswehr* planning.

### **“Basic Posture” and “Mission Structure”**

The tension between officially giving equal importance to all missions while de facto prioritizing collective defence is to be reconciled through the concepts of “basic posture”, “mission structure”, and “mission packages”. In principle, the *Bundeswehr*'s “basic posture” (*Grundaufstellung*) – its garrisons and the basic order of battle – will remain roughly unchanged. Contrary to some reports, there will be no significant increase in strength. The basic posture is supposed to reflect the primary task of collective defence, especially for designated units of high readiness. Yet as a general rule all units are supposed to regroup into “mission structures” (*Einsatzstruktur*) tailored to task-specific requirements when called to action. This is to be achieved through so-called “mission packages” (*Missionspakete*) that are intended to bridge any capability gap between the basic force posture and the operational requirements at hand.

To illustrate, if an armoured brigade were to deploy to NATO's eastern border, the unit would move swiftly and largely in its peacetime composition. If that same brigade were to send soldiers to a stabilisation operation, it could swap its organic main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles for protected patrol vehicles externally stored as “mission packages”.

This system is key to making sense of the figures circulating in media reports. The *Bühler-Paper* defines a “national level of ambition” with indeed ambitious targets, especially regarding the land forces. Much like today, the *German Army* is to have three divisional headquarters and eight brigades by 2032. By that date, however, all of these should be deployable simultaneously for the purpose of collective defence. Looking beyond 2032, it should even be possible to deploy up to ten brigades in “mission structures”. However, more important than the mere number of brigades are efforts to reconstitute the *Heer*'s “hollow structures”. To regain lost operational capabilities, the

field army's brigades, divisions and corps will be reassigned critical support units. For example, to regain critical indirect fire capabilities, rocket and tube artillery is to be organically reintegrated into the brigades, divisions, and corps through so-called "artillery capability packages" (*"Fähigkeitspakete Artillerie"*) of as of now unspecified strength and structure.

As part of NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense System, the *German Air Force* has traditionally been closely oriented towards the Alliance. With its flying platforms and ground-based systems, the *Luftwaffe* is to perform all the core functions of aerial warfare, while also preparing to provide the core of a *Multinational Air Group* capable of up to 350 sorties per day. Additionally, the air force is to regain a credible capacity for naval air warfare. The *German Navy* shall be able to provide at least 15 platforms and vital support capabilities at all times. Further capability targets are defined for the cyber domain, special operations forces, the Joint Medical Service (*Zentraler Sanitätsdienst*) and Joint Support Service (*Streitkräftebasis*). Thus, while the army might benefit from significant investments, the air force and navy are supposed to modernize and expand their capabilities primarily on the basis of existing platforms, and only secondarily by introducing new systems.

In this process, the *Bundeswehr* consistently subordinates itself under NATO guidance and participates in multinational force development. NATO's role manifests itself in two ways: First, through the *Bundeswehr's* near-complete integration into NATO's Defence Planning Process (NDPP); and, second, through Germany's often misunderstood leadership role in the Alliance's FNC.

### Guidance from Brussels

On the first aspect: With its reorientation toward collective defence, the *Bundeswehr* follows NATO's strategic guidance. The NATO summits in Wales 2014 and Warsaw 2016 were landmarks of an increased Allied effort to credibly reassure Allies and deter

a revanchist Russia. In its 2015 Political Guidance, the Alliance agreed on a new level of ambition based, inter alia, on an ambitious scenario of conventional collective defence (*Major Joint Operation – Plus* (MJO+)). On this basis, member states and NATO institutions have negotiated targets for future force planning.

Germany, for the first time and as the first major member state, accepted the outcomes of the NDPP as the basis of its own planning. While Berlin continues to retain full control over the process – only those requirements *accepted* fully or in part form the basis of its planning efforts, and even those are merely *politically* binding – this is a significant step, both in terms of symbolism and planning guidance. The majority of targets described above are to be met by 2032. Thus, Germany's national capability targets are to be in sync with NATO's planning, in the long term aiming at qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient capabilities across the Alliance.

### Towards an "Anchor Army"

On the second aspect: The *Bundeswehr* is set to assume indirect responsibility for the force development of Allied armies. Few other aspects of current German force planning have received more international attention, and few are plagued by greater misconceptions, than Germany's role in the FNC. If implemented consistently, and with strategic realism, this concept has the potential to substantially change the structure and character of European armed forces within NATO and beyond.

Today's FNC originates in a German idea of 2013. While NATO adopted the FNC the following year, it still is essentially designed, financed, and implemented by the member states. This results in an inherent flexibility; yet on the downside, it infuses a confusing ambiguity in terminology. NATO alone effectively knows three different FNC approaches, each grouped around a respective framework nation. Parallel to the German-coordinated group, one group around the

UK's *Joint Expeditionary Force* aims at a specific combined and joint task force for high-intensity operations; the other, coordinated by Italy and significantly less ambitious, aims at developing capabilities for stabilisation operations. In addition, the EU, too, has decided to launch its own "Framework Nation Concept" (consciously adopted without the letter -s at the end of "Nation") in 2015. This analysis uses the term "FNC" exclusively with regard to the group coordinated by Germany.

Processes reflect politics, and thus Germany assumes a central role in the FNC. It chairs the main steering committees and is responsible for preparing and following-up the meetings of FNC defence ministers where basic decisions are made.

The German-led FNC group has two distinct pillars which are only partially interdependent. Since the beginning, it has focused on the *coordinated development of capabilities* in so-called "Clusters"; since 2015, an additional focus has been placed developing *large multinational formations*. To this day, 19 nations have joined Germany. Out of this group of 20, seven have thus far committed troops to the "larger formations", and several others are deliberating on this possibility. Formally, both pillars of the FNC are of equal importance. Considering its effects on current *Bundeswehr* and NATO planning, the development of "larger formations" is of higher significance.

### Capability Development

The primary objective of the FNC's first pillar is the coordinated closure of capability gaps by the participating states. While the initial identification of these gaps is done by NATO, the subsequent steps are taken by the FNC-members, coordinated by Germany. The German FNC has 16 clusters, each dedicated to one capability (such as Anti-Submarine Warfare). Members are free to decide in which clusters to participate, and have the alternative of obtaining observer status. Each cluster is coordinated by a unit of the German MoD.

This capability focus was not revolutionary in 2013/2014 as similar programs already existed in both NATO and the EU (*Smart Defence/Pooling & Sharing*). Yet the programme gained new relevance when, in 2015, the FNC defence ministers agreed to link this capability development with NATO's strategic-operational response to Russia's aggression. Through this link, the clusters no longer necessarily represent stand-alone solutions but can provide capabilities directly to the Alliance's dedicated rapid reaction forces, such as NATO's "Spearhead", the *Very High Readiness Joint Task Force* (VJTF) and the *enhanced NATO Response Force* (eNRF). For example, a Role 2 field hospital stood up in one cluster is supposed to be made available for a specific VJTF rotation, thereby providing clear parameters for planning efforts.

### Developing "Larger Formations"

It is only in the context of the FNC's "larger formations" around the framework nation that current *Bundeswehr* planning can be fully understood. Interpreted elsewhere as essentially creating a "European Army" (possibly even dominated by Berlin), this pillar is first only a plan for multinational force development – although an ambitious one.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO was forced to once again lay the groundwork for credibly deterring Russia. A vital part of any such deterrent rests on credible conventional response options. Since 2014, NATO has made significant progress. The Alliance agreed to establish the *enhanced Forward Presence* (eFP) in the Baltic States and Poland, a politically balanced and militarily necessary step. With the eFP now deployed, the focus shifts towards the question of follow-on forces to reinforce the still rather weak forces in place. The first "wave" in any conflict would naturally be the eFP, the forces of host nations and, possibly, unilaterally deployed formations. The eNRF, and especially its "Spearhead", is to provide the second wave. Without any designated force for the third wave, this

would have to be stood-up from member states' forces as they are.

It is here where force development and defence planning meet, and it is in this context where the second pillar of the FNC is to create effects. The aim of the “larger formations” is twofold. Firstly, to enhance interoperability and harmonise capability development of Allied forces through close cooperation with designated *Bundeswehr* units. Secondly, to secure the basis for combat-effective multinational divisions around Germany as the framework nation, and thus a basis from which to generate follow-on forces – with an eye primarily, but not exclusively, to NATO's east. This is new, and a politically and militarily highly ambitious agenda.

Germany's role in these formations and structures – whether on land, in the air, or at sea – would be significant. A view on the FNC's timelines and objectives shows the integral links with current *Bundeswehr* planning. By 2032, and thus in parallel to Germany's national plans, the FNC force pool is to provide three multinational mechanized divisions, each capable of commanding up to five armoured brigades. As of now, two of these divisions would be formed around German divisional headquarters. Indeed, for the *Luftwaffe*, national and FNC-targets are partly identical: The FNC's envisioned *Multinational Air Group* is a basic planning parameter for the German Air Force and would rely to more than 75 percent on German capabilities. With an eye to the navy, the FNC manifests itself most clearly in the re-establishment of the well-known regional focus on the Baltic Sea, establishing a *Baltic Maritime Component Command* around German structures. In any scenario of collective defence Germany could thus well become the indispensable framework nation for most of its smaller FNC partners, and NATO as a whole.

It is with regard to the nature of the “subordination” of Allied FNC units under German structures where the main misconception arises. Although the *Bühler-Paper's* terms are not used explicitly, its

paradigm that the “basic posture” does not necessarily have to mirror the respective “mission structure” could apply to the FNC as well: Neither is any Allied brigade, whether Dutch, Czech or Romanian, completely subordinate to the *Bundeswehr*, nor are they permanently stationed in Germany and fully integrated into Germany's force posture. Each state, including Germany, retains full sovereignty over its forces and will ultimately have to decide freely how to equip and whether to deploy its forces. Naturally, closely linking European forces could lead to de facto dependencies; and, indeed, the FNC's success may well depend on coordinated dependencies. As smaller states lose capabilities, their dependency on the larger framework nation grows – a dependency potentially institutionalized through the FNC. Yet just as all states are invited to “plug in” parts of their forces to German structures, they retain the explicit right to “plug out” at any point in time. This in itself should make it clear that concerns about a “German-dominated European Army” only serve to obscure the many relevant implications of the FNC. At the same time, however, this lack of legally binding cooperation in times of crisis should also caution against overblown expectations of efficiency gains through the FNC.

### **Critical Implications**

Of the many implications, six seem most critical for the *Bundeswehr* and Germany's role in the Alliance.

#### **A Risky Prioritisation**

Structurally prioritizing high-intensity warfare and collective defence is a logical move that accurately reflects current challenges. Yet, like any prioritization, it carries risks.

For NATO as a whole, not prioritizing any specific region – its “360-degree approach” of Wales – is an acceptable political compromise, as its member states' armed forces naturally focus on their respective regional

challenges. While Paris, to take one example, focusses almost exclusively on counter-terrorism operations in Northern Africa and on its own soil, it has kept its presence in NATO's eFP to a minimum. The *Bundeswehr*, however, is prioritizing collective defence, yet the "anchor army" will not be able to refrain from participating in potential missions to NATO's south.

While the triad of "basic posture", "mission structure" and "mission packages" might be able to alleviate some strains on the force structure, it cannot be a panacea. Any new stability operation on the scale of ISAF, or an escalation of *Resolute Support* in Afghanistan, would come with many of the same challenges around force generation and sustainability that the *Bundeswehr* had to consistently overcome since 1990. The MoD's planning is refreshingly clear. Yet policy makers in government and parliament have to be aware of the associated risks.

#### **Expensive Plans**

The *Bundeswehr's* ambitious plans will require a further and long-term rise in defence spending. It will be important to provide planning security that allows for long-term projects to be implemented over more than one fiscal year. Significant progress has already been made. The MoD is on course towards a budget of 42.4 billion Euros by 2021, from only 37 billion Euros in 2017. What is more, Germany already wants to reach NATO's defence investment target of spending 20 percent of its defence budget on procurement and investments by 2020.

This trend is far more important than the politically sensitive and counterproductive debate concerning NATO's "two percent goal". While member states pledged to work towards spending 2 percent of their GDP on defence by 2024 – with varying interpretations of this pledge's binding character – Germany is still far from that threshold, even under the current increases. By 2021, defence spending will likely have risen to about 1.3 percent of GDP – current

economic growth rates remaining the same. Yet irrespective from politically sensitive numbers, it seems clear that even investments of 130 billion Euros already promised until 2030 will not suffice to modernise the *Bundeswehr* while meeting the FNC's ambitious objectives.

Crucially, the FNC will not help to save money – to the contrary. The concept's long-term success might depend on more efficient spending through harmonized equipment of the "larger formations". Yet the FNC aims at military efficacy first, and efficiency only second. Unlike *Smart Defence* or *Pooling & Sharing*, the FNC is a politico-military investment project. As a framework nation, Germany will effectively – if indirectly – finance the capability development of allied armies. The FNC is not an economic but a security policy concept, and a politico-military leadership role will not come cheap.

#### **Avoiding the "Modernisation Trap"**

As a concept aimed at efficacy first, it is all the more important that Germany keeps the FNC focussed on its long-term goal: developing a balanced force pool from which to generate the forces for any contingency rather than creating standing and multinational rapid reaction forces. Earlier efforts of NATO and the EU to develop multinational forces in peacetime fell into the "modernisation trap". Both the NRF and the *EU Battle Groups* were successful instruments of force development yet did not provide effective operational formations. Too cumbersome were their processes, too inflexible their structures, and too complicated the political negotiations among troop-contributing member states. Whenever rapid and decisive action was needed, it fell mostly to overwhelmingly national forces that were quickly mobilized and deployed.

The "modernisation trap" is inherent in the FNC's inclusive approach: interoperability is not a precondition for participation, but rather is the ultimate objective of cooperation. While doubtless necessary to

increase the number of potential partners, a look at the current “troop contributors” to the FNC’s “larger formations” implies that for many of Germany’s Central European partners, the long-term modernisation of their forces is paramount. It appears critical not to politically overstate the expectations of the “larger formations” combat effectiveness – with the possible exception of the Dutch-German cooperation.

Germany has often, and not without reason, been suspected by some of its larger allies of regularly favouring military integration with an eye on political symbolism first, and practical concerns only second: Cooperation for the mere sake of cooperation. The FNC, however, is a systematic and structured approach to gradually build European forces within NATO, and to thereby indirectly facilitate the generation of forces for specific missions. National forces will continue to be the bedrock of NATO for many years. Thus, Berlin will not be able to “cooperate its way out” of its responsibility.

### **Spill-Over Effects to the EU**

With few exceptions, neither NATO nor the EU permanently control forces. That is no downside, however. Through its long-term focus on generating a pool of principally national forces rather than standing multinational units, the FNC might contribute to European security beyond the Atlantic Alliance. While FNC units may be assigned to NATO, the FNC’s “larger formations” remain under the sovereign control of the member states – and may thus also be deployed for EU operations, thereby contributing significantly to the EU’s capacity to act.

Coordination with EU-processes is further facilitated by the European Defence Agency currently holding observer status within the FNC. If handled smartly, the new initiatives under the EU’s “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (PESCO), driven forward with great ambitions at the Franco-German Council of Ministers in July 2017, can be fully complementary to the FNC. Given current rifts in transatlantic rela-

tions, the FNC has the potential to strengthen the European pillar not only within NATO, but also beyond the Alliance.

### **Political Challenges for Berlin**

For Berlin, finding itself in a politico-military leadership role is a rather new and unfamiliar experience. Even if the FNC does not legally bind Germany, the *Bundeswehr* will become one of the most important armed forces in Europe; and through the FNC, it will accept an indirect responsibility for the development of Allied forces. It therefore seems vital that the political processes and debates in Berlin begin to reflect Germany’s growing weight.

For the national debate necessary, the 2015 conclusions of the “Rühe-Commission” contain concrete proposals. After a review of the law governing *Bundeswehr* deployments, the committee suggested steps to *politically* increase the binding character of these cooperation initiatives. In addition, discussing the nature of current scenarios of collective defence and its political and constitutional implications, as proposed by the commission, does not appear any less relevant today.

### **Necessity for German Leadership**

Finally, it will need continuous German leadership to fully realize the potential of the FNC and current *Bundeswehr* planning. This is not an empty argument. Any lack of leadership by Berlin would likely turn the FNC’s strength – its flexibility as an initiative driven by the states – into a critical weakness. In the MoD, and within NATO, the FNC has to be led with clear responsibilities and at high levels.

As of today, the *Bundeswehr*’s plans as outlined above still float about at the lofty heights of ministerial concepts. Many questions remain open, and the *Bundeswehr*’s services are currently tasked with examining the manifold implications. Yet should Germany be willing to shoulder the long-term political, military, and financial costs

associated with the *Bundeswehr's* ambitious plans and the FNC – and should the German public support such a commitment – the MoD's current course has the potential to leverage the Germany's capability planning for its European partners within and beyond the Alliance – especially in times of crisis.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect the authors' views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 1861-1761

*Translation by Annabelle Vuille*

(English version of  
SWP-Aktuell 62/2017)

### Further Reading

*Rainer Glatz and Martin Zapfe*  
**NATO Defence Planning between Wales and Warsaw. Politico-military Challenges of a Credible Assurance against Russia**  
SWP Comments 5/2016, January 2016

*Claudia Major and Christian Mölling*  
**The Framework Nations Concept. Germany's Contribution to a Capable European Defence**  
SWP Comments 52/2014, December 2014