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Defence Policy in Transition

Among the changes in Germany’s position as a result of the end of the cold war, the role and the use of power in the international system is one that the Germans find very difficult to come to terms with, since the exercise of such power was politically and morally restrained as a consequence of the Second World War. This applies in particular to the use of force. West Germans born after the war without the direct sense of a military threat to West German security arising from the experience of the Berlin air-lift, the division of Germany, the crushing of the uprising in East Germany, the erection of the Berlin wall, that is the development of the cold war in Central Europe where Germany was on the frontline, were socialized in a different manner from the older generation. Their parents which experienced the formation of the Federal Republic whose political culture developed on a foundation of the rejection of Nazism and the rehabilitation of West Germany in the international world, the rebuilding of the shattered German economy on the basis of high German productivity and generous American aid (Marshall Plan) and the reliance on an American security. The United States thus was seen both as the protector of West Germany as well as the model for democratic values. Part of the process of international rehabilitation was the profound rejection of militarism. The Bundeswehr was developed as a force whose sole purpose it was to make sure that it would never be used.¹

The requirements of the new international situation have given rise to a wide debate in Germany about these issues. During the cold war the perceived external threat provided the rationale for West Germany’s defence policy and served to define the parameters of force planning. What are the requirements for defence in an era where Germany is facing no military threats?

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At one end of the spectrum is the view that Germany has now been rehabilitated in the international community; it must become a ‘normal’ state. Furthermore, in view of its economic and military resources and its location in the centre of Europe, Germany has to play a leading role in Europe, East and West. Its economic and political weight means that Germany will have to assume greater international responsibilities. This includes international security. Germany has to come to terms with the fact that it is a major medium-range power. For Germany to assume its responsibilities in the international arena will require the use of influence and power, including, if necessary, military force, although the use of force is envisaged not as a tool of power politics, but rather as a contribution to peacekeeping and intervention in conflicts in Europe. This view has been articulated by some prominent academics such as Michael Stürmer, the former Director of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, and Hans-Peter Schwarz from the University of Bonn, and it was widely shared among the political élite in charge during the early post-cold war years, especially those close to the government. Former Chancellor Kohl, President Herzog and former defence minister Rühe all made explicit statements along those lines.

Quite a different perspective is based on the definition of Germany as a ‘civilian power’. The implication is that Germany, like Japan, has a unique experience as an economically successful state, rehabilitated from its former aggressive nationalism. During the rehabilitation period it was constrained in its foreign policy and thereby forced to adopt instruments of foreign policy that did not involve military force or the exercise of power. Germany should continue to play the role of a ‘civilian power’, based on the reality of international interdependence, with a strong emphasis on multilateral security arrangements and settlement of conflicts by negotiations. It should continue to rely on political and economic instruments as a way of conducting foreign policy. This notion, with the implication that Germany should abstain from military action abroad, was adopted by many on the left of the political spectrum, including the ‘realist’ branch of the Green Party.

Much of this debate focused rather narrowly on the question of whether Bundeswehr can be used in combat missions outside the NATO treaty area. It is therefore necessary to look in some detail at this debate and its outcome so far.