



# Incoming!

## Germany's Thrifty Defense Budget Under Fire

By Stephan Strothe

NATO's current infighting would probably have shocked even the reportedly unflappable Lord Hastings Ismay, the alliance's first Secretary General. He famously declared that NATO's mission was to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." Seventy years later, the first two objectives are surprisingly topical, but when it comes to the Germans, these days most NATO allies strongly suggest that their former enemy should spend billions more on tanks, fighter jets, and guns.

Nobody puts it more bluntly, albeit erroneously, than the U.S. commander-in-chief. President Trump accuses Germany of owing "vast sums of money to NATO & the United States" and blames the "unfair" Germans for letting Washington pay for their security.<sup>1</sup> What sparks Trump's ire is the fact that Angela Merkel's government does not plan to fulfill its promise to spend at least 2 percent of Germany's GDP on defense by 2024. In 2014, all NATO members confirmed an earlier commitment to the 2 percent contributions, but so far only seven of the 29 nations have met that pledge. Germany's draft budget for 2019 allocates a mere 1.3 percent.

### More Than Money

The dispute over money clearly put a damper on the celebrations of the alliance's 70th anniversary in Washington, DC. The tension was palpable at the high-profile "NATO Engages" conference, convened in early April 2019 by the Atlantic Council, the German Marshall Fund, and the Munich Security Council. In addition to U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, the event featured five "storytelling" segments. In one, Major Matt Wilson, an F-16 fighter pilot with the U.S. Air Force, praised the professional side-by-side service of the U.S. and European troops during his tour in Afghanistan. The major made this point only after Vice President Pence zeroed in on the "glaring deficiencies in Germany's military readiness", in spite of having "benefited from U.S. protection of Europe for generations... Germany must do more."<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly under fire, German government officials are digging in. Defense Minister

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Ursula von der Leyen is certainly on safe ground when declaring that contributing to NATO's mission is about more than money. Berlin can rightfully point to the ongoing deployment of German troops in Afghanistan and to the German Army's (Bundeswehr) presence in several countries around the globe. And the United States can hardly overlook the fact that Germany is the base for vital segments of the worldwide American command structure: the staffs for the Ramstein Air Base and the U.S. Africa Command in Stuttgart are among the more than 30,000 U.S. troops stationed there. For good measure, German politicians like to invoke their country's devastating experience with military power and the resulting pacifist credo across most of Germany's current political landscape.

### **Kaputtsparen**

However, Germany's habitual justifications are met with a growing sense of frustration on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Berlin's latest estimate, Germany will continue to miss the 2 percent target by a wide margin well into the future. Foreign Minister Maas, speaking a short time after Vice President Pence at the NATO anniversary event, promised only 1.5 percent of Germany's GDP for military spending by 2024. Berlin's persistent unwillingness to increase its defense efforts not only frustrates the White House, but also European allies like Great Britain and Poland, who have fulfilled their financial obligation. They are concerned that Berlin's thrifty defense spending sends a signal to other members of the alliance that if the richest country in Europe can get away with not investing 2 percent of its GDP, why wouldn't they?

German politicians think that pointing to the almost 40 percent increase in the country's defense budget since 2014 should give the Merkel government some credit, but these additional funds are desperately needed just to cover the most urgent shortcomings in Germany's armed forces. Even Germans less inclined to vote for a sizable increase in defense spending are concerned about the "Kaputtsparen" of the Bundeswehr—the underfunding of Germany's military to its breaking point. It is hardly an overstatement. In late 2018, more than half of the German Air Force's Eurofighter and Tornado jets were out of commission, most of the submarines could not leave their docks, and the German soldiers deployed as part of NATO's operations in Afghanistan had to be transported using civilian aircraft, which is incredibly unsafe in a war zone.

### **The Home Front**

Even if the Merkel government wanted to increase spending to reach the 2% threshold, Germany's current domestic political scene would prove to be the biggest roadblock. None of the country's parties sees any political gain in

pushing for a bigger Bundeswehr budget. At least in very general terms, Chancellor Merkel and her defense minister, both members of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), keep promising higher budgets "toward" the 2 percent goal. But Merkel's junior partner in Berlin's "Grand Coalition" government, the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), shows no ambition to reach that target any time soon. To the contrary, Foreign Minister Maas' SPD seems more interested in distinguishing itself as the party least responsive to any political pressure from Washington.

Ironically, it is the current American president's attacks that help Merkel's government absorb domestic criticism of limited military spending. Not only has Donald Trump repeatedly called NATO obsolete, he also exhibits an alarming lack of understanding about the alliance's guiding principles. In the words of a former U.S. permanent representative to the NATO Council, President Trump seems to see multi-national alliances like NATO, "mainly, if not solely, in terms of an economic transaction."<sup>3</sup> It is fairly easy for German politicians to rebut the president's freeloader accusation by reminding the White House that "there is no debt account at NATO" because the 2 percent target refers to the member's investment in their own country's defense.<sup>4</sup>

Without a doubt, that pressure is not going to ease. At the same time, Angela Merkel will have to prove that her passionate commitment to multilateralism at this year's Munich Security Conference was more than a-not-so subtle rebuke of President Trump's "America First" motto. NATO probably offers the most important domain to fulfill that pledge—not to satisfy the White House, but for Europe's security and the safety of Germany's troops inside and outside their home country.

The F-16 pilot Major Wilson echoed this sentiment when he told the Washington audience that one of his most memorable sorties in the sky over Afghanistan's Northern provinces was giving air cover to a group of German soldiers. Vice President Pence, who left the conference early, did not hear the major's remarks. Would it have softened his criticism of America's most important NATO ally in Central Europe? Based on his earlier comments, probably not.

#### **Endnotes:**

- 1 Twitter post, @realDonaldTrump, March 18, 2017
- 2 "NATO Engages" conference, April 3rd, 2019
- 3 Ivo H. Daalder, Washington Post, March 20th, 2019
- 4 Ursula von der Leyen, March 20th, 2017