The Myth of German "Kriegstauglichkeit" (War Capability)

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In the new defence policy guidelines of the German Federal Ministry of Defence ("Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien"), Defense Minister Pistorius has frequently used a term that had already been able to generate a great deal of media resonance in his recent public relations work: "Kriegstauglichkeit" (war capability). After years of a sleeping beauty slum-

ber characterized by permissiveness with regard to all security issues, there is an increasing awareness in Berlin (where, incidentally, large sections of the parties now in power have a long record of chanting slogans such as "Soldiers are murderers" rather than of serious support for the Bundeswehr) that state sovereignty is not God-given. The focus on military capability is to be applauded: Because how should an army be measured if not by its ability to put an enemy in its place by using force in the case of an armed conflict?

However, politicians and society must finally free themselves from false ideas about the achievability of this war capability. The Bundeswehr is at its limit; and it will remain so even after the marginal increase in the military budget for the 2024 financial year, which will be completely consumed by the rise in salaries alone.

Some are calling for the reintroduction of compulsory military service. There were just under 750,000 school leavers in 2021. If we make the conservative assumption that only 500,000 of these were of military age and half of them opted for alternative civilian service, the basic military pay ("Wehrsoldgrundbetrag") alone (not including higher costs in the event of promotions, for clothes, buildings, etc.) would result in additional costs of EUR 4.5 billion per year. But military training is expensive. A single 155mm artillery shell, not having a laser or GPS guidance system, costs around EUR 3,000. At peak times, however, the Russians alone fired between 40,000 and 50,000 shells per day in the Ukraine (this means costs of around EUR 120 million).

Restocking the Bundeswehr's inventories in a way that complies with NATO stockpiling requirements, which stipulate that ammunition must be held for 30 days of war (the conflict in Ukraine has already lasted far longer than 500 days) would cost EUR 30 to 40 billion after extensive deliveries to Ukraine; EUR 1.1 billion is currently spent on ammunition procurement each year. Paradoxically, the special fund approved by the Bundestag in 2022 ("Sondervermögen") also contributes to the reduction of financial possibilities: The flight operation of an F35 (purchase price: approx. more than EUR 230 million per jet) costs more than EUR 80,000 per hour, making the F35 even more expensive than the Eurofighter. And there is another aspect of the ultra-modern fighter jet that gives pause for thought. This year, the manufacturer Lockheed Martin plans to deliver 156 of them – worldwide (35 of which are to be delivered to the German Armed Forces in the medium term). For comparison: Between 1939 and 1945, almost 58,000 German aircraft were shot down by the Royal Air Force and US Air Force on the Western Front alone (i.e. an average of more than 20 per day).

But it's not just about money. A "change of mentality" is being called for among the population and the military. Last summer, I attended a lecture at the "34. Heidelberger Symposium" with, among others, Colonel ("Oberst") André Wüstner, the President of the German Armed Forces Association ("Bundeswehrverband") and Anna Engelke, a security expert and journalist.

The consensus was that we must prepare for an era of the danger of conventional conflict. About five minutes later, there was talk of making the military profession more attractive by providing Internet access in the barracks and making rooms there more comfortable. But conventional warfare also means: mortar fire, trenches, and unidentifiable corpses. The abrupt change in the discussion seemed unrealistic to me; almost irreverent.

Readiness for war is important – si vis pacem para bellum. But those who demand it should look reality in the eye. And recognize that the fitness for war without the fitness for diplomacy leads to major problems.

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