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# A New NATO Command in Germany Modelled on the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service

by *Philipp Lange*

**In February 2018, NATO Defence Ministers at their Brussels meeting agreed to adapt the NATO command structure. In addition to the United States, Germany offered to host one of the two future headquarters. Germany's proposal has meanwhile taken concrete shape: Ulm, a town in the southern state of Baden-Württemberg, where a multinational command of the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service is already located, is to become the seat of the new Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC). The decision to base the new command in Germany, at a facility that also houses the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service, makes sense; yet, new structures alone will not solve all of NATO's problems.**

## **Painful lessons for NATO's collective defence**

Four years have passed since Russia not only violated international law with the annexation of the Crimea, but also challenged the European peace order to enforce national interests through military means. Continuous large-scale Russian military exercises, its aggressive and threatening rhetoric, which in part is nuclear, and continual anti-Western campaigns in the information environment and cyberspace have not improved the situation. All this consolidates the change that has occurred in the perception and actions of NATO Allies: the objective is to deter Russia, and the Alliance has come full circle to its defence-oriented mindset, which includes manoeuvres, troop movements and measures to assure Allies of NATO solidarity in Europe. Thus, the demands placed on the military have grown significantly. The capabilities for collective defence within the Alliance need strengthening, without losing sight of ongoing missions in crisis areas such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite all visible success in the measures taken to highlight NATO's military preparedness, the years after 2014 included lessons on where these efforts fell short. It became apparent that numerous capabilities were not maintained after the end of the Cold War, and that well-established procedures had been lost. These deficiencies are especially apparent where the uncomplicated and swift movement of large force contingents across Europe is concerned. The list of unresolved issues is long and ranges from the carrying capacity of bridges for heavy tanks, the use of railroads, and standards in truck load securing to red tape encountered when moving military forces and goods across borders. What was common practice up until the early 1990s with regular REFORGER exercises (Return of Forces to Germany) nowadays faces many bureaucratic hurdles. Leading politicians and military decision-makers complain not only about what is physically available in terms of tanks, aircraft and ships, but also about the tremendous difficulties they encounter when deploying major units over long distances to the required sites.

So it is only logical that NATO is planning to better gear the entities of its command and armed forces structures toward meeting the needs of the Alliance's collective defence. The intention is to establish, in addition to the existing Joint Force Commands at Brunssum (NLD) and Naples (ITA) – which perform NATO's command and control functions for the missions in, e.g., Afghanistan and Kosovo – two new commands on the level of the armed forces structure: one with a predominantly maritime orientation, for Atlantic-based operations, which will be based in the United States, and one to coordinate all measures in Central and Western Europe, for which the German government has proposed a base in Germany. Current information indicates that this second command will be a Joint Support and Enabling Command and will be tasked with ensuring the protection and operational freedom of force contingents, as well as the functioning of various support processes, from its base at Ulm.

Besides this organisational development, the idea of establishing a 'military Schengen' has since 2017 been gaining momentum among NATO members. The term was coined by former Commanding General of the US Army in Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, and has been taken up by German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen. The initiative aims to enable military forces, vehicles and equipment to be deployed unhindered across Europe to NATO's external borders, similar to the free movement of goods within the EU. One task of the new NATO command in Germany could be to drive this process.

### **Two arguments in favour of a new NATO command in Germany**

For Germany, there are two aspects which make it nearly imperative that it play a major role in the future organisation of joint NATO exercises and operations. The first is Germany's geostrategic location in the centre of Europe. This makes Germany not only a transit country for troop movements, but also a receiving state and host nation for Allied armed forces within the framework of Host Nation Support. Furthermore, it makes Germany a part of the joint rear area for Alliance defence measures. This spatial overlap in the provision of services for units with different mission-related tasks in a variety of scenarios results in a number of national and multinational tasks and coordination efforts which can no longer be performed by every single Alliance member, or on a single member's territory. Hence, Germany will be prepared to act as the central logistic hub for Allies and partner states and will also assume an essential role for the Alliance's security in Central Europe in the event of a major threat.

The second aspect is the experience Germany has gained, since the year 2000, with the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service (Streitkräftebasis – SKB). In the early days of the millennium, the decision taken by then German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping was met with great scepticism; it meant that task areas such as CBRN protection, military police or cross-sectional logistics were to be detached from the regular services, i.e., the army, air force and navy, and allocated to a new central organisational element, the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service. The focus was not only on greater efficiency, but above all the desire to successfully tackle Germany's increased role in missions abroad, despite reductions in personnel and budget cuts. The criticism expressed at the time has meanwhile given way to appreciation at both national and international level, admitting that this forward-looking project initiated 18 years ago has proven its worth when organising not only the redeployment of large sections of the German Afghanistan contingent, but also the deployment of German troops to the Baltic states for the purpose of providing assurance to NATO's eastern Allies. Moreover, this organisational element will serve as a model when developing joint support efforts within the North Atlantic Alliance and within the European Union. Both factors are likely to have been crucial when Germany indicated its willingness to establish the multinational NATO command at Ulm – an offer that was very well received within the Alliance.

## **The Bundeswehr Joint Support Service as a model**

It currently appears that NATO will create between 1,000 and 1,500 additional billets in the enhanced command and control structure, of which 100 to 150 could be part of the new NATO command in Germany. The Bundeswehr will probably have to provide its own personnel for the major share of these billets. It is most likely that decision-makers will fall back on the existing structures of the Multinational Joint Headquarters Ulm, which belongs to the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service. One reason is that the command will also perform purely national tasks and should thus be able to draw on experience and well-established procedures; the other is that there are not sufficient personnel available to establish another independent command, despite all efforts to increase the number of Bundeswehr personnel. It is therefore inaccurate for critics to call current developments an 'arms build-up' (*vis-à-vis* Russia), as the planned enhancement of the NATO command and control structure will not even attain half of the 20,000 billets that this structure contained during the Cold War. It is more a question of making existing forces fit to perform a variety of tasks.

This requires that their structures be adapted, that they be fully equipped, sustainably supported and – as the example of the new NATO command shows – placed under effective command and control. The intention is to adapt the NATO command and control structure in such a way that the new command can ensure protection in the joint rear area, including efficient support. The joint rear area will in future include a remit of responsibility called the Rear Area which basically comprises the territory of all NATO nations in Europe. The command will, among other things, contribute to the protection of military installations, to medical support and the supply of troops, to the coordination of traffic movements and the synchronisation of any operation in its entirety.

With the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service, the German armed forces already have an organisational element in which the essential functions for routine operations, support on deployments and command and control in domestic operations are consolidated. To ensure cooperation in the Alliance, Germany has offered to act as a framework nation and a partner to lean on for smaller nations under the umbrella of the Framework Nations Concept (FNC); it will make the cross-sectional capabilities of the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service available together with European partners. This step was taken against the background that only very few nations in Europe are capable of raising larger formations at national level. Large multinational formations sustained by European NATO partners will therefore be planned together, thereby contributing to credible deterrence and to a strengthening of NATO's European pillar.

## **An overarching support organisation in the middle of Europe**

Consequently, it is essential to have a viable and overarching support organisation in the middle of Europe which reflects the diversity of the forces to be deployed. This approach is now also being pursued in the EU through the measures of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on the way to a European defence union. Overall, a protected common support area is thus being created by the participating European countries; an area which respects the sovereignty of each nation and at the same time facilitates joint deployments in an efficient and effective manner, also in keeping with NATO's 360-degree approach.

The tasks to date of the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service are already far reaching, and they will be needed all the more as the Alliance prepares for deterrence via a comprehensive capability for collective defence. The Bundeswehr Joint Support Service will thus fulfil national tasks for both the Bundeswehr and Allies, in keeping with the new NATO command's approach. It is responsible for logistic processes and the military police – which involves, for example, controlling and securing military convoys – and making available installations that provide essential training, exercise and accommodation facilities for the Bundeswehr. In this context, the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service not only supplies 'foreign' forces, but has highly specialised own units which are needed for missions ranging from deployments in Afghanistan to national defence. This includes biological and chemical defence, the supply of fuel, and the filling of specific billets at civil-military organisations, such as in the sphere of Disaster Management.

Germany as a NATO hub plays a central role in the Alliance's defence planning, because it will be responsible for ensuring the unhindered and swift movement of troops as well as Host Nation Support. By the same token, German forces receive national support in other NATO or EU nations. The Bundeswehr Joint Support Service already coordinates all support efforts for Alliance members in Germany within the framework of Host Nation Support. It is also responsible for planning all military convoys, exercises and deployments within Germany, including transit movements through Germany; all these competencies will in future be in greater demand. Increased NATO activity aimed at improving defence preparedness – also in the event that actual Alliance defence is needed in Europe – would require Germany's support, as a logistic hub, of substantial Allied troop movements. The employment of the necessary resources requires multinational coordination and reliance on civilian service providers for, among other things, railway transport and port handling. This lead function and the role of a 'spider in its web' in Germany is currently fulfilled by the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service. In future, all military, commercial and administrative measures Europe-wide must be coordinated and practiced in peacetime, to ensure their smooth implementation in the event of crisis. This alone is a tremendous task.

While considerable distinctions exist between the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service and the new NATO command in terms of their geographic responsibility, positions within the chain of command and individual tasks, clear overlaps are apparent in their respective portfolios. Another aspect is that the process of establishing a command of this kind under a different organisational umbrella alone will cause frictional losses as the number of personnel will have to be reduced and this will cause the loss of expertise and transfer-induced drain elsewhere, which should be avoided with a view to maintaining an effective defence capability. It was therefore consequential for Germany to declare to NATO that it was prepared to assume responsibility for the new command. The Bundeswehr Joint Support Service is gearing its planning policy toward assuming this responsibility.

### **New structures alone are not enough**

Bundeswehr assets and capabilities constitute a single set of forces. Specific reserves for tasks that are purely national, or EU or NATO-related, are an exception and can hardly be generated in terms of personnel. Therefore, duplication of units, commands or projects cannot be realised. This also needs to be taken into account for the structure of the future support command. The Bundeswehr Joint Support Service as an organisation will be required to provide, together with international partners, greater and wider-ranging support for multinational formations on German territory. Maintaining collective defence capabilities will remain a permanent task. Irrespective of the new NATO command, a separate review is needed to assess the extent to which the increased need for support services will shape the Bundeswehr's future structure. This must include the option of falling back on civilian resources, as well as the question of how many military standby forces are needed as a reserve for the entire spectrum of required support scenarios. In peacetime, the Bundeswehr's own military maintenance, supply and receiving units can presumably be drawn on to a greater extent than in a state of tension or defence, when the need for contracted services from civilian partners in the commercial sector will increase markedly. This is similarly true for European partners that have geared support services to the requirements of their own armed forces. The following would therefore be conceivable in a state of tension: a British tank battalion would be protected by Dutch soldiers upon arriving at the German port of Bremerhaven, then escorted by Bundeswehr forces while transiting Germany and eventually briefed by members of the Polish armed forces on its area of operations along NATO's eastern border – and all this would need to be coordinated by the command at Ulm.

The new NATO command will have to speedily pick up momentum in its work. The non-military sector must be adapted, as well, to enable joint and effective planning of combined troop movements. Armed forces in Europe are increasingly facing similar tasks and challenges, and this is why a multinational approach is more than expedient. Issues such as promoting standardisation, reducing red tape, improving civil-military cooperation, creating a legal foundation and institutionalising multinational cooperation must therefore be addressed. Moreover, the new command will not be able to make bridges more sustainable or rail networks

more efficient, and cannot give ports more capacity, by acting alone. Ownership of infrastructure investments should remain with the member countries. The same applies to cooperation among authorities for the purpose of protecting and escorting convoys from the Atlantic to Tallinn, and to simplified border-crossing procedures. Recently, the EU Commission presented an Action Plan on Military Mobility containing various packages of measures; it is intended to dismantle existing hurdles as quickly as possible and to strengthen the European Defence Union. Respective measures will be binding on EU member states only. For this reason, cooperation with NATO on this issue is imperative if Europe wishes to avoid different mobility areas.

Should this challenge not be tackled, the establishment of a new central command would simply postpone finding comprehensive solutions to these issues. Framework agreements at national and international level could lay the foundation for achieving standardisation and exchange of information, joint situational awareness and access to national services. The new NATO command can provide the specialist input that is needed – while coordination must occur at political level and should be anchored in agreements. This, however, requires the political will to back the resulting measures, also vis-à-vis other sovereign nations, and to explain the decision to the general public. Germany should therefore launch a public relations campaign that explains the need for both establishing the new command and assuming greater military responsibility in Europe; the general public must also be shown why this decision is efficient and, first and foremost, why it is good security policy.

## **Conclusions**

From a security and military perspective, Germany's willingness to accept greater responsibility in an adapted NATO structure is reasonable. To avoid duplication and parallel structures with thinned-out personnel, and to make use of national experience, the existing element of the Bundeswehr Joint Support Service at Ulm should be utilised. Evident overlaps already exist with the tasks of a respective NATO command. Merely establishing an organisational element, however, would not sufficiently enhance collective defence. Shared capabilities must be established between Allies that enable the support of joint operations from a single source. The actions required for this and the implementation of the relevant packages of measures should be actively communicated to the general public.

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