

Germany acquiring drones for military use

By Johann Müller
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The German government is re-arming. It wants to procure armed drones for missions abroad and use re-engineered military reconnaissance drones domestically.

In response to parliamentary questions from the Left Party, the government has admitted it is procuring armed drones for the Bundeswehr (armed forces), as had been reported by *Spiegel Online*. Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union-CDU) already agreed to the use of armed drones in foreign military missions in August of 2012. The chief of the Air Force, Karl Müllner, is also demanding that Germany purchase armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

It remains unclear exactly which type of armed drones the Bundeswehr will introduce. Under discussion is the purchase of American Predator drones, used by Washington for targeted killings.

Another option is the re-engineering of Heron drones, produced by the Israeli arms manufacturer IAI and used by the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan for intelligence-gathering. These would be converted by Cassidian, a subsidiary of EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company). What is clear is that Berlin is intent on deploying armed drones as swiftly as possible.

The significance of this announcement is highlighted by the heinous crimes committed by the US military and the CIA by means of armed drones. In the name of the “war on terror”, drones are currently used to attack targets in Afghanistan, the Pakistani border region, Somalia and Yemen. Alleged “terrorists” are killed illegally, with President Barack Obama personally selecting the designated victims. Thousands of civilians have already been killed in these attacks.

The deployment of the Bundeswehr to Afghanistan and other international theatres of war, the deployment of Patriot missile systems to the Turkish-Syrian border,

and the support for France’s Mali invasion show that the German government is pursuing its imperial interests increasingly at gunpoint. Strengthening the effectiveness of the Bundeswehr by deploying armed drones is a further step in the direction of aggressive combat missions.

In its response to the Left Party, the German government stated that in contrast to unarmed robotic aircraft, armed drones could be used against designated targets “rapidly, accurately and to scale.” It added that armed drones create a situation in which “enemy forces are exposed to a permanent, and for them unpredictable, threat, and their room for manoeuvre is reduced.”

The use of surveillance drones domestically holds great dangers for democratic rights. Such UAVs can provide a great deal of information that can be gathered in conventional ways only with much greater effort.

For example, the Bundeswehr wants to spend €1.2 billion to purchase five Euro Hawk drones. This drone, co-developed by the EADS subsidiary Cassidian, is gigantic. It successfully completed its first test flight in early January.

The Euro Hawks will fly for thirty hours at very high altitudes over Germany. They are equipped with sensors that can receive and evaluate various radio signals.

Previously, such missions were carried out using reconnaissance aircraft. In future, both pilots and the specialist personnel involved in the evaluation of the signals can remain on the ground. Moreover, it will be possible to monitor a far more extensive range of signals than before.

As is already the case in the US, drones will now be allowed in civilian airspace in Europe. A paper published by the European Commission entitled “Towards a European Strategy for the Development of Civil Applications of Remotely Piloted Aircraft

Systems,” which was the basis of the inquiry made by the Left Party, discusses the opening up of Europe’s airspace to unmanned aerial systems.

The German government has already begun to prepare the ground. In May 2012, a new version of the Federal Aviation Act was passed that recognized drones weighing more than 25 kg as aircraft.

As reported by *Die Welt*, Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union-CSU) is considering the use of medium-sized UAV systems by the federal police. The plan is to deploy the Heron drones in this context. *Die Welt* speaks of the drones being used for “air-sea rescue, but also (...) for fighting crime, for example, by environmental polluters, as well as (...) controlling refugee flows.”

“Control of refugee flows” is a euphemism for the more effective sealing of the EU’s external borders, a process that has already led to thousands of refugees attempting to reach Europe drowning or dying in some other way.

The Interior Ministry has not yet confirmed the plans regarding the use of drones, but broad-based and in some cases already completed tests and simulations show that the plans are well advanced.

These tests are part of an EU project managed by the German Aerospace Centre (DLR). Among other things, the suitability of drones for coastal surveillance is being investigated by the police, as the DLR confirmed to *Die Welt*.

Before Christmas, as part of such a simulation in Brunswick, the interaction of Heron drones and other flying objects, such as rescue craft, was evaluated—with great success, as the head of the Interior Ministry unit responsible for federal police engineering and logistics, Achim Friedl, said. Test flights are planned this summer over Spain’s southern coast.

The introduction of medium-sized UAV systems by the German police will be a first in Europe. Not only can they be used to seal off the EU’s external borders, but also, in face of mounting social tensions, they can be used in monitoring demonstrations and suppressing social rebellions.

Such surveillance measures have previously been employed. For example, in 2007, military surveillance aircraft were used at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, providing high-resolution photos of the protesters’ camp.

In 2011, during an anti-Nazi demonstration in Dresden, all mobile phone traffic and positional data from phones were captured and analyzed in one district.

In some parts of Germany, including Hesse and Lower Saxony, smaller drones are already being used by the police. In Lower Saxony, the police have used such drones to monitor protests against nuclear waste transport.

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