"Broken helicopters, Panzer tanks without parts, and submarines which lie on the land like dead whales."

That was the *Frankfurter Allgemeine's* blistering comment on the state of German military equipment, following the annual report from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces in February. The report found that there is 'equipment misery' in every part of the armed force, writes Penny Bochum.

This report, and the reaction to it in the German press, illustrates a conflict at the heart of German defence policy. There is an acceptance in government that Germany's status as a leading European power means that it has to take a more prominent role on the world stage, especially against the backdrop of changing world security needs highlighted by Trump, Brexit and Putin. However, greater military involvement and an increase in defence spending is not accepted either by the German public or by many members of the German parliament.

This conflict is seen in the agreement made by Angela Merkel's new coalition government with the SPD. Following the election in September 2017, Merkel's CDU and the SPD both lost seats. However, Merkel's failure to negotiate a 'traffic light' coalition with the FDP and Greens meant that she had to go back to the SPD, which, despite a historically low vote, now has major influence as part of the new coalition government.

Merkel had previously committed Germany to incrementally increasing defence spending

towards 2% of GDP, in line with NATO's aims. An increase to 2% of GDP would have meant Germany spending 70 billion euros on defence by 2024, almost double today's expenditure of 37 billion euros. This policy was strongly opposed by the SPD and the Green Party.

The coalition negotiations watered down the ambition: the 2% target was missing from the coalition agreement, and the SDP won a commitment to tie increases in defence spending to equal investment in international development with a focus on prevention of conflicts. It is unlikely that the SPD would have got the approval of its membership for the coalition agreement if the 2% target had remained.

In recent years, the involvement of German troops in Mali, the anti-IS coalition and Lithuania have showed that Germany is moving away from its post-war non-interventionism (although always clearly keeping to the constitutional requirement that all military action should be approved by parliament, and be either for defence or multi-lateral). The new government took a decision in early March to increase the number of troops and extend geographical operations in Mail, Afghanistan and the anti-IS action in Iraq and Syria.

However, the defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, has a difficult job ahead of her. The only minister to keep her job in the new government (and rumoured to be a contender to be the next general secretary of NATO), she has been in her position since December 2013. She has consistently argued for greater defence spending and increased German military involvement around the world.

Von der Leyen's position is clear. Firstly, she is moving the country further away from its traditional non-interventionism (she was described by one newspaper, the Handelsblatt as being 'determined' on military involvement). Secondly, she has signalled increasing Europeanisation of defence policy, especially in co-operation with Macron's France.

Her speech at the Munich Security conference in February showed these tendencies. The *Hand elsblatt*
noted that she was more clear than any defence minister before her that Germany must be prepared to use its military weight where necessary. She pledged to continue to invest and modernise the German armed forces, noting that Germany is still falling far short of its target to spend 2% of GDP on defence.

She spoke of the continuing transatlantic relationship in defence, but argued that Europeans need to contribute more to their own defence, saying, "We want to remain transatlantic â€“ while also becoming more European." She argued that Europe must become more self-reliant in terms of the military, citing increased European defence cooperation initiatives such as PESCO.

Von der Leyen also argued that there should be more cooperation in European foreign policy making. This was included in the coalition agreement, which promised that Germany would strengthen European foreign policy making, in the same way that PESCO plans to coordinate EU military projects.

Von der Leyen received strong criticism in the German press for her Munich conference speech: she was accused by major newspapers of playing air guitar to all the old hits, repeating fairy tales and living in a dream world. The criticisms centred on the difference between her ambitions and the parlous state of the armed forces' equipment, for which she is held responsible.

On her appointment as defence minister, she promised to get the equipment shortages in the German armed forces under control with her 'Armaments Agenda'. However, the annual Parliamentary Commissioner's report (publication of which was delayed because of the election and coalition negotiations) was labelled by the Spiegel as a damning indictment of von der Leyen. It showed that the planned turnaround had not happened.

The author of the report, Hans-Peter Bartels, wrote that the state of equipment remains dramatically bad, and even worse than it was in 2014 in some areas. For example only 42 out of 75 Panzer Howitzer's, 12 out of 30 Tiger helicopters and one out of 6 submarines were ready for use. In addition, procurement procedures are poor; according to the Frankfurter Allgemeine, equipment arrives 'more expensive, later and worse than ordered'. One project was even delayed by 12 years.

Von der Leyen has also been criticised by the military. In March the navy commander publicly said that her commitment to foreign intervention meant that the forces have not had enough time to practice military manoeuvres. She has also been criticised for her commitment to changing the culture of the armed forces â€“ she has tried to root out right-wing extremists, modernise (for example by having child care facilities) and to present the Bundeswehr as an attractive employer. This did not go down well in many quarters, especially amongst some

high-ranking officers.

Von der Leyen has responded to critics that it is not possible to make up 25 years of under-investment in the armed forces in a few years. Currently at around 1.2% of GDP and the second largest expenditure after social security, defence spending still falls far short of the 130 billion euros by 2030 that von der Leyen estimated as necessary to modernise equipment and to increase the number of military personnel.

The German public is uncomfortable with these policies. Von der Leyen has earned the nickname Flinten-Uschi or Shotgun Uschi (Uschi being the diminutive of her first name). Polls show that only a third of Germans support an increase in defence spending; there is a majority against increasing German military commitments; only minority support for a European Defence Union; and a majority are against military action if a NATO ally were to be involved in military conflict with Russia.

In the Bundestag, political opposition to increased defence spending comes not only from Merkel's coalition partners, the SPD, but also from the Green party and the Linke (Left Party). Heiko Mass, the new Foreign Secretary (SPD) said that Germany cannot 'duck away' from its international commitments in his inauguration speech in March; however, the focus of the SPD is development rather than defence. Die Linke have gone further than arguing against an increase in spending: they believe that Germany should withdraw from all military involvement and NATO.

However, there is cross-party support for strengthening European Union defence cooperation and strengthening cooperation with NATO, with the CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP and Greens all supporting these policies. There is also support for the aim of the coalition agreement to reduce arms exports and stop exporting to counties involved in the Yemen conflict.

On the thorny issue of Russia, there is also disagreement amongst the parties. The CDU have pursued a stronger line against Russia than the SPD, which has always argued for more negotiations and wants to relax sanctions. The coalition agreement committed the government to continue to try and find a solution to the Ukraine conflict, and to loosen sanctions if Russia implements the terms of the Minsk agreement.

The road Germany travels on defence in the future is not certain, given the backdrop of a weakened Merkel, uneasy coalition and sceptical public. Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security conference, warned that Germany must avoid being a freeloader, reluctant to take on combat roles. But ever-conscious of history and aware that other European countries may fear a Germany with a stronger military, Germany could still opt to remain on the sidelines.