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### **German Defense Policy: Where to Now?**

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It was a sheer coincidence, yet it was telling: barely 24 hours after Donald J. Trump had won the U.S. Presidential election on November 5, 2024, the German Government coalition, made up of Social Democrats, the centrist Free Democrats, and the Greens, fell apart. On the surface, there were certain parallels: the governments of President Biden and Chancellor Scholz both appeared to have lost touch with a large part of their electorates' concerns. They emphasized agendas that most voters regarded as peripheral to their daily lives, such as climate change or diversity, while failing to address core challenges such as illegal immigration or affordable energy. The victory of the German conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in February 2025, as well as the strong showing of the more right-wing party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), confirmed that, in broad political terms, both the United States and Germany are moving to the center-right.<sup>1</sup>

In theory, such a conservative shift in Berlin and Washington should make cooperation easier, including on security and defense. For example, in the 1980s, several conservative German governments established cooperative ties with the Reagan and George H. W. Bush Administrations, which proved crucially important for winding down the Cold War and managing German reunification. This time around, however, the gap between U.S. and German worldviews in general, and on security in particular, is far too wide to expect a similarly smooth relationship.<sup>2</sup> President Trump's transactional view of international relations and his long-standing narrative that allies who do not pay up will lose U.S. protection evoke



serious concerns about the future of the transatlantic relationship and NATO—in Europe in general, and in Germany in particular.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, both countries realize that, with autocratic states colluding to challenge the West, U.S. and German military capabilities must be strengthened, while their economic or energy dependencies on challengers like China and Russia must be reduced. However, Berlin is struggling to make sense of Trump’s unconventional leadership style, and German political and military leaders are worried about not measuring up to Washington’s expectations in terms of defense. Whether the issue is a substantial increase in German defense spending or helping to implement an eventual U.S.-brokered peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, the political discourse in Germany reveals a palpable anxiety that the United States will demand far more than Berlin will be able to deliver.

Germany does not see itself as a great power, yet it remains Europe’s biggest economy as well as one of the closest U.S. allies.<sup>4</sup> Hence, to save this relationship from being damaged by U.S. frustration and German fears of abandonment, it is useful to take a closer look at the structural limitations of German security and defense policy. This may help explain why Germany often fails to meet U.S. expectations and can facilitate a sober assessment of what Germany can realistically deliver.

#### **Four Structural Limitations of German Security and Defense Policy**

***Underfunded Armed Forces.*** The *first* and most significant limitation of German security and defense policy remains the state of its armed forces. Since the end of the Cold War, when Germany ceased to be a NATO frontline state and instead found itself “encircled by friends” (as observed by former Defense Minister Volker R  he), Germany has severely underfunded the once formidable *Bundeswehr*. All major German political parties tolerated the hollowing out of the armed forces. The suspension of the draft in 2011 aggravated the notorious shortage of personnel. Germany deployed forces in crisis management missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Yet such operations, which differed significantly from Germany’s traditional mission of providing for territorial defense, stretched the *Bundeswehr* to its limits.

The deterioration of the security environment after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea allowed German political and military leaders to make a more convincing case for a stronger military, with opinion polls showing a growing acceptance of higher defense budgets. However, it took Russia’s assault on Ukraine in February 2022 to initiate what looked like a truly significant shift in German defense policy. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s “*Zeitenwende*” (turning point) speech of February 27, 2022 promised a serious increase in defense spending, jump-starting the process with a “special fund” (“*Sonderverm  gen*”) of 100 billion Euro.<sup>5</sup> The German Defense Minister, Boris Pistorius, argued that Russia might be able to attack NATO in a few years and demanded that the armed forces become “fit for war” (“*kriegstauglich*”).<sup>6</sup> However, the continuing shortages in money, personnel, and equipment have made such calls aspirational. The “special fund” helped Germany to just about reach the NATO defense spending goal of two percent of GDP in 2024. Yet the fund, which will run out by 2028, is being



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spent almost entirely on addressing only the most glaring deficiencies. When Chancellor Scholz himself opposed a serious increase in the regular defense budget, it became clear that the “Zeitenwende” would not be far-reaching. As a result, in the absence of dramatic change, the *Bundeswehr* will likely remain in serious disarray. Even with an increased defense budget, it may take many years—and possibly even decades—for the *Bundeswehr* to become “fit for war.”<sup>7</sup>

***Military Risk-Aversion.*** The deplorable state of the German armed forces is closely linked to the *second* structural problem of German security policy: a general reluctance to use force in less than existential circumstances. Strongly rooted in the post-World War II mindset of “never again,” German thinking on the use of military power has evolved only slowly. While Germans embraced the logic of deterrence in the Cold War, the shift towards expeditionary missions after the end of the Cold War was never fully internalized by many leaders and parts of the public. As a result, Germany remains risk-averse, at least when compared to some other allies. This is not to say that Germans are indifferent to the changing security environment. Over the past three decades, Germany has participated in NATO operations in the Balkans; was the third-largest troop contributor in Afghanistan (behind the United States and the United Kingdom); and participated in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. The Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022 accelerated the change in German attitudes with regard to military power. A clear majority opted in favor of higher defense expenditures, and Germany has emerged as the second-largest supporter of Ukraine (after the United States).<sup>8</sup>

However, this trend in thinking will not automatically translate into a significant change of Germany’s defense policy nor end its great hesitancy to employ force. While many Germans view Russia as a threat to European security, there is no publicly-discernible alarmism about an imminent Russian attack on NATO or Germany. Only parts of the defense establishment and some defense academics argue that, if Moscow is successful in its war against Ukraine, Russia might decide to attack Western countries. Indeed, should the Trump Administration manage to achieve a ceasefire in Ukraine, fears of Russia might diminish further. Consequently, German leaders who want to make a convincing case for higher defense budgets must stress the need to deter Russia not just now, but also in the long run, and to remind their electorates of the need to re-balance the transatlantic defense burden. However, none of this will necessarily change Germany’s hesitancy to employ force.

***An Ambiguous Role of the Parliament.*** A *third* structural limitation of German defense policy is the considerable power given to the *Bundestag* (German Parliament). Tellingly, the *Bundeswehr* is often referred to as *Parlamentsarmee* (a parliamentary army). This system exposes German security policy to kind of a permanent plebiscite, which turns every important decision into a domestic political balancing act and often leads to delays. For example, on several operational issues, NATO had to “wait” for the German *Bundestag* to approve the government’s policy. Consequently, the government—wary of parliamentary resistance—only puts forward



requests that have a high probability of success, resulting in military contributions that are often small and heavily caveated.

In contrast to the U.S. presidential system, whose first responsibility is “to provide for the common defense,” the German system lacks the executive speed and determination required to resolutely respond to immediate security challenges. This can easily be perceived from Washington’s vantage point as Berlin looking for excuses not to act – with respect to using force or spending more on defense. German decision-makers are aware of this. Yet, because every government is made up of two or three coalescing parties, given the usual differences among them as well as between the government and the opposition, it is unlikely that Germany will ever meet U.S. standards for quick and decisive decision-making on defense matters.

*Trappings of the Welfare State.* A fourth structural limit is Germany’s position as a social welfare state. This model has been extremely successful in the past; it allowed for post-war (West) Germany’s economic rise and political stability. By satisfying the demands of many different interest groups through a large social budget, Germany achieved a high level of identification of its population with the state. For Germany, providing social welfare remains an investment in its domestic security and stability. However, for the model to work requires high levels of spending on social programs, limiting attempts to substantially increase the defense budget.

While all major political parties repeatedly express their support for higher defense expenditures, the financial commitments of the welfare state model will effectively rule out sudden major increases in the defense budget.<sup>9</sup> The recent election campaign confirmed this. The term “security” was used mostly in conjunction with domestic security, i.e., crime and immigration. The political parties catered to German worries about a sluggish economy rather than fears of Russia. Moreover, it is fair to say that parts of the Greens and the SPD have not accepted the logic of the “Zeitenwende,” namely to better prepare Germany for an era of strategic competition, and are likely to oppose any government’s efforts to significantly expand Germany’s military options, even if these parties are part of the governing coalition.<sup>10</sup>

### **What Germany Can Deliver**

Taken together, these factors explain why Berlin looks warily at the second Trump Administration. German analysts regularly emphasize the need to differentiate between style and substance in U.S. politics, and point out that President Trump’s confrontational rhetoric is part of his strategy of making deals. However, President Trump’s approach runs counter to Germany’s preferred low-key, conciliatory approach to foreign and security policy, and is leading more and more German observers to fatalism about an inevitable transatlantic divorce.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, a growing number of Germans understand that the current transatlantic bargain works to the detriment of the United States, and that, with the U.S. focus shifting to the Asia-Pacific region, Europeans will have to carry a greater share of the burden for their own defense.



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Many Germans now also acknowledge that some of their erstwhile complacency regarding “hard” security needs was a mistake.<sup>12</sup> While this soul-searching is not likely to lead to radical changes in Germany’s defense and security policy, it should nevertheless allow for a number of concrete steps to prove to Washington that the strategic partnership is worth preserving.

***Spending More on Defense.*** As during his first term, President Trump’s number one concern regarding the NATO allies is their lack of military clout, largely due to their insufficient defense spending. It is therefore fair to assume that, in Washington’s eyes, defense spending will be the foremost litmus test for Germany’s seriousness. While some allies, notably Poland, are now spending over four percent of their GDP on defense, many others barely reach NATO’s two percent guidelines or remain even below. According to current projections, if there is no substantial increase in its defense budget, Germany will soon again be below the two percent benchmark.<sup>13</sup> The election victory of the conservative party may make such an increase more likely. But even a conservative-led coalition government will have to maneuver between competing demands, such as social welfare or re-building an eroding public infrastructure that has long been neglected.

German observers have repeatedly recalled that during Cold War days, (West) Germany spent over four percent of GDP on defense, while still enjoying steady economic growth. Hence, although the German economy is currently not doing well, replacing NATO’s initial goal of two percent of GDP with three percent, or even three and a half percent, should be possible, if made a political priority. However, this would amount to a massive spending increase in absolute terms, and such a goal can only be reached gradually.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, simply spending more on defense will not automatically translate into more combat power. The German defense industry cannot expand its capacities rapidly, nor does the *Bundeswehr* have sufficient personnel to absorb massive extra funds on short notice. In addition, German leaders must explain a higher defense budget as a genuine response to a changing security environment and avoid the impression that they are merely responding to U.S. pressure. Hence, the most likely course for Germany is to gradually increase the defense budget to about three percent of GDP over a period of several years.

***Accelerate the Transformation of the Armed Forces.*** When it comes to military-operational issues, Germany will need to become more serious when promising certain capabilities to NATO or specific allies, so as to avoid the impression of writing bad checks. Chancellor Scholz’s promise that Germany was going to provide NATO with a fully-fledged, heavily armored division by January 2025, could be kept only by ignoring certain deficiencies.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, the brigade that Germany promised to deploy in Lithuania by 2027 is plagued by numerous problems, and requires the “cannibalization” of other units. While some equipment shortages can be explained by Germany’s support for Ukraine, most of them are caused by a clumsy and overly bureaucratic procurement process that shows no sense of urgency. Overcoming such obstacles would call for a thorough reform of German military procurement practices, going far beyond the rather haphazard attempts made by several consecutive



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Defense Ministers.<sup>16</sup> A return of the suspended draft, which many conservatives favor, is not likely to make a significant difference in the short term, and thus is only envisaged in the longer run.<sup>17</sup>

***Support the United States in extra-European Contingencies.*** Germany's focus on NATO's traditional collective defense and deterrence mission suits the current security environment. However, should the need for expeditionary missions arise again, Germany will have to contribute, as it has done in the recent past. Moreover, as an export-oriented economy, Germany must also contribute to maintaining international freedom of navigation, even if it remains a classical land power with a rather modest navy. For example, Germany participated in NATO-led counter piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, and temporarily employed a naval vessel to combat the threat to international shipping posed by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The German navy also sent a warship through the Taiwan Straits to signal to Beijing that Germany rejected China's expansive territorial claims in these important waterways. While the military impact of such deployments remains small, in particular given the preponderance of the U.S. Navy in these regions, they demonstrate the unity of Western political and legal positions.

***Support the United States in the Implementation of a Peace Deal between Russia and Ukraine.*** Berlin is aware that when it comes to ending a major war in Europe, Germany cannot afford to be perceived as a reluctant bystander. Although there remains considerable skepticism with respect to President Trump's initiative to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine, notably his attempts to force Ukraine to make far-reaching concessions, German political leaders are careful not to dismiss his initiative out of hand. At this stage, U.S. views on how to implement an eventual peace agreement are not yet fully defined. However, should it become clear that preventing another Russian assault would require a major deployment of Western forces in Eastern Ukraine, Germany would probably feel compelled to participate, even if this would be a massive strain for the *Bundeswehr*.<sup>18</sup> Should Washington not put American "boots on the ground," Germany – and probably others – might find any participation even more difficult given America's unique military standing and the respect it commands in Moscow. Whether a different type of U.S. involvement (e.g., providing intelligence, logistical assistance or air cover) would change the equation remains to be seen.

***Buy American.*** Germany could also support the United States through financing more of the infrastructure used by U.S. forces in Europe, or via a political decision to "buy American" when it comes to purchasing new military equipment. The latter approach will be criticized by some European analysts as undermining the strategic goal of building a stronger European defense industrial base. However, Germany's conclusion from Putin's war against Ukraine is clear: the United States remains crucial for European security. Even if others, notably France, may have arrived at the opposite conclusion, namely, to accelerate Europe's "strategic autonomy," Germany has every reason to make preserving a U.S. role in European security a strategic



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priority. This does not rule out closer intra-European cooperation, or the rebuilding of a solid national defense-industrial base. Yet, Germany will take great care not to make these efforts appear to be directed against the United States and will seek to shield defense procurement issues from disagreements in other areas, such as trade.

***Support (Extended) Nuclear Deterrence.*** One element of Chancellor Scholz’s “Zeitenwende” speech was a commitment to purchase the F-35 fighter, which indicated the Government’s determination to retain Germany’s role in NATO’s nuclear-sharing arrangements. Even before Russia’s attack on Ukraine, the deteriorating international security environment had almost muted those voices that had advocated the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany or signing the Nuclear Ban Treaty. After the outbreak of the war, for the first time in decades, a majority of Germans polled were in favor of keeping U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Germany.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the announcement of Chancellor Scholz at the NATO Summit in July 2024, according to which the United States would soon deploy long-range conventional missiles in Germany, did not spark a major controversy. The fear of losing U.S. nuclear protection seems to have largely trumped whatever nuclear disarmament ambitions may have existed in diplomatic or academic circles. This suggests that Germany will remain a staunch supporter of nuclear deterrence and of NATO’s character as a “nuclear Alliance” – provided that Washington refrains from calling into question the U.S. role in providing extended nuclear deterrence.

## Conclusion

The deteriorating international security environment has forced Germany to give up some long-held illusions about the diminishing role of military power. The need to repair Germany’s underfunded and underequipped armed forces is now widely understood. At the same time, Germany’s political leadership and large parts of the public agree with the need to address U.S. complaints about an unfair sharing of the transatlantic defense burden, first and foremost by spending more on defense. However, due to a number of political, fiscal and other structural challenges, Germany will likely not be able to implement the kind of radical changes that an impatient Washington may expect. The challenge for Washington, then, is to push Germany to do more on defense without creating the impression of blackmailing its ally. This will call for a deft touch. Germany’s challenge, in turn, is to make decisions that signal to Washington that Berlin has left behind its complacency on security and defense and is ready to play its role as a more capable ally of the United States.

<sup>1</sup> The CDU had ruled out coalescing with the AfD; the new German Government will be made up of a coalition of the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), led by chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU).



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<sup>2</sup> The speech by U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, in which he chastised Europe for restricting democratic freedoms, was interpreted by many Atlanticist German observers as a fundamental assault on the very core of the transatlantic partnership; see, “Vice President JD Vance Tells Munich Security Conference ‘There’s A New Sheriff In Town,’” *RealClearPolitics*, February 14, 2025 ([https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/02/14/full\\_speech\\_vice\\_president\\_jd\\_vance\\_addresses\\_munich\\_security\\_conference.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/02/14/full_speech_vice_president_jd_vance_addresses_munich_security_conference.html)).

<sup>3</sup> In a recent poll conducted among 400 European experts, the number one risk identified was U.S. isolationism and its withdrawal of security guarantees. See Veronica Anghel, “Global Risks to the EU,” Robert Schuman Centre, January 2025 (<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/77808/QM-01-25-018-EN-N.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>).

<sup>4</sup> According to one poll, 51% of Americans believe that Germany is a great power, yet only 22% of Germans do so. See Tobias Bunde, “America First, Germany Alone?,” in German Marshall Fund, *Germany’s Role in a Changing Global Order*, February 2025 ([https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Germans%20Role%20in%20a%20Changing%20Global%20Order\\_digital\\_0.pdf?mc\\_cid=ea752b1209](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Germans%20Role%20in%20a%20Changing%20Global%20Order_digital_0.pdf?mc_cid=ea752b1209)).

<sup>5</sup> “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz,” Federal Government, February 27, 2022 (<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>).

<sup>6</sup> “In ‘fünf bis acht Jahren’. Pistorius warnt vor russischem Angriff auf NATO,” *ntv* (online), January 19, 2024 (<https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Pistorius-warnt-vor-russischem-Angriff-auf-NATO-article24673573.html>).

<sup>7</sup> See Guntram B. Wolff, et al, “Fit for war in decades: Europe’s and Germany’s slow rearmament vis-à-vis Russia,” *Kiel Report*, No. 1, September 1, 2024, Kiel Institute for the World Economy ([https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/1f9c7f5f-15d2-45c4-8b85-9bb550cd449d-Kiel\\_Report\\_no1.pdf](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/1f9c7f5f-15d2-45c4-8b85-9bb550cd449d-Kiel_Report_no1.pdf)).

<sup>8</sup> See The Federal Government, *How Germany is supporting Ukraine*, January 30, 2025 (<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/federal-government/germany-aid-for-ukraine-2192480>). Germany also quickly ended its energy dependence on Russia, mostly by purchasing more pipeline gas from Norway, as well as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from several suppliers, including the United States.

<sup>9</sup> One poll conducted in 2024 noted that a majority of Germans were in favor of a higher defense budget, but could not identify any area where corresponding cuts should be made. See, “Reliably Unreliable? Germany’s Struggle for Standing,” *The Berlin Pulse 2024/2025*, Körber Foundation ([https://koerber-stiftung.de/site/assets/files/43931/the-berlin-pulse\\_2024-25.pdf](https://koerber-stiftung.de/site/assets/files/43931/the-berlin-pulse_2024-25.pdf)).

<sup>10</sup> Due largely to the resistance of the Social Democrats against the acquisition of armed drones, the German Parliament debated ethical and other aspects of these systems over a period of six (!) years.

<sup>11</sup> See Carlo Masala, “Es gibt nur eine Chance, Europas Sicherheit zu gewährleisten,” in *Handelsblatt*, February 12, 2025 (<https://www.handelsblatt.com/meinung/kolumnen/es-gibt-nur-eine-chance-die-europaeische-sicherheit-zu-gewaehrleisten/100107147.html>).

<sup>12</sup> See the interview with Heinrich August Winkler, “Größte Bewährungsprobe in der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik,” in *Die Welt*, July 17, 2022 (<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus239932093/Heinrich-August-Winkler-Groesste-Bewaehrungsprobe-in-der-Geschichte-der-Bundesrepublik.html>).

<sup>13</sup> In 2024, the Defense Ministry did not spend its entire budget due to “problems in contract design, industrial delivery delays and lower than projected operational expenditures for the Bundeswehr.” See, *Hartpunkt*, January 20, 2025 (<https://www.hartpunkt.de/verteidigungsausgaben-2024-hat-deutschland-2-prozent-ziel-verfehlt/>).

<sup>14</sup> The projected 2025 Federal Budget is 489 billion Euro, with 53 billion earmarked for defense. About 20 billion was added as part of the “special fund.” If Germany were to spend 3.5 % of GDP, the 2025 defense budget would have to





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be above 130 billion, while 5% of GDP would amount to over 200 billion. The previous government had planned to spend only around 80 billion annually, beginning in 2028 (after the end of the “special fund”).

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Carstens, “Die improvisierte Kanzler-Division,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 29, 2025, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive list of possible improvements see Marco Seliger, “Das Ende des parasitären Pazifismus,” in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 12, 2025, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> A reintroduction of the draft could only happen in the broader context of an “allgemeine Dienstpflicht” (a general public duty for young men and women that also includes civilian services), the costs of which would be extremely high. Since the *Bundeswehr*'s initial requirement would only encompass around 30,000 conscripts, “drafting” an entire cohort of young people (the number of 18-year-old German citizens is about 800,000) in order to meet a rather small military requirement appears disproportional. It could also raise constitutional problems, as such a procedure might violate basic principles of equality.

<sup>18</sup> For a German view on the requirements of a peace deal see Claudia Major and Aldo Kleeman, “Models for upholding a potential cease-fire in Ukraine,” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Research Division International Security, *Working Paper*, No. 2, February 2025 ([https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Working\\_Paper\\_FG03\\_2025\\_C\\_Major\\_A\\_Kleemann\\_EN\\_Version.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Working_Paper_FG03_2025_C_Major_A_Kleemann_EN_Version.pdf)).

<sup>19</sup> See “Erstmals Mehrheit für Atomwaffen-Verbleib,” *Tagesschau*, June 2, 2022 (<https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/panorama/umfrage-atomwaffen-deutschland-101.html>).

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