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Germany's Role in a Changing Global Order



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ALFRED LANDECKER
FOUNDATION

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The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of GMF.

Foreword

By Silke Muelherr and Sudha David-Wilp

Wartime Europe has forced Germany out of its comfort zone. Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine put an end to illusions of a lasting peace dividend that Europe has held on to dearly since World War II.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz acknowledged this turning point three years ago in his "Zeitenwende" speech in the German parliament. Since then, Germany, the reluctant power, has been trying to adapt to shifting geopolitical realities.

For well over a decade, the country's partners hoped it would match its economic might with military weight. Scholz's address offered a breakthrough moment for Germany to shed its automatic aversion to the use of force and recast its historical responsibility to defend democracy.

Progress has been made since then. Material investment in defense, energy transformation, and a growing realism toward authoritarian actors will undoubtedly strengthen Germany's role as a capable partner in the long run. In the meantime, however, European partners have voiced frustration over discrepancies in Berlin's proclamations and actual commitments to strengthening the continent. Scholz himself recognizes that his country requires a "new strategic culture" to navigate a post-1989 global order and maintain momentum for transformation.

The Alfred Landecker Foundation and the German Marshall Fund of the United States have partnered over the past year to convene decision-makers and experts to discuss Germany's challenges in the face of this turning point. A working group called "Zeitenwende—Navigating

Change in a Fractured World" has examined the country's evolving foreign and security policy against the backdrop of political and social constraints.

Chaired by former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, the working group has held meetings that provided platforms for frank debates on the need to face geopolitical challenges, make strategic choices, and convey these priorities to a wider public. Participants came from across the political spectrum to share their national and international perspectives on Germany's capacity and limitations to act, the expectations of Germany's partners, and the adjustments needed to strengthen German foreign and security policy.

At its core, this project is about fostering a trusted network that enables open dialogue at a pivotal period for Germany and Europe. In this spirit, this compendium of essays comes from a group of authors who addressed issues related to Germany's role in the world in the run-up to the country's February 2025 election.

Following Joschka Fischer's introduction, the first contribution by Julia Friedrich reviews German support for Ukraine and offers recommendations for the next government. It is followed by a piece from Tobias Bunde, who delves into the implications of the war for the European security order and Germany's role as a security actor in Europe. He concludes that the country must transform itself from a perceived roadblock into "Europe's enabling power".

Georgina Wright broadens the scope to address European sovereignty and the challenge Europe faces to remain competitive. She

outlines Germany's critical role in balancing the different interests of EU member states to achieve ambitious and decisive European action.

Going beyond Europe, Dhruva Jaishankar discusses Germany's role in the Indo-Pacific. He argues that the country has significant economic and security interests in the region, and lays out a path for Berlin to scale up its bilateral and multilateral engagement there.

As a changing global order also implies considerable social challenges, Karsten Jung and Tobias Spöri shift the focus to resilience and its implied costs. They contend that confronting

the German public with the difficult decisions ahead will be critical to holding the necessary honest national debates on Germany's way forward. As has become increasingly evident, scaling up defense capabilities requires a shift in mindset and a willingness to reallocate resources.

Finally, Carsten Cramer from the German soccer club Borussia Dortmund offers a personal reflection on the relationship between soccer and society at a time when questions of sponsoring partnerships have brought military and defense issues onto the soccer pitch and, therefore, to the heart of society.

Silke Muelherr is co-CEO of the Alfred Landecker Foundation, which supports the strengthening of democracy and contemporary Holocaust remembrance.

Sudha David-Wilp is the vice president of external relations and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The Zeitenwende and Its Impact on Germany

By Joschka Fischer

Russian President Vladimir Putin's order for his troops to attack Ukraine on the morning of February 24, 2022 was not only the beginning of an unprovoked war of aggression against a smaller neighbor. It was also an attack on the European peace order and on a Europe that had emerged from the end of the Cold War and the confrontation between East and West.

Germany was the big winner when that confrontation ended. The country regained its national unity and found itself in a pan-European peace order in which all relevant powers renounced violence. Liberal ideas were victorious, and, shrouded in a grand illusion of the "end of history", war was banished. A peace dividend would replace an arms race between superpowers.

But that illusion negated the Kremlin's perspective, which held that Russia had been utterly defeated and humiliated.

The fantasy was shattered on the morning Putin attacked. The West was unprepared for the invasion. Many did not want to believe it was happening, especially the Europeans of the old West, and least of all the Germans. Their country had twice in the first half of the 20th century launched world wars in an attempt to achieve global domination. Both efforts ended in total defeat. The second attempt under Adolf Hitler ignored any pretense of morality, left 6 million European Jews dead in a genocide that remains an unprecedented crime against humanity in the modern era, and destroyed almost the entire European continent.

The response of Germans, east and west, to the military defeats was a pacifist U-turn and a staunch "Never Again!" to power politics, a military, and war. Although both Cold War blocs rearmed, the Germans' pacifist mentality endured. But Putin's aggression toward Ukraine and, consequently, a free Europe forced a fundamental reorientation. This epochal change has been called a "Zeitenwende". Pacifism is being replaced by rearming Europe so that it can defend its own freedom. A European defense union and NATO now have priority over the EU and the common market. For Germany, this is a return to power politics as a result of a rupture of those deeply rooted illusions about Russia and pacifism. The simple question that arose was: Would a hands-off approach to Russia satisfy Putin and end his policy of conquest? And the answer is a profound "no". He would continue to pursue it, moving further west. The issue would then be one concerning the military balance of power until the time, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, when NATO territory becomes directly involved. What then?

All this comes as a security guarantee for a free Europe from a Donald Trump-led United States is uncertain. Europe must, therefore, become able to defend itself. The Russian threat is long-term, and it is just as certain that an effective European defense can work only with the participation of Germany, the most populous and economically strongest EU member state.

It is equally certain that effective defense and deterrence can succeed only in a European alliance that is integrated into NATO. It cannot

work if each European nation acts alone. Europe's success or failure in this effort will determine the fate of all us Germans. This is another certainty.

Germany's unique history means this dramatic development in European security will require a fundamental change in policies and mentality. The country needs first and foremost to pursue policies that align with its strategic interests, an approach with which it has little, if any, experience. It also needs policies that advance the common European goal of making the EU a military power, on top of an economic and technological one, to guarantee its security.

None of this will be achievable without a fundamental realignment of EU priorities and finances, too. The common agricultural market remains important, but the funds allocated to it cannot supersede those for common security.

Intangible factors are also important. Germany, unlike most of its neighbors and despite being a large country in the heart of Europe, does not have an unbroken tradition within which this fundamental reorientation can be firmly anchored. Germany has had to deal with two radical cultural breaks in 1945 and 1990. Does this lack of historic continuity constitute a risk of a relapse into the disastrous period before the founding of the Federal Republic? On what traditions can and must we Germans draw? Such a risk must be taken seriously, especially in view of resurgent nationalist forces throughout Europe. Yet Germany's successful democracy offers a solid foundation of values, even in the military domain.

The overriding issue nevertheless remains the type of Europe that exists in the future. I hope it will be a power based firmly on liberal values and the rule of law.

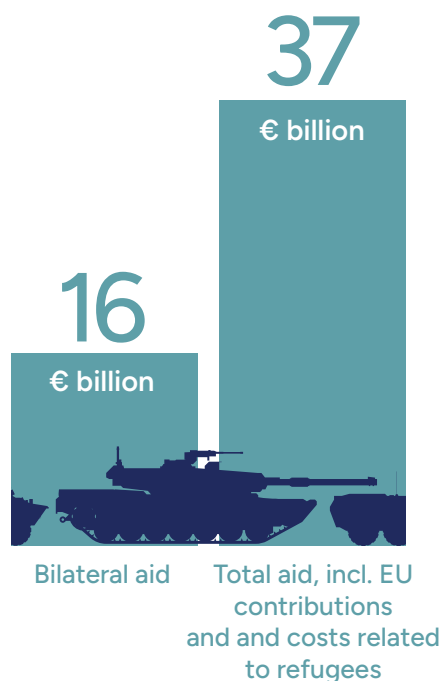
Joschka Fischer served as German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor from 1998 to 2005.

Embracing Hard Power

Germany has a responsibility to shape the outcome of the war against Ukraine.

By Julia Friedrich

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” the popular saying goes. German policy toward Ukraine following Russia’s full-scale invasion is a case in point. Berlin is trying to walk a fine line, ensuring that Kyiv does not lose while Moscow does not win, and has spent [nearly €16 billion](#)¹ in direct bilateral financial, military, and humanitarian aid pursuing these objectives. As the largest EU member state, Germany also pays the lion’s share of the bloc’s support to Ukraine. In total, Berlin has made an investment so large that it would signify a German failure, too, should Ukraine lose the war. At the same time, the assistance is insufficient to prevent Moscow from winning, especially if the United States substantially reduces or ends its military support. Germany is simultaneously in it too deep but not deep enough.



Source: Kiel Institute - Ukraine Support Tracker

Much has indeed changed in and for Germany since February 2022. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s *Zeitenwende*, the “watershed moment” of the country’s foreign and security policy, mobilized an extra €100 billion for its military. Berlin has become the second-largest donor to Kyiv (in absolute terms; relative to GDP, Germany trails other European countries), has welcomed about 1 million Ukrainian refugees, and has stepped up its role in NATO by deploying a brigade to Lithuania. Germany has also released its first national security strategy, which names Russia as the greatest threat to European prosperity, peace, and security.

Yet much has also stayed the same over the last three years. A substantive overhaul of Germany’s view of its global role is only gradually taking shape, too slowly given the pace of the war in Ukraine. In addition, the chronic disconnect between the foreign policy challenges Germany faces and its reactions to them were again apparent when, on the day after Donald Trump’s reelection, the government in Berlin collapsed rather than decisively boosting aid to Ukraine. Germany still believes that the United States must steer any decisive action there. It continues to follow Washington’s lead on supporting Kyiv, seeing itself as a security actor constrained but protected by the United States. And even though Germany named Russia as the greatest threat in its national security strategy, debate on a new policy toward Moscow remains nonexistent, as does a reckoning with past strategic mistakes.

With Trump back in the White House, the speed at which Germany acts, which Scholz likes to call the “Deutschlandtempo”, must increase. The new government in Berlin, once in power, faces especially tough choices on Ukraine, and officials will need to act quickly. Will they muster the courage, money, and equipment to prevent Kyiv from losing more ground to Russia? Or will Germany await the results of an agreement between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, one in which Berlin may or may not have a say?

Crucially, the next government will also be unable to avoid clarifying public spending priorities, whether the debt brake is kept, reformed, or abolished. If resources are to continue flowing to defense and Ukraine, cutbacks elsewhere will be necessary. [A majority of Germans](#)² has long supported aid to Ukraine, but political parties promising peace at all costs have gained ground since the full-scale invasion. [Many Germans](#),³ struggling to understand the meaning of “Zeitenwende”, simply equate the term with “crisis”.

The implications of the war for Germany, therefore, must be communicated even more clearly. If Ukraine loses, Germans will not return to the status quo ante with a revised European map. They will have lost their best defense against a country intent on ending German and European prosperity. Friction with Russia will continue regardless of whether Germans want it or not. And, in an international context in which, for many outside Europe, the war in Ukraine is just one more armed conflict that could have been avoided, only Europe can stand up for itself.

The incoming government in Berlin should consequently:

- be honest about the prospect of a Trump–Putin peace deal on Ukraine (slim), the Russian threat (real), and the cost of protecting Germany (and Europe) from that threat (high)
- implement a long-term plan for securing Ukraine, including a steady, sustainable supply of military equipment based on an understanding that Europe, including Germany, will maintain support for Kyiv even beyond any potential peace deal or ceasefire
- formulate a new Russia policy based on lessons learned, including medium-term provisions to counter the current and likely future threat that Russia poses, and options for rapid, decisive action to respond to sudden changes in Moscow for the worse or, surprisingly, for the better

Julia Friedrich is a research fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), where she contributes to the institute’s work on peace and security.

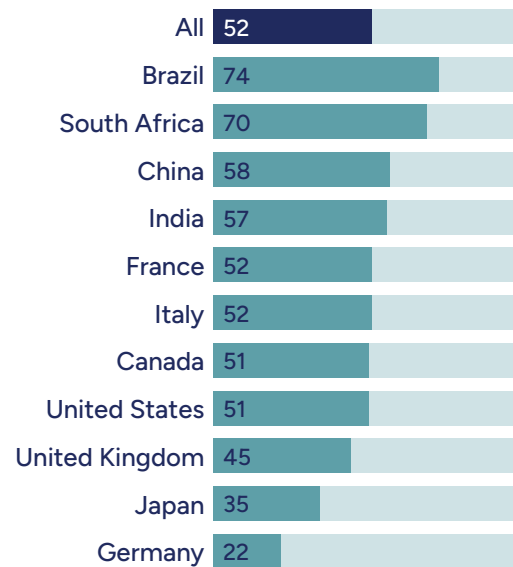
America First, Germany Alone?

Berlin must transform itself from junior US partner to Europe's enabling power.

By Tobias Bunde

Germany faces a daunting challenge as the American foreign policy consensus that shaped the country's post-World War II role erodes. Few other countries adapted as well to an international order largely formed by US ideas and underwritten by its material power. Germany's role as a junior partner in this global structure solved key problems and allowed the country to thrive. West Germany's NATO membership addressed its precarious security situation in the Cold War through a "Westbindung" that also allowed for the emergence of a stable, liberal-democratic political system. Once the country was reunified and the Cold War ended, Germany could focus on domestic challenges, reaping a tremendous "peace dividend" from being surrounded by friends. Its export-oriented economy flourished under the conditions of an open economic order. EU and NATO integration in the shadow of US hegemony made it easier for Germany's neighbors to deal with Europe's economic powerhouse.

Percentage of respondents in listed countries who believe that Germany is a great power.



Source: Munich Security Index (Kekst CNC/Munich Security Conference)

US President Donald Trump is likely to upset this comfortable situation. His administration will not act as the leader and guardian of a values-based community of democracies. Rather, he and his domestic allies will strengthen illiberal parties in Germany and throughout Europe. His disdain for an open economic order and the World Trade Organization and his love of tariffs will challenge the German economy. His unwillingness to guarantee Europeans' security, or even subsidize it unless they pay more for it, draws particular attention to Germany. The erosion of the United States' role as the ultimate guarantor of European security presents the thorniest challenge of the [broader Zeitenwende](#),⁴ defined as the erosion of the key geopolitical certainties on which German foreign policy has been based since the end of the Cold War.

This requires Berlin to soberly reassess its position and reinvent its foreign and security policy. To start, Germany must accept that it now bears a key responsibility for Europe's political, economic, and military defense. It can no longer hide behind others. Obviously, European security will continue to depend on the United States in the foreseeable future, and Germany and its partners will not be able to compensate for a potential US withdrawal in the short to medium term. But to maintain

Washington's engagement, Germany must increase its investment in security to signal its readiness to carry a much larger share of the burden. This does not necessarily mean spending 5% of GDP on defense, as Poland will soon do. But it does require a fundamental shifting of domestic resources. Germany cannot solve Europe's security problems alone, but neither can Europe without Germany. The next government in Berlin must turn the country into Europe's [enabling power](#),⁵ forging a transnational coalition of pro-European actors willing to make "geopolitical Europe" a reality. It must halt further fragmentation and nationalization. It must promote Europe together over Germany alone or Germany first.

Many Germans, however, still believe that their country is just one among many and doubt that it can play a leading role. International partners may tend to exaggerate Germany's power and influence, but Germans vastly underestimate its importance and potential. Respondents to the [Munich Security Index](#),⁶ a public opinion survey conducted in the G7 states and Brazil, India, China, and South Africa, consider Germany to be among the world's most powerful nations. Majorities in all countries, except for Japan and the United Kingdom, believe that Germany is a "great power". Strikingly, only 22% of German respondents agree.

The mismatch between Germany's self-image and its image abroad leads to recurring disagreements. German politicians, for example, often emphasize that their country has spent more to support Ukraine than any other country save the United States. Other Europeans complain that German support is not commensurate with its GDP. And Germans may believe that they have already come a long way to meet European security needs, but most of Berlin's partners see a widening gap between German efforts and the requirements of a changing security environment.

At the same time, some of Germany's European neighbors could soon become wary of Berlin leading too strongly, making unilateral decisions and perhaps even attempting to dominate the continent again. Germany will need to tread carefully if it aims to become Europe's key military power in addition to being its leading economy. It will need to consider its neighbors' perspectives, dispel any doubts about nefarious aims, and offer an enlightened definition of German interests.

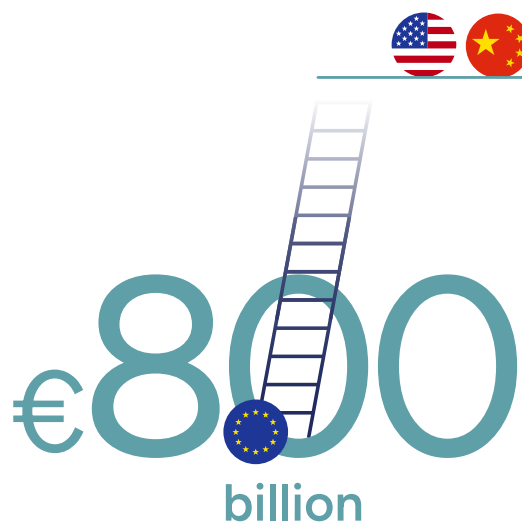
The changing role of the United States rephrases Europe's German question: Can Germany lead in a way that finds domestic and international acceptance?

Tobias Bunde is director of research and policy at the Munich Security Conference and professor of international security at the Hertie School in Berlin.

Germany's Role in a More Sovereign Europe

By Georgina Wright

Europe is facing immense challenges. The war in Ukraine is entering its third year, Donald Trump's return raises doubts about US security commitments, and the EU risks economic stagnation unless it reinvents its industrial model. In his recent report to the European Commission (EC) on EU competitiveness, former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi warns that bridging the competitiveness gap with China and the United States will require €800 billion annually in investments. This is a daunting task that demands clear priorities, decisive leadership, and financial resources. Germany's role in all these developments is critical.



Estimated annual investments to bridge the EU's competitiveness gap with China and the United States

Source: Politico⁷

A German Leadership Vacuum

Germany has historically shaped EU policy, from safeguarding the single market to steering Europe through financial crises. Yet, in recent years, Germany has been strikingly absent. European partners understand that Berlin is grappling with seismic shifts—a collapsed economic model reliant on Russian gas and exports to China, and a potentially eroding security policy anchored in US guarantees. But they are frustrated by Germany's tepid response and a lack of leadership in Brussels.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition was largely seen as dysfunctional: slow to act, unable to articulate clear positions in Brussels, and mostly inward-looking. Germany's promised *Zeitenwende* delivered increased defense spending, which was welcomed by European allies, but no clear overall strategy or vision. The deterioration of Franco-German relations further stalled EU decision-making. The consequences have been twofold: other member states, such as Denmark, Poland, and Italy, have been stepping in to fill the leadership vacuum where possible, and there is now a more centralized EC leadership. However, the reality is that the EU stands a better chance at formulating a more forceful response when Berlin and Paris are on board. Germany's European partners now hope that the next elections will reset Berlin's role in EU affairs.

Securing Ukraine, Strengthening European Defense

The EU's new leadership has pledged to act faster, prioritizing security, competitiveness, and cohesion. Supporting Ukraine remains central, yet NATO membership remains unlikely and Europe

lacks a unified vision for alternative security guarantees without the United States. Options range from bolstering long-term military aid to deploying European troops in Ukraine. But without clear commitments, Ukrainians may flee in greater numbers, complicating post-war reconstruction in the event of a peace deal.

On the question of defense spending, EU countries have collectively pledged to spend more on their security. But the modalities of funding remain an issue. Should the EU borrow jointly, reallocate existing funds, or issue defense bonds? Nations with advanced defense industries—France, Sweden, and Germany—may seek looser state aid rules to boost production, but smaller EU members fear an uneven playing field and may demand compromise in other areas, such as more funding for farming. Germany will be crucial in balancing these competing interests, particularly as pressure mounts on Berlin to relax the strict debt limits set by its so-called “debt brake”.

Defending Economic Competitiveness

Growing protectionist trade policies, particularly from the United States and China, pose significant risks. Trump has already vowed to impose tariffs on European exports and could resort to sanctions to pile further pressure on the EU to reduce its trade surplus. The EU must be able to respond decisively to these trade threats and reduce vulnerabilities in its supply chains. Strengthening ties with partners such as Canada and Japan will be vital in mitigating external pressures.

Both the Draghi Report and another report for the EC from former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta highlight the need for EU investment in innovation and industrial modernization. The EC must listen carefully to the needs of companies and demonstrate that it can protect the single market while keeping it open to investment and business. Germany’s role in this debate will be closely monitored by all EU countries, not least by Central and Eastern European nations whose economies are deeply integrated with Germany’s.

Restoring Germany’s Leadership in Europe

The EU has proven resilient in past crises, responding to the COVID-19 crisis, imposing swift sanctions on Russia, and navigating economic shocks. But today’s challenges demand renewed leadership, especially from Germany. To reassert its influence, Berlin must act decisively and prioritize three key actions:

First, Germany must engage more effectively within EU institutions. It must articulate clear policies and priorities and demonstrate how these align with broader European interests—not just its own. A painfully negotiated position inside Germany will not necessarily fly in Brussels. Berlin must show that it is ready to compromise and give itself time to negotiate with other capitals.

Second, Germany must repair its strained partnership with France. The two countries’ breakdown in trust has stalled EU policymaking, with Denmark, Poland, and Italy stepping into the void where possible. Yet, on critical issues such as defense spending and industrial strategy, EU responses are far stronger with Berlin and Paris actively participating in talks.

Finally, Germany must deepen security ties with the United Kingdom and continue to actively participate in adhoc groupings such as the Weimar Triangle. Germany's 2023 national security strategy failed to mention Britain—an oversight that must be rectified. The United Kingdom remains a crucial player in European security, a fact underscored by Germany's signing of its first defense agreement with London in October 2024. In it, both countries promised to work together to reinforce Euro-Atlantic stability and develop joint military capabilities, including deep-precision strikes, interoperability of future combat systems, and undersea security.

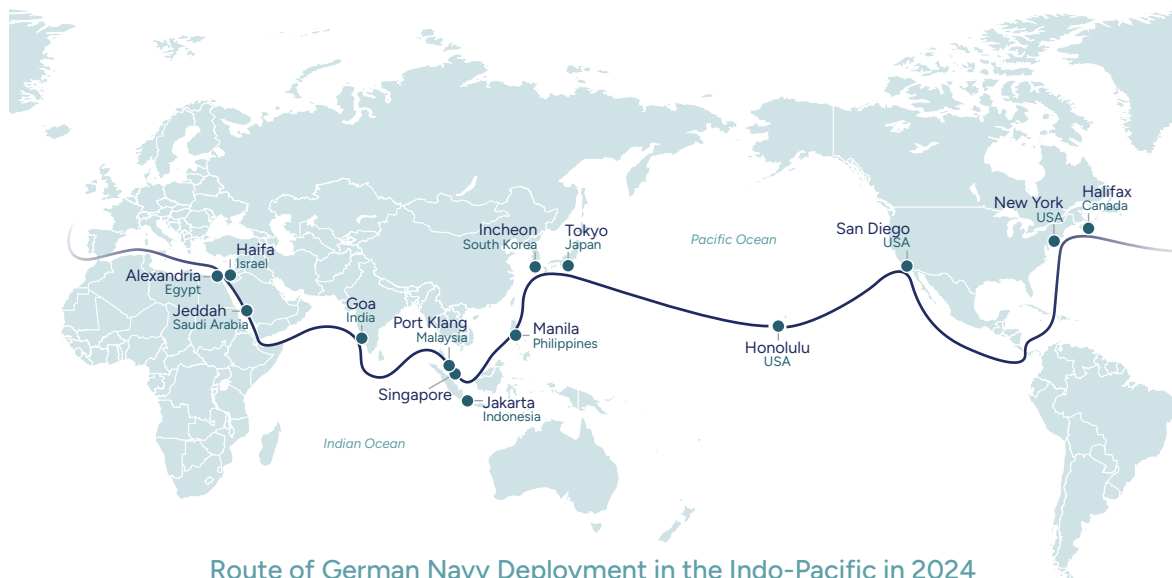
By setting clear priorities, repairing key partnerships, and adapting to new geopolitical realities, Germany can help steer Europe through its most pressing crises. A failure to act decisively risks weakening the EU's ability to respond to global challenges. The time for German leadership is now.

Georgina Wright is senior fellow and deputy director for international studies at Institut Montaigne.

Germany and the Indo-Pacific

by Dhruva Jaishankar

Germany should continue to pay close attention to the Indo-Pacific as it considers its place in a post-Zeitenwende world shaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and US President Donald Trump's reelection. China's rise and growing influence defines the Indo-Pacific, which stretches from eastern and southern Africa to the western Pacific. The region remains important as a locus of global commerce and economic growth, and for being home to heightening geopolitical tensions among the world's largest economies.



Source: Table.Media, Bundeswehr⁸

Germany was early in identifying the importance of the Indo-Pacific, with Berlin releasing a strategy for the region in September 2020 as part of an effort to lay out an EU-wide approach. The strategy listed seven priorities: multilateralism, climate change, security, trade, human rights, culture, and digital transformation. Germany has already contributed to the region's maritime security through legal and multilateral efforts, such as issuing statements of concern about Beijing's activities in the South China Sea and by coordinating diplomatic positions and legal approaches at UN bodies. Berlin has also deployed naval assets in the Indo-Pacific.

To examine the region it is helpful to disaggregate it. A primary component is China, a major German trading partner but also a growing challenge due to its territorial revisionism (and military buildup), non-market economic practices, and institutional revisionism in multilateral bodies. Discussions about China are playing out most immediately on three issues: unification with Taiwan; overcapacity in various industrial sectors including electric vehicles, semiconductors, and solar components; and Chinese intransigence at the UN and other multilateral bodies. But growing China-Russia convergences also make Beijing an important and direct factor in Europe's security and well-being. In addition, continuing German investment in China is beginning to have negative consequences for Berlin's political, security, and economic interests.

Other countries in the Indo-Pacific offer opportunities for cooperation with Germany and its approach to China. The United States and other regional allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, that are integrated into NATO, G7, and other bodies with a heavy transatlantic component, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and with which cooperation with Germany on a variety of issues is forthcoming, form one group of partners. Another group comprises members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, smaller South Asian states, and Pacific island countries, although they do not necessarily share Western concerns about the consequences of China's rise. Finally, there is India, which is neither fully integrated into Western alliances nor unconcerned about the prospects of Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. Deeper security cooperation between Berlin and New Delhi is possible, as is economic and technological collaboration. Continued German engagement throughout the region, therefore, is to be expected.

How should Germany approach the Indo-Pacific? On the economic front, investment in the region writ large, beyond a highly saturated and centralized Chinese economy, is required if Germany is to increase its own resilience through diversified market access and import sources. Germany can also play a valuable role to bolster security, though political and military considerations rule out force projection. Berlin, however, could mirror the actions of some smaller European countries, such as Czechia and Lithuania, by developing a closer relationship with Taiwan. This would offer intelligence cooperation and increased economic resilience, and it would show Washington that Germany is playing a greater role in a theater that the United States is likely to prioritize in the coming decades.

Berlin could also leverage the scale of Indo-Pacific markets to help rebuild the German defense sector. As the country rearms under its *Zeitenwende* and seeks to decrease its dependence on the United States for military support and armaments, certain Indo-Pacific countries become more attractive for their markets and as supply chain partners and sources of technology. These include the more obvious candidates—Japan, South Korea, and Australia—and others such as India, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Understandably, Germany will be preoccupied in the short term with Europe's eastern and southern flanks, the transatlantic relationship, and the Middle East, but Berlin has important economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific. A proactive German approach to the area will require clarifying challenges and priorities, investing in a better understanding of regional dynamics, and pursuing a set of creative policies that defends and advances economic and political interests.

Dhruva Jaishankar is executive director of the Observer Research Foundation America in Washington, DC.

Democratic Resilience

Germany's (In)Ability to Cope With Change.

By Karsten Jung and Tobias Spöri

Germany's traditional business model, based on cheap Russian energy, profitable exports to China, and a sizable "peace dividend" underwritten by an American security guarantee, is crumbling. The Kremlin's brazen attack on the European security order, China's new economic and political assertiveness, and Donald Trump's return to the White House, have buffeted Germany's economic power base. The erosion also extends to the country's long-neglected infrastructure and military, and its ubiquitous welfare state is under mounting demographic and financial pressure. The real—and perceived—consequences of mass migration and nationalist populism are straining social cohesion.



94% of the German public supports fundamental or partial national reform in Germany

Source: ARD Deutschlandtrend, December 2024

A sense of uneasiness has crept into the national consciousness. Coming at a critical historical juncture, such pessimism threatens to paralyze a nation that seems to have lost its ability to cope with change. With increasingly large bailouts—a "Wumms", or oomph, being inevitably followed by a "Doppel-Wumms", or double oomph—successive governments have propped up the illusion that nothing—neither climate change nor COVID-19 nor the *Zeitenwende*—can disrupt unobtrusive German life.

The Shock of Reality

Over time, the country has become so weary of reform and dependent on the cash-based approach to crisis management that its government collapsed when it ran out of funds to throw at an ever-growing number of problems. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the end of cheap gas deliveries undermined the model's economic foundation. The government's commitment to a national "debt brake" and the constitutional court's strict interpretation of that borrowing rule precluded alternative, credit-based approaches to financing. At the same time, Trump's return to the White House reawakened uncertainty about the US security guarantee, dramatically raising the cost of bolstering national defense.

The German economy is expected to have [contracted](#)⁹ for the second consecutive year in 2024, the only one among those of major developed countries to perform so poorly. Stuck in a protracted

recession, Germans are learning the hard way that their economic prowess has limits and their decades-long neglect of the Bundeswehr comes at a price. [A massive majority](#)¹⁰ of 94% acknowledges the need for at least some national reform, citing the economy, migration, and international security as the most pressing issues. Almost half even demand a fundamental change of course. But few Germans are willing to make sacrifices: [Only 27% support spending cuts, 14% a suspension of the debt brake, and just 7% a tax increase for defense.](#)¹¹ That [around 70% support loosening the debt brake to invest in critical infrastructure](#),¹² however, reflects the willingness of the public to suspend the spending rules for comprehensible priorities.

Instead of turning the upcoming election into a referendum about the right response to the Zeitenwende, however, most centrist parties (the Greens are the most notable exception) shy away from frank debate. Under pressure from their populist challengers' seemingly simple solutions (e.g., "peace with Russia", "welfare not weapons"), they appear less afraid of the threats confronting Germany than of the Germans' reaction to potential countermeasures. These parties consequently confine themselves to paying lip service to the Zeitenwende and resort to the tried-and-tested, if untimely, platitudes of political campaigning: tax cuts, wage increases, and stable pensions. They argue that none is affected by national security concerns, including support for Ukraine. They shy away from necessary prioritization by failing to effectively communicate the strong link between the shifting geopolitical landscape and future German and European prosperity and security. As a result, Germans remain largely unaware of—and unprepared for—the Zeitenwende's actual consequences and costs.

The Need for Leadership

The new international environment requires more determined political leadership than that presently on display. A public that does not fully understand the challenge that the Zeitenwende presents cannot be expected to respond appropriately to it.

Germans must finally drop the pretense that they can isolate themselves from the ongoing global transformations. They must confront the harsh reality that they are already in a hybrid war launched by actors seeking to undermine Germany and the West more broadly. The populations of the Baltic countries and Poland are clear-eyed about this, and their social resilience is much higher.

German political leaders must stop glossing over hybrid attacks in the vain hope that they can avoid unsettling the public. They must directly address these malicious actions and clearly communicate that such activities ultimately aim to undermine German and European democracy, security, and prosperity. Once that is widely understood, the magnitude of the challenge can guide an informed debate about the appropriate national response.

The new German government should lead this discourse. Political leadership can help shape public opinion, as increased public support for sending battle tanks to Ukraine shows. Once the government decided to go through with the delivery, [the public came on board](#).¹³ Public contemplation of austerity cannot be expected when political leaders promise welfare benefits and tax cuts. But a government that signals a need for fundamental change to increase social resilience, such as through a defense tax or a resumption of the draft, can expect to get the public's attention and,

perhaps, understanding. Expectations may then begin to change. This undoubtedly comes with political risk, but the risk that accompanies continued inaction is exponentially higher.

Karsten Jung is professor for political science at the Federal University of Applied Administrative Sciences in Brühl. His research focuses on Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policy.

Tobias Spöri is a senior research fellow at the Berlin-based think tank d|part and a senior research fellow at the University of Vienna's department of political science.

Soccer and Social Change

By Carsten Cramer

Runners like to describe reaching a certain point in the midst of their struggle at which they escape the suffering, feel no effort, and move forward step by step in a kind of euphoria, simply “doing”. I had a similar experience 37 years ago at my desk. I sat down in front of a blank sheet of paper, writing away, initially a bit strained, but eventually the arguments flowed almost effortlessly from my fingers. My missive, when completed, was 12 pages long, a conviction-driven letter of conscientious objection to the German draft. Twenty months of civilian service followed.

It was a time of change in Europe. Borders were opening, the “winds of change” slowly began to blow into Eastern bloc countries, and at some point my divided Germany became united. War on the continent was not an issue for me.



Source: German Olympic Sports Association (DOSB)

Fast forward to today, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has certainly changed Germans’ environment. My compatriots and I now face enormous challenges to our security and democracy, in Germany and in Europe. This is what led me, as managing director of Borussia Dortmund (BVB), to see why the storied football club would associate itself with Rheinmetall, the automotive and arms manufacturer. But I will be honest: If such a company had offered to sponsor BVB before February 22, 2024, the day on which Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the club probably would have rejected it.

It is astonishing and yet understandable how personal points of view have changed with the *Zeitenwende* and the desire to secure and defend German democracy. The deputy premier of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Mona Neubaur, once clearly positioned herself as a Green politician opposed to the business model of Düsseldorf-based Rheinmetall. But in 2023, she took part in the company’s ground-breaking ceremony for a plant in the town of Weeze. And Robert Habeck, minister for economic affairs and climate action, noted in May 2024 that BVB’s cooperation with Rheinmetall showed “where we stand” in Germany. “We know and unfortunately have to admit that we are in a different, more threatening world,” Habeck said in a comment on the partnership. The “practiced and understandable restraint” when talking about the arms industry is “no longer tenable and no longer correct”, he added. In this respect, Rheinmetall’s sponsorship “also reflects the reality of the new era to a certain extent”.

This changing attitude probably also reflects the feeling that everyone would prefer to live in a world in which no arms company is needed. But then there is also the question: What, apart from military strength, does a man like Russian President Vladimir Putin respect? Since the answer to that question is widely known, several more inevitably arise: Would we prefer that weapons for Ukraine, for modernizing the Bundeswehr, and for securing German democracy are manufactured by a company with thousands of employees in North Rhine-Westphalia? From a company whose business the German parliament controls? Or should production be in the hands of states and companies for which transparency is a foreign concept?

There is no question that a sponsorship deal is precisely that for BVB: a deal. A lot of money is at stake, and I do not want to give the impression that I am trying to disguise this. Trustful discussions with club partners about entering the partnership were had. In the end, sponsorship was accepted because the need for a €100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr and a significant increase in German defense spending to bolster national security was clear, and BVB could help spread that message through a wide-reaching platform. Sponsorship did not come about because BVB is elated about weapons, supports wars, exalts itself, or agitates to be on the global political stage.

Looking back, I think we have succeeded in elevating public awareness of the threats to national security. That is unsurprising. Soccer, after all, offers arguably the largest social and media stage in Germany. The sport, along with music, is *the* topic that unites people of all ages, faiths, and income levels, especially at a time in which politics and religion often divide, and churches and political parties shed members.

Rheinmetall and BVB have been partners since May 2024, and I believe the sponsorship has been good if not easy. There has been much support and criticism. BVB accepts and incorporates into its internal discussions every well-grounded perspective on the cooperation. BVB also works with Rheinmetall to ensure that it appraises its own corporate past and connects it with intensive remembrance work that we have carried out for years. In short, BVB lives this challenging partnership as authentically as possible.

I think it unlikely that the sponsorship will ever become easy or normal. But that is not the goal. Sometimes the right path is not the easiest one, especially in a time that does not feel normal at all.

Carsten Cramer is managing director of Borussia Dortmund GmbH & Co. KgaA. He oversees sales and marketing, internationalization and digitalization.

Endnotes

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Alfred Landecker Foundation

The Alfred Landecker Foundation was founded in 2019 and is based in Berlin. Its purpose is to remember the Holocaust, fight antisemitism and strengthen democracy. This becomes all the more challenging since trust in democratic institutions is declining while historical revisionism and hatred toward minorities are on the rise. As a contribution to strengthening democracy and its institutions, the Foundation brings together and supports a global network of academics and civil society.

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