Report







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The “German Question” Revisited

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The “German Question” Revisited

Europe fears German selfishness more than German power.

By Sophia Besch, Niklas Ebert, Claudia Major

Germany is rearming. Berlin aims to build the strongest conventional army in Europe, spending 3.5% of its GDP on defense by 2029. It is permanently stationing a brigade in Lithuania and is considering bringing back the draft in its efforts to become a “leading middle power”.[1]

These developments have been accompanied by a growing debate over whether Germany’s neighbors truly welcome more German military power or fear it. Labeled a return of the “German Question”, this public debate centers on the risks that could result from the disproportionate strength of Germany in European defense at a time when the United States is withdrawing as its unofficial leader.

This series seeks to answer whether, in a return of the German Question, Germany’s allies fear its rearmament and German leadership more than its weakness. In a comparative analysis, experts of 13 partner countries[2] detail how governments, policy communities, and publics across Europe view Germany’s rearmament, what role Berlin is expected to play, and whether it is trusted to do so. This allows us to cut through the debate and assess which of the concerns are real.

Most of Germany’s allies welcome its rearmament. Few of the countries studied here fear that Berlin will turn against Europe. Their concerns are not about Germany doing more in defense, but rather about how Germany leads. They worry about German risk-aversion, immature strategic culture, and industrial protectionism, as well as about signs that Berlin is turning inward under domestic pressure. Fears of a far-right government are seen as a long-term risk.

Berlin should accept that a leader is held to a higher standard than its neighbors set for themselves. It must respond to fair criticisms and ignore instrumentalized anxieties.

This effort begins with a definition of what “the German Question” means.

Box 1. Questions for the country studies

All authors were asked to address the following three questions in their analysis:

- **How are Germany's military rearmament and ambition to become Europe's leading conventional military power viewed in the country?**
    - To what extent are these developments welcomed or viewed with concern by government officials, the wider policy community, and the public, and what expectations do they create regarding Germany's future role in European security?
    - What is the government's position? Are there significant differences across political parties or stakeholder groups?
    - Is this a topic of political or public debate?
- **What role is Germany expected to play in European and transatlantic security, incvluding the responsibilities it is expected to assume and the areas where it is seen as making the greatest contribution?**
- **Are Germany's ambitions considered credible, and is Germany trusted to assume greater military power and leadership?**
    - How are Germany's capabilities, resources, and political commitment assessed?
    - What obstacles are seen as limiting Germany's ability to fulfill its ambitions and responsibilities (for example, political, financial, societal)?
    - What historical experiences, political factors, or operational experiences shape confidence or skepticism? What are the key concerns (for example, lack of strategic culture, a return of hegemony)?

What Is the German Question?

While the negative connotation is evident, there is no single definition of the German Question. In the 19th century it referred to whether and how the German states would unite; after 1945, it was commonly used in the context of reunification debates. In discussions about European security, it is generally understood as a reference to the challenge of fitting a state of Germany's size and strength into the European order at the service of Europe rather than against it. "Too big for Europe but too small for the world",[3] a militarized and aggressive Germany haunted Europe in the last century, causing Europe's biggest catastrophes, World War II and the Shoah—memories of which are still alive. Since 1945, German policymakers' and their allies' goal was above all to tame Germany by

embedding its military and economic power irrevocably in Euro-Atlantic structures (NATO and the EU). They also aimed to build a political system with multiple checks and balances, particularly with regard to the military, that would prevent Germany from ever again turning against Europe and going it alone.[4]

During the Cold War, Germany's division into East and West helped reassure allies. The quip, attributed variously to French novelist and journalist François Mauriac and former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, that they loved Germany so much they were "glad there were two of them" captured a widely shared sentiment. German unification in 1989–1990 revived old fears in London and Paris.[5] Washington, however, backed it on the condition that a united Germany would stay in NATO and embedded in Western structures. For Berlin's European neighbors, the fact that the united Germany's leaders committed the country to deeper European integration helped, too.

After 1949, Germany defined itself as a "civilian power", shaped by a culture of military restraint and of pacifism in government and society. In 1999 in Kosovo, after heated debates, German forces took part in combat operations for the first time since 1945; Afghanistan followed in 2001. Thereafter the debate over Germany's military role in Europe turned to "normalization", with allies beginning to complain not about German strength, but about German passivity and reluctance to take up a more "normal" role corresponding to its economic and political weight.[6] Calls for Germany to step up, contribute to European burden-sharing, and stop hiding behind the past became louder. At the 2014 Munich Security Conference, leading German politicians called upon Germany to take on more responsibility.[7] Yet defense spending stayed well short of the 2% of GDP pledged at NATO's Wales summit that year. Only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did this change.

The Changing International Order Triggers the German Question

The urgency of the German debate arises from larger global developments. First, international relations are becoming increasingly brutalized: Coercion, intimidation, and the use of force are again central instruments of statecraft. Major powers including the United States, Russia, and China disrespect existing rules or reinterpret them to serve their interests. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought power politics, war, and nuclear threats back to Europe. The second Trump administration makes it more difficult for Europeans to deal with the Russian threat. Second, the competition over resources continues to intensify, spanning energy, minerals, and strategic technologies. Third, multipolarity is rising, as an increasing number of actors seek to expand their influence, reshape economic and connectivity networks, and build alternative forms of cooperation outside traditional Western structures. Fourth, technology has emerged as a critical instrument of power, both economically and militarily.

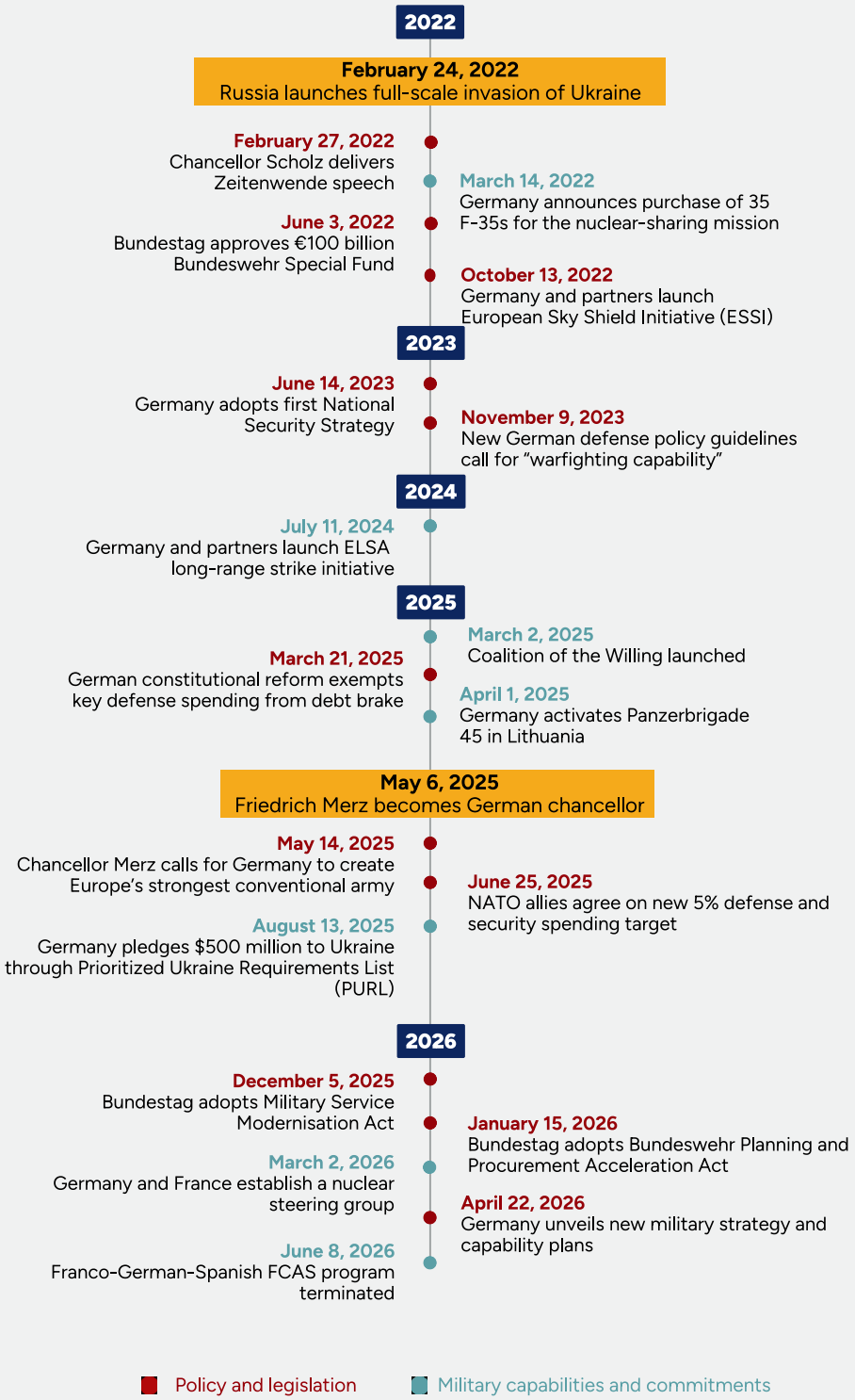
As a result, given Brussels' limited hard-power leverage and preference for rules-based approaches, Europe struggles. To preserve its model, the continent must become more sovereign and resilient. But implementation in the military realm remains slow, partly because Europe's traditional leaders and only nuclear powers are weakened. The United Kingdom is facing fiscal constraints, finding its position outside the EU, and wondering whether the special relationship with Washington still holds. France has articulated a European vision, yet persistent domestic

political and economic constraints limit its capacity to act. The potential election of a right-wing populist president in spring 2027 might take France out of the equation. As a result, attention is increasingly turning to Germany. If the rearmament is successful, it is likely to become the strongest conventional military power on the continent. Among Europe's major powers, it remains comparatively stable politically and economically. In fact, many allies, particularly those from northern, central, and southern Europe, have called for Germany to lead.[8]

Since 2025, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has promised to live up to the expectations of allies while taking into account their potential worries: "As far back as 15 years ago, [Polish Foreign Minister] Radek Sikorski made a point of telling Germany—and I quote him—'I fear German inaction more than German power.'... We accept this responsibility." He aimed to transform Germany from a "sleeping middle power" to a leading one. Yet, the chancellor also addressed potential fears, for example when he remarked in his speech at the 2026 Munich Security Conference: "Leadership based on partnership—yes; hegemonic fantasies—no. Never again will we Germans go it alone. That is the enduring lesson of our history." Rather, he aims to position Germany as the European coordinator who brings together European countries, as was the case ahead of the 2025 Putin-Trump summit in Alaska and in November 2026 with the Coalition of the Willing meeting in Berlin, in parallel to the Putin, Trump and Xi meeting in Shenzen. Also, Berlin's 2023 Defense Political Guidelines and 2026 Military Strategy state that Germany must assume a new leadership role in Europe. According to Chief of Defense General Carsten Breuer, "As the largest economy in Europe and in view of an increasingly complex and intense threat situation, Germany must and will assume a leading role within NATO—also at the military level. It represents a paradigm shift and underpins our ambition to play an active and substantial role."

Germany's Zeitenwende Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

(Selected Steps)



The increasing demand for German leadership was met with a growing German acceptance of the need, if not ambition, to step up. Yet it also led to new debates.

The Four Foci of the New German Question

The current debates focus on four key concerns: strategic culture, financial power, nationalism, and a right-wing takeover of the Zeitenwende.

The first strand is shaped by concerns about German military power and what some perceive as an ill-adapted and immature strategic culture. Rearmament is moving Germany away from its previous civilian power role. Some allies worry that Germany struggles to define a clear strategy to direct its substantial capabilities. This leads them to fear that the unwise use of military power will lead to unintended escalation. Others are concerned about Germany’s restraint—even to the point of passivity—and its risk aversion. They fear that Berlin lacks the strategic culture and experience to lead, and that this could weaken or harm Europe as a whole. Germany’s refusal to deliver Taurus air-launched cruise missiles to Ukraine, its hesitance to stop Russia’s shadow fleet, and its reluctance to contribute to the Coalition of the Willing to uphold a ceasefire in Ukraine seem to confirm this fear. Some also worry that Berlin’s defense establishment is often instinctively transatlantic rather than European, and is reluctant to emancipate itself from Washington.

The second strand focuses on concerns about Germany’s financial power and its defense-industrial ambitions. The financial scale of German rearmament is impressive, and no other European country can match it. In a historic 2025 decision, Germany loosened its debt brake for defense and made plans to spend 3.5% of GDP on its armed forces by 2029, ahead of the schedule agreed upon at the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague. Since 2024, Germany has been Europe’s largest defense spender in absolute terms. By 2030 it plans to spend more than the current French and British budgets together. Funding on this scale is shaping European defense markets. As German defense spending flows to national firms, the expanding reach of the German defense industry feeds anxieties among some partners whose relative fiscal weakness constrains their own defense-industrial ambitions. They worry that German rearmament will unfairly redistribute defense-industrial gains in Europe and in export markets. Berlin’s resistance to common European debt for defense while exempting its own defense spending from the debt brake does little to counter accusations of selfishness.

The third version of today’s German Question describes the fear that a militarily and economically strong Germany could alter Europe’s fragile power balance, turn away from European cooperation, dominate Europe, and shape European defense according to German interests. This is the fear of German nationalism, a fear that draws on history but also on more recent memories of how Germany used its economic weight to dominate the eurozone during the last financial crisis. Partners who remember German economic nationalism now ask whether German defense nationalism will follow. They feel burned by their experience of the Olaf Scholz government, which promised to turn its attention to Brussels and ended up distracted by domestic politics. They fear that increasing political fragmentation and economic pressure will lead Berlin to continue turning inward, leaving it with no capacity left to commit to the (greater) European good.

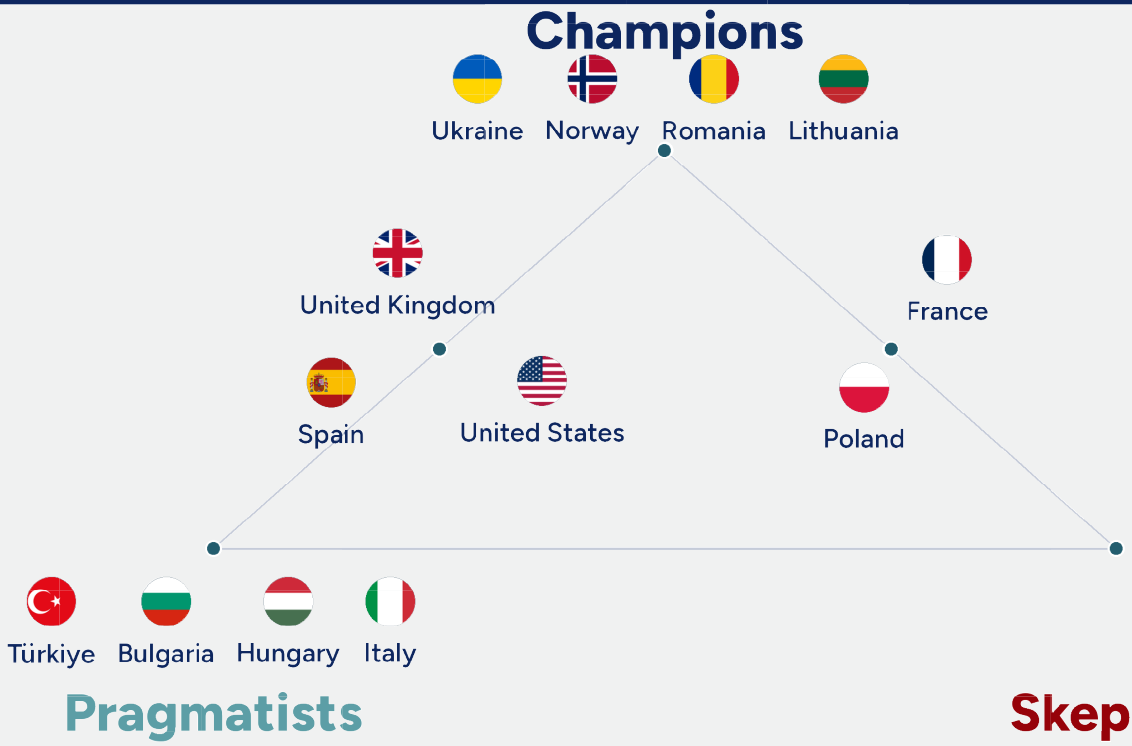
Finally, the fourth strand is motivated by concern about a far-right takeover of the Zeitenwende if the populist right-wing, pro-Russian Alternative for Germany (AfD) party were to enter the federal government. Partners would then face a larger German army directed by a government unwilling to defend them, and that might abandon its NATO commitments to team up with Europe's greatest threat: Russia. A potential AfD election victory is not imminent. But if it were to happen in the next few years, it might coincide with the delivery of large long-term procurement projects. This prospect further fuels fears.

Most Partners Want More From Germany

Our analysis shows, however, that most of the countries under study here do not worry about the current Germany. Quite the opposite: Most broadly welcome Germany's military efforts and many actively call for more. They see German rearmament as a necessary response to Russian aggression and uncertainty about the United States' role in European defense. There are some who disagree with the specific politics of German rearmament, and who are concerned about the direction of German leadership, specifically. They worry, for instance, that the German balance between transatlantic and European solidarity is off. Others are concerned about German competition in the defense-industrial space. Many of Germany's allies also have doubts about whether the Zeitenwende can be delivered and paid for. They point to stalling recruitment and to a procurement system that may lack the capacity to absorb new money quickly or to buy innovative kit. And they wonder whether the economy can carry the effort, since the "China shock" and weak growth forecasts could erode the Zeitenwende's financial base. However, real fear that Germany might turn against Europe is largely absent. Where it does exist, it tends to be focused on the uncertain future, with the main concern being a potential right-wing takeover of the Zeitenwende and the purpose that Germany's military might serve under far-right political leadership.

Three groups can be distinguished in our study: Champions, Pragmatists, and Skeptics. The categories are necessarily simplified; the country chapters give a more nuanced picture.

How Allies View German Rearmament and Defense Leadership



Countries are grouped at a category corner or exactly halfway between two categories.

Champions do not see any issues with German rearmament. They welcome a greater German role and in fact openly call for more German leadership and practical commitment. They want Germany to send more weapons to Ukraine, or to look beyond the eastern flank to southern Europe and the Black Sea. They also want German troops stationed in countries other than Lithuania. They also want political leadership. They see German power as a direct answer to the threat from Russia.

The **pragmatists** accept German leadership as a fact resulting from geographical position, economic-financial strength, and military power. They are unemotional about it and hope to see benefits for European defense and in some cases themselves. They expect that as Germany rearms, Europe’s defense order will increasingly be shaped in Berlin. They often hope to deepen cooperation with German defense firms.

The **skeptics** are apprehensive of a greater German role. They often call for greater German commitment, but they question Germany's ability to lead and worry about the direction German leadership might take. Reasons range from concern over an immature German strategic culture perceived as risk-averse and soft on Russia, to the sense that Berlin lacks a European vision, to fear of a far-right take over. Those who see themselves as Germany's peers also fear that they may lose their standing in European defense.

Current Realities Versus Future Fears

In fact, most partners do not fear today's Germany. Two crucial distinctions are often lost in the current debate. The first is between rearmament and leadership. Most Europeans clearly support a greater German defense commitment; given Germany's size and its economic power, they can hardly do without it. But some Europeans are reluctant to accept a leadership role for Germany. That reluctance seems driven less by fear of German power than by doubts about its leadership capacity and strategic culture.

The second distinction is between the current Germany and a potential future one. These are often confused, and worries about a potentially dangerous future Germany play out as fear of the current one. Thus, currently, the German Question is overstated. The long-term danger is an AfD takeover. A current danger is the exaggeration of potential fears about Germany that may slow down Germany's defense effort, undermine European cohesion by playing countries against each other, and weaken Europe's defense development.

While there is no evidence that the current government is planning to go it alone and turn against Europe, there is a possibility that Berlin might do so in the future. Given the rise of the right-wing populist AfD party in Germany, as demonstrated in recent elections victories in Mecklenburg Vorpommern and Saxony Anhalt in autumn 2026, European allies wonder what would happen if the Euroskeptic, Russia-friendly, and nationalist AfD were to run the federal government. According to current polls—which put the AfD in the lead but preclude it from forming a coalition—this seems highly unlikely in the next elections, scheduled for 2029, but cannot be excluded for the ones after.

Taking the Debate Forward

Yet, turning this eventuality into a prediction is irresponsible. It remains to be seen whether the AfD will make it into power at the federal level. The AfD's potential behavior is uncharted territory. German right-wing extremism and populism certainly differ from those in the rest of Europe in that over the years, AfD has been radicalized—to the point that even its sister parties in the European Parliament exclude cooperation. Yet far right populist parties have shown different tendencies when coming into power. Some oscillate between pragmatic adaptation and normalization and confrontational, yet often symbolic politics.

After World War II, the German political system was built precisely to diffuse power and contain the military. Once in power, an extreme government cannot be reliably contained. But the federal structure of German politics, the parliamentary control of the armed forces, the principle of “Innere Führung” (leadership development and civic education that encourages German service members to disobey unlawful orders), and the embedding of Germany into NATO and the EU were all set up explicitly to serve as guardrails to prevent militarization and unilateral actions. A potential AfD government might be slowed down through these institutional safeguards. These considerations should inform how Berlin thinks about the resilience of its rearmament effort right now. They should not be used to prevent it from rearming in the first place. Europe simply cannot afford to lose German economic and military power in its continent-wide defense.

How the Debate Could Do Harm

Our analysis shows that the debate has taken on a life on its own. At times, an alarmist public debate, especially in Germany itself seems to be disconnected from the positions of its neighbours, and confuses current reality with potential future scenarios, and commitment with leadership. There is even the risk that it could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many European partners are not only fine with a greater German role; they are actively calling for it.

More importantly, critical voices in Germany that reject military investment and a leading role for their country in Europe—such as some groups in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), The Alliance for Social Justice and Economic Reason (BSW) or the Left (Die Linke)—are already using neighboring countries’ supposed fear of Germany to question German re-armament and commitment. In this way, the very fear of a German-led European defense might soon result in a Germany-shaped hole in the middle of Europe’s defense structure.

It is worth keeping in mind that Russia has been attempting to stir up fears around the German Question. Pro-Kremlin outlets portray Germany as moving “from remembrance to rearmament”. Russian information campaigns claim that Berlin’s goal of developing Europe’s strongest conventional army breaks with the postwar promise of “never again”, and accuse Berlin of abandoning the Two Plus Four Treaty that settled unification in 1990. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has called Germany “dangerous again”. Russian disinformation only catches where similar beliefs are already present. But these narratives, aimed at audiences in Germany and its neighboring countries, are explicitly targeted to weaken support for defense spending and for Ukraine, fuel fears about Germany, and drive NATO allies apart.

A New Kind of Normal

Berlin has to determine how broadly to read its historical responsibility to preemptively reassure partners that it is not pursuing German military dominance.

Where the concern over German rearmament is driven by domestic concerns, it is more difficult for Germany to constructively assuage those fears. For instance, in Poland, concern over the rise of the AfD is real. But skepticism of German leadership is also often instrumentalized in a deeply polarized domestic debate in which Germany-related accusations and allusions to the past are easily mobilized against the political opponent.

In France, the situation also mirrors domestic politics. With Germany's military upgrade, the traditional balance in the Franco-German relationship, where France had the military lead and Germany the economic one, no longer holds. While Paris embraces German rearmament—though it has concerns about its practical implementation—it does not embrace German leadership on European defense. Paris worries that Berlin's pro-transatlantic instincts and risk-averse strategic culture will lead it to invest in the wrong kit, undermine European cohesion, and put Europe at risk. At the same time, France fears its own strategic decline—which is more difficult to accept when it comes in parallel to Germany's strategic upgrade. As a result, for some in Berlin, the question of German relative strength appears more as a question of French relative weakness.

The "normalization" debate once asked whether Germany would become a power like France or Britain. Recent developments suggest something different: a Germany that may in future take on part of the role the United States has traditionally played in European defense, as the continent's largest spender, its biggest buyer of equipment, a coordinator and convener, and a protector of the eastern flank. France has traditionally been the counterweight to US dominance in European defense. But Europe cannot afford for France to play the same role against Germany. European defense and the broader European ability to act depends on Paris and Berlin finding compromises on industrial cooperation, common European debt financing, and the connection between France's nuclear deterrent and Germany's conventional weight.

Finding Answers to the German Question

Berlin should consider ways to allay its neighbors' anxieties about Germany's defense-industrial competitive advantage and risk-averse strategic culture.[9] One option to address European worries is to embed Germany's rise by integrating it into European structures and institutions. Another option—though domestically highly controversial and therefore unlikely—would be to accept European debt for defense in addition to its own national debt, to level the playing field. In addition, Germany, together with its European partners (and without the United States), can conceive of new inclusive political decision-making structures for European defense. The chief objective for such new structures should not be to balance Germany's power (which many Europeans welcome) or to reassure its neighbors, but to find the best means to secure Europe's defense. That effort requires Germany to prioritize Europe, even when domestic politics draw Berlin to focus inwards.

A leading power must accept that its partners will rely on it and resent it at the same time. German power, based on a strong military and a financial and industrial weight that others cannot match, can look like hegemony even when used with good intentions. Germany will have to learn to absorb criticism without retreating into passivity, to offer reassurance without being patronizing, and to accept national constraints because they serve the greater (European) good. This comes with a steep learning curve for the government, the military, and society.

Goodwill is needed on all sides. Allies would be well advised to refrain from invoking concerns about Germany for domestic political purposes and to invest instead in their own relationship with Berlin. Germany, for its part, should seek to address valid concerns openly and reassuringly, demonstrating that its growing influence is exercised in the interest of the wider alliance rather than at its expense. However, Berlin does not have to put up with bad-faith criticism or entertain instrumentalized fears. If it leads by integrating with partners, sharing risks, and anchoring its actions firmly within (potentially new) European frameworks, it can mitigate fears of dominance and unilateralism. The goal should be to define a new answer to the German Question; that is, for Germany to serve as the enabler of a stronger and more capable Europe, and to demonstrate to partners that it can deliver over the long term.

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[2] *The thirteen countries are Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Türkiye, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.*

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[4] *Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., "Tamed Power: Germany in Europe" (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, "Germany and the European Union: Europe's Reluctant Hegemon?" (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), see review in German Politics (2019); William E. Paterson, "The Reluctant Hegemon? Germany Moves Centre Stage in the European Union", Journal of Common Market Studies, 2011.*

[5] *"Record of Telephone Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and François Mitterrand", November 14, 1989, Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, fond 1, opis 1, English translation by Svetlana Savranskaya, reproduced as document 18 in "Fall of Berlin Wall Caused Anxiety More than Joy at Highest Levels," ed. Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 293, November 7, 2009.*

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[8] *"Germany Is the Key to a European Survival Strategy", Internationale Politik Quarterly, February 9, 2026; "'Zu führen heißt auch, dass man mal scheitert'", Internationale Politik, June 29, 2026; "There Is No New German Military Question", Internationale Politik Quarterly, June 30, 2026.*

[9] *Liana Fix, "Germany Rearmed: The Return of War and the End of Illusions" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026).*

Bulgaria: Goodwill Without Alignment

By Dimitar Keranov

In Bulgaria, German rearmament has generated little domestic anxiety. Germany's ambition to become Europe's leading conventional military power has engendered no parliamentary opposition and no substantial public debate.

The underlying disposition towards Germany is very favorable. In Myara polling from August 2025, Germany received a 61% positive assessment, against 39% for NATO, 33% for the United States, and 31% for Russia. Germany is thus viewed more positively than the alliance within which it would exercise greater leadership. Three factors sustain this positivity: Germany is Bulgaria's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding €12 billion in 2024; roughly 440,000 Bulgarians live in Germany; and German remains the third-most important foreign language in Bulgarian grammar schools. Bulgaria also does not share the experience of German occupation, historical domination, or strategic vulnerability that shapes perceptions elsewhere in Europe.

Prime Minister Rumen Radev, whose Progressive Bulgaria won 44.6% in the April 2026 election, chose Berlin for his first foreign visit. After the August 2026 Leipzig drone attack, he told parliament that Bulgaria categorically supported its ally Germany against hybrid attacks—although the foreign ministry's statement did not name Russia as responsible.

Solidarity with Germany has not fully translated into wider strategic alignment, however. The Radev government is withholding support for measures requiring a more confrontational posture toward Russia. It has ended weapons transfers to Ukraine, though not commercial sales by Bulgarian industry, argued for negotiations to end the war, and stayed out of the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine.

Germany's defense aspirations are viewed as credible but largely peripheral to Bulgaria's main security concerns. Expectations focus on industrial investment and defense production rather than on a larger German military role in the Black Sea, where the principal security provider is the United States. The approximately €1 billion Rheinmetall venture with VMZ-Sopot, Bulgaria's largest state-owned arms manufacturer, intended to produce propellant and 155mm artillery shells and create around 1,000 jobs, is the test case for Bulgaria's ambition to benefit from Germany's expanding defense-industrial footprint in Europe. The venture is stalled, and the opposition accuses the government of sabotage. Rheinmetall is meanwhile expanding in Romania, Lithuania, and Croatia. Bulgaria may lose the investment, and that would be read as a deliberate failure of the Bulgarian state under Radev—to the benefit of Moscow.

No major parliamentary actor in Sofia argues that Germany should remain militarily weak or fears German hegemony. The disagreement in Radev's Bulgaria concerns how German and allied power should be used, above all with regard to Russia and Ukraine—not whether Germany should possess it. Nor is Germany expected to replace the United States as NATO's leading power. The AfD's record result in Saxony-Anhalt was widely reported, but as German domestic news rather than as a question about Germany's European role.

Berlin therefore enjoys real goodwill in Bulgaria, and that goodwill rests on trade, diaspora, and the absence of threat-memory rather than on any German government's policies. It will outlast this German government. What cannot be assumed is Bulgaria's follow-through.

France: The Age of Disillusion

By Martin Quencez and Tara Varma

The return of the "German Question" to French strategic and public discourse is one of the most striking evolutions of the past four years. Throughout the 2010s, France repeatedly called on Germany to assume greater security responsibilities and increase defense spending.

In that context, Paris initially welcomed Berlin's Zeitenwende and its rearmament effort following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as signs that Germany was moving closer to longstanding French positions on European defense and security. That enthusiasm faded, however, as a series of bilateral disagreements emerged. Structural differences over dependency on US military capabilities, the collapse of joint projects such as the Future Combat Air System, and Germany's unilateral development of a European Sky Shield Initiative, among others, have increased tensions. Notwithstanding the respites provided by Germany's participation in France's forward deterrence, and Paris and Berlin's call to create new trade instruments at the EU level, Germany's defense policy has consequently become a source of concern in Paris.

The German Question is likely to feature prominently in the 2027 French presidential campaign, as it intersects with sensitive debates over France's strategic decline, European sovereignty, relations with the United States, and intra-EU power balances.

In parallel, the AfD's electoral successes are changing the nature of French concerns. Until recently, criticism focused mainly on German unilateralism, and on increased competition in the defense-industrial domain. The AfD's electoral gains now revive fears of a more illiberal, pro-Russian, and less reliably democratic Germany with imperialistic inclinations. French officials point to the irony of the situation, as Germany has long questioned France's strategic credibility and reliability considering the potential for a far-right president to enter the Élysée in 2027.

The intensity of anti-German sentiment varies across the political spectrum, with the most hostile views voiced by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and La France Insoumise leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. However, party leaders from the center-right and center-left, including Macron's central block, also express a more critical perspective on Germany's ambitions and a fear that Paris will lose its strategic leadership status in Europe. Compounding such fears is the relative French economic and political decline.

This evolution is reflected in both military and defense-industrial circles. The French defense industry relies on exports, while Germany's growing defense-industrial base is a competitor in Europe and abroad. This is a sore point given French President Emmanuel Macron's personal investment in the Franco-German partnership. While Macron encouraged many European allies to adopt the concept of strategic autonomy, it is increasingly likely that Germany will shape it.

French defense officials generally point to four factors that could constrain Germany's ambition to become Europe's leading conventional power: an immature strategic and military culture; persistent difficulties in recruiting and generating forces despite attractive compensation; growing dependence on US technology and capabilities;

and political instability that may encourage a more inward-looking posture while weakening Berlin's leadership aspirations.

Against this backdrop, Paris argues for a more collective approach to European defense, with Germany shaping the continent's future jointly with partners—especially France. Paris remains hesitant about a division of labor that would let Germany alone take the lead on specific capabilities, advocating instead for constant and comprehensive coordination.

The view from Paris thus consists in a shared strategic vision, informed in part by France's forward deterrence, rather than in a transactional logic in which the size of Germany's defense budget becomes the main driver of decision-making. The concept of a French-German "engine" as the natural entity shaping and leading Europe's defense effort remains central within French strategic circles. Germany's apparent disregard for this proposition will therefore continue to generate misunderstanding and disappointment.

Hungary: Military Continuity, Political Reset

By Zsuzsanna Végh

Defense cooperation between Germany and Hungary goes back decades and deepened gradually through the 2010s and 2020s, particularly via industrial investments from the former in the latter. It continued even as political ties between Berlin and Budapest deteriorated during the last two terms of former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. At that time, the governing Fidesz party ratcheted up the rhetoric, going as far as claiming, in the run-up to Hungary's April parliamentary election, that German (and European) rearmament efforts were evidence of preparing for war against Russia. Such claims served the political interests of the Orbán government that sought to mobilize its voters through fearmongering. They were not a reflection of Hungarian historical memory or societal fear of German hegemony. Nor were they raised as part of a broader public debate about Germany's role in European defense.

The current Hungarian government under Péter Magyar, which took office in May, broke with Fidesz's rhetoric. It has not voiced concrete views on German rearmament and defense ambitions but appears comfortable with an overall stronger German role. The new government in its initial months has deliberately sought to improve relations with Berlin after years of political conflict. In June, Magyar called Germany a natural ally and explicitly encouraged further defense investment in Hungary. Three months later, the foreign ministers of both countries committed to building trust and expressed an intention for their ministries to consult regularly, including on strategic issues. Meanwhile, defense chiefs have discussed expanding training and personnel exchanges and strengthening force-development cooperation. These developments reflect Budapest's broader effort to re-anchor Hungary in the EU and NATO, and restore allied confidence in the country.

The extensive bilateral cooperation on defense grants Germany a privileged place among Budapest's European partners and provides a particularly valuable base to build on. Hungary participates in the German-led NATO Framework Nations Concept, which was launched in 2014. Hungary's 2021 National Military Strategy lists it among the multinational defense-cooperation frameworks through which the country seeks to strengthen its security and develop its capabilities. The collaboration covers logistics; military medicine; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) defense; and military policing, training and exercises, while a joint German-Hungarian Safety Fuel exercise has run since 2012. In addition, Hungary's land-force modernization relies heavily on German systems, including Leopard 2 A7+ tanks and PzH 2000 howitzers from KNDS, and Rheinmetall's Lynx KF41 produced in Zalaegerszeg. The picture is complicated, however, by the defense industrial role of 4iG, a company with close ties to the Fidesz government that became deeply involved with Rheinmetall ventures in Hungary. The Magyar government, suspecting corruption, has ordered a review of all state contractual and ownership relations with 4iG. But there is no indication that it wishes to challenge the cooperation between 4iG and Rheinmetall.

Budapest's current, positive stance toward Germany, including on defense cooperation and military investment, is driven more by political and business considerations. It is also rooted in existing cooperation rather than a response to Germany's rearmament and growing ambitions.

Italy: Leveraging German Rearmament

By Beniamino Irdi

German rearmament, and Chancellor Friedrich Merz's stated ambition to build Europe's strongest conventional army, is discussed in Italy with few historical references. The debate focuses instead on what Berlin can deliver. The government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni sees rearmament as necessary for Europe's changed security environment and closing a European capability gap. Intergovernmental consultations in Rome in January turned that view into a bilateral *agreement on security, defense, and resilience* that covers drones, naval systems, and air and missile defense.

Differences, however, characterize a domestic debate centered on rearmament rather than on Germany. Center-right Forza Italia supports the emphasis on security, while the right-wing Lega criticizes the EU's ReArm Europe plan. The progressive Five Star Movement, the Greens, and the Left Alliance oppose higher military spending, while the Democratic Party is divided on the issue. Public opinion leans against it. In a European Council on Foreign Relations survey of 15 countries conducted in May, Italy was the only one in which a majority (58%) expressed opposition to higher defense spending. Just over a quarter (28%) said they supported it. German rearmament itself is rarely a subject of public controversy.

Berlin, however, is expected to carry a share of burden-sharing commensurate with its economic weight, and its planned increase in core defense spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2029 is seen as the backbone of a stronger European pillar of NATO. A Germany that spends more also makes the pan-European effort less dependent on the fiscal maneuvering that Rome must undertake to reconcile higher defense spending with budget constraints. According to NATO's latest figures from March, Italy's defense spending rose from €33.4 billion in 2024 to €45.3 billion in 2025, a 36% increase, though part of the jump may reflect the reclassification of existing expenditure rather than entirely new spending.

Italy expects to benefit from defense industrial cooperation with Germany. Leonardo Rheinmetall Military Vehicles, a 50-50 joint venture between the two companies, will build the Italian army's next tanks and armored combat vehicles for more than €23 billion. The partnership gives Italy greater scale by combining Germany's advanced military-industrial capabilities, including in tank development and production, with preserving domestic industrial activity, manufacturing capacity, and jobs. By anchoring the cooperation in a long-term industrial partnership, Rome also wants to move Berlin toward a broader strategic outlook, one that extends beyond NATO's eastern flank to include the Mediterranean as a core area of European security.

German ambitions are broadly considered credible, and Berlin is trusted with greater military weight. Resources are the least questioned element since the debt brake reform, which has permitted greater defense spending. Doubts concern delivery. The Bundeswehr remains far from its goal of raising active personnel from 182,000 to 260,000 by 2035, and sustaining high spending across several budget cycles will be harder as fiscal pressures grow. Any slowdown would also reverberate through European defense programs and suppliers whose businesses increasingly depend on sustained German procurement. More broadly, investors are demanding evidence that Europe's rearmament commitments can be converted into contracts, production capacity, and earnings rather than remaining headline spending pledges.

Confidence rests more on recent history than on politics. Rome and Berlin remain broadly aligned on Ukraine, despite differences over immobilized Russian assets. The main concern in the policy community is the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Ideologically, the party may appear closer to parts of Italy’s governing coalition, notably the Lega, its former ally in the European Parliament, than to Merz’s Christian Democrats. Strategically, the picture is reversed. The AfD’s positions on Russia, Ukraine, and Germany’s role in European defense challenge the assumptions of Rome-Berlin alignment. The party’s strength raises doubts about whether the Zeitenwende is a lasting shift in Germany’s strategic posture. But most of all, the AfD’s recent electoral victories raise concerns about what strategic identity that posture would serve.

Lithuania: Invested in German Leadership of Europe's Defense

By Justinas Mickus

Bilateral security cooperation between Germany and Lithuania is reaching new heights just as concerns about Germany's political and economic future mount. Lithuanians welcome Germany's projected leadership in European defense, but some worry about whether Berlin will be up to the task.

One of the flagships of Germany's rearmament agenda since 2022 has been the permanent stationing of the 45th Armoured Brigade to Lithuania, to be completed in 2027. In Lithuania, this decision is officially presented as a historic achievement and a milestone in bilateral relations that strengthens Lithuania's national security and collective defense.

The deployment of the brigade enjoys broad cross-party support and is a declared priority for the government and President Gitanas Nausėda. The public supports it as well: According to polls, 7 out of 10 Lithuanians view the deployment as beneficial, and almost 80% view Germany positively.

Since they view Germany as committed to the transatlantic security relationship, Lithuanians do not broadly consider its increased role in European security a threat to their country's long-term commitment to strategic partnership with the United States. Lithuanian officials generally see Germany as more aligned with the US-led transatlantic alliance than with the French vision of "European sovereignty".

There is little discussion in Lithuania of Germany's specific responsibilities in European security, as the official position is that Germany's greater role in defense should develop in accordance with, and as a contribution to, NATO regional defense plans. However, some analysts point out that Germany's growing military power will inevitably shift the balance of power within Europe, potentially causing friction with its other European partners, notably France, the United Kingdom, and Poland. Consequently, deeper US involvement in European security remains essential for European political unity.

Germany's credibility as a military power has not always been taken for granted, and the early discussions on the brigade in 2022–2023 were marked by doubts about Berlin's willingness and capacity to deliver on its defense ambitions. Since the deployment began, however, Berlin's spending commitments and political ownership of the brigade have increased its perceived credibility.

Yet, some concerns persist. Lithuanians recognize operational-level challenges such as recruitment, as well as broader concerns about Germany's long-term strategic trajectory given the weakness of the traditional parties, the historical tradition of Ostpolitik, and pressing economic problems. The rise of AfD, which abstained during the vote on the Lithuanian brigade and has questioned support for Ukraine, is particularly concerning, with the Lithuanian president calling the party's state elections victory a "disappointment". Still, Lithuanian officials insist that they expect the deployment of the brigade to proceed as planned, though they acknowledge that more engagement is needed with individual states of the federal republic.

Consequently, further strengthening military cooperation with Germany remains an operating consensus goal for Vilnius. This is coupled with the goal of deepening other regional security partnerships—with Poland, Ukraine, and the Nordics—which are seen as complementary to, though not compensatory for, bilateral Germany-Lithuania security commitments.

Norway: Building European Capacity

By Sophie Arts

Norway welcomes Germany's ambition to become a more consequential military power as Europe faces its most serious security challenges in decades and the United States prioritizes other regions. Norwegian policymakers view Germany as a critical partner whose relative economic strength and defense investment allow it to generate the conventional defense capacity and mass needed to enable a burden shift toward greater European responsibility within NATO.

Most Norwegian decision-makers continue to view the United States as NATO's political-military anchor. Norway's first National Security Strategy (NSS), published in 2025, identifies the United States as Norway's most important ally and NATO as its primary collective defense framework. Close US-Norwegian ties are seen as central to deterrence against Russia, whose strategic nuclear forces are based close to Norway's northeastern borders.

Norwegian stakeholders recognize that Germany cannot fully replace the United States and acknowledge reservations in Berlin and other capitals about more overt German leadership within NATO. Nonetheless, Berlin is expected to play a more significant role as the backbone of conventional defense and logistics in Europe, complementing the critical US contribution to extended deterrence and transatlantic reinforcement.

Germany is one of several leading European military powers with which Oslo is strengthening ties under its garderingsstrategi (hedging strategy). The strategy builds on recommendations in the Norwegian Defense Commission's 2023 report to deepen cooperation with key allies, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Poland amid concerns about Europe's dependence on the US security guarantee. Norway's Long-Term Defence Plan and NSS reflect this approach.

Geography, history, and enhanced cooperation through NATO's regional plan Northwest and the Joint Expeditionary Force make the United Kingdom and the Nordic allies key military partners for Norway. Although Germany sits outside these formats, its size, economic weight, increased defense investment, and industrial base make it the European country best positioned to provide greater conventional military scale. Moreover, it is an important ally in helping Europe to procure, develop, and field critical capabilities and enablers. Germany's logistics function matters to Norway as a host and transit nation for allied forces across an integrated Northern flank.

Germany is expected to play a larger role in sustained North Atlantic maritime operations, domain awareness, and anti-submarine warfare, including through its P-8 maritime patrol aircraft. The 2026 Hansa Arrangement formalizes Norwegian-German cooperation across maritime security, the defense industry, and space-based capabilities. Norway's submarine partnership with Germany and the frigate partnership with the United Kingdom are part of the country's hedging strategy. Berlin's and Oslo's procurements of the same submarine class and cooperation across training, logistics, and maintenance enhance interoperability and strengthen Norway's defense-industrial base and posture toward Russia. Germany's successful 2026 Spectrum launch from Andøya Spaceport has further highlighted opportunities for deeper cooperation in the space domain, which underpins situational awareness, military communications, and targeting.

Norwegian interlocutors view Germany’s ambitions as credible and assess that Berlin has the institutional and economic foundations to sustain its buildup and follow through on major commitments—advantages not all European allies share. Norwegian stakeholders are closely watching German political developments. But neither recent far right gains, generally contextualized as part of a broader European trend, nor memories of Nazi Germany’s occupation have fundamentally altered Norwegian assessments of Germany as a reliable security partner.

In today’s volatile geopolitical environment, Norway sees Germany as a strategic ally and a principal political, military, and industrial pillar of a stronger European contribution within NATO.

Poland: Keep the Germans Down, but In

By Oscar Luigi Guccione and Philip Bednarczyk

Poland is onboard with Germany's rearmament, but that support remains conditional. Under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Warsaw has moved closer to Berlin on a number of significant fundamentals: higher defense spending, sustained support for Ukraine, and recognition of Russia as the principal threat to European security. Yet Poland's embrace of greater German military power depends on several factors. Historical grievances, Berlin's past accommodation of Moscow, and the rise of the far-right AfD party in Germany all contribute to doubts in Poland about whether their neighbor will necessarily remain a reliable ally, and about how it might wield its growing power. The Polish government views German Chancellor Frioedrich Merz's ambition to create Europe's strongest conventional army as reassuring, especially given doubts about US reliability. Warsaw expects Berlin to strengthen eastern-flank defense and enhance Europe's military mobility, sustain Ukraine, and step up as a co-leader through NATO and other formats.

The Law and Justice (PiS) governments (2015–2023), on the other hand, stoked popular anti-German sentiment, instrumentalizing political debates over World War II reparations and portraying Germany as using the EU against Polish interests. By 2022, only 13% of Poles rated bilateral relations positively. In 2025, under Tusk's government, 25% rated relations as good and 77% said they support military cooperation. Defense Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz recently remarked: "There is no security without Poland, there is no security without Germany."

Poland regards the Zeitenwende as belated. Decades of the German "culture of restraint" keep Poland asking whether higher budgets will bring durable resolve, faster decision-making, and societal acceptance of Germany's deterrence role and military risk. This doubt is reflected in public opinion: Only 40% believe Germany would militarily assist Poland if Russia were to attack.

Poland is wary of Germany's ability to convert its resources into capabilities. While in 2013–2015 Poland purchased a Leopard 2 fleet from Germany, from 2022 Poland turned to South Korea's K2 tanks as Seoul guaranteed faster and more reliable deliveries. Yet, as the process of German rearmament gathers speed, two documents now form the basis for building trust and a working framework: the "Action Plan" (2024), which defines cooperation on defense and security, support for Ukraine, and regional strategy; and the Bilateral Defense Agreement (2026), which reduces bureaucratic and legal hurdles to coordination, military mobility, and interoperability. Neither is binding, and implementation depends on political will.

Warsaw harbors some concern that Berlin's military-industrial weight could shape European procurement around German interests. Poland leads NATO in relative spending (4.68% of GDP in 2026 against Germany's 2.69%), yet Germany's absolute spending is nearly three times Poland's. Polish firms are so far the largest beneficiaries of EU SAFE loans, part of the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan, but future contracts will mandate joint procurement. This requirement may reignite recent internal political battles over SAFE loans if it entails greater reliance on non-Polish suppliers.

Warsaw also worries that an AfD-influenced government could weaken Germany's commitment to NATO and Ukraine and seek accommodation with Moscow instead. Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski warned: "We

remember all too well where a rearmed Germany in the hands of a far-right, pro-Russian party can lead.” This qualifies his 2011 remark that he feared “German power less than German inactivity”: Polish acceptance of German power depends on who controls it and to what end.

In sum, Warsaw welcomes Germany’s growing military weight, as long as Berlin rearms through NATO, delivers on its commitments, does not undermine Polish defense-industrial interests, and remains politically stable.

Marvin Huber contributed to the research for this piece.

Romania: A Greater German Role in European Defense

By Bogdan Cozma and Sergiu Panainte

Romania welcomes Germany's rearmament and would like Berlin to play a bigger role in European defense. German rearmament is perceived as (partial) insurance after a recent US troop reduction from Romania; Germany is not seen as a competing hegemon trying to sever transatlantic ties. President Nicușor Dan has called European rearmament a correct decision while maintaining that the United States remains NATO's main security provider.

German rearmament is not a topic of Romanian public debate. However, contracts with Germany are. The country is Romania's largest economic partner, and a €5.7 billion deal signed with Rheinmetall in May 2026 is the largest international contract in the company's recent history. It is here, however, that the German question becomes controversial, since Romanians want a fair return for domestic firms. The concern is that most of the €16.7 billion that Romania received through loans from the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative will end up in the accounts of German (and French) companies, while Romanian defense factories will see little of it. Transparency and industrial sovereignty are the main issues, not historical fears.

Romania's defense experts and defense industry have reacted strongly to the agreements with German companies, with criticism focused on how much SAFE-funded production will actually occur in Romania. The government's position is to aim for over 50% local production, largely through partnerships between domestic and foreign companies. Rheinmetall's gunpowder factory in Brasov county is considered a success story for local production, but more projects of this kind are needed before the debate is settled.

Romanian public opinion toward Germany is generally positive. Fully 71.8% of Romanians see Germany as friendly or very friendly toward their country, more than say that about France (70.8%) and the United States (61.9%). Anti-German framing does exist, but it is part of anti-Brussels and anti-Ukraine narratives. Sovereigntist parties such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians present SAFE as a scheme that benefits German industry with loans that Romanian citizens must pay back.

Politically and militarily, Romania wants more Germany, not less. When Bucharest asked for a permanent German presence in 2023, Berlin declined, explaining that Germany cooperates with Lithuania while France cooperates with Romania. German fighter jets conducted air policing missions in 2025 and 2026, but this involved only a rotation of forces. Bucharest wants a more diversified security presence and has since requested, including in talks with Germany's NATO ambassador, a more consistent allied presence in the Black Sea region.

From the Romanian perspective, German strength is not the focal point. It is, rather, whether that strength will benefit Romania. Germany is well regarded, and anti-German narratives remain marginalized. Bucharest would like Berlin's greater presence in the Black Sea region while reaping a commensurate share of the boon from SAFE funding.

Spain: Make German Rearmament European

By Kristina Kausch

Spain’s centrist elite broadly supports greater German military capability, if it is embedded in collective European defense—a concept Madrid often leaves vague. At the 2026 Munich Security Conference, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called for both a “European army” and a stronger European pillar within NATO. The ambiguity reflects Spain’s broader balancing act: reassuring Washington of its reliability while reinforcing strategic autonomy within the EU.

The “German Question” matters less in Spanish public debate than it does in Central and Northern Europe. Diplomats and mainstream commentators portray Germany’s defense buildup as an overdue response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and doubts about US protection; an opportunity for German leadership and investment in European defense through NATO and the EU; and an end to the mismatch between Germany’s economic and military power. Spanish observers were impressed when Berlin seemed ready in 2025 to break with decades of defense-policy stasis, but enthusiasm soon mixed with skepticism.

Germany’s inconsistency in loosening national debt limits for defense while blocking common EU defense borrowing has drawn media scrutiny in Spain. Some diplomats privately doubt Berlin can deliver amid competing financial pressures, daunting structural reforms, and uncertain governing majorities—concerns partially echoed in a recent study by the Spanish Defense Ministry’s research institute. Others fear German dominance could shift European security priorities farther east, away from southern flank concerns that Spain and other Southern Europeans have struggled to highlight.

Spanish society remains deeply pro-EU and pro-integration. In the Spring 2026 Eurobarometer, 80% of Spaniards (EU average: 68%) supported a greater role for the EU in defense. Support for higher military spending, however, is conditional. A 2025 Elcano poll found 57% in favor, but support weakens if it means massive social cuts. As a reflection of this, Sánchez opted out of NATO’s 5% target at the 2025 summit, prioritizing, among other concerns, social spending over undifferentiated spending targets.

The rise of the right-wing AfD in Germany in recent years has made some Spanish observers wary of greater German military strength. Historical concerns about German rearmament are less salient than in other European countries, but commentators and academics argue that a possible AfD-led government strengthens the case for European coordination, oversight, and institutional embedding of national capabilities. An April 2026 El País editorial argued that European integration can mitigate these concerns. Industry and analysts also warn that industrial competition and national procurement could fragment capabilities, hamper interoperability, and entrench national advantages rather than create an EU defense market. Spain’s export-oriented defense industry is among the EU’s top five strongest in aerospace, shipbuilding, and electronics, with about 6% of Europe’s defense-industry turnover in 2024, but remains behind French, German, and Italian counterparts. If Berlin channels Germany’s new spending mainly to German firms, rather than to joint programs, Spanish companies risk being left behind.

The breakdown of German-French-Spanish cooperation on the future combat air system (FCAS) sixth-generation fighter embodies these hopes and concerns. The industrial agreement fractured in June 2026 amid Dassault-Airbus disputes over governance, technology ownership, and commercial benefits. This disadvantaged Spain's Indra. Defense Minister Margarita Robles described the breakdown as "putting the interests of national industries before those of European defense and security" and "deeply concerning for Europe". In September, however, Madrid opened talks with Berlin on a bilateral FCAS successor, casting Germany as its preferred industrial partner. Madrid's message to Berlin: Rearm, but do so as Europe's Germany.

This contribution was written before October 5, when the government of Pedro Sánchez called for snap parliamentary elections.

Türkiye: Looking for Opportunity in German Rearmament

By Elene Kintsurashvili

Türkiye's response to Germany's military rearmament has been pragmatic. The issue has generated relatively limited public debate, and the legacy of Germany's role in World War II has had little bearing on Turkish perceptions of its current military ambitions. While Ankara has expressed unease about the rise of far-right and Islamophobic movements, particularly given Germany's large Turkish-origin community, these concerns have not translated into apprehension about a stronger German military. Among policymakers, attention is focused instead on the opportunities a stronger Germany may create. For Ankara, the relevant question is therefore not whether Germany is becoming too powerful, but what a stronger Germany will mean for European security and for Türkiye's place within it.

This pragmatism is clearest in defense-industrial relations. During Chancellor Friedrich Merz's October 2025 visit to Ankara, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan linked Europe's changing security environment to the need to overcome previous obstacles in defense procurement and pursue joint projects. He welcomed Germany's July 2025 decision to clear the Eurofighter sale after years of opposition arising largely from concerns over human rights and democracy in Türkiye.

The shift continued into 2026. At a joint press conference with German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul in March, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan identified defense-industry cooperation as an area that could take German-Turkish economic relations to a higher level and expressed his hope that Germany's positive approach to the Eurofighter would extend to other areas of defense cooperation. Türkiye's participation in the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative similarly suggests that German military leadership is not itself the source of concern.

Rather, Ankara sees German rearmament as potentially expanding opportunities for procurement, co-production, and participation in European defense projects. However, the value of a stronger Germany will also depend on the kind of European security architecture Berlin helps to shape. Ankara looks to Germany to play the role of integrator and to strengthen a European pillar in NATO. At the same time, from the Turkish point of view, Germany should ensure that emerging European defense structures remain complementary to NATO and inclusive of non-EU allies such as Türkiye—rather than developed through exclusively EU-centered arrangements.

As a non-EU member, Türkiye is largely removed from concerns that increased EU defense spending could disproportionately benefit Germany's defense industry. Ankara is more concerned with maintaining access to European defense supply chains and ensuring that new procurement instruments and defense initiatives remain open to Türkiye and its growing defense industry. That priority was clear in March 2026, when Fidan welcomed Germany's support for Turkish access to the EU's SAFE defense-financing instrument in the face of opposition from Greece and Cyprus.

There is also the question of German credibility. For Ankara, it will depend on the consistency and sustainability of Berlin’s political commitment. Germany’s eventual approval of Türkiye’s Eurofighter acquisition, after it had previously withheld the necessary consent, points to a significant shift under the Merz government. Whether that shift develops into sustained defense cooperation will therefore matter as much as Germany’s ability to translate higher spending into military capability.

Türkiye thus broadly welcomes German rearmament, but its support is pragmatic rather than unconditional. A stronger Germany is useful to Ankara insofar as it strengthens NATO’s European pillar, opens opportunities for defense-industrial cooperation, and contributes to a European security architecture in which Türkiye has a place.

Ukraine: Germany's Ambition Meets Ukraine's Urgency

By Yuliia Korotia

For Kyiv, Germany's growing commitment to defense is a welcome change. Berlin's deepening security cooperation with Ukraine is one expression of this broader effort. A stronger Germany is also seen as an important contribution to Europe's ability to provide for its own defense in the face of Russia's aggression and greater uncertainty about the future US role in European security.

Until Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022, much of the Ukrainian debate about Berlin centered on what Germany was unwilling to do: provide weapons, adopt a firmer policy towards Moscow, or use its economic leverage more effectively to counter Russian pressure. In January 2022, Ukrainian officials openly criticized Germany's reluctance to provide arms to Ukraine. The concern in Kyiv was that Germany was doing too little with the weight it already had.

Since then, Berlin has come a long way. Germany now reports more than €43.3 billion in bilateral civilian assistance to Ukraine and around €57.6 billion in military assistance, including funds earmarked for the coming years. The 2024 German-Ukrainian security agreement put bilateral defense cooperation on a long-term footing, and in April 2026 the two governments elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership, with Germany named in the declaration as Ukraine's most important bilateral partner.

Germany's current military transformation is also increasingly drawing on Ukraine's battlefield experience. Under a new agreement, Ukrainian military personnel are being brought into German training institutions to share experiences from the war. This is a notable role reversal: Ukraine is no longer only a recipient of German military support, but is now also a source of battlefield knowledge for Germany's own defense transformation. This dynamic points to a more reciprocal security relationship—one that German Generalleutenant and Inspector of the Army Christian Freuding has described as on "an equal footing". German officials have also acknowledged that the war in Ukraine, and particularly the rapid evolution of drone warfare, is forcing the Bundeswehr to rethink how quickly it develops, procures, and adapts military systems.

At the same time, Kyiv's support for a stronger German role is tempered by a persistent question of timing: Can Berlin move quickly enough and act decisively enough to match the urgency of the security environment? The Taurus debate, for example, highlighted the gap between Germany's growing defense ambitions and its willingness to make politically difficult decisions, while its initially cautious approach to the Coalition of the Willing raised similar questions for Ukraine about how far Berlin is prepared to go in assuming the responsibilities of greater leadership.

This caution is reflected in Ukrainians' view of Germany's role: While Germany enjoys broad public support in Ukraine, there is considerably less expectation that Berlin should lead international efforts to support the country.

Kyiv's other concern is about how durable Germany's new defense course will prove to be. The AfD's growing political strength adds an important source of uncertainty, given the party's opposition to continued military support for Ukraine and its advocacy for closer economic and security ties with Russia.

For Ukraine, the test of Germany's new military role is hence straightforward: Can Berlin turn political ambition into sustained capabilities at the speed Europe's security environment demands now? Delivery schedules, production volumes, and forces ready to deploy will ultimately matter as much as the headline figures behind Germany's rearmament.

United Kingdom: Welcomed in London, Envied in Private

By Georgina Wright

British thinking about German rearmament has come a long way. For much of the Cold War, the United Kingdom's belief was that a militarily constrained Germany made for a safer world. Today, the view is the opposite: German rearmament is seen as essential to European security, in particular to deter Russia, support Ukraine, and underpin the continent's long-term prosperity.

London has welcomed Germany's steps to bolster its conventional defense and has said that it will work with Berlin to strengthen NATO's European pillar. In government circles and parliament, the mood music is especially positive. Former Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government moved quickly to sign not one, but two agreements with Berlin: the 2024 Trinity House Agreement on defense and the wider 2025 Kensington Treaty. On his recent visit to Berlin, Starmer's successor, Andy Burnham, made clear that he also wants to keep the relationship close.

Before 2024, bilateral defense cooperation had been largely ad hoc, with only one bilateral defense-industrial program and most coordination happening within NATO. The hope is that stronger bilateral ties will complement this. Behind the scenes, UK diplomats also hope that Germany will back the UK's bid for closer UK-EU ties, including participation in EU defense programs.

Britain's defense industry is also looking to benefit from Germany's deep pockets. Recent announcements include the introduction of German P-8 submarine-hunting aircraft operations from Scotland, the opening of a new Rheinmetall artillery barrel factory in England, and an agreement to develop a Deep Precision Strike missile with a range of over 2,000 kilometers in the near future. AI is another area of cooperation, with Helsing announcing a £350 million UK investment at the Trinity House signing.

In many ways, Germany's rearmament is taken as a given in the United Kingdom. Media commentary has been supportive, praising Germany for stepping up, while also using the buildup as a way to highlight Britain's own shortcomings—whether because of budgetary shortfalls or political constraints. In particular, opposition parties have used Germany's defense promises to ask the government why the United Kingdom had not set a date and trajectory for its own higher defense spending.

But there are some concerns. The first is that as Germany grows stronger militarily, Britain will matter less as a thought-leader and arms provider. The second is the future direction of German politics. With the AfD surging and Merz's coalition polling at record lows, some worry about how a different government might constrain German defense policy and spending long-term.

Overall, however, the view is positive. German rearmament is happening. For London, the most sensible course is to forge close ties now rather than let others, such as France, secure the best deals.

The United States: Welcoming German Rearmament

By Carrie A. Lee and Parker Nash

Since the creation of NATO, the United States has seen German rearmament as key to its commitment to defend Europe. US policymakers therefore view current German defense efforts as broadly positive. Indeed, as the US government looks to prioritize security challenges in the Western hemisphere and the Pacific, officials in both Congress and the executive branch hope to see Germany take on a greater leadership role within the alliance.

Where division does exist about the prospect of German rearmament, it largely mirrors attitudes about the overall role of the United States within NATO. Isolationist voices favor a scenario in which Germany, and Europe more broadly, largely replace US conventional assets, including through a reduction of US forces on the continent, but with Washington maintaining its nuclear umbrella. More mainstream defense officials (and the American public) see Germany's increasing defensive capabilities as complementary to those of the United States, with strong public support for keeping or even increasing US forces in Europe. Specifically, US officials and security experts express a desire for Germany to provide more land forces and strategic capabilities for the alliance. Germany's announced plans to scale its deployment in Lithuania to the brigade level were therefore celebrated by US policymakers.

Critically, Germany's ability to leverage economies of scale in defense production is seen as a major potential advantage. Many US officials believe that untapped German defense production could help ease US industrial-base issues, and express a strong interest in accessing the German market for munitions and matériel orders—especially in support of potential US operations in the Indo-Pacific. Despite recent tension over the US war against Iran, Department of Defense officials also value access to basing in Germany for operations in both European and Middle Eastern theaters, and Pentagon leaders recognize the importance of Germany as a logistical hub for NATO operations. Many US officials see the need to maintain strong and friendly diplomatic ties with Germany to ensure that US companies remain integral to foreign military sales to the German armed forces—despite the current administration's antagonism toward European allies.

However, German domestic politics have the potential to further influence the United States' strategic outlook. Should the far-right, pro-Russia AfD take on a significant role in a federal government coalition, this would significantly complicate Germany's rearmament and its relationship with NATO. Unlike during the Cold War, when the United States went to great lengths to mitigate allied concerns over German rearmament, US policymakers today have not fully considered the potential for European hegemony if a future German government were to be hostile to allied interests.

American optimism is also tempered, with many political interlocutors choosing to withhold comment until the German government proves that its Zeitenwende can realistically be implemented over the long term. Some US officials doubt the country's ability to hit its recruiting and procurement goals for the armed forces even as they are encouraged to see German defense investment rapidly increasing. Despite these concerns, US-German relations remain a bedrock for transatlantic security, with ongoing political engagement at the national and subnational levels, industrial ties permeating the US and German economies, and strong military to military relationships serving as solid foundations for sustained cooperation.

About GMF

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