Europe needs greater strategic clarity on defence, more credible deterrence, and better policy coordination. Germany's upcoming decisions on its path towards genuine leadership will play a significant role in shaping these efforts.

In 2025, Europe finds itself at a historical crossroads. Russia's continued war against Ukraine, the erosion of US security guarantees under the second Trump presidency, and the increasingly volatile global security landscape have exposed deep vulnerabilities in the European security architecture. As these trends converge, the call for stronger European defence capabilities and more autonomous leadership grows louder. At the heart of this moment lies a critical question: can Germany, Europe's largest economy and most influential political power, step up to lead a renewed and more resilient European security order?

Until recently, Germany has hesitated to assume such a role. Anchored in its post-1945 identity as a "Zivilmacht" (civilian power), Berlin traditionally avoided assertive military strategies, relying instead on diplomacy, trade, and multilateral institutions. This strategic culture – rooted in the logic of "Wandel durch Handel" (change through trade) – was supported by the implicit assumption that the United States would continue to underwrite Europe's security indefinitely. That assumption no longer holds.

The current context demands a fundamental rethink of Germany's defence posture and foreign policy doctrine. The Zeitenwende – first announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2022 – marked a rhetorical turning point, recognising the need for significant defence investment and a more assertive role within NATO and EU structures. However, the implementation of Zeitenwende has so far been constrained by budgetary politics, institutional inertia, and public hesitancy.

This ambiguity has had tangible consequences. Without a more consistent approach from Germany, Europe's response to mounting security challenges has often been fragmented and reactive.

Germany's refusal to supply Taurus long-range missiles to Ukraine in 2023–24, despite sustained allied pressure, reinforced divisions within NATO and the EU over military aid. Delays in implementing the €100 billion special defence fund and hesitation over procuring F-35 fighter jets further stalled progress toward enhancing Europe's collective defence posture. Germany's eventual move to acquire the F-35 represents not just alignment with the U.S., but a necessary step to maintain interoperability and operational credibility.

In the realm energy security, Germany's initial reluctance to endorse a comprehensive embargo on Russian gas imports significantly complicated and delayed the EU's collective response to the war. While several member states, notably Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary, also expressed reservations rooted in their structural energy dependencies, Germany's position carried disproportionate weight due to its central role in shaping EU policy and its longstanding entanglement with Russian energy infrastructure, notably through Nord Stream I and II.

Germany's hesitation compelled other member states to adopt fragmented national energy strategies. This disjointed response undermined the EU's credibility as a coherent geopolitical actor and exposed the structural asymmetries in its energy architecture. While Berlin has since recalibrated its stance – accelerating LNG infrastructure, reducing import dependencies, and promoting joint gas purchasing mechanisms – its initial ambivalence revealed the enduring tensions between national economic calculations and the imperatives of collective strategic autonomy. Moving forward, Germany's ability to lead on energy security will depend on its willingness to internalise and act upon the geopolitical consequences of past policy choices.

Germany's Strategic Reassessment

Under the emerging leadership of Chancellor Friedrich Merz and the new CDU-led coalition, Germany is signalling a sharper strategic shift. Merz has openly called for a "radical overhaul" of the country's security apparatus. In a moment of candour, he acknowledged the uncomfortable reality: "The absolute priority must now be to strengthen Europe quickly so that we can step by step become independent of the United States".

This sentiment, unthinkable in mainstream German politics a decade ago, reflects the gravity of current threats and the diminishing reliability of transatlantic guarantees. It also speaks to a deeper recognition: that Germany's traditional low-profile approach is no longer sufficient. Already, tangible changes are underway. In early 2025, Germany passed a historic constitutional amendment removing debt limits on defence spending. This move expands and deepens the Zeitenwende, pushing Germany beyond the limits of its civilian-power legacy.

Germany is actively seeking a more assertive role in European security initiatives, especially in response to uncertainties surrounding US commitments under the Trump administration. While initiatives like the proposed EU-led "Coalition of Willing" for Ukraine are primarily driven by the UK and France, Germany is making significant contributions to bolster its position within multilateral defence frameworks.

For example, in December 2024, Friedrich Merz proposed the creation of a new European contact group comprising Germany, France, Poland, and the UK. This group aims to coordinate arms deliveries to Ukraine independently of the US-led "Rammstein format". Germany is also initiating dialogues with France and the UK regarding shared nuclear deterrence as a complement to the existing US nuclear umbrella. In October 2024, Germany and the UK signed the Trinity House Agreement, aiming to deepen bilateral defence cooperation across all domains. Germany additionally leads the European Sky Shield Initiative, launched in October 2022, which involves joint procurement of air defence systems among 15 European nations.

However, obstacles remain. Despite growing support for increased defence spending (66% of population as of March 2025), Berlin's strategic culture has not fully caught up. Public debate is still shaped by ambivalence about the use of force, and bureaucratic sluggishness continues to delay military procurement and deployment.

Additionally, Germany's cautious stance on supplying advanced offensive weapons to Ukraine – such as persisting refusal to deliver Taurus long-range missile systems (despite increasingly positive signals from Merz) – highlights the limits of its current strategic shift. In many ways, Germany is still in transition: rhetorically committed to change, structurally struggling to deliver.

From Zeitenwende to Epochenbruch

To meet the challenge of this new geopolitical era – what the new chancellor has called an Epochenbruch (historic turning point) – Germany must transform its current trajectory into a sustainable strategy of European leadership. The following steps are critical:

Institutionalise Strategic Culture Change

Germany must embed the principles of Zeitenwende into its institutional frameworks. This means streamlining military procurement, creating clear operational mandates for Bundeswehr deployments etc. A permanent National Security Council – integrating foreign, defence, and economic policy – would help coordinate strategy and accelerate implementation. Friedrich Merz has already expressed strong support for such an initiative, presenting it as a key component of his broader vision for a more agile and coherent national security architecture. The chancellor has emphasised that "the world will not wait for us", highlighting the urgency of moving from ad hoc responses to structural readiness.

Lead, not Follow, in European Defence

Germany should take the initiative to establish a permanent EU defence coordination body – an institutional mechanism designed to significantly enhance Europe's ability to respond swiftly to crises. Such a body, situated within or closely affiliated with the European External Action Service (EEAS), would go beyond the current mandates of the EU Military Staff or ad hoc coalitions by providing a standing platform for operational planning, intelligence coordination, and rapid decision-making among coalitions of willing member states.

Unlike existing structures that operate on the basis of consensus and are often limited in flexibility, this new

mechanism could function on a modular and mandate-based model, allowing for deeper integration while remaining anchored in the EU's institutional architecture. It would not duplicate NATO but rather complement it, filling a coordination gap at EU level in situations where the Alliance is politically constrained or not institutionally engaged. Moreover, such a body could serve as a driver for consolidating multiple ongoing initiatives – such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Strategic Compass – into a more coherent and operationally effective framework.

Work Within and Beyond EU Institutions

The European Commission has taken on a more visible role in security and defence policy – through existing and new initiatives such as the European Defence Fund, PESCO, Military Mobility Action Plan and White Paper for European Defence. These mechanisms have helped streamline joint capability development, enhance cross-border troop movement, and incentivise collaborative R&D among member states. However, despite these ambitions, the Commission's institutional mandate remains limited. It lacks the legal authority to direct member state defence policies or to lead joint military operations.

Therefore, Germany's effort to lead in European security must include active cooperation with pan-European initiatives that operate both within and outside formal EU structures. This means avoiding a selective or nationally fragmented approach and instead implementing a strategy that reflects a truly European logic of defence integration.

Align with France and Poland on Strategic Frameworks

The Weimar Triangle – long dormant as a formal vehicle of strategic coordination – possesses significant untapped potential to serve as a cornerstone of European defence and security architecture. France's longstanding advocacy for European strategic autonomy, Poland's assertive security orientation towards the Eastern flank, and Germany's pivotal economic and logistical role form a natural division of labour. In light of mounting geopolitical pressures and a fragmenting transatlantic consensus, reactivating this trilateral format could address critical gaps in Europe's capacity to act collectively on defence, procurement, and crisis response.

However, the viability of the Weimar Triangle is contingent upon political alignment among its members. The re-election of Prime Minister Donald Tusk has temporarily brought Poland's European policy back into closer alignment with the EU's strategic direction. But this is not guaranteed to endure beyond the current legislature and the Triangle's long-term coherence will hinge on anchoring Poland's participation in a broader, societally embedded consensus on European integration and strategic autonomy. As such, the Triangle's revitalisation must be seen not as a *fait accompli*, but as a time-sensitive opportunity demanding institutional entrenchment, public legitimacy, and clear deliverables now.

There have been encouraging initial steps: The planned Weimar Triangle military exercises in 2025 – hosted by Poland and centred on hybrid threats and interoperability – could become a foundational template for broader EU joint force planning. France's accession to the German–Polish–Dutch military mobility pact strengthens operational logistics for rapid deployments and offers a practical layer of integration. Moreover, the alignment of defence ministers on Ukraine-related support – including harmonised equipment transfers and political backing for Kyiv's EU/NATO trajectory – demonstrates an emerging consensus on core strategic priorities. Merz's decision to prioritise Paris and Warsaw on his inaugural foreign visits, alongside the establishment of a Franco-German Defence and Security Council and a symbolic Franco–Polish treaty, underscore a deliberate effort to restore trilateral credibility. Nevertheless, further institutionalisation is essential – potentially through a standing secretariat, regularised high-level summits, and formalised mechanisms for joint capability development.

Embrace Political Responsibility

Above all, Germany must shed its reluctance to lead. As the EU's largest member state, Germany has both the capacity and the responsibility to act decisively. This means not only contributing financially, but setting the political agenda, rallying consensus, and defending European interests in an increasingly hostile world.

Germany's transformation from a civilian power into a strategic actor is far from complete. But if pursued with clarity and commitment, it could mark the beginning of a more autonomous, coherent, and secure Europe. In a world where the rules are being rewritten, United Europe cannot afford a hesitant Germany. It needs a Germany that leads.

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