In the face of a hostile Russia and an uncertain US administration, Germany's current security policy efforts don't live up to the need for a major reorientation of European security. German leadership is needed to drive fundamental systemic renewal that extends beyond reactive solutions.

There is no doubt that the pressure on European security is high. With regard to Ukraine, the United States and its European partners are becoming increasingly divided. In an effort to end the war in Ukraine, the Trump administration is significantly reducing its own assistance to Ukraine and placing the burden on Europeans to fill the void. Although President Trump is prepared to make enormous concessions to Russia in the hope of achieving peace, the Europeans are standing firmly by Ukraine and condemning any impunity for the aggressor. The transatlantic divergence and European responsibility extend beyond Ukraine as the US seeks to shift the burden of Europe's defence and withdraw further from the continent. So far, Washington has provided Europe with extended nuclear deterrence, roughly half of NATO's conventional capabilities, up to 100,000 troops, and many of the critical enablers needed to fight modern wars. Meanwhile, Russia is continuing and even intensifying its attacks on Ukraine, increasingly testing NATO and the EU by violating their airspace and using other grey-zone measures.

Germany and its European partners are attempting to address these three challenges. Within the EU, they are working to secure financial support for Ukraine and maintain pressure on Russia, primarily through maintaining sanctions and strengthening defences against hybrid attacks. At the 2025 NATO summit, Berlin and the majority of other European NATO members pledged to increase defence spending and related infrastructure investment to 5% of GDP by 2035. The European Commission supports the accelerated acquisition of core military capabilities by European countries. As part of the "Readiness 2030" plan, fiscal flexibility has been permitted and member states can now invoke the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact. The Commission can thus raise up to €150 billion in capital markets to provide long-term loans for joint defence procurement.

In this complex situation, the new German government has made its ambition to influence the future of European defence clear, both within and outside the European Union. Chancellor Merz has repeatedly stated that the German Bundeswehr will become the 'strongest conventional army in Europe'. Nevertheless, the long-standing question of how Europe can become more independent of the United States and what Germany's role in European security should be remains unanswered.

New Ambitions, Old Constrains

Currently, it seems that Germany is donning the mantel of leadership in Europe in a number of ways.

Through substantial increases in defence spending, both through the regular budget and the reform of borrowing limitations approved by the previous Bundestag in spring 2025, Berlin is attempting to make the armed forces 'fit for war' at a national level. In 2025, the Federal Ministry of Defence had €86.37 billion at its disposal – more than ever before.

To enable faster and more consistent decision-making on foreign policy, security and defence issues, the new government established a National Security Council in autumn 2025.

At the European level, Berlin has strengthened its ties with key partners. A new chapter in relations has been opened with France, and a friendship treaty has been signed with the United Kingdom. The Friedrich Merz-led government has helped to revive flexible, mini-lateral formats (E3, Group of Five, Weimar Plus), in which strategic and operational issues – like support for Ukraine or joint arms procurement – are discussed.

Last, but not least, Germany has stepped up its assistance to Ukraine significantly. In spring 2025, the US administration decided to reduce its military aid to Ukraine significantly. While US aid dropped sharply to just €0.49 billion between April and June 2025, European assistance to Ukraine surged to €20.53 billion. Since the start of the war, Germany has supplied Ukraine with weapons worth €40 billion. Berlin is also one of the NATO partners that has agreed to purchase military equipment worth €500 billion from the United States under the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List Mechanism.

Despite the flurry of activity and the drastic increase in spending, old realities and preferences remain that limit the German ambition to transform European defence.

When it comes to the desired institutional end-state of European defence, rhetoric has been lofty but little has been proposed in the way of concrete solutions. In its coalition treaty, the new German government envisages a European defence union and calls for "comprehensive strategic sovereignty" of Europe. Neither the coalition treaty nor the respective campaign programmes define specific goals or necessary changes to achieve such a union. While the depth of the geopolitical challenges must be acknowledged, the recipes for treating Europe's security problems are largely familiar, well-worn refrains. Institutionally, NATO remains the linchpin for organising European security. The new government sees a limited but valuable contribution by the EU in strengthening Europe's defence industrial base to ensure the continent's ability to act. Sovereignty then is largely defined the capacity to procure the military equipment necessary to ensure Europe's defence, as well as Ukraine's and perhaps other eastern-flank countries. The further institutional development of the Common Security and Defence Policy has not played a very prominent role for the new government. Rather, immediate crisis management and the extensive use of different inter-governmental formats have been the main trademark of this coalition.

With regard to the defence industry there is also a distinct gap between aspiration and reality. While Berlin emphasises the long-term goal of a European single market for defence goods, old national reflexes are also prominent in Germany. The coalition government has supported efforts by the European Commission to deregulate in order to simplify and standardise demand for military systems to reach the necessary scale on the market. Berlin opposes a further delegation of authority and any further competences for the Commission to coordinate joint procurement.

When it comes to filling critical capability gaps identified in the EU's Defence White Paper of March 2025, Berlin favours projects based on multinational cooperation rather than EU funded projects. Some, like the development of long-range precision missiles (ELSA), rest purely on European systems. Others also include off-the-shelf purchases, such as the European Sky Shield Initiative that include American Patriot systems. Reasons for worry that these approaches will not be enough are plenty. On the national level, Berlin has extended legislation originally intended to speed-up procurement processes. The side-effect of this reform has been the government's increased ability to award national contracts and to protect the German defence industrial base.

Next Steps

For the German government to fully live up to its claim to leadership in European security and defence policy, it must take further steps.

1. This includes clearly defining how the EU and NATO should be reformed to support Ukraine in the long term, to compensate for the withdrawal of American support, and to robustly counter Russian aggression. In NATO, the call for a strengthened European pillar requires further clarification. Within the EU, Berlin must commit to additional methods of jointly financing arms procurement. As some member states have high levels of public debt, it is understandable that Germany is opposed to defence Eurobonds. However, negotiations on the EU's new multiannual financial framework provide an opportunity for Germany to prioritise security and defence within the Union's political agenda.

2. Furthermore, Germany should clarify how it plans to assist the Commission with the joint endeavour of establishing an internal market for defence equipment. This is where the discrepancy between its rhetoric and actions is greatest. The development of an EU internal market for armaments would require the government to distance itself from the use of Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which protects the national autonomy of member states in matters of essential security relating to the production or trade of arms, munitions and war material.

3. Last but not least, Berlin should critically examine the various partially overlapping bilateral and multilateral formats dealing with aspects of European security. While these formats allow the inclusion of the United Kingdom, for example, and contribute to improving European defence capabilities, flexible formats oftentimes are not be the most effective. Their multitude carries the risk of losing sight of the goal of strategic coherence. Furthermore, such formats continue a policy that has contributed to a lack of simplification, standardisation and scale in defence in Europe. Thus, Berlin will have to examine the effectiveness of these various approaches critically, prioritise them accordingly and incorporate them into the EU's decision-making process.

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