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The Future of NATO

Germany's NATO Policy shaped by the Ukraine War and Donald Trump

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Content

1
A Dual *Zeitenwende*

Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine has ushered in a new era in German foreign and security policy, which was labelled a *Zeitenwende* ('turning point') in 2022. It sparked a broad and at times highly controversial debate about its significance and scope as well as how to assess the character and threat potential of Putin's Russia, the prospects of the war in Ukraine, and the future place of both countries in the European security order. However, three years after the declaration of the *Zeitenwende*, collective deterrence and defence by NATO have neither been spelt out in detail nor operationally implemented in Germany. This forms the backdrop for the second (likewise postulated) *Zeitenwende*, which is linked to the return of Donald Trump as US President. According to many observers, his first weeks in office also constituted an epochal watershed. Even though the repercussions are not yet fully clear, two patterns of behaviour have become obvious: unilateralism and erratic decisionism. Both undermine trust in the mutual commitment to support allies in times of need, which is the essence of any military alliance. Reactions in Europe make it clear that Trump has ushered in a second turning point, which concerns the very foundation of NATO itself and its possible adaptation.

In the first part of this contribution, we examine the political and discursive background to the debates on the *Zeitenwende* and the perception of new threats in Germany. In the second part, we explore the operational consequences for NATO as discussed in Germany. Hans-Joachim Spanger is responsible for the first part, Matthias Dembinski for the second part.

Rolling Backwards into the Future: The German, European, and Global *Zeitenwende*

A number of German terms have found their way into international usage and *Zeitenwende* is probably the most recent example. As proclaimed by Olaf Scholz in the German Bundestag on 27 February 2022, only three days after the launch of Russia's open aggression against Ukraine, it has a – theoretically – far-reaching significance for Germany. The shock of the Russian war of aggression in the European neighbourhood was so profound in Germany because its much avowed foreign policy culture of "restraint" was based on the assumption that a large-scale war was hardly conceivable anymore, at least not in Europe. Germany perceived itself as a trading state, a civil or post-national and normative power par excellence. For decades, most decision-makers were convinced that economic interdependence in general, and the well-established economic and energy ties with Russia in particular, adhered to a logic of mutual economic benefit and thus promoted peace.[1] In the modern world, which is shaped by globalisation and interdependence, security and influence were fundamentally based on the ability to persuade and set rules. It is not armaments and hard power, but rather soft power and the ability to form regimes that are said to be the decisive factors in our modern world.[2]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has, according to Scholz, cast serious doubts on all of this: "The issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers. Or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check" (Scholz, 2022). It also brought about the "greatest transformation of German security policy since the founding of the Bundeswehr (Federal Armed Forces) in 1955" (Scholz, 2023), as Scholz outlined at the start of the following year in an article for the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, which targets an international audience. The *Zeitenwende* is therefore aimed at defending the status quo, the much-invoked rules-based order, while resorting to means that are unfamiliar to and outmoded for civilian power, but which the opponent renders

1 A prime example of this is presented by the Chairman of the German Eastern Business Association, Oliver Hermes. Immediately before the outbreak of open warfare, Hermes called for a "Helsinki 2.0" instead of "military muscle-flexing" and pointed out that the German economy has "always seen itself as a 'bridge-builder' "contributing towards political and social understanding and reconciliation with a region in which Germany caused unimaginable disaster in the 20th Century." This is said to apply in particular to the energy relationships that have been a source of tension since February 2022, because: "[a]bove all, the topic of energy has connected Germany, Russia and Ukraine for over 50 years" ('Helsinki 2.0 instead of warmongering', article by Oliver Hermes on the conflict over Ukraine, 1 February 2022, www.ost-ausschuss.de/de/helsinki-20-statt-kriegsgeschrei).

2 In line with this tradition, in January 2022, for example, against the backdrop of the Russian ultimatums, Rolf Mützenich advocated exhausting all opportunities for negotiation and, in the spirit of a policy of détente, "seeing the world through the eyes of others". He asserted that the goal needed to be to "reinvigorate the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Charter of Paris" and to create a "security architecture that spans the blocs" in Europe over the long term (Rolf Mützenich, 'Entspannungspolitik auf der Höhe der Zeit' ['A policy of détente in line with the times'], 17 January 2022, www.ipg-journal.de/interviews/artikel/entspannungspolitik-auf-der-hoehe-der-zeit-5653). However, even back then, this did not meet with universal approval within the party. Critical voices pointed out, for example, "that the policy of détente was only possible at all due to integration in NATO, in the Western alliance and value system", and that dialogue with Russia "brings little". They added that "[m]any encounters have confronted us with the bitter reality that Russia continues to break the rules and that we have not really made progress on any of the conflict issues" (Nils Schmid, 'Geschlossenheit demonstrieren' ['Demonstrating unity'], 10 December 2021, www.ipg-journal.de/interviews/artikel/geschlossenheit-demonstrieren-5599).

necessary. The *Zeitenwende* also ended the era of the "peace dividend" and shifted "credible deterrence and defence" back onto the agenda of German policy – within the transatlantic alliance of NATO as the "indispensable foundation of German, European and transatlantic security", as stated in the first National Security Strategy of 2023 (German Federal Government, 2023: 31). This transatlantic orientation was implemented under the Biden administration without friction, hence the ongoing doubts about the viability of alternative security arrangements, such as a purely European defence or the French nuclear umbrella. But the long-feared (rather than anticipated) (re-)election of Donald Trump as US President calls this orientation into question: Trump has shown a very unique relationship to the rules-based international order and instead practises a purely power-based unilateralism, while also raising doubts about the American commitment to NATO's collective defence in Europe.

In view of such radical changes, it is hardly surprising that both the cause (Russia's aggression) as well as the reaction (the announcement of the *Zeitenwende*) have given rise to some confusion among the German political class and academia, especially on the left of the political spectrum. Although such groups have conceded that adjustments were necessary, they have not recognised the need for a permanent departure from the German culture of restraint and understanding. The conservative left-of-centre critics, on the other hand, have had a field day, which they have celebrated to the full. In keeping with the militant liberal internationalists, who rally around the Greens in particular, they have demanded *mea culpa* and a fundamental change of course, including constant warnings against backsliding into supposedly outdated patterns of behaviour.

The war in Ukraine and Russia are the pivotal points that divide opinions on the *Zeitenwende*. This can be illustrated by the differing understandings of the escalation risk regarding the Ukraine war, which can be classified as either vertical or horizontal. Those who want the war to be over as soon as possible emphasise the vertical escalation towards nuclear war and therefore address NATO and the US in particular. Their political demands are as follows: stop the supply of weapons to Ukraine as a contribution towards (or even a precondition for) negotiations to end the war. Those who primarily castigate Russia's aggression emphasise horizontal escalation, the potential expansion of the war into NATO territory, and thus address Russia and the Putin regime. Their demands are for the (re-)establishment of a credible military deterrence within the framework of NATO and increased weapons supplies until Ukraine's victory is achieved, or at least to deny such a victory to Russia.

Opinions are equally divided on the extent to which the *Zeitenwende* in Germany has actually progressed, three years after its announcement. Those who call for a fundamental transformation of German foreign and security policy as well as a permanent departure from civilian power lament that it has become nothing more than rhetorical window dressing and has produced partial results at best. For example, Benjamin Tallis, the Project Manager of the "Aktionswerkstatt Zeitenwende" (organised by the German Council on Foreign Relations, the DGAP, with the support of the Mercator Foundation until summer 2024) stated simply that it had "failed" and was "dangerously inappropriate". He added that "the failed *Zeitenwende* puts Germans' security, prosperity and freedom at risk and has diminished Berlin's influence with key allies and partners in Europe," concluding that the term should therefore be abandoned (Tallis, 2024).[3]

However, for those who adhere to the concept of civilian power, the transformation has already gone too far. They lament the fact that Germany has succumbed to a binary logic of blocs and war, which ignores global challenges and squanders the achievements and lessons of the détente policy of the past. Herbert Wulf from the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), for instance, characterises the *Zeitenwende* as "panic politics" and insists that "security policy is more than just defence with weapons".[4] The Peace Report 2023 published by the German peace research institutes – the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) and the Institute for Development and Peace at the University of Duisburg (INEF) – argues along similar lines: "a turning point – understood as a break with an old era – requires a broader understanding and needs to be actively shaped." This includes tackling the climate crisis and promoting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Peace Report 2023). There are similar considerations in Germany's official National Security Strategy under the heading "Integrated Security" which implies "bringing together all topics and instruments that are relevant to our security against external threats" (German Federal Government, 2023: 30).

European Security: With or Against Russia?

NATO's new 2022 Strategic Concept leaves no doubt: "[t]he Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." For this reason, the Russian Federation cannot be regarded as a "partner", even if NATO wishes to maintain "communication channels" with Moscow "to manage and

3 Karl-Heinz Kamp, firmly established in the security policy community, has adopted the opposite view, maintaining in a reply "that the *Zeitenwende* in Germany will be permanent and sustainable, and that we will not return to the old security policy stereotypes" (Karl-Heinz Kamp, 'Der Weg zur Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie' ['The path to a national security strategy'], *SIRIUS* 7 (3): 285–290/290). Frank Sauer from the Universität der Bundeswehr Munich, on the other hand, perceives the *Zeitenwende* to be an "empty formula" even after more than two years (Minna Ålander & Frank Sauer, 'Stockende Zeitenwende' ['Faltering *Zeitwende*'], 22 April 2024, www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/stockende-zeitenwende-7461).

4 (Wulf, 2023a; 2023b). The Director of the IFSH, Ursula Schröder, has adopted a similar approach: "[c]alling for a turning point in the field of defence policy alone is by no means enough. German foreign policy must resist the urge to return to an old era" 15 March 2022, www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/zeitenwende-1-5797).

mitigate risks, prevent escalation, and increase transparency". Any change to this situation would depend exclusively on Russia (NATO, 2022: No. 13). The Washington Anniversary Summit 2024 reinforced this assessment and added that the "all-encompassing threat" would continue for "a long time". Therefore, "recommendations for NATO's strategic approach to Russia are to be developed" for the next NATO summit, namely in 2025 (NATO, 2024: No. 26).

In contrast to NATO's categorical demarcation, in his government statement on the *Zeitenwende* of 27 February 2022, Olaf Scholz reiterated that Berlin "will not refuse to engage in talks with Russia". He also added the classic formula of Egon Bahr's détente concept: "yes, lasting security in Europe is not possible against Russia" (Scholz, 2022).

Since then, support for this moderate position has mainly come from peace research. Thus the Peace Report 2023 calls for "a strong peace policy agenda" whereas others reiterate, in line with Bahr, that "there can be no long-term security in Europe without Russia and certainly not against Russia" (Wulf, 2023a).[5] Because Russia is currently a "de facto opponent and potential contracting partner", however, "NATO should be guided by the Harmel Process from the 1960s" (Ehrhart, 2024: 433). This Process combined credible deterrence with a willingness to enter into dialogue for the first time during the Cold War. As a rule, such approaches are linked to the formula that takes heed of Russian security interests (or even "legitimate" security interests) as a "prerequisite for de-escalation, for serious negotiations" (Wulf, 2023a).[6] But this raises the question of which compromises might be conceivable after the war. This is not specified, as the "security interests" claimed by Moscow not only fluctuate but are also very expansive.

Instead, it is noted that we should not be blinded by a hot war because even the fundamental differences of the Cold War – albeit worn down over 30 years – were overcome in the end and hence provide lessons to be learnt. Consider, for example, the recognition of realities and small (diplomatic) steps as practised in the German *Ostpolitik*, which, at that time, aimed at German reunification and today would aim at "peace with Russia" (Kundnani, 2024).[7] Under the current conditions, however, this is fatally reminiscent of Putin's formula of striving for a settlement in Ukraine, "taking account of the realities on the ground." Not only is this an invitation to a land grab, but it also does not take proper account of the fact that – contrary to the Cold War – there is no recognised demarcation of respective spheres of influence, as was imposed on the countries affected by the Yalta Agreement towards the end of World War II. The Korea model is therefore much more relevant to the current situation – and much more frightening.

Nicole Deitelhoff and Christopher Daase from PRIF also advocate co-existence but attempt to square the circle by clothing their concept in three-phases. The first phase is one of "antagonistic peacekeeping through deterrence, armament and alliance formation and, yes: also arms supplies". This phase must be "conceptually oriented towards a second phase of peaceful co-existence", which primarily entails restrictions on military options, before a final third phase "in which a co-operative peace order is sought. In addition to arms limitations and disarmament efforts, this also requires the establishment of institutions for political dispute resolution and processes of peaceful change." However, these are not so much small steps as steps in different directions with the goal of arming in order to disarm. This sequence follows differing logics in the first and subsequent phases respectively. The bottom line is that "in an imperfect world, a substantive peace concept remains one that has teeth and is able to stymie aggressors at an early stage" (Deitelhoff und Daase, 2024).

The political fringes in Germany have had a particular view on the problems concerned, but Russia's war in Ukraine has triggered a fundamental identity crisis. Within the Left Party this happened because the romanticised Russia, rooted in old Soviet mindsets, suddenly did something that was otherwise only associated with the imperialist West. Among the radical right-wing AfD, the war hindered a rapprochement that aimed to revive a reactionary and anti-Western Berlin-Moscow axis. For the AfD, the war in Ukraine is "not our war" (Chrupalla, 2023). Moreover, Germany, as stated in outright Kremlin terms, is the "big loser", because the US is primarily waging an "economic war against Germany" both in and over Ukraine (Weidel, 2022) – at least as long as Biden was in the White House and despite the economic warfare unleashed by Trump. The AfD refrains from portraying Russia as the aggressor; instead, akin to Trump, they wish to "restore undisturbed trade with Russia" (Bundesprogrammkommission, 2025). In 2022, Björn Höcke, the openly fascist wingman of the AfD from Thuringia, expanded these goals further to a Eurasian continental strategy (very much in the geopolitical tradition of Karl Haushofer): "it was and is a US-American strategy as a foreign power to drive wedges on our continent – to drive wedges between peoples and between nations that could actually work very well together. [...] The natural partner, the natural partner for us as a nation, the inventors and thinkers, the natural partner of our

5 See also Tobias Fella and Cornelius Friesendorf, IFSH, 'Die unbeabsichtigten Folgen der Zeitenwende' ['The unintended repercussions of the turning point'], www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/die-unbeabsichtigten-folgen-der-zeitenwende-7408.

6 'Open letter calls on Scholz to stop arms supplies to Ukraine', *Berliner Zeitung* 22 April 2022, www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/offener-brief-fordert-von-scholz-stopp-der-waffenlieferungen-an-die-ukraine-li.223704. Added to this is the demand for a "courageous peace logic" to create a "new European and global peace architecture that includes Russia and China".

7 Critically, Rother raises the often-posed question of "which reality" should be recognised: "[p]eaceful co-existence does not belong to Putin's foreign policy offers; he demands subjugation to his hegemonic desires. You cannot negotiate with him like you could with Leonid Brezhnev, even though both are or were dictators. Putin is pursuing an aggressive, imperialistic programme and wants to change the existing borders" Bernd Rother, ['Everything has its time'], 22 August 2024, www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/alles-hat-seine-zeit-7720).

way of living and working would be Russia, a country with almost inexhaustible resources" (quoted from Bensmann, 2023). In previous – and much darker – times, this was referred to as "living space in the east".

Within the Left Party there has been an attempt to perfect a balancing act with a strong distancing from Russia using keywords such as "authoritarian oligarch capitalism" (Riexinger, 2022) or the characterisation of Putin as a "Great Russian chauvinist" and "Russian imperial nationalist" (Klein, 2022). Yet at the same time, and with almost as much verve, they complain about the "hour of warmongers and patriots" in Germany, noting that the Left must "resist this reactionary pull towards bellicosity" (Klein, 2022). The alternative on offer calls for visions like a "system of co-operative security on the Eurasian (!) continent" comprising Russia, China, India, and all other countries on the continent, which, according to party chairman Jan van Aken (2024), promises that "conflicts of interest [will be] resolved cooperatively". The fact that he also calls for a "restructuring" of the Bundeswehr to ensure its "structural inability to attack" would certainly please the originator of the concept back in 1987, Horst Afheldt, and serves a much-cherished Left topos. This has long since been realised, but in an unplanned manner. Another alternative rests on hopes for social mobilisation cultivated in the form of a "worldwide alliance of multi-faceted social movements that will finally re-establish overarching connections: against militarism, militaristic interventionism and arms build-up". However, it is not fully clear whether this "new international peace movement" is meant to support cooperative peace strategies, or whether it is more closely linked to revolutionary hopes (Klein, 2022).

Criticism levelled at all the cooperative approaches mentioned above is just as fundamental as it is confrontational. As it was the Putin regime that launched the attack on Ukraine and thus on the European security order, the solution to the problems would lie in Russia alone: through a change of regime in the Kremlin. And because this attack was neither expected nor prevented in Germany, all cooperative aberrations of the past ought to be stamped out as well.

This criticism is mainly found within the community dealing with security issues but is also familiar to some representatives of peace research. Hence, two representatives of the IFSH bemoan the fact that "peace based purely on deterrence" is not stable in the long term. Their solution, however, is surprisingly one-sided: "Russia's political and social system needs to be democratised for peace in Europe to become stable in the long run. It must therefore be worked on consistently and in spite of resistance" (Hegemann und Kahl, 2023: 162). This is certainly a plea for a regime change, but rather through political means from within as opposed to military intervention from outside.

The two (green) representatives of the Center for Liberal Modernity (LibMod), Ralf Fücks and Marieluise Beck, share the diagnosis but offer a different and more militant solution. For them, it is obvious that a defeat in Ukraine represents "the only chance of positive change in Russia" (Fücks, 2024). Moreover, "a Russian defeat in Ukraine is key for the future European security order and the condition for any new beginning with Russia." This must additionally take place from a position of strength, because "every signal of weakness is understood as an invitation to cross the next border" (Fücks, 2024). The end of the Soviet Union is clearly seen as a model here, yet the proponents ignore the fact that it makes a difference whether surrender occurs in a cold or a hot war. This assumption is also countered by a well-known peace researcher, Hans-Georg Ehrhart (2023: 385): "relying on a total defeat of Moscow and a regime change as a prerequisite for ending Russian imperialism would be careless."[8]

According to this line of reasoning, however, any conciliation with Vladimir Putin's Russia is out of the question. According to Andreas Heinemann-Grüder (2022a: 5–6), formerly a fellow at the peace research institute BICC, "with a regime that periodically threatens to deploy nuclear weapons to wage the war of annihilation against Ukraine unhindered, there is no 'cold war', but rather an antagonism to life and death. Putin is a danger to world peace. Under Putin's regime there will therefore be ceasefires at best, but no longer peace in Europe. The Russian regime is structurally incapable of peace, which is why there will only be peace in Europe after the end of the Putin regime." German politicians have fatally succumbed to illusions about the nature of Putin's regime in the past: "the ideologisation of the idea of civil power became a policy of appeasement based on the assumption that the more Putin is granted what he demands, the more accommodating (relaxed) he will be." Heinemann-Grüder does not specify to what extent the Russia policy of the Merkel era played a role in "facilitating Putinism", but then continues in the same vein: "the fear of Russian escalation, the primacy of economic interests and the idea that a European peace order is only conceivable with Russia, continue to contribute to the indulgence that has enabled Putin's aggression" (Heinemann-Grüder, 2022b: 371).

It is telling that Heinemann-Grüder – along with Joachim Krause from the Institute for Security Policy at the University of Kiel (ISPK) – does not shy away from blatant falsifications in his fervour. This reveals the shaky foundation of such arguments.[9] Although Germany's "disastrous" (Tallis, 2024) policy towards Russia is often claimed as the cause

8 Moreover, the consequences would be fatal: "[a] Western victory would be a Pyrrhic victory at best. According to this scenario, it would come at the cost of massive destruction in Ukraine, countless victims, perhaps a nuclear escalation, an expansion of the war beyond Ukraine, and the humiliating decline or even collapse of Russia" (Hans-Georg Ehrhart, 'Ukrainekrieg ohne Ende? Neun Thesen für ein Kriegsende' ['Ukraine war without an end? Nine theses for an end to the war'], *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* (2024) 17: 415–435/418).

9 This pertains to the two authors of this article, among others. Heinemann-Grüder claims that our 2017 plea for a "plural peace" amounts to the "acceptance of Russian zones of influence" (Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, 'Russland-Politik in der Ära Merkel' ['Russian policy in the Merkel era'], *Sirius*, 2022, 6 (4): 359–372/368). Or, in Krause's version, the accu-

of Putin's militaristic manoeuvres,[10] there is little evidence besides the fact that Russia has behaved in a way that was neither desired nor anticipated. This, however, is merely a coincidence and not a causality – especially as it has simultaneously been determined that Western influence on the regime in Moscow is minimal.

Such verdicts clearly aim to ensure that there is no (further) attempt to build upon *Ostpolitik* in the spirit of détente, but that, in the spirit of the new confrontation, the past of a supposedly "illusory policy towards Russia" (Adomeit and Krause, 2022: 147–48) is sealed off. This is urgently required as the "appeasement policy towards autocrats [...] is deeply entrenched in social democracy, but also in the Christian Democratic Party" (Heinemann-Grüder, 2022b: 371).[11]

If, like the authors cited above, we rely on regime change as a panacea, this inevitably means that the confrontation with Russia must be placed in the larger context of a global systemic conflict: "the political systems of democracy and autocracy are mutually exclusive. Many in politics as well as society still find it difficult to realise the full consequences of this, even two years after the proclamation of the turning point" (Horlohe, 2024: 156).[12] This claim is probably aimed at then-Chancellor Scholz's plea, who rejected renewed bipolarism, not least with a view to China.

Security for Ukraine – With or Without NATO?

The contrast between the cooperative and confrontational European security concepts linked to past and future dealings with Russia is also evident in dealings with Ukraine. This concerns the question of which security guarantees can be given to Ukraine – bilateral, multilateral or within the framework of NATO – as well as the idea that emerged at the end of 2024 regarding the deployment of troops after the conclusion of a ceasefire. It also affects the question of the urgency with which a ceasefire can be pursued and Russia's war in Ukraine can be ended.

Russia had only just invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022 when calls, appeals, and open letters rained down on Germany under such contradictory headings as "Ceasefire now!" (*ZEIT*, 2022a)[13] versus "Heavy weapons now!" (*Focus*, 2022).[14] There was also a torrent of mutual accusations and insults. The ones who eyed a military solution in favour of Ukraine, with the wind of the *Zeitenwende* behind them and confident that they alone were serving a just cause (and that they alone had the necessary academic expertise), marched resolutely ahead (*ZEIT*, 2022b).

However, the calls by Alice Schwarzer and Sahra Wagenknecht (2023) found the greatest resonance. The first, published on 10 February 2023 under the amorphous title 'Manifest für Frieden' ('Manifesto for Peace') and with similarly amorphous content, contented itself with testifying that Ukraine could not win the war against the "world's largest nuclear power". Therefore, negotiations and compromises were called for as opposed to an "escalation of arms deliveries". Under the title 'Eine Minute vor Zwölf' ('One Minute to Twelve'), the second appeal, from 4 December 2024, was far more dramatic and entirely focused on the danger of a nuclear war – especially their own concern that Germany could "become the new battlefield" without "de-escalation and an immediate ceasefire".

The warnings of both calls also shaped the positioning of Sahra Wagenknecht's electoral association for the elections to the Bundestag in February 2025, as she had been involved with the "Russia Today Group" when she was still member of the Left Party's parliamentary group in the

sation that "we placed the blame on Western states for Moscow's Ukraine policy" (Joachim Krause, 'Konnte man den Krieg Russlands gegen die Ukraine vorhersehen?' ['Could Russia's war against Ukraine have been foreseen?'], *Sirius*, 5 March 2024, 8 (1): 76–79/77); id. 'Falsche Analysen, Empfehlungen und Schlagworte: Friedensforschung lieferte den Überbau für eine illusionäre Russlandpolitik', ['Incorrect analyses, recommendations and buzzwords: Peace research has provided the superstructure for an illusionary policy towards Russia'], interview with *Cicero* (www.cicero.de/aussenpolitik/friedensforschung-russlandpolitik-joachim-krause-interview). Nothing could be further from the truth. However, it would be far-fetched to claim that our "statements" represented the ideological superstructure for the Foreign Ministry dominated by the Social Democrats in the Merkel era (two terms of office for Frank-Walter Steinmeier, one for Sigmar Gabriel and one for Heiko Maas)", (368), as Heinemann-Grüder makes us believe as well.

10 The argument becomes downright absurd when it is extended to "serious mistakes of Germany's policy towards Russia, such as Putin's invitation to the Bundestag in 2001 or the modernisation partnership as of 2008" ('Experten fordern Korrektur deutscher Russlandpolitik. Mehr als 70 Osteuropa- und Sicherheitsexperten wenden sich an Regierung und Parteien: Dem aggressiven Vorgehen Russlands dürfe Deutschland nicht länger tatenlos zusehen' ['Experts call for a correction of Germany's policy towards Russia. More than 70 experts on Eastern Europe and security appeal to the government and political parties: Germany must no longer ignore Russia's aggressive stance']: *Zeit Online*, 14 January 2022,
www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2022-01/deutsche-russlandpolitik-korrektur-forderung-sicherheitspolitik).

11 Interestingly, this allusion also meets with approval in the SPD, as demonstrated, for example, by an open letter by Heinrich August Winkler, Jan C. Behrends, and other SPD academics lamenting the lack of an "honest appraisal of mistakes in the policy towards Russia in recent decades". The letter continues that "[r]ather, the tradition of Bahr's foreign policy continues to be uncritically and romantically upheld as a hallmark of the SPD." This "not only portrays a false picture of Russian policy and interests, but also creates a dangerous, because erroneous, basis for future foreign policy" (letter to the SPD party executive, 20 March 2024, https://deuge.net/onewebmedia/Brief%20an%20den%20SPD-Parteivorstand_240320.pdf). This criticism has been rebuffed by the Willy-Brandt-Kreis ('Allgemeinfloskeln statt differenzierter Analysen oder verwertbarer Vorschläge. Ein Kommentar zum Brief von drei Historikern und zwei Historikerinnen an den SPD-Parteivorstand' ['Platitudes instead of sound analyses or usable proposals. A commentary on the letter from five historians to the SPD Party Executive'] of 20 March 2024, 2 May 2024, www.willy-brandt-kreis.de).

12 Thomas Horlohe, 'Die „Zeitenwende" und die Suche nach einem Paradigma für die postliberale internationale Ordnung' ['The "turning point" and the search for a paradigm for the post-liberal international order'], *SIRIUS* 2024; 8 (2): 143–158/156). However, Horlohe believes that the systemic conflict between autocracies and democracies is ultimately not suitable as a "new paradigm" "because, as a real analysis, it is too undifferentiated, programmatically immature, and difficult to communicate. Not every autocracy sees itself in the camp of the great powers of Russia and China." He therefore urges modifying this concept in favour of "democratic anti-revisionism" (157).

13 Forerunners were "open letters" to the Federal Chancellor, such as "28 intellectuals and artists write an open letter to Chancellor Scholz", 29 April 2022 (www.emma.de/artikel/offener-brief-bundeskanzler-scholz-339463).

14 There was also a mirror-image reaction to the "Open Letter" by the "28 intellectuals"; 'Waffenlieferung an die Ukraine: Intellektuelle um den Publizisten Ralf Fücks plädieren für die kontinuierliche Lieferung von Waffen an die Ukraine – nachdem eine Gruppe um Alice Schwarzer davor gewarnt hatte' ['Arms delivery to Ukraine: Intellectuals led by publicist Ralf Fücks call for the continued delivery of weapons to Ukraine – after a group led by Alice Schwarzer warned against this'], 4 May 2022, *ZEIT* No. 19/2022 (www.zeit.de/2022/19/waffenlieferung-ukraine-offener-brief-olaf-scholz?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.faz.net%2F).

Bundestag (Haupt, 2022). On the one hand, she complained about "uselessly squandered taxpayers' money" in Ukraine, which seamlessly corresponds with the national-patriotic signature that the alliance and its namesake – not unlike Donald Trump – elevated to the essence of their brand. On the other, she warned against the risks associated with an escalation of the war. Above all she blamed the US, explaining that "[i]n Ukraine, a proxy war is raging between Russia and the United States, which could escalate into a world war at any time" (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025: 26-31). The US motif is also propounded by her husband, Oskar Lafontaine (2023), who deploys all the talking points found in Russian propaganda to criticise the US, right down to the bio-laboratories in Ukraine – an old obsession of his (Lafontaine, 1983). Here, too, it would be interesting to find out how Donald Trump fits into the Manichean world view.

Warnings of a nuclear war may be alarmist, but the fact that the advocates of a military solution do the opposite and play down the threat of nuclear weapons as "part of the Russian disinformation campaign" (Meister, 2023) signals a classic cognitive dissonance: while Putin, in their view, is capable of anything as proven by many years of bloodshed, his nuclear threats are shrinking to a variant of hybrid warfare. There is no doubt that these threats serve as intimidation, but this says nothing at all about their possible use if intimidation fails to achieve the desired effect (which has partly been the case already, as indicated by the Western notion of "boiling the frog") or when the Kremlin resorts to nuclear use to ultimately prevail.

The public debate about waging or ending Russia's war in Ukraine has reinforced traditional front lines, such as between peace and security research, but has also partially dissolved them. The latter is likely due to the extreme situation of a major war with a powerful aggressor in the immediate neighbourhood. Even if there is a marked disciplinary differentiation between (to put it bluntly) pacifists and warmongers, there are striking deviations. These can be fully studied in peace research, which, according to security policy standard-bearers, in the past "virtually provided the ideological superstructure for Germany's policy towards Russia, which was shaped by illusions and self-deception" (Krause, 2024a: 77).

Harald Müller, longstanding Managing Director of PRIF, provides the most drastic example. He equates Putin with Hitler and feels reminded of the year 1938: "Putin, a secret service officer who underwent training in history by the Soviet KGB, has meticulously imitated Hitler's blueprint. He is his revenant." As a lesson for peace research, Müller concludes that "its standard repertoire of peace-promoting measures" reaches its "ultimate limit" when faced with an unscrupulous, aggressive opponent that is prepared to use violence. This can only "be countered by a combination of credible defence and deterrence" (Müller, 2022).

This is certainly an outlier in the spectrum of peace research. The majority of studies are in the political mainstream – promoting a ceasefire, but only in the distant future and under conditions that are acceptable for Ukraine. For instance, the Peace Report 2023 argues explicitly against calls for immediate peace negotiations and a halt to arms deliveries, because this "would not lead to sustainable peace" (Peace Report 2023: 5). The 2024 edition proposes as preparatory measures an "international contact group" in order to pave the way for negotiations and draw up "compromise solutions", while also postulating that "military support to Ukraine must be ensured and increased over the long term if negotiations are to be facilitated in the war in Ukraine" (Peace Report, 2024: 114). Herbert Wulf (2023c) from BICC argues more strongly in the spirit of peace insofar as he wishes to afford Putin the "opportunity" to "end his war while saving face".[15]

If such positioning illustrates (cum grano salis) that, as diagnosed by Christopher Daase, Nicole Deitelhoff, and Anna Geis (2024), the former rigid distinction between peace and security research has been lost, others, such as Hendrik Simon and Lothar Brock (2025) from PRIF, have attempted to restore it. Their line of argument is that "the pursuit of security invariably generates new insecurities", insofar as it is one-sidedly based on fitness for war and a build-up of arms. This can only be countered with a focus on peace, and, in the current situation, by revisiting the Cold War policy of détente: "for the absence of 'peace' in security policy renders this policy hopeless and thus susceptible to tipping over into a new arms race" (Simon and Brock, 2025).

The Greens' divided stance on war and peace is even more pronounced than that of the field of peace research, ranging from radical pacifism to radical warmongering, and from liberal internationalism to liberal interventionism. In the face of such a war as that which is currently being fought in Ukraine, it is hardly surprising that a value-based policy encourages radicalisation, but it is astonishing how consistently this occurs among a number of prominent and formerly prominent representatives of the party. This applies in particular to Ralf Fücks and Marieluise Beck, who found a retirement sinecure at LibMod in Berlin. For Fücks and Beck (2024) there is no doubt that "this is also our war", leading to the bold statement that "if you do not want to win a war against an opponent who is determined

15 Fritz Felgentreu explicitly rejected and countered this negotiation-oriented approach in a reply: "[a]fter all, only a Russian failure can confound the Kremlin's war policy and thus restore the basis for a stable security in Europe" (Fritz Felgentreu, 'Kein Exit ins 19. Jahrhundert' ['No exit to the 19th century'], 9 August 2023, www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/kein-exit-ins-19-jahrhundert-6903). By the same token, Wolfgang Ischinger also spoke in favour of an "off-ramp" for Putin, at least at the start of the invasion: "[o]ff-ramps" mean saving face. They point to a way that avoids a military or a political defeat or both together ('Deutscher Spitzendiplomat Ischinger: „Es ist schädlich, wenn westliche Politiker öffentlich darüber spekulieren, ob und wie man Putin eliminieren könnte"' ['Top German diplomat Ischinger: "It is harmful for Western politicians to publicly speculate about whether and how Putin could be eliminated"'], 7. March 2022, www.nzz.ch/international/putin-eliminieren-spitzendiplomat-warnt-vor-westlichen-drohungen-ld.1673016?mktcid=nled&mktcval=164_2022-03-08&kid=nl164_2022-3-7&ga=1&trco=).

to do anything, you have already lost it. The German 'middle course' – neither Russia nor Ukraine should win the war – is a mistake."[16]

Such a "middle course" is also adopted by NATO when it comes to the question of Ukraine's membership of the alliance. NATO's Strategic Concept, which was adopted half a year after Russia's invasion in 2022, did not extend beyond "confirming" the decisions of the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit that Ukraine, like Georgia, "will become a NATO member" – at some point. Despite (renewed) fierce efforts from Kyiv and other (eastern) capitals, the 2024 Washington Summit did not develop this indefinite prospect any further. Only a number of concrete steps towards operational integration were agreed, such as the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) to coordinate and streamline support in the face of American inconstancy. Another was to confirm the NATO Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) that was adopted in 2023 for the required reforms on the part of Ukraine. The general commitment was also rhetorically upgraded with a renewed affirmation that Ukraine has embarked on an "irreversible path towards full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership" and that the aforementioned NATO activities represented a "bridge to membership". All this, however – an important limitation – without wanting to become a "party to the conflict" (NATO, 2024: No. 15, 16).

It is no secret that, unlike its Eastern European allies, the German Federal Government ranks among those who are sceptical of NATO membership for Ukraine. This puts the government in line with the Biden administration, which, in the best-case scenario for Ukraine, favoured a long-term moratorium, and even more so the Trump administration, which fundamentally rejects the notion of Ukraine's membership. Yet this view is certainly not shared by everyone. Those who call for a visible German profile in arms deliveries to Ukraine – often expressed as: learning from Eastern Europe – also favour rapid NATO membership. In the political domain, there are repeated cross-party initiatives, embodied in statements such as: "no defence is as good as NATO membership, because it acts as a deterrent" (Faber et al., 2024; Hofreiter et al., 2024; Kaim and Kempin, 2024). The political fringes, however, unanimously and fundamentally reject NATO expansion, in the case of the AfD including EU expansion (Federal Programme Commission 2025). The Left Party retains the traditional scepticism towards NATO. Even though some in the party concede that the war has unexpectedly turned NATO into an "anti-imperial defensive alliance" (Marwecki, 2022), for others it remains true that "approaches to cooperative security cannot be established within the structures of the alliance" (Gehring, 2024).

Within academic discourse, various degrees of appreciation for NATO membership can be found. A favourable stance is embodied in statements such as: "only NATO membership can guarantee pan-European security" (Tallis, 2023). Johannes Varwick from the *Universität Halle-Wittenberg* states the exact opposite. For him, it would be an "imperative of sober realpolitik" to "stop Ukraine's move towards NATO as perceived in Russia (even though it is not actually on the cards today)" in order to facilitate "serious negotiations" (Varwick, 2023: 77).

Given that Ukraine's admission to NATO cannot be achieved in the (un)foreseeable future owing to a lack of unity within the alliance, advocates of NATO membership propose bilateral or minilateral ("coalitions of the willing") security guarantees as the "second-best solution". Such options would have to "establish a visibly credible deterrent position" (which would only be possible "if the Bundeswehr were to become even more involved in supporting Ukraine" – something that NATO still sought to avoid in Washington in 2024) (Risse, 2024).

Deterrence yes, warfare no: NATO's stance towards – and dilemma over – Ukraine can be reduced to this simple formula. In other words, membership only becomes conceivable after the end of the war, when trust in the deterrent capability is high enough. But it also means that, in the meantime, only "second-best" solutions can be considered. This includes bilateral security agreements (Klein and Major, 2023: 6), which, however, hardly merit their name, as demonstrated by the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.

Against the background of Trump's removal of taboos surrounding a negotiated end to the war as well as his unilateral and amateurish approach towards this, discussions were held in late 2024 regarding troop deployments in Ukraine, driven primarily by Paris and London. The details of these discussions have not yet been finalised. The scope varies: Ukraine claimed up to 200,000 soldiers, whereas the initiators referred to 40 to 50,000 at the time.[17] The same is true for deployment areas, which may be along the demarcation line or in the hinterland (with a clear tendency towards the latter). The mandate is also open, but use of the term "Reassurance Force" (which has become increasingly prevalent) points to a hybrid of peacekeeping and deterrence. Moreover, there is a lack of willingness to participate: beyond Paris and London, there are only express statements of interest from the Baltic states and clear refusals from Germany, Italy, Poland and, above all, the US (which demands European security guarantees but does not want to support them). What is more, such a deployment of troops would only be conceivable with the agreement of Russia, and – insofar as troops from NATO mem-

16 Tallis sees it in precisely the same way: "[a]nd that is the key problem. Chancellor Scholz has never said that Ukraine should win – and his government's policy reflects that" (Benjamin Tallis, 'The end of the *Zeitenwende*. Reflections after two years of action group *Zeitenwende*', 30 August 2024, https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-zeitenwende).

17 A carefully considered study by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) arrived at the conclusion that at least 150,000 soldiers would be needed, with rotations three times that number, if a credible deterrent were to be achieved (Claudia Major, Aldo Kleemann, 'Modelle zur Absicherung eines möglichen Waffenstillstandes in der Ukraine' ['Models for safeguarding a potential ceasefire in Ukraine'], *SWP Working Paper* No. 2, January 2025, p. 11 et seq.).

bers are involved – this cannot be foreseen in any way.[18] That is why – as of April 2025 – activism by the British and French governments should primarily be understood as a diplomatic operation to curb Trump's unilateralism.

The last remaining variant is to strengthen Ukraine's self-defence capability, which is accompanied by phrases such as "steel porcupine". However, as demonstrated by the collective commitment among NATO's European members to ongoing (and reinforced) arms deliveries in the hot war (Kapitoneko, 2023), this would not change the status quo.

China and NATO in the Indo-Pacific: No *Zeitenwende* (yet)

Within Germany, there is a widespread view that a *Zeitenwende* is also needed with regard to China (CDU/CSU parliamentary group, 2023). This view is, however, by no means unanimous (Federal Foreign Office, 2023). Its implementation has therefore been incremental – and is still anything but complete (Godehardt, 2024). The same also applies to NATO. China was first mentioned in a NATO summit document in 2019, with a succinct sentence that equally emphasised the "challenges" and the "opportunities" that would arise from China's "growing influence and its international policy" (NATO, 2019). This essentially applied until 2021 when, at the Brussels Summit, the sentence was almost identical – aside from the fact that it omitted the word "opportunities", leaving only the "challenges" (NATO, 2021).[19] NATO's new Strategic Concept of 2022, after the outbreak of open war in Ukraine, follows on from this and specifically laments the fact that the "intensifying strategic partnership" between China and Russia "and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests" (NATO, 2022: No. 13).[20] The 2024 Anniversary Summit in Washington adopted a significantly sharper tone and criticised the fact that China had become "a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine". "This increases the threat Russia poses to its neighbours and to Euro-Atlantic security" (NATO, 2024: No. 26). But escalation from a "challenge" to a (direct) Chinese "threat" has so far failed to materialise, as is also the case in Berlin.

The triad defined by the EU Commission in 2019, which classified China as a "partner, economic competitor and systemic rival" is still the relevant point of departure in Germany's China policy (see Federal Foreign Office, 2023; CDU/CSU parliamentary group, 2023). Since 2022, however, an increasing number of voices have deemed this combination to be outdated and call for a clear shift towards "systemic rivalry" (Godehardt, 2024; Heide, 2024) as a minimum. The war in Ukraine and the experience with Russia and its autocracy are the main drivers. This experience and Beijing's "Russia-friendly neutrality" in the Ukraine war (Heberer, 2023) are shaping the increasingly critical stance towards China in Germany. Even though China has hitherto occupied a grey zone between cooperation and confrontation, the trend is clear: the distance is growing, and China is becoming an opponent in the global systemic conflict as well as a tangible security problem. The confrontational positioning of the US and the expected pressure from the Trump administration are also not helping.

For Stefanie Babst (2022), who worked at NATO for more than 20 years and is now a member of the DGAP Executive Committee, competition between political systems is "strategically essential" and she calls for "the defence of our liberal order against Russia and China". The CDU and CSU (2023) have adopted the same view: for them, China represents the "greatest challenge since the end of the Soviet era, also ideologically". What is more, they complain that this has been underestimated for too long. This builds upon the dominant perception in the US that China, not Russia, is the real peer competitor. This assessment comes close to the Greens' election manifesto, which bemoans the "years of naivety". The China strategy of the traffic-light coalition government has, however, allegedly overcome this with their participation (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2025b).[21] Thorsten Benner (2023) from the Berlin think-tank Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) is less optimistic in this regard. He, too, sees China as a "greater systemic challenge" than Russia and urges us to learn the right lessons from the "catastrophic failure" of the Russia policy. He bemoans the fact that there are still "too many dangerous illusions", as "too many seek refuge in the narrative, 'China is not Russia'".[22]

These alleged illusions obviously apply to the sinologist Thomas Heberer from the University of Duisburg-Essen, who explicitly opposes lumping Russia and China together. His argument is that in doing so, the "West is not only squandering the opportunity for international cooperation with China, but also fanning the flames of the geopolitical

18 From the Russian side, there have only been official statements of firm rejection, whereas unofficial sources from Russian experts prefer UN peacekeepers, but of course without NATO participation (cf. Anton Troianovski, 'For Russia, Trump has a lot to offer, even without a Ukraine deal', *New York Times*, 24 March 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/03/24/world/europe/trump-russia-putin-ukraine.html).

19 The much more detailed communiqué (unlike the London Declaration two years earlier) also states: "56. NATO maintains a constructive dialogue with China where possible."

20 Yet it continues to call for "constructive engagement" (NATO, 2022: No. 14).

21 In the classic Cold War mode: "[i]n this competition between political systems, we are firmly committed to liberal democracy and thus also strengthening our security, our freedom and our prosperity." It is striking that the strongest critics of Russia and autocracy in general among the Greens, Ralf Fücks and Marieluie Beck, show restraint when it comes to China. Evidently, youth engagement in the (Maoist) Communist League of West Germany (KBW) is still having an effect here.

22 Janka Oertel from the European Council for Foreign Policy in Berlin takes the same line and summarises as follows: "[t]he Russian invasion of Ukraine shockingly illustrates how competition between political systems, Beijing's claim to power, and the security interests of the Communist Party are already having a direct impact on security and prosperity in Germany and Europe and how, despite everything, the illusion persists that everything might still get better" (Janka Oertel *Ende der China-Illusionen. Wie wir mit Pekings Machtanspruch umgehen müssen* [*End of the China Illusions. How We Must Deal with Beijing's Claim to Power*]. Munich: Piper Verlag 2023, 244).

conflict" (Heberer, 2023). The Peace Report 2022 adopts a similar line, emphasising that "elevating" the contrast between democracy and autocracy to a systemic conflict would give Russia, but also China, a "reason to pose a coordinated challenge to liberal principles of order".[23] This corresponds with the SPD's position, which also refuses to sign up to an offensive and confrontational course.

Rolf Mützenich (2023), speaking in his former role as head of the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, and in line with Olaf Scholz, also rejects the diagnosis that the "West is already in a new Cold War with China", observing neither a systemic conflict nor a "great power competition". In his view, the ideological differences do not determine the global system and "the era of unipolar or bipolar systems" is in any case over.[24] This judgement is clearly intended to establish what Mützenich calls a "smart foreign policy" that "does not just copy old concepts from the past" (Mützenich, 2023). Even under current circumstances, China should not be isolated and cooperation with it should not be curtailed (Scholz, 2023). This is all the more relevant as the SPD believes that "global challenges such as climate change, problems of arms control and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as the debt crisis in the countries of the Global South cannot be resolved without its involvement." Nevertheless, according to the SPD election manifesto, this requires a "robust" dialogue with China (SPD, 2025).[25]

The varying positions in the German debate over China are reflected in NATO and its potential role in the Asia-Pacific. Changes in the global balance of power, both economically and militarily, along with the competing expansion of security cooperations beyond the region, are increasingly intertwining European and Indo-Pacific security. In the wake of the Ukraine war, these are now largely perceived to be indivisible, both in Europe and in the US. The reason for this is that, in North Korea and China, two Far Eastern powers have sided with Russia: North Korea by openly supporting Russia with troops and weapons, while China, with its pseudo-neutrality, has sided with Russia economically and rhetorically. Moreover, the rapid pace of economic development and the conflict dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region will make it the most important and precarious battleground for global influence and the global order, which is a particular concern for the US.

This constellation has far-reaching implications for NATO. According to a diagnosis by Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), the European-American relationship will be "increasingly integrated into the organisation of US-Chinese relations and the value of the former will be measured by the significance for the latter. This is because China's rise in power politics is increasingly becoming part of the geostrategic picture" (Kaim and Kempin, 2024: 32).[26] The way in which NATO positions itself towards China and the Indo-Pacific has a threefold dimension: institutionally, it concerns relations between NATO and the EU and their respective roles in the region. Within NATO, the future role of the US in both regions is concerned and, finally, relations with possible "partners" in the Indo-Pacific region are of great importance. Generally, an expansion of NATO into the Indo-Pacific has not yet been addressed, but discussions envisage closer cooperation through joint military exercises, intelligence cooperation, or even an informal military alliance (such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, between the US, Australia, India and Japan) with all those interested in preserving the much-cited "rules-based international order" (cf. Lim, 2022).

In Berlin, there is a political consensus that the EU should be the primary coordination platform and that the EU and NATO should work together closely vis-à-vis China. This was less clear prior to the war in Ukraine. Back in 2021, Markus Kaim and Angela Stanzel (2021: 335, 340–41) from the SWP in particular emphasised "the economic and political challenges arising from Beijing's actions in the Euro-Atlantic area", which would require "an economic or political response in particular", "for which NATO is ill-equipped. The alliance should be careful not to suggest anything else and thus inadvertently inflate China as a military threat to the Euro-Atlantic area." They also had doubts as to whether a "defined policy for overcoming" the security challenges or even a "military strategy specifically for China" are conceivable in light of differences within NATO regarding the degree and nature of the challenge posed by China as well as NATO's scope and area of responsibility. Nowadays, the CDU and CSU call for such a "strategically aligned transatlantic China policy" to mutually complement the European China Strategy (CDU/CSU parliamentary group, 2023). In early January 2025, the CDU Chairman and newly elected Chancellor Friedrich Merz illustrated what this could mean in practise when he suggested the establishment of a "permanent European naval base in the Indo-Pacific" (Merz, 2025).

Rolf Mützenich (2023) pursues a distinctly different approach when he urges for a "genuine European approach to our future engagement in the Indo-Pacific." He perceives the role of the EU mainly as a mediator between the US

23 Especially since its authors also believe that it is generally a "fallacy to perceive China and Russia as an "authoritarian mirror image of the transatlantic community" (Peace Report 2022: 26).

24 Scholz, too, denies that we are "on the brink of an era of bipolarity in the international order", in which the US and China are engaging in a new Cold War (Olaf Scholz, 'The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era', *Foreign Affairs* (102) 1, Jan/Feb 2023). Strong objection has come from Benjamin Tallis: "Scholz's multipolar approach seeks to ignore rather than deal with Germany's contradictions by charting an impossible middle course between the US and China" ('The End of the *Zeitenwende*. Reflections after two years of action group *Zeitenwende*', 30 August 2024, https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-zeitenwende).

25 This aligns with the German Federal Government's China Strategy (of the previous red-yellow-green coalition).

26 Similarly, see Hanns W. Maull, Angela Stanzel & Johannes Thimm, 'USA und China auf Kollisionskurs' ['US and China on a collision course'], Berlin, *SWP-Studie* No. 2 March 2023, p.43.

and China, "for example, for the establishment of arms control forums" and for the urgent creation of "new trilateral formats and mechanisms that minimise the risk of military confrontation and an unintended escalation."[27] This refers to the conflict over Taiwan, where – according to his diagnosis – "both parties [have] manoeuvred into a strategic impasse where there is hardly any tactical leeway". This has led to Washington and Beijing increasingly asking themselves "when, as opposed to whether, the war between both countries will be waged". Against the backdrop of the experience with Russia, his goal is "to show that a war between China and the West is not inevitable" after all (Mützenich, 2023). Hanns W. Maull, Angela Stanzel, and Johannes Thimm (2023:44) from the SWP adopt a similar perspective and call for strengthened cooperation with "like-minded states in Asia and Oceania" in order to "exert a moderating influence on the American stance towards the People's Republic".

The transatlantic dimension of supporting or limiting the US strategy towards China mainly concerns two complexes: firstly, the formation of a joint front to contain China, primarily politically and economically, but possibly also militarily. For some time, this has been a consistent endeavour of the US and has been intensified under the specific auspices of bullying à la Donald Trump (De-Coupling in lieu of De-Risking). The second complex concerns the undiminished US military presence in the European theatre. This presence is being called into question for two reasons. Since 2014 at the latest, the US has regarded China as the real and long-term challenge (with Taiwan as a potential hotspot), while Russia, by contrast, has been seen only as a short-term threat. This is a fairly ideal constellation to manoeuvre Europe into an uncomfortable decision-making situation. In addition, the US is confronted with the objective problem that it can scarcely afford two major wars, let alone prepare for them both at the same time (while Russia, on the other hand, in contrast to the last three decades of the Cold War in Europe, has plenty of leeway thanks to its quasi-alliance with China). There are thus major doubts within the German debate as to whether NATO can count on the same presence and support from the US in Europe. In future, it will comprise neither "a massive American presence in peacetime in Europe, nor an overwhelming air power from the first day of high-intensity conflict, [with] especially no redeployments of heavy reinforcements across the Atlantic to Europe" (Meyer zum Felde, 2022: 175). His conclusion is that the tighter the Russian-Chinese military alliance becomes, the more China must also be "regarded as a potential threat and possible opponent on Russia's side" (Meyer zum Felde, 2022: 182) – with far-reaching repercussions for European defence budgets, NATO's Strategic Concept, and all commitments to European deterrence and defence. This would have been the case even without "America First", but under this banner (which was clearly evident from Trump's first weeks in office), it will undoubtedly be implemented much more consistently and unilaterally.

27 This opinion is also shared by Oliver Meier from the European Leadership Network and Michael Staack from the University of the Armed Forces in Hamburg to the extent that, in light of the importance of China, global disarmament and arms control regimes would not be viable over the medium term without Beijing's involvement and regional trust-building is also necessary (Oliver Meier & Michael Staack, Ohne geht nicht [We cannot do it without them], 3 November 2022, www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/ohne-geht-nicht-6291).

2
The Return of Donald Trump and the Precarious Future of NATO

Following Putin's war of aggression in 2022, Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 presented the second shock for NATO. A brief look back in time might help to understand the significance of these shocks for German NATO policy and how they could change Germany's position in the alliance. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the broad political centre in Germany – including the vast majority of think tanks – associated NATO membership with enormous advantages. The costs of security were moderate. The intra-Western security dilemma was resolved by embedding Germany in a strong multilateral organisation. Moreover, NATO membership was compatible with the German security policy culture of restraint that it had developed as a prototypical trading and civilian power. During the Cold War, NATO's philosophy of war prevention and the combination of deterrence and détente accommodated the German guiding principle that wars had become inconceivable. After 1990, and with the globalisation of the Western liberal order, there was a risk of becoming embroiled in hot military conflicts in other regions. However, Germany was able to mitigate this risk, either because participation in military NATO interventions served humanitarian ends (as in Afghanistan) or because a refusal to participate (as in Iraq and Libya) did not undermine the core of the alliance (Besch, 2022). The rapid shift back to the transatlantic orientation following Trump's first term in office and Joe Biden's electoral success in 2020 was an expression of common values just as it was proof of the perceived advantages of the alliance and of doubts about the viability of alternative arrangements in the form of purely European defence, for instance.

Most observers believe that Trump's return to the White House signals the erosion or even the death of NATO as a community of values. At the start of his second presidency, Trump was better prepared, and the counterbalances (the much-cited political "guardrails" in Washington) are much weaker than during his first term. Unlike in the past, he is now surrounded entirely by sycophants. Trump, according to drastically confirmed expectations, is thus implementing his political ideas even more radically than before, when they were largely exhausted in erratic rhetoric. Prior to Trump's official inauguration, controversial debates considered whether this would remove the basis for transatlantic cooperation. Those who assumed continuity in transatlantic relations at that time based their expectations on the perceived American interests (Rühle, 2025). They believed that Europe was so important for the US that Germany and Europe should confidently negotiate deals with Trump. Others anticipated a break, however. Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff (2024), Director of DGAP, pointed out the differences in values and the erosion of the internationalist consensus in the US, which is being reinforced by Trump's erratic conduct.

After the first encounter at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 revealed the depth of transatlantic differences, and after the Trump administration had unilaterally and brutally torn down the common basis for negotiations with Russia and Ukraine, a new sense of urgency took hold in Berlin: it was time for Europe to start acting autonomously. In Trump's first term of office, the unease was still limited to Angela Merkel's much-cited statement that "the times when we could entirely rely on others are a thing of the past", and her conclusion that "we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands" (Bauchmüller, 2017). As we know, however, this did not lead to much. Friedrich Merz made this sound more striking immediately after the 2025 Bundestag elections, when he said that "the interventions from Washington have been no less dramatic, drastic, and ultimately outrageous than the interventions we have seen from Moscow", concluding that "we have to gradually achieve true independence from the US".[28]

The expert community agreed with this assessment virtually unanimously. Thus, on 12 March 2025, 18 academics from across the entire spectrum of German think tanks stated that under Trump the US "had become a security risk for Europe" (Wiegold, 2025). Tom Enders from the DGAP corroborated this when he stated that "this American government has now become an adversary and is no longer an ally" (Enders, 2025). According to representatives of IFSH, Trump's approaches towards Moscow are reminiscent of the Munich Agreement of 1938 and emphasise the "toxic similarity in the world views of the Kremlin and the White House" (Friesendorf and Zellner, 2025).

28 'Elefantenrunde' ['Heavyweight round'], *Zeit Online*, 23 February 2025 (www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-02/bundestagswahl-elefantenrunde-spitzekandidaten-scholz-merz-weidel-habeck). In an interview with the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* a few days later, he went on to say that both the community of values with the US and the credibility of the nuclear umbrella were being called into question ("Never has an American president undermined this credibility as much as Donald Trump"). The "shock" had therefore become a definite impetus for action (Interview with Friedrich Merz, '"Es könnte auch ein für uns sehr schlechtes Szenario eintreten"' ['"A very bad scenario could also arise for us"', *FAZ*, 28 February 2025, www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/friedrich-merz-im-interview-ueber-seine-plaene-fuer-deutschland-und-die-usa-110327264.html).

The following section will analyse in greater detail how Germany should position itself vis-à-vis NATO in light of the dual threat, exploring whether Germany can still rely on an alliance under American leadership and whether there are any alternatives.

Germany and the Return of Collective Defence

In the face of Russian aggression, the German debate sees no alternative to NATO's return to collective defence. It is also significant that the focus on international conflict prevention and crisis management, which dominated until 2014 and was regarded as having shaped the structure of the Bundeswehr from 2003 at the latest, had been perceived by many as questionable and a deviation from the constitutional mandate to defend the country (Schwegmann, 2024). Central planning documents such as the National Security Strategy (German Federal Government, 2023), and even more so the Defence Policy Guidelines (BMVg, 2023), address this shift and identify collective defence as a priority task of the Bundeswehr once again. Moreover, owing to its size and geographical location, Germany has a responsibility to "make significant contributions to the protection and security of our allies" (BMVg, 2023: 9). International leadership and responsibility are the new guiding principle in policy-related research, too. The Defence Policy Guidelines declare an ambitious approach to make ends meet: "our most pressing goal is to quickly become fully equipped so as to turn the Bundeswehr into one of the most capable armed forces in Europe" (BMVg, 2023: 32).

However, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the large gap between ambition and reality was widely noted in the German debate. The Inspector of the German Army, Alfons Mais, summarised the state of the Bundeswehr shortly after the outbreak of the war: "it is more or less bare" (*Tagesspiegel*, 2023). Since then, the expert community has provided a consistent and detailed description of the shortcomings in terms of personnel, equipment, combat readiness, and the stockpiling of ammunitions and spare parts in the wake of years of underfunding and a focus on crisis intervention missions *out of area* (Sebald, 2024). Thus, according to the general consensus, the new reality of war in Europe and the return of collective defence requires considerable efforts. As a result, hardly anyone in the expert community initially disputed the Special Fund of 100 billion euros as the major contribution of the *Zeitenwende*.

Controversy subsequently arose on three issues. Firstly, how much money is enough, and is the pace of the armed forces' reorientation towards collective defence appropriate? Secondly, how are collective defence and its associated risks and costs for Germany to be structured? Thirdly, and most urgently following Trump's re-election: should Germany develop a European pillar in NATO or a European defence to complement or replace NATO?

How Much Is Enough? The Debate on the Level of Defence Expenditures

The 2022 Act on Financing the Bundeswehr not only creates a credit-financed Special Fund amounting to 100 billion euros, but also stipulates that NATO requirements for defence expenditures must be complied with in future.[29] In view of the controversies surrounding the two per cent target prior to 2022, at first glance, this commitment highlights the transformation of Germany's security policy landscape. Upon closer inspection, however, we can see considerable differences in terms of what the right benchmark is, whether this target is set too high or is not ambitious enough, and how higher defence spending is to be financed. In the political realm, the Sahra Wagenknecht alliance (BSW) and the Left Party continue to level criticism against the target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence. By contrast, public opinion polls reveal a majority support for higher defence spending (Graf, 2024; Katsioulis, 2025: 51). That being said, policy-related research also asks how sustainable the consent for higher defence expenditure might be when it comes to distribution conflicts (Teschendorf, 2024). Explicit reservations against increasing defence expenditure are articulated less frequently in think tank debates than was the case prior to 2022. However, a study conducted by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (the foundation/think tank of the Left Party) repeats the argument made in previous debates that the two per cent target links defence spending to an increase in economic output and has no relation to external threats (Ihl and van Aken, 2024). Herbert Wulf (2024) and Ernst Hillebrand, Head of the FES office in Budapest (2024), have argued that, with respect to various indications such as nominal defence spending and main combat systems, the European NATO members alone were in a far better position together than their opponent, Russia. What is more, the war has revealed structural deficiencies in Russia's military leadership. On the other hand, NATO is now in a strategically stronger position, thanks not least of all to the accession of Finland and Sweden. Longstanding NATO representative Michael Rühle also criticised a "rhetoric that drastically overestimates both Russia's military capabilities and Moscow's intentions to attack NATO" (Rühle, 2024a).

Others point out that it is not about nominal defence expenditure, but rather how much military strength states can buy for their expenditures (Mejino-Lopez and Wolff, 2024: 5). Calculated according to purchasing-power parities, a

29 Article 1 (3) of the Act on Financing the Bundeswehr and the Establishment of a "Special Fund for the Bundeswehr" stipulates: "after having spent the Special Fund, the federal budget will continue to provide the financial resources to ensure the capability profile of the Bundeswehr and the German contribution to the relevant NATO capability targets" (www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bwfinsvermg/BJNR103010022.html).

Greenpeace study estimated a surplus in favour of NATO (excluding the US) compared with Russia at 430 versus 300 billion US dollars (Steinmetz, Wulf and Lurz, 2024). The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), estimates the combined defence budget of the European NATO members as lower than Russia's (IISS, 2025). A calculation by the Kiel Institute for World Economy also sounds ominous. Russia's war economy is not only replacing the major losses of main combat systems due to the war, but also produces far more weapons systems than the European NATO members (Wolff, Burlikov, Bushnell and Kharitonov, 2024).[30] Ultimately, according to another argument, comparing aggregated values has little relevance. The correct benchmark is Germany's contribution to defending NATO's long border with Russia. The effort required for this was specified by NATO's regional plans on the one hand, and the German level of ambition, on the other.

The gap between German pledges to NATO (and the EU) in military capabilities, and the capabilities it currently disposes, is large. According to the official pledge "to make significant contributions to the protection and security of our allies" (BMVg, 2023: 9), Germany wants to once again fully equip major army units and, from 2025, offer a tank division for Tier 1 of the very rapid response forces. As part of this division, a fully equipped brigade with 5,000 soldiers will be stationed in Lithuania as of 2027. A second fully equipped division is to be ready from 2027. Added to this are units from the air force and navy, which together make up around 200 aircraft and ships. Germany pledges a total of 35,000 soldiers for the rapid deployment forces of NATO (Tier 1 and 2). Furthermore, Germany is living up to its "all-in" tradition and also plans to provide NATO with a third division that consists of more lightly armed forces (BMVg, 2024). Only the planned fourth division for homeland security would not be included. However, it is becoming clear that the schedule that has been brought forward by two years cannot be adhered to (Deutscher Bundeswehrverband, 2023).

Compared with what would be necessary following the pledges made to NATO, the pace of the *Zeitenwende* is considered insufficient by the majority of experts. Carlo Masala (2023) from the University of the Armed Forces in Munich paints a picture of an emaciated Bundeswehr, whose shift towards collective defence is being stymied by bureaucratic inertia. A study by the DGAP deems better and more reliable financial backing for the Bundeswehr over the medium term as essential in order to "actually provide the military capabilities pledged to NATO over the next few years" and to give the armament industry a credible signal for the expansion of its production capacities (Mölling and Schütz, 2023).

Even prior to the Trump shock, this complaint led to calls to spend far more than two per cent of GDP on defence. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius warned that two per cent "will probably not suffice in the coming years" in order to make the Bundeswehr "cold-start capable" or "fit for war" (Pistorius, 2024). Following the re-election of Trump in November 2024 and in view of transatlantic uncertainties, calls for more than two per cent now meet with declared approval both in politics and among the expert community. Researchers at the Kiel Institute for World Economy consider 3.5 per cent to be necessary in the long run so as to offset a possible (partial) retreat on the part of America (Burlikov and Wolff, 2025). Pistorius now envisages the need to be at three per cent, while Robert Habeck of the Green Party called for 3.5 per cent in the federal election campaign. At that time, Friedrich Merz and the CDU/CSU did not want to state a precise figure, but they also demanded 3.5 per cent during coalition negotiations with the SPD.[31] The election programmes of the centrist parties regard the two per cent target as the lower limit at best, albeit with different wording (CDU, 2025: 50; SPD, 2025: 75). Yet, until March 2025, there was no clarity at all as to where this money was to come from. Germany could only achieve the two per cent target from 2024 to 2026 thanks to credit financing from the Special Fund. After a moderate nominal upward trend during the years of the traffic-light coalition, mid-term financial planning for the regular defence budget had originally earmarked annual spending of 53.3 billion euros for the financial years 2025 to 2027, thus representing real cuts. A sudden increase to 80 billion euros was only planned for 2028 (German Bundestag, 2024a: 28), which, in view of the constitutionally enshrined debt brake, would have only been possible with drastic reallocations in the federal budget.

Against this backdrop, it was hardly surprising that the (at that time still prospective) coalition partners CDU/CSU and SPD, with the support of the Greens, suspended the Basic Law's debt brake for defence spending above 1.5 per cent in early March 2025. This was not only an astonishing volte-face for the CDU/CSU in particular, but, in order to secure a constitutional majority, even went through the outgoing parliament in the week prior to the constitution of the new Bundestag on 24 March 2025. These national resolutions were flanked by the European Commission's "ReArm Europe" initiative, which aims to mobilise a total volume of 800 billion euros. To this end, two instruments in particular – that have regularly been blocked by Germany until now – are to be activated: the use of national escape clauses within the Stability and Growth Pact, whose use is limited to four years, and the provision of loans amounting to 150 billion euros (ReArm Europe, 2025). The rest is based on the Commission's trust in national efforts.

30 However, the report makes an important qualification. When it comes to armoured vehicles, up to 80 percent of the production volume in Russia is accounted for by overhauls of old stock from storages. As soon as these are depleted by around 2026, the production could fall significantly. Still, it is expected that Russia could build approx. 350 modern tanks per year as of 2026 with the existing production lines alone (Wolff et al., 2024: 22).

31 On the demands made by Pistorius, see www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/dann-kostet-es-eben-drei-prozent-oder-mehr-pistorius-halt-aktuelle-hohe-der-militarausgaben-nicht-fur-zielfuhrend-13041190.html. On Habeck's initiative from early January 2025, see https://augengeradeaus.net/2025/01/zur-dokumentation-habeck-fuer-verteidigungsausgaben-von-35-prozent-der-wirtschaftsleistung.

"All In"? The Risks of Alliance Defence Using the Example of the Lithuania Brigade and the Deployment of American Medium-Range Weapons

While the financial costs are being broadly discussed, the potential risks of various forms of alliance defence are only slowly coming to the fore. That Germany is even able to hold a debate about the military-strategic consequences of its pledge of mutual defence under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty is, in contrast to the first East-West conflict, thanks to its much more comfortable geostrategic situation. During the Cold War, Germany as a front-line state had a dominant interest: to make the security guarantees of the alliance as watertight as possible – through the deployment of allied troops near to the front line and American nuclear weapons, for example. Today, the fundamental question is whether Germany should rely on effective defence on the Eastern border of the alliance and hope for the possibility of localising a war, or increase deterrence through threats with rapid horizontal and vertical escalation. Currently, this question bears relevance to two military projects: the Lithuania Brigade and the planned deployment of American medium-range missiles in Germany.

With the deployment of around 5,000 soldiers of the 45th Armoured Brigade (and their families) at today's equivalent of the former Fulda Gap – the Sulwalki Gap between Lithuania and Poland – the risks are obvious: in a war, Russia could quickly encircle the Baltic states and deny access to reinforcements. The Brigade would be trapped. Yet these risks have received little attention in either the political arena or expert discussions. Kai-Olaf Lang of the SWP (2023) regards the Brigade as an opportunity to prove Germany's leadership. The former Lieutenant General Ulf von Krause (2024) only perceives risks if the project were to fail due to financial and personnel bottlenecks. Rainer Meyer zum Felde, a former Brigadier who is associated with the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University (ISPK), explains what "all-in" and a strategy of defence close to the border could mean in concrete terms: "we need to make ourselves resilient when it comes to personnel, material and mental endurance for warfare spanning months, or even several years, in a war of attrition imposed upon us" (Meyer zum Felde, 2024: 272).

A much livelier and controversial response was triggered by the bilateral agreement between Washington and Berlin on the fringes of the 2024 NATO Summit to deploy conventionally equipped medium-range American missiles in Germany as of 2026. These weapons will be replaced at a later date by systems that are to be developed by a European consortium (ELSA: European Long-Range Strike Approach). Organisations of the peace movement warned that this stationing would put Germany in the firing line and that Russia's reaction would increase the risk of nuclear war (IPPNW, 2023; AGDF, 2024; Ganser, 2024). The Left Party and the BSW justified their opposition by warning of the singularisation of Germany and risks of escalation, and ultimately with traditional reservations towards the US (German Bundestag, 2024b). The SPD (2024) kept internal party controversies in check with the decision of the SPD Executive on 12 August 2024 that the deployment would serve deterrence and security.

Analyses by think tanks place the planned deployment of the three systems – the Tomahawk cruise missiles, the Standard Missile (SM-6) and the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (Dark Eagle) that is currently under development – in the context of the US Army's multi-domain operations concept.[32] The headquarters of the second of a total of altogether five planned US Army multi-domain task forces is located in Wiesbaden (Graef, 2024). In the event of war, the task of this unit would be to attack those Russian capabilities that could deny NATO troops access to critical territories such as the Baltic states (anti-access) and limit their freedom of movement within these areas (area denial) (Kuhn, 2024). To succeed, time-critical and high-value targets such as command centres and launch pads for missiles (including those in the Russian heartland) would have to be attacked rapidly and comprehensively (Schneider and Arnold, 2024).

Analysts generally agree on the implications of this strategy. There would be a risk of rapid geographical escalation and the involvement of Germany in the event of war. Given that the components of the Russian conventional and nuclear infrastructure are not clearly separated, there would be a threat of vertical escalation too. Weighing these risks and their trade-off against the potential advantage of greater deterrence is subject to controversy. Jonas Schneider and Thorsten Arnold of the SWP do not see any relevant additional risks: as a logistical NATO hub, Germany is already a target of Russian missiles, singularisation is relative at best, and the new weapons do not substantially compromise crisis stability. Alexander Graef from IFSH (2024) weighs the risks higher and hopes that these could be offset in due course with arms control proposals. Frank Kuhn from PRIF (2024) weighs the risks of involvement against the deterrence effect of being able to successfully defend the Baltic states. He, too, assesses the escalation risks of multi-domain operations as so high that such doctrines would need to be reviewed.

32 The origins of this concept date back to the war in Iraq. The American interest in developing and deploying conventionally equipped medium-range missiles in East Asia in particular also emerged in the context of developments that led to the end of the INF Treaty. The main reason for its termination was Russia's failure to credibly respond to concerns, initially raised by the Obama administration, that it had violated the treaty.

A Greater European Role in NATO or European Security and Defence?

The re-election of Donald Trump has once again focused German think tanks' attention on the major risks of dependence on the US – in the sense of a potential abandonment rather than potential entrapment. As in 2017, since March 2025 voices have once again been heard calling for greater European "autonomy" and for Europe to "actively pursue strategies of de-risking and de-coupling from the United States" (Fella, 2025). In concrete terms, however, coalitions of states rather than integrated European solutions are primarily being discussed here. For example, Wolfgang Ischinger proposes a "European Defence Union (EDU)" that should group around France, Germany, Poland and "other like-minded neighbours" that are "willing to speak with one voice in security matters" (Ischinger, 2025). IFSH researchers also gravitate towards this idea when calling for a German strategy against Russia that would bring together "European partners (especially the UK, France, Poland, the Baltic and Scandinavian states) within NATO", because "the attempt to do this at EU level is likely to fail" (Friesendorf and Zellner, 2025). As a matter of fact, despite the generally articulated urgency, debates on the EU Commission's "ReArm Europe" initiative have once again had an extremely disappointing trajectory.

Even prior to Trump's assumption of office, individual studies had discussed whether and how European NATO members could compensate for a US withdrawal (Meyer zum Felde, 2024; Krause, 2024; Dembinski, 2025). The unanimous diagnosis was that, owing to their economic potential, the European states ought to be in a position to build up a sufficient conventional defence capability on their own in order to deter Russia. Replacing the approx. 100,000 American soldiers currently stationed in Europe and their strategic capabilities, such as satellite-based reconnaissance and communication, will take time and be extremely costly, however (Jones and Daniels, 2025). NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte (2025) estimates ten to fifteen years as well as a necessary defence expenditure of eight to ten per cent of GDP. Yet the even more important question is whether NATO would function without the leadership of the US. In addition to its recognised role as a hegemonic power, the US stabilises NATO through two other functions. Firstly, it extends a nuclear umbrella over NATO (see below). Secondly, it provides a safety net below the formal alliance structures consisting of bilateral agreements and the institution of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who also serves as Commander in Chief of the American forces in Europe. This network promises an ability to act even in the case of a politically blocked North Atlantic Council.

If the Europeans wanted to replace the leadership of the US, they would have to increase the level of cooperation and integration, according to consensus among the expert community (Ehrhart, 2023). Still, there is scarcely any debate and no consensus about how this could succeed. The concepts of a European army, an army of Europeans, and European sovereignty as discussed in 2016 have now lost their allure (Franke, 2024; Katsioulis, 2025). Instead, there is a prevailing conviction that democratically elected governments will have to remain in charge (Dembinski and Peters, 2024, Franke, 2024). According to the expert community, closer cooperation on armaments would be less detrimental to sovereignty concerns than a European army, and is considered urgently necessary in light of the fragmented European defence markets and the low economies of scale. That being said, the German think tank community is also aware of the reservations in most European capitals about a resolute consolidation of defence markets. Instead, it is focusing on intergovernmental forms of cooperation, such as the structured cooperation of smaller groups of states with similar interests.

Such cooperation exists within NATO in the form of the Framework Nations Concept (FNC). One variant of this is the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) that was spearheaded by Germany following the war in Ukraine. This network of (currently) 24 participating countries wishes to jointly purchase and use air defence systems of different types and range so as to achieve economies of scale and strengthen interoperability. The planned incorporation of the systems into NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) will also serve this end. The plan is to procure a short-range air defence system, which is being developed by a consortium under the leadership of Rheinmetall, the medium-range IRIS-T SLM that is already used in Ukraine, as well as Patriot units for longer ranges. Germany is also purchasing the American-Israeli Arrow 3 system to defend against medium-range ballistic missiles.

In view of Russian capabilities and the serious deficiencies in Western air defence, the initiative is generally advocated by the expert community. Certainly, the procurement of existing systems from non-European production is questioned as detrimental to the goal of strengthening the European defence industrial base, which is also shared by Germany. In this particular case, however, the objective of rapidly closing gaps in air defence prevails (Loss, 2024: 6). Experts are critical of the purchase of the Arrow 3. This system is only suitable for exo-atmospheric defence against warheads of intermediate-range ballistic missiles. As of 2023, however, Russia is regarded as not having possessed such systems, which were prohibited under the expired INF Treaty (Kuhn, 2023a; Wachs, 2023b: 5). Yet this argument is becoming invalid, too. After the first-time use of the Oreschnik medium-range missiles against Ukraine, Russia has invested considerable resources in the production of this missile (Starchack, 2025).

What is more, studies note possible alliance frictions within the ESSI. The Franco-German relationship had already been strained by Germany's shift back to the transatlantic partnership following Biden's election. This was then exacerbated by the decision to purchase the F-35 multi-role combat aircraft and the sluggish progress of two Franco-

German flagship projects – the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS). The initially reserved German response to French initiatives to provide a European dimension to France's nuclear deterrence only added to the estrangement. The ESSI provides further potential for conflict in this mixed situation. From a French perspective, the German initiative to purchase American and Israeli air defence systems jeopardises the goal of strengthening Europe's defence industrial base. This is even more regrettable as European systems will be available in the foreseeable future: these include the French-led PESCO Twister project and the Franco-Italian SAMP/T defence missile, which is currently being further developed in a new generation with similar performance parameters to the Patriot (Arnold and Arnold, 2023). Tom Enders, who was Chief Executive of the Franco-German Airbus Group and is now President of the DGAP, also expressly agrees with this against the backdrop of the transatlantic crisis: "it is imperative that we become independent of American systems as much and as quickly as possible" (Enders, 2025).

The Future of Nuclear Deterrence: Necessary but Precarious

Closely linked to the discussion on deterrence and defence in view of Russian aggression and transatlantic uncertainties is the question of the future role of nuclear weapons. Opinions were divided on this prior to the war in Ukraine. Discussions evolved on whether and how Germany should actively participate in NATO's nuclear sharing programme with dual-capable aircraft (DCA) in the future. The then Defence Minister, Kramp-Karrenbauer, planned to use American F-18 fighter aircraft as an interim solution for the outdated Tornado until the Franco-German FCAS became available. However, large sections of the SPD and the Greens were able to envisage withdrawing from the nuclear sharing programme altogether and instead acceding to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Among think tanks, the spectrum of opinions ranged from unilateral steps towards disarmament to calls to make nuclear sharing fit for the future (for an overview, see Dembinski, 2021: 45).

The war and Putin's nuclear sabre-rattling have dramatically changed the debate. Although the German Federal Government's quick decision to procure the F-35 met with reservations in Paris, it was largely welcomed by the German expert community as the better solution (Arnold, 2023; Kuhn, 2023b; for criticism of the costs and performance parameters of the F-35, see Mikeska, 2022). The discussion about joining the TPNW, which came into force in 2021, is also taking a different course. While Germany still took part in the second Meeting of State Parties in November 2023, it was no longer present at the conference in March 2025. Instead, the Federal Foreign Office, which was then under the leadership of the Greens, emphasised that NATO nuclear deterrence must remain credible in light of the Russian war of aggression. The Green Party's federal election manifesto describes joining the TPNW as only a distant goal. For the moment, "nuclear sharing in the context of NATO is an essential pillar of our security" (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2025a: 44). This cautious position is now only criticised by ICAN (the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) and by peace groups (Balzer, 2022).

The new situation is also reflected in think tank debates regarding nuclear strategy and arms control. Karl-Heinz Kamp (2023) emphasises the German interest in protection through nuclear deterrence. Here, the key question is how extended deterrence is to be organised. At one end of the spectrum, Heinrich Brauß, former Lieutenant General and Assistant Secretary General of NATO, argues that although the DCAs of European states certified to use American nuclear bombs can be flexibly deployed, they are vulnerable and may be unable to overcome Russian air defences. Building on earlier work (Brauß and Krause, 2019), Brauß, who is associated with the DGAP, thus proposes the additional stationing of nuclear-armed medium-range missiles in Europe. At the other end of the spectrum, institutes discuss the limits and possibilities of arms control. The finding is clear: the bilateral and multilateral arms control architecture that has emerged since the 1970s has been eroded and could, it is feared, disintegrate completely. In February 2023, Russia also terminated its compliance with the New START treaty, the last bilateral agreement. On-site inspections have no longer taken place since the coronavirus pandemic. Even the Outer Space Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, which the US never ratified, are at risk. Russia "de-ratified" the latter in 2024. Beyond these crisis symptoms, the institutes believe that negotiated arms control is currently futile in light of the major importance that Russia attaches to its nuclear inventory. As long as the war in Ukraine rages, scarcely anything will change. Frank Sauer (2022) from the Metis Institute for Strategy and Foresight at the University of the Armed Forces in Munich still considers negotiated arms control to be relevant as an accompanying instrument of deterrence, but also regards this as highly unlikely at present due to the complete loss of trust. Researchers at the peace research institutes have reached similar assessments (Dembinski and Polianskii, 2024; Fella, 2023; Kühn and Williams, 2024).

In this situation, the debate is focused on unilateral measures. Behaviour-based arms control (Kühn and Williams, 2024) aims to further delegitimise the first use of nuclear weapons (Dembinski and Polianskii, 2024: 23) and develop international codes of conduct such as limits on artificial intelligence (Reinhold, 2024). The Peace Report 2024 has rather restrained expectations: the best we can expect for the foreseeable future is a "stabilisation of rivalry" (Peace Report, 2024: 100). What matters is to keep communication channels between the defence ministries open, not to shy away from unilateral confidence-building measures (combined with the hope of reciprocity), and to urge compliance with the comprehensive test ban treaty (which is endangered by Russian activities).

Since the change of power in Washington, the certainty that nuclear deterrence is necessary has been coupled with the uncertainty of whether German and European security is reliably guaranteed by the American nuclear umbrella. Up until the Munich Security Conference in 2025, however, potential alternatives were viewed in Germany even more critically than during the first Trump administration (cf. Kunz and Kühn, 2024). The option of a joint European nuclear force as proposed by Katarina Barley in autumn 2024, has no chance of being realised, as both Karl-Heinz Kamp and Ulrich Kühn agree. Without a European state (which is not in sight) thoughts about a European nuclear force are merely pipe dreams (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). A national German nuclear option appears in public from time to time and is advocated in academic debates only in remote fringe areas,[33] while being rejected by the vast majority (Peace Report 2024: 99 et seq.; Krause, 2024b: 257). According to Kamp, Germany "will never strive for its own nuclear weapons" (Kamp, 2023: 93). A third option, the expansion of the French deterrent, is discussed more openly. While Eckhard Lübkemeier (2020; 2024) advocates taking up Macron's offer (2020; 2025) of strategic dialogue and a European role for the French nuclear forces, which was renewed on 5 March 2025, others regard this offer as scarcely credible. Macron does not want to call the primacy of national sovereignty into question, which is the foundation of the French nuclear strategy (Wachs and Horovitz, 2023). What is more, the French system is quantitatively limited and, despite flexible elements such as the option of a limited use as a last warning, is designed for massive retaliation and therefore not credible as an extended deterrence (Brauß, 2023: 234 et seq.). France is not prepared to engage in an arrangement similar to the current nuclear sharing programme (Kamp, 2023: 93). Finally, the possibility of a future right-wing populist president would constitute an even greater obstacle to the reliability of a French nuclear guarantee (Peace Report, 2024: 99).

Hence participants in the nuclear debate were not willing – or able – to anticipate a radical break with US policy until the Munich Security Conference: "[...] the U.S. nuclear protection provided to Europe will almost certainly remain in place" (Payne and Rühle, 2024: 3; cf. also Horovitz and Suh, 2024). This is, of course, an optimistic expectation. Even assuming that the Europeans take over primary responsibility for conventional defence, the repercussions on nuclear deterrence would be dramatic. After all, if American interest in Europe were to wane to such an extent, what credibility would remain for the promise of risking Washington for Warsaw (Peace Report, 2024: 99)? Therefore, the emphasis of the debate has shifted since Munich and even Karl-Heinz Kamp can now imagine a European role for French (and British) deterrence, including German co-financing (Kamp 2025).

Crisis Prevention, Crisis Management and the Fight Against Terrorism: NATO's Southern Dimension

Although the expert community in Germany agrees that collective defence is and should be NATO's priority task once again, it is unclear what importance should be attached to the former focus on crisis prevention and crisis management, the fight against terrorism, and thus, geographically speaking, the southern dimension. There is no doubt that the stabilisation of fragile and conflict-ridden regions, especially in the southern neighbourhood, continues to be a central task of German foreign and security policy. According to the National Security Strategy, military peacekeeping and training missions also remain part of the integrated security toolkit (German Federal Government, 2023). However, the prospects of success with military interventions in general, and the role of NATO in this field in particular, are subject to controversy.

The disastrous failure of many military interventions, including those with German participation in Afghanistan and Mali – ISAF and MINUSMA – has led observers to fundamentally question such missions.[34] In line with the tradition of realism, Carlo Masala generally declares interventions with a liberal transformation impetus as doomed to failure (Masala, 2024). Following the end of the intervention in Afghanistan, Michael Rühle (2024a) no longer sees any willingness for larger missions. The former NATO Ambassador, Martin Erdmann, agreed in his statement to the Parliamentary Commission on the evaluation of the Afghanistan mission. He does not expect "that complex international crisis missions on the scale of engagement in Afghanistan or Mali will be carried out again in the foreseeable future" (German Bundestag, 2025: 74). A report by the German Federal Government on the evaluation of the Bundeswehr's foreign missions does not rule out the possibility of future engagements. However, against the backdrop of past experiences, it also argues in favour of self-restraint. Foreign missions should be prioritised more clearly along Germany's security interests, refrain from overly ambitious transformation goals, and be adapted to the reality of multi-polarity and systemic rivalry (BMVg and the Federal Foreign Office, 2024).

By contrast, other observers point to the mixed track record of so-called humanitarian military interventions (Gromes, 2024). In light of ongoing fragility and crises with considerable potential for repercussions on German security, participation in international crisis management should still be on the agenda. Frank Sauer from the

33 One exception here is Maximilian Terhalle's plea for Germany to purchase nuclear weapons from the US for its own arsenal. See *Die Welt*, 13 February 2024, www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus250067928/Aufruestung-in-Europa-Uns-fehlen-mindestens-1000-strategische-Nuklearsprengkoepfe.html.

34 While NATO largely disregards the failure in Afghanistan in official statements, Stefanie Bapst (2021), a former member of NATO's International Secretariat, lists the astronomical costs of the war against terrorism in the form of human lives and financial resources.

Metis Institute adopts a similar line of argument. "knowledge and experience that have been painstakingly acquired in this field must be preserved. Otherwise, a pendulum that swings as far as it can towards national and alliance security will guarantee nasty surprises in the future" (Sauer, 2022). The report "Lessons Learnt From Afghanistan For Germany's Future Networked Engagement", drawn up by the aforementioned Study Commission with the broad participation of think tanks, also recommends that "in addition to national and alliance defence, participation in potential future international missions should continue to be of great importance" (German Bundestag, 2025: 5).

The expert community is divided when it comes to the prospects of success with military interventions. It is largely unanimous in its doubts about what role NATO could play in this context and whether it should even play a role at all. The German Federal Government's new Africa Strategy merely mentions NATO in a subordinate clause and only its diplomatic instruments, namely the Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan and its partnerships (German Federal Government, 2025: 33 et seq.). In addition to the concern about a "securitisation" of social, economic and political problems, the scepticism is based on organisational theory. The above-mentioned Evaluation Report by the German Federal Government (BMVg and Federal Foreign Office, 2024) criticises the fact that within consensus-based organisations such as NATO, coordination processes on foreign missions are becoming increasingly complex. Policy-related research comes to the same conclusion. It observes that, especially in the case of robust interventions, governments are increasingly relying on informal "coalitions of the willing" owing to formal organisations' inertia and susceptibility to blockades (Tull, 2022). This development manifests itself in interventions such as those in Libya and against the Islamic State terrorist militia (Operation Inherent Resolve). It is also reflected in EU planning documents, such as the Strategic Compass of 2022. Germany, too, prefers coalitions for robust crisis interventions, although this could lead into a constitutional grey area (Dembinski, 2023: 24). In line with this trend, specialist literature now pays very little attention to NATO playing a leading role in combating terrorist organisations abroad. Michael Rühle even argues that prominent mentions of the fight against terrorism in key NATO documents "suggest a role for NATO in counterterrorism, which it does not have" (Rühle, 2024a). With lower-risk missions that are more focused on creating a public good, such as peace and regional stability, NATO does not offer any advantages here either. In such cases, researchers suggest that United Nations peacekeeping missions are more promising due to their greater legitimacy and better burden-sharing (Dembinski, 2024).

The Defence Against Hybrid Threats: A Task for NATO?

Since Russia's clandestine takeover of Crimea and the Donbass in 2014, the topic of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare has been a subject of growing interest in German security debates. The Russian attack in February 2022 further sharpened awareness of such attacks. Since then, it is not only Russian disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks (Benediek, Bund and Kerttunen, 2024) that have received attention. There are also reports of actual or planned acts of sabotage in Germany and Western Europe that have been attributed to Russia: drone sightings above military facilities and critical infrastructure, a plot to kill a CEO of the defence industry, attacks against military facilities and those of the arms industry, as well as the destruction of maritime infrastructure. Such threats do not only quantitatively increase with the return of great power conflicts but could also evolve into complex operations. For example, Konstantinos Tsetsos from the Metis-Institute characterises hybrid attacks as the fourth or fifth "generation of warfare" (Tsetsos, 2023; 2024). Outgoing Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also speaks of a hybrid war of aggression waged by Russia.[35]

According to research, Russia, as an authoritarian state, has advantages over the open societies of the West when it comes to conflict resolution with hybrid means. What is more, "the expansion of the combat zone" is an effective strategy of military weaker opponents, as already pointed out by Christian Mölling in 2015 (Mölling, 2015). Equally ubiquitous are scenarios of future threats that have gained in significance due to technological developments, such as artificial intelligence (Thiele, 2023; Kleemann, 2023). There are therefore fears that Russia may have installed explosive devices on undersea cables and pipelines (Swistek, 2024: 64). With the conflict being shifted into the realm of hybrid attacks, it is widely believed that the boundaries between internal and external security, and between the states of peace and war, are becoming increasingly blurred (Benediek and Bossong, 2022). As it is difficult to draw red lines in this grey area where the responsibility for attacks can easily be denied, the danger of escalation is particularly high.

The excessive rhetoric is coupled with a lack of conceptual clarity as well as uncertainty about the role military means in general, and NATO in particular, should play in defending against such threats. This uncertainty begins with the often inconsistent definition of what is meant by "hybrid threat" or "hybrid warfare". Studies that use both terms interchangeably (Maschmeyer, 2023) perceive the military as having a major role in defence against such threats. The proposal by Konstantinos Tsetsos (2024) takes this even further with his call for "total defence". Among other things, he envisages a National Guard that would be responsible for military homeland security, including critical infrastructure.

35 www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/russland-sabotage-spionage-hybrider-krieg-bedrohung-100.html.

However, if we classify hybrid threats as "illegitimate actions by state and state-controlled actors [...] that remain outside the scope of a conventional military attack" (Federal Ministry of the Interior, N.D.), internal security bodies, the intelligence services, and private actors appear to be responsible for fending off such attacks. When interpreted in such a way, most studies perceive the primary task to be to increase political and social resilience. The military continues to be part of the arsenal, but has only a limited role, for example in protecting military facilities.

This still does not answer the question of what role NATO could play. Most studies refer to the principle of subsidiarity and to Article 3 of the NATO Treaty (Swistek and Paul, 2023). This urges member states to help themselves and to engage in mutual support to preserve their own and joint resistance against armed attacks. In this sense, Brauß and Mölling (2021) suggest that one of the alliance's tasks should be to set standards for national resilience. In this area, however, NATO is in competition with the EU, whose regulatory instruments enable it to act more effectively as a standard-setter. With regard to the protection of maritime critical infrastructure, subsidiarity means that states are responsible within their own territorial waters; in the case of Germany, the coastguard is in charge as opposed to the military. Although experts see a number of legal grey areas in the deployment of military force when it comes to protecting critical infrastructure outside territorial waters, they believe that NATO has a coordinating, monitoring and deterrent role to play (Swistek, 2024: 63).

In general, German think tanks discuss two possible tasks for NATO and the military: the military response to hybrid attacks that take place in preparation for or parallel to kinetic warfare on one hand, and the deterrence of hybrid attacks with major potential for damage on the other. The responsibility of NATO in the first case is undisputed, but the threat of invoking Article 5 to deter a hybrid attack is not regarded as very credible (Rühle, 2024a). What is more, lowering the high threshold for invoking the defence clause entails the risk of military escalation (Rühle, 2024c).

Summary: The German View on the Future of NATO

With only minor variations, German security experts perceive the threat posed by Russia to be of a systemic nature; a return to the former partnership is considered unrealistic. Accordingly, NATO and NATO membership are seen as essential. It is deemed to be the indispensable transatlantic link in the framework of which the US makes a decisive contribution to European security. The high importance attached to membership corresponds with an awareness of the dependency on NATO. This is why, after the start of Russia's open war in 2022, Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 came as a second shock.

The expert community fundamentally accepts that Germany must take greater responsibility for its own security and for alliance defence. Yet discussions on what German responsibility for European security specifically means – in view of the uncertain and potentially dwindling American commitment – are still in the embryonic stages. Since the beginning of 2025, there has been no doubt in the political and academic mainstream that Germany will have to spend significantly more than two per cent, and probably even more than three per cent, of its GDP on defence over the long term. However, this can only be implemented due to the massive expansion of credit financing that was enabled in March 2025, which will dramatically increase Germany's debt ratio.

Trump's re-election caught the German expert community off guard in other areas as well. The return to a transatlantic focus following Biden's election had brought discussions on collective European defence as a strategy for balancing or as a fall-back option to a standstill. Thus, valuable time for conceptual debates has been lost. One issue in the emerging debate revolves around the role nation states should play in the coordination of European defence and armament. How intergovernmental forms of defence cooperation might function in light of the US' dwindling interest in European security, and what responsibility might be placed on Germany, are yet to be clarified. The dependence on the American nuclear umbrella is proving just as challenging as the search for alternatives.

At the same time, the pitfalls of dependence on the US are becoming more apparent and are most visible in the organisation of Ukraine's security guaranties. The mantra of the German security elite – "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine" and "Ukraine must win or Putin must not win" – was shattered in February 2025 by Trump's foreseeable, yet ultimately brutal, volte-face. For now, Germany and Europe are struggling to be more than onlookers when it comes to decisions on the future of Ukraine, and they may have to face the risks of a possible US-Russian arrangement.

The expert community is only slowly getting to grips with the new reality that large-scale conventional warfare is once again possible on the European continent, even in the shadow of the threat of nuclear annihilation. NATO's plans envisage such scenarios and Germany has signalled its intention to pursue this path and bear the risks (with the deployment of a brigade in Lithuania, for example), despite being materially unprepared and unready in terms of its security culture.

Whether there is still scope for a geographically and functionally expanded NATO is subject to controversial debate. Hardly anyone can imagine a role for the alliance in Eastern Asia. Even a greater role in the form of transatlantic collaboration to contain China's technological and geostrategic ambitions is viewed critically by the majority of commentators. The same goes for the core task of crisis management and the fight against terrorism. For larger military

stabilisation missions in the wider world, there is a lack of societal approval and political will. What is more, critical voices are increasingly questioning whether NATO, as a military alliance and consensus-based international organisation, is the right framework for smaller yet robust conflict management operations.

A functional expansion – in the sense of assuming responsibility for energy security, the defence against hybrid threats, and climate security – is just as controversial. Hybrid threats are subject to more intense discussion, but most experts do not see a prominent role for NATO that goes beyond coordinating national measures to increase resilience or defend against hybrid assaults in combination with kinetic attacks.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report Germany

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 4 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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