

# Next Steps for Germany's National Security *Zeitenwende*

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Germany, the most populous and richest country in European NATO, is integral to European and transatlantic security.

Germany's stated shift toward a stronger national security seems real, but it needs to increase defense spending well beyond 2 percent of GDP to make it permanent.

Germany must focus on military procurement and personnel, especially in standing up new armored units to deter Russian aggression against the Baltic states.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared in 2022 that Germany was undertaking a societal and political sea change on national security matters. The word he used for this sea change in thinking, *Zeitenwende*, has come into common usage in Anglophone defense circles when discussing German national security. The *Zeitenwende* represents a cross-party consensus in Germany that the changing strategic landscape necessitates a stronger Bundeswehr (German armed forces) that is capable of protecting Germany's national security interests as well as serving as a leader of European collective deterrence. Germany's rearmament needs to move quickly, because the United States, facing a rising and hostile China that presents a far larger challenge to American security and prosperity than any other potential adversary, will need to re-posture forces out of Europe and to the Indo-Pacific in the immediate

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future. Germany, as both the most populous and the wealthiest country in Europe, is critical to filling the capability gaps that the United States will leave as it reduces its footprint in Europe.

## From Cold War Powerhouse to Delinquent

In recent years, many defense analysts and politicians have employed the talking point that German rearmament since 2022 is a first for the modern German state and that pacifism is ingrained as a legacy of World War II. This is a misconception that ignores that critical role that Germany played in the defense of Europe throughout the Cold War.

**West Germany During the Cold War.** There is a misconception that Germany has been demilitarized since the end of World War II, and that the defense spending increases and changes in rhetoric and national security strategy since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are a first for re-unified Germany. This talking point ignores the history of the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War, a period in which West German soldiers stared down the Soviets for decades and acted as the backbone of conventional deterrence for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for the better part of the frozen conflict. Early in the Cold War, NATO and West Germany both decided that West Germany should rearm itself, and the Bundeswehr fielded a 500,000-man armed forces, which included 12 heavy-tank divisions.<sup>1</sup>

As the nominee for Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby put it in an article for the German weekly paper *Die Zeit*: “What characterized postwar Germany’s role for its military was a powerful force dedicated to collective defense of free Europe within an Allied framework—not pacifism or disarmament.”<sup>2</sup>

**Massive Defense Cuts in the 1990s and 2000s.** The military malaise of the modern German state originates in decisions made during the 1990s and 2000s to drastically cut military spending as a result of the “peace dividend” yielded by the end of the Cold War. Germany was not unique in this, as spending fell generally across the Alliance in terms of percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) from the 1990s until it slowly began to increase after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. End strength was drastically reduced as well. Five years after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Bundeswehr’s end strength was two-thirds what it had been at the end of the Cold War.

The Bundeswehr’s reduction in size and scope was not entirely a German decision, as it largely reflected the post-Cold War consensus in a Europe

that was still apprehensive about the role of a unified and powerful Germany. One of the conditions for German reunification, as laid out by the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and France in the 1990 Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, was that Germany reduce its personnel strength to 370,000 (combined ground, air, and naval personnel) within four years.<sup>3</sup> The near-unanimous calls now for increases in German military spending reflect a change in thinking not just by Germans, but also by other Europeans, as well as by the United States, on what the role of Germany in Europe should be.

**Ignoring Repeated Warnings.** Calls for increases in German defense spending from the United States did not begin with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. American Presidents and Secretaries of Defense from both Republican and Democratic Administrations have been warning European leaders since the Bush Administration that the United States was unable to shoulder the burden for European security and that the wealthy countries of Western Europe, in particular, needed to be spending a minimum of 2 percent of GDP on defense.

At a NATO summit in 2006, President George W. Bush pushed for increases in European defense spending (at a time when German defense spending stood at a meager 1.4 percent of GDP).<sup>4</sup> In 2010, NATO heads of state recommitted at the Lisbon Summit to spend a minimum of 2 percent of GDP on defense. In 2011, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned that “if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2014, NATO reaffirmed its commitment to a 2 percent minimum in the wake of the Russian seizure of Crimea.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, President Barack Obama stated that every country in NATO needed to spend at least 2 percent, pointing out that if Greece could maintain spending above 2 percent even during its economic crisis, then surely wealthy Western European NATO members could do so as well.<sup>7</sup> President Donald Trump, of course, has called for all NATO members to hit their 2 percent minimum from the beginning of his first Administration in 2017, and has consistently signaled the importance of Europeans taking primary responsibility for conventional deterrence in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

## The *Zeitenwende*

Since Chancellor Scholz declared the *Zeitenwende* in 2022, defense thinkers have both hailed and derided the concept, with some arguing that

Germany was making real progress and others doubting that the *Zeitenwende* reflected a meaningful shift in German thinking. Some undeniable (albeit limited) progress has been made since 2022, with Germany finally hitting the 2 percent minimum spending level in 2024.<sup>9</sup>

There has also been a clear shift in thinking within the German defense establishment. The German Ministry of Defense's 2023 Defense Policy Guidelines, for example, opens with: "War has returned to Europe. Germany and its allies must once again confront a military threat." The document admits that Germany has neglected the Bundeswehr for too long and that Germany must "reorient the focus of the Bundeswehr toward national and collective defense" and "measurably increase its operational and deterrence capacity."<sup>10</sup>

**The Special Fund.** The German government announced that a one-time special fund for defense spending of 100 billion euros would be enacted to jump-start Germany's military spending and deliver some of the much-needed equipment that the Bundeswehr lacked.<sup>11</sup> The first major project identified was a block buy of 35 F-35As from the United States, the first F-35s to be used by the German Air Force. As part of the package, German military pilots are stationed for training in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Using the special fund, the Bundeswehr also purchased 60 CH-47F Chinook transport helicopters, 123 Boxer armored infantry vehicles, and 82 H145M light-combat helicopters, along with investments in digitalization, Patriot missiles and other munitions, and other military investments.<sup>13</sup>

**Military Aid to Ukraine.** German military aid to Ukraine is the single biggest indicator of the seriousness of the German government in its new role as a leader in European collective deterrence. Germany became an ardent and active supporter of Ukraine throughout this period and is both the biggest donor of military aid to Ukraine in Europe as well as the second-biggest donor of military aid to Ukraine after the United States. In total, Germany has provided or committed approximately 28 billion euros worth of military assistance to Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Germany has delivered to Ukraine armored fighting vehicles (including 103 Leopard main battle tanks and 140 Marder infantry fighting vehicles), air defense systems, artillery, drones, ammunition, and a host of logistics and support materiel. This significant support for Ukraine differentiates Germany from other Western European governments, which have provided bellicose rhetoric but relatively small amounts of military aid, and brings it into the camp of European countries who are serious about providing military aid to the Ukrainian government, alongside the Baltic states, Poland, and Scandinavia.<sup>15</sup> Germany has also played a significant role in training Ukrainian soldiers, hosting them at military bases in Germany and providing military training in a variety of competencies.

**Political Buy-In and Public Support.** The outgoing German coalition led by Chancellor Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) made some progress on defense spending and rearmament but left much of the hardest work to the incoming government led by Friederich Merz and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Scholz's commitment to the *Zeitenwende* sometimes gave the impression of spending just enough to meet the 2 percent minimum spending target (and therefore remove some of the political pressure on Berlin) but nowhere near enough to make up for decades of underfunding the Bundeswehr and meet the strategic challenges that Germany faces. The incoming CDU-led government has signaled its desire to truly commit to rebuilding the German military but may face significant obstacles from its coalition partners. If the new government is successful in removing debt limits for defense spending and garnering the necessary support within the coalition, it may be able to truly transform German defense spending and make Germany the linchpin of European security that American conservatives hope it can be.<sup>16</sup>

## German Defense Spending

Defense spending levels are an important indicator of a given NATO member's political will to act as a net contributor of security to the Alliance. What the money is spent on is also relevant, and both the United States and European NATO members need to focus on procurement of weapons systems for the foreseeable future.

**Durability.** The question, then, is whether Germany will be able to increase annual spending by 2027 enough to stay above 2 percent of GDP once the special defense fund runs out in 2027. First, Germany will need to increase defense spending over the next two years just to avoid dropping back below 2 percent of defense spending when the special fund runs out in 2027. Germany will not be able to achieve its strategic goals by staying at the minimum level of 2 percent in 2027 and beyond and will need to raise defense spending enough between now and 2027 to move well beyond this minimum level aiming toward or beyond the new goal of 3 percent.

**Focus on Procurement and Personnel.** An effective Bundeswehr capable of deterring Russia from military adventurism in the Baltic does not require the massive personnel levels of the 1980s, not least because Russia presents a smaller strategic challenge to Europe than the Soviet Union did. It does, however, require several additional armored divisions and the requisite increases in personnel and procurement to sustain them.

The most pressing needs of the Bundeswehr are in capacity relevant to deterring Russia in Northern Europe, and new spending by the German Ministry of Defense needs to focus on procurement and personnel, especially for armored units. Funding for other concerns such as research and development, cyber, and expeditionary forces relevant to peacekeeping missions outside Europe, among others, needs to be treated as a secondary concern that must not take away from the core goal of funding the procurement of weapons systems and additional personnel.

## Leadership Role in NATO

As the most populous and wealthiest European NATO member, Germany naturally has an important leadership role to play. Some recent trends indicate that Germany is now embracing this role.

**Germany's New Base in Lithuania.** One particularly salient example of German commitment to a new leadership role in European security is the planned stationing of a permanently forward-deployed German armored brigade at a base in Lithuania.<sup>17</sup> The armored brigade, designated as *Panzerbrigade 45*, is expected to be at full strength by 2027, and 4,800 German soldiers and their families will be permanently stationed in Lithuania, with a base model similar to the ones housing American troops in Germany and Italy.<sup>18</sup>

Russia has underperformed in Ukraine, failing to take the capital and being fought to a standstill by the Ukrainians. Russia, however, remains a moderately competent regional power and does pose a security challenge, particularly to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Deterring Russia from aggression against these three Baltic states should be the focus of German, Polish, and Scandinavian defense planners.<sup>19</sup>

**Germany's Relationship with Poland.** Bilateral military cooperation between Germany and Poland is integral to collective deterrence in the Baltic. Berlin and Warsaw should jointly pursue a wide range of increased engagements, including military-to-military exchanges, joint exercises, and deepening of existing collaboration, such as the cooperation and integration of the Polish and German Maritime Forces Staffs in the Baltic Sea. In particular, a deepening of cooperation in logistics will be critical to NATO measures to deter aggression against the Baltic states. As part of this deepened cooperation, Germany and Poland should enhance the NATO fuel supply chain through Poland and reduce obstacles to military border crossing.<sup>20</sup>

**Pushing Delinquent Countries to Increase Defense Spending.** Now that Germany has reached the 2 percent spending minimum, it now has the political capital to push for other NATO members that are not yet meeting

the spending requirement to do so. European NATO members are quite used to being lectured by the United States on this topic, but hearing the argument for increased defense spending for all members coming from Berlin might provide additional encouragement. As of 2024, Belgium, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain (and, for that matter, Canada) were still not meeting the minimum spending requirement.<sup>21</sup>

**The European Sky Shield Initiative.** One lesson from the Russo-Ukrainian war is the importance of air defense in modern warfare for protecting critical infrastructure and supply lines for military operations. NATO countries, under German leadership, have recognized the importance of significantly expanding the air defense capabilities of European NATO member states and responded with the European Sky Shield Initiative, which aims to develop, produce, and deploy an integrated air defense across the Alliance.<sup>22</sup> The initiative is focused on addressing the serious capability gaps that Europe currently faces, especially in very short-range to medium-range ground-based air defense (GBAD), by integrating planning among European NATO members and engaging in co-development and co-production of new systems moving forward.<sup>23</sup>

In the shorter term, Germany is purchasing a large number of Patriot missiles, and in 2024 was cleared by the U.S. State Department to purchase 600 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missiles.<sup>24</sup> MBDA Germany, a large German defense contractor, is also expanding its facilities in Bavaria as part of a deal between MBDA and Raytheon to produce Patriot missiles in Germany. This is a positive and much-needed step in the right direction, as munitions production lags across the Alliance. Germany and the United States have a history of successful coproduction of munitions—during the Cold War, the U.S. co-produced AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles with West Germany, a move that both boosted the stockpiles of a key American ally and alleviated the strain on U.S. resources. West German co-production also led to design improvement and cost reduction for all parties producing the missile.<sup>25</sup> As the U.S. works to revitalize its own defense industrial base and ramp up munitions production, these sorts of agreements with close allies will be key.

## Avoiding Strategic Distraction

In any country, budgets are limited, and defense planners must avoid strategic distraction if they are to achieve their primary goals. German planners and politicians should resist the temptation to try to do everything and, instead, focus on enabling collective deterrence in Europe.

**Focusing on Collective Deterrence.** German defense planners need to avoid the temptation to spread the Bundeswehr thin by engaging too heavily in secondary (or even tertiary) priorities, such as crisis management and peacekeeping. To its credit, the German government recognized the need to divert resources away from these sorts of foreign missions and to focus on expanding capacity for collective deterrence in Europe in its most recent national security strategy, which repeatedly identifies conventional capabilities for collective deterrence in Europe as the primary goal of German national security strategy. Yet the national security strategy reflects a great deal of unserious and distracted national security thinking as well, including commitments to obvious non-defense issues, such as “increasing the impact of women in climate policymaking.”<sup>26</sup>

**The China Question.** Germany’s national security strategy identifies China as a “partner, competitor and systemic rival” and acknowledges that China is seeking to remake the world order and assert itself as the dominant power in its region. Compared to previous national security strategies, this is a welcome change. In 2024, two German frigates sailed through the Taiwan Strait, and Bundeswehr soldiers participated in a series of exercises with partners and allies around the Indo–Pacific. German policymakers are clearly trying to signal to Washington that they take the challenge posed by China seriously, after having heard for years from American policymakers (and especially, American conservatives) that China is the pre-eminent challenge facing the United States and the United States needs to focus its resources on deterring China in the Indo–Pacific.

This acknowledgment from an ally is welcome, but German military planners (and European military planners, in general) should maintain their focus on security in their near abroad, especially deterrence against Russia. Additionally, Europe should also continue stability and counterterrorism operations in the Red Sea and North Africa, although the latter effort ought to be more of a focus from Mediterranean states, such as France and Italy, while it makes more sense for Germany to focus on security in the Baltic and Eastern Europe. The most helpful thing that European governments can do when it comes to China is to take primary responsibility for conventional deterrence in Europe, thus freeing up *American* resources to deter China. Signaling seriousness on China in economic and diplomatic terms, however, is helpful and welcome. American policymakers would be very grateful to see more efforts at de-risking and research security, as well as condemnations of aggressive Chinese actions against Japan, the Philippines, or Taiwan.



## How America Can Enable Germany to Defend Itself

In order to enable Germany to fill mission-critical capability gaps as it pivots, the United States should:

- **Move quickly to approve European-produced munitions for the F-35.** For the foreseeable future, the U.S. must focus first on producing precision-guided munitions for its own depleted stocks and second on arming allies in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan and Australia, that are critical to deterring Chinese aggression. European munitions sales will be at best a tertiary concern, despite the need for Finland, Germany, and Poland to arm the large number of U.S. F-35s that will be delivered over the next several years, and the need of European NATO as a whole to deter Russia. The solution is for Lockheed Martin to quickly certify munitions, such as the Meteor missile (among others), manufactured by MBDA for use on the F-35. Quick certification will allow the U.S. to focus on arming itself and its Indo-Pacific allies, allow Europe to deter Russia with less help from the U.S., and stimulate European domestic defense manufacturing to make Europe less reliant on the U.S. and thus a more capable ally.
- **Maintain certain key capabilities to maintain deterrence even as the U.S. shifts to the Indo-Pacific.** As the U.S. shifts focus, it will spend less money on European Command (EUCOM), rotational deployments will end, some bases will close, and Pentagon planners will reduce the overall U.S. troop presence in Europe. As Europe responds by filling the resulting capability gaps, the United States should maintain certain key capabilities to continue to enable deterrence in EUCOM. U.S. command-and-control (C2) infrastructure should be maintained, as there is not yet a good alternative and it is relatively inexpensive. The U.S. should also consider expanding its nuclear deterrence options on the continent even as it draws down its conventional assets, as the French and British strategic deterrents are insufficient to cover NATO. Where possible and when not in conflict with Indo-Pacific requirements, the United States should maintain limited air defense capabilities in the short term while Germany and other European NATO members build up their own capabilities.
- **Transfer closed bases to the Bundeswehr.** As the United States closes bases in Germany, this infrastructure will become available

to the expanding Bundeswehr. (In fact, in many cases the bases were originally German.) This continues a process of returning Department of Defense–owned infrastructure across Europe to host countries since the end of the Cold War, as fewer and fewer American troops have been needed on the continent.<sup>27</sup>

- **Recognize German progress and maintain the relationship.** Germany is not the worst offender in European NATO in terms of defense spending, but American defense analysts have focused their criticism on it. To some extent, this makes sense, both because Germany has not been spending or doing enough, and because Germany is the wealthiest and most populous country in European NATO and is therefore integral to the security of Europe. The smaller or poorer NATO members hitting 3 percent of defense spending (while welcome) would not have the same positive effect on the security of Europe as Germany hitting 3 percent. U.S. criticism has been focused on Germany because Germany matters so much to European and transatlantic security. That being said, American policymakers should strive to offer constructive criticism and should recognize and applaud significant steps in the right direction when they happen.

## Conclusion

The United States and Germany are long-standing and essential allies, and the U.S. relationship with Germany, the world’s fourth-biggest economy, is one of the most important of the entire U.S. ally and partner network. The United States is forced by strategic necessity to prioritize deterrence in the Indo–Pacific but wants to maintain good relations with its civilizational cousins in Germany and the rest of Europe as it does so.

A stronger, wealthier Europe will be a good thing for the United States in the increasingly multipolar world, and the United States should do what it can to strengthen its European allies and enable them to be more self-sufficient and capable of defending their own interests, which broadly align with those of the United States. Germany and the rest of Europe should embrace the opportunity and seize the moment by building up their militaries to defend their national security interests.

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