Germany—A Great Power in Need of Company

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Resumé

Tyskland är en stormakt med såväl styrkor som svagheter. Styrkorna kommer bl a från landets storlek och ekonomi, en svaghet från att såväl Tyskland som andra länder fortfarande minns landets roll i andra världskriget. Inom säkerhets- och försvarsområdena vill därför Tyskland inte agera på egen hand. Frankrikes och Tysklands långvariga samarbete har spelat stor roll för dem själva och EG/EU. Tyskland har också genom sin s k Ostpolitik haft ett starkt band till Sovjetunionen/Ryssland, men den starkaste relationen har varit till USA, garanten för Tysklands säkerhet. I det nya Europa, där Ryssland har inlett ett fullskaligt krig och Trump tycks stödja Putin, söker Tyskland sin säkerhet i Europa, och framför allt i samarbetet med Frankrike och Storbritannien. En återgång till den tidigare relationen till Ryssland skulle kunna garantera gas- och oljetillförsel, men skulle möta politiska svårigheter. En ny administration i USA skulle lösa en del problem i Europa, men vissa broar är sannolikt rivna för lång tid.

GERMANY IS A central country in Europe[1], situated in the midst of the continent, powerful, wealthy and with a large population. It can, however, also be described as a country resting on a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths lie in economic growth and stability, a responsible policy and a large population. In security issues, however, Germany sees itself as dependent on the perception of others, a view that is at times confirmed by reactions from other countries and emanating from its role in the Second World War. Germany has, therefore, avoided what has been labelled Alleingang, instead preferring to pursue its security policies together with one or several other countries.

This article will describe the German policy of building its security through cooperation with other countries, which have traditionally primarily been France and the US, but also the UK and Russia. In addition to security, it will consider factors such as energy, trade, and internal politics as key elements for its policies.

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Germany has undergone many changes since the end of World War II. Some of them have been significant, but despite this, the pattern of close relations has remained fairly stable, even in times of tensions. The question is whether it will stay so as a Russia-initiated

full-blown war rages in Europe, and President Trump has taken Russia's side on important issues making the future of the American engagement in Europe highly uncertain.

Cold War Cooperation

Franco-German Cooperation

Among european countries France has been by far the most important one for Germany, and Franco-German cooperation after the Second World War signified that Germany was now an acceptable cooperation partner again. The friendship between Konrad Adenauer (Chancellor 1949–1963) and General de Gaulle (President 1958–1967) was also part of the background. The collaboration acquired a more formal structure through the Elysée Treaty of 1963, providing a framework for close cooperation, including regular meetings. For both countries, albeit differing from each other in many ways, the European Communities (EC) was in focus, and the compromises made by France and Germany often resulted in proposals that others accepted.

The Elysée Treaty, however, also provided an example of the limitations of Franco-German cooperation: the German Bundestag ratified it only after adding a preamble stating the priority of the Atlantic Alliance for German security.[2] This was a disappointment for President de Gaulle and a lasting facet of cooperation.

Furthermore, the rapid German economic recovery, combined with its active policy towards the East, known as *Ostpolitik*, were reasons for French concern about which direction future German power may take. France, now under President Georges Pompidou, became more favourable towards British membership of the EC, whereas Germany felt that the UK would serve as a good counterweight to France. Both countries, therefore, welcomed the UK as it joined the EC in 1973. The positive attitude, however, lasted only until the following year when Prime Minister Harold Wilson raised the budget issue, thereby bringing France and Germany closer again, now under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, respectively. Their cooperation continued in the traditional pattern, in which their different views led to searches for compromises, which were often presented to and accepted by the EC.[3]

Franco-German cooperation increasingly came to be about a balance of power. While Germany gradually grew richer, France had the upper hand in defence matters, not least due to its nuclear weapons. These weapons, which France had developed during the 1960's, were entirely under French command, and Germany was not involved in decision-making regarding their use. At the same time, it was generally recognised that during a nuclear exchange, Germany would be directly affected by them.[4]

Germany and the United Kingdom

In contrast to the Franco-German cooperation, the British-German relationship has not received much attention, which can be attributed to the fact that there were no strong disagreements or any close commonalities. Generally, cooperation was smooth in areas related to NATO, as seen in the common defence of the East-West border, including the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) and the British commitment to Berlin. Furthermore, unlike the French, the British saw German *Ostpolitik* as positive. As for EC issues, however, the opposite was the case. There were no serious clashes, but the budget crisis just after the UK joined the EC, combined with

the different views between them regarding European integration, prevented a closer relationship between the two.[5]

Germany's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union

Germany's dependence on the United States, as expressed in the Elysée Treaty, could also be seen in the presence of the Iron Curtain and the presence of more than 200 000 American soldiers deployed in Germany to deter a Soviet attack across this wall. For Germany, it meant being torn between the United States, its guarantor for security and France, its main cooperation partner in European affairs, which sought a distance from the US, and withdrew from NATO's military cooperation in 1966.

The German relationship with the Soviet Union during the 1950´s and 1960´s was defined by the Hallstein doctrine, which prescribed no diplomatic contacts with countries (except for the Soviet Union) that kept diplomatic contacts with East Germany. Gradually, however, this doctrine was seen as difficult to maintain, and it was replaced in 1969 by the new Chancellor Willy Brandt's (and after 1974 Helmut Schmidt's) *Ostpolitik*. This policy was based on German recognition of the borders after World War II, but also on benefits such as increased trade and some Soviet concessions on humanitarian issues. The long-term German aspiration was that this would lead to reforms in the East, as expressed in the catchphrase *Wandel durch Handel* (Change through trade). In the sense of seeking a future in which the Soviet Union would change, France was similar to Germany, but the French differed profoundly in the way they envisioned a powerful Europe taking a distance from the United States, which for Germany was unthinkable.

1990–2022: Increasing Challenges

With the end of the Cold War and, thereafter, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, the world changed fundamentally. For NATO, the doctrine of collective defence became less important than that of crisis management, and in some of these operations Russia was now a partner.

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Major steps of enlargement of both the EU and NATO took place during this period, driven by the strong wishes of candidates, many of which had previously been part of Russia or the Warsaw Pact. Non-candidates, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, became members of the Eastern Partnership.

The first significant signs that Russian politicians were not aligned with the West emerged with the election of the new Russian President, Vladimir Putin, who, in several speeches, voiced his resentment over Western policy. The cyberattack on Estonia in 2007, the war towards Georgia in 2008 and the military attack on Ukraine in 2014 proved that Russian goals were now set on expansion. The measures agreed in the Minsk I and II agreements were never adhered to, and the war continued, albeit on a lower level, until the full-scale attack of 2022.

Relations between the US and Europe also underwent some difficult times. During the war in the Balkans, serious disagreements arose, leading to a European realisation that Europe needed more military assets of its own. Furthermore, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a serious (albeit temporary) transatlantic rift, but also disagreements within

Europe. The presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) was a different sort of crisis, and more serious in the sense that the basic elements of NATO were seen to be at risk.

Franco-German cooperation

The prospect of German unification, which followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, met resistance from both President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Thatcher, concerned that Germany, already a powerful nation, would now become even stronger. The American support for unification was, however, decisive, and the solution to the situation was to tie Germany closer to the EC. In 1990 France and Germany jointly presented a proposal that meant that EU member states would now have leverage over the powerful D-Mark. The decision on a common currency was subsequently made at the Maastricht meeting in 1991.[6]

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The aspirations to contain German economic power by introducing the euro, however, failed, as France continued to be marred by weak growth, budget deficits, and a high unemployment rate. Meanwhile, the German economy thrived, and Germany was generally regarded as the leader of Europe. The balance between the two leading countries in Europe became lopsided and the EU (particularly German) demands for French budget discipline sometimes led to hard verbal exchanges between the two. France consequently found other collaborators in southern Europe, where, among others, Italy shared its views on German dominance in the economic field.[7]

As Emmanuel Macron defeated Marine Le Pen of the populist *Front National* party in the 2017 presidential election, relief in Europe was evident, not least in Germany. The relationship between President Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2005–2021) was close but not always easy. The many proposals by the French president sometimes received a cold response from Germany, when perceived as being based on German financial contributions.

As Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 the seriousness of the situation brought France and Germany closely together into the so-called Normandie format in Minsk. Very hard negotiations, lasting 17 hours, led to an agreement (Minsk II), but not to peace.[8] The sanctions that were introduced impacted Russia, but also affected Europe and became a problem for its cohesion. In both Germany and France, strong forces among politicians and business leaders lobbied to lift the sanctions and maintained contacts with Russia.[9] In this difficult situation the leadership of Merkel was of great importance to maintain the united front against Russia.

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When in June 2016 the British voted to leave the European Union, this was deeply deplored by others in the EU, but for the Franco-German cooperation it also had a positive effect. Their common ambition to increase EU integration in the defence area, was realized in a successful initiative in the autumn of 2016. On the other hand, as Germany saw it, Brexit led to a weakening of the EU.

German-Russian cooperation

The bilateral German-Russian cooperation continued also after German unification and in a manner similar to before. Chancellor Schröder in 2005 explained it as follows:

> No other people paid such a high price in the criminal war unleashed by Nazi Germany. […] Therefore, the German people have a special responsibility to support Russia on its way to modernization and to help Russia become an integral part of the European and democratic institutions.[10]

The two also had common interests, such as in trade, where Russian energy became highly important for Germany after the Fukushima accident in 2011, which led to the *Energiewende*, the phase-out of German nuclear power plants. Furthermore, as part of its long-term goals for Russia, Germany promoted its inclusion in several Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as the G7, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).[11]

The level of closeness has varied, the closest being Social Democratic Gerhard Schröder's period as Chancellor (1999–2005), when the Chancellor called Putin "an impeccable democrat". Angela Merkel, leading the Grand Coalition from 2005, was initially less positive towards Russia, but her attitude changed, and the Russian attack on Georgia in 2008 did not cause any ruptures. The Medvedev presidency period (2010–12) was characterized by a very positive German attitude.[12]

The Nord Stream I gas pipeline, owned by Russian Gazprom (51 per cent) and four other companies, was inaugurated in 2011. However, the criticism of the project for being politically motivated gradually increased, especially after the initiation of Nord Stream 2 (owned by a subsidiary of Gazprom). While several European countries, and the United States, urged Germany to halt the pipeline, viewing it as a threat to European security and a weapon in Putin's hands, Merkel instead insisted that this was a commercial project. In September 2021, as Nord Stream 2 neared completion, American sanctions compelled foreign companies to withdraw their participation.[13] In 2022, multiple ruptures in the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines were detected and later deemed as sabotage.

German-US cooperation

Whereas cooperation during the Obama administration (2009–2017) had been positive, the election of Donald Trump soon led to frictions between the two countries. While the most serious issue was the conditioning of Article 5, another concerned the tariffs imposed on Europe, which prompted Angela Merkel to urge Europeans to stand together, considering that others could not be trusted. Donald Trump, while frequently criticizing European allies, was particularly critical of Germany for not meeting the NATO target of allocating two per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defence. At the NATO meeting in July 2018, Trump's tone, particularly towards Germany, was very antagonistic.[14]

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While relations between Germany and the United States improved as Joe Biden took office in January 2021, as seen above, the US view of the Nord Stream 2 project remained as critical as it was during the Trump era.

2022—The World Changes

A major war in Europe has for many years been seen as inconceivable. Still, it happened as Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The attack also clarified for all people in Europe that Russia had lied all along and that the war was about regaining lost territories which had been part of its empire. The Western reaction was quick, and the cohesion shown by the EU surprised even its members. The sanctions that the EU imposed on Russia and Belarus in 2014 have continued and been extended, as well as coordinated with like-minded states. Similarly, the financial and military aid to Ukraine has been substantial. Hungary, which does not share the views of others regarding Russia, has been a challenge, and the EU has been forced to negotiate with it to avoid its veto.

Effects of the Russian War

A fundamental change in Germany's approach was announced as Chancellor Scholz, a few days after the Russian attack, held his

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famous speech, declaring a *Zeitenwende* in the German policy towards Russia. As it turned out, however, Chancellor Scholz remained reluctant to send certain types of weapons to Ukraine, claiming that they might contribute to an escalation of the war. While many countries criticized Germany for this, Germany could rightly refer to the fact that it was the second largest contributor to Ukraine, ranking only after the United States.[15]

Germany was more affected by the war than most other countries. The Germans could no longer maintain their heavy reliance on Russian oil and gas and now needed to find new suppliers. Unlike oil, the EU has not imposed sanctions on imports of Russian gas, but the EU has pledged to phase out its remaining gas imports from Russia by 2027. France, also relying on energy imports, had instead opted for nuclear power, both countries disagreeing with the other's choice. In the area of security there were also some disagreements with France which criticized Germany for not living up to *Zeitenwende*, whereas Germany (and other countries) denounced the French idea (in December 2022) of starting negotiations about Ukraine, in particular since President Macron claimed that Russia must not be humiliated and should also have "security guarantees".[16] The following year, Macron, in a speech in Bratislava, deplored these statements and stated that he regretted not having listened more to the eastern EU countries, which were more critical of Russia.[17]

Effects of the new US policies

While Europeans had held some apprehensions about Donald Trump's policy, they had not predicted his closeness to Vladimir Putin or his echoing of Russian views. To this can be added his indifference to the fate

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of Ukraine and his eagerness to benefit from Ukrainian assets without any compensation, such as giving guarantees for its security. For

Europeans, it seems obvious that Trump does not understand the importance of Ukraine (or Georgia and Moldova) for the security of the rest of Europe. Further reasons for European concern are the way Trump and his ministers, while claiming that the US stands by its obligations in NATO, treat Article 5 as conditional and threaten NATO members such as Canada and Denmark—Greenland. Recent news in the press also indicates the withdrawal of 10 000 American soldiers from Europe, and some fear that this may be only the beginning of a substantial exodus.[18] Finally, the haphazard way of introducing and retracting tariffs on other countries and on the EU is not only without foundation but also highly detrimental to the economic situation in the world.

The European Reactions

Ad hoc cooperation

The combined effect of the Russian war on Ukraine and the change in US politics has led to a new pattern of cooperation in which European countries cooperate in groups whose compositions have been formed according to the needs of the situation and particular issues. The background, on which there is almost total agreement (Hungary being the exception), is that (1) Europe should do its best to defend Ukraine, even in a situation when the US withdraws and (2) Europe must build up a defence capacity strong enough to make it as independent as possible from the United States.

The Ukraine Defence Contact Group (UDCG), also known as the Ramstein Group, was initially set up and chaired by US President Joe Biden, and is responsible for coordinating the military aid to Ukraine. During the autumn of 2024, fearing the impact of a Trump presidency, NATO took over. The signs of decreasing US interest in Ukraine are now obvious. At the meeting on April 8, US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth participated via Zoom only, and the chairmanship was handed over to the UK and Germany.[19]

The European Policy Cooperation (EPC) was established in 2022 after the Russian attack. Proposed by France, the purpose was to create a forum in which all European countries (except Russia and Belarus) could participate to discuss matters of importance for Europe. Unsaid, but highly important, was the creation of a European forum in which the UK could meet on equal terms with EU states. The EPC has been successful and is also appreciated by the UK.

In November 2024, at the EPC meeting in Budapest, a subgroup of countries was established. France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK, as the six largest economies (in terms of GDP), were given the task of representing Europe as future problems arose with the United States. At this time, the tariffs, already announced by President-elect Donald Trump, were at the center of discussions. Several other meetings followed, which were mainly devoted to Ukraine, and the composition of the group could vary slightly as well. Sometimes referred to as the European Group of Five (E5), the group at times does not include Spain. The group also includes representatives from the EU, NATO and Ukraine.[20]

On March 2, 2025, the first meeting of a new group took place at the invitation of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Named the Coalition of the Willing, it gathers the countries seen as able to contribute military forces to an operation in Ukraine, as well as willing to do so.

As American pressure on its NATO allies, combined with seemingly lesser interest in Europe, has increased, so has the

need for Europeans to determine their own fate. France, the UK and Germany, together with, among others, the Nordic countries, are aiming to present a plan for increased European defence within 5–10 years, which will be discussed at the NATO meeting in The Hague in June.[21]

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Institutional changes

The major institutional change, albeit an informal one, is that NATO has lost in importance for the European countries. While Mark Rutte fulfils his duties, seeking to maintain the US interest for Europe and in particular for NATO's Article 5, the main focus of the European NATO members, as well as Canada, is now, as described, to defend themselves in a situation of weak US engagement, or none at all.

On the other hand, the European Commission has played a considerable role during the first months of 2025. On March 4, the Commission proposed the ReArm Europe plan, which is aimed to free up around 800 billion euros in defence spending over the next few years.[22] This plan, also backed by the European Parliament, was the main content of the conclusions of the European Council meeting of March 6, 2025.[23]

Germany in a new Europe

As expected, the CDU/CSU turned out as the victor of the German elections on February 23, 2025. Friedrich Merz, the incoming new Chancellor, spoke out already on election night in a surprisingly strong statement: "My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the US." He added: "I never thought I would have to say something like this on a television program. But after Donald Trump's statements last week at the latest, it is clear

> *Europe may also have to find a replacement for NATO.*

that the Americans, at least this part of the Americans, this administration, are rather indifferent to the fate of Europe." Potentially, Merz said, Europe may also have to find a replacement for NATO, and to do so within months. Furthermore, he referred to Elon Musk's endorsement of the pro-Russian Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and noted that the interventions from Washington were just as "dramatic and drastic and ultimately outrageous" as those from Moscow. Merz has also stated that he wishes to explore nuclear cooperation in Europe to replace the American nuclear umbrella.[24]

Friedrich Merz has previously expressed his intention to change Germany's foreign policy, concerning European policy and Ukraine. Since the German Parliament has now agreed to cancel the law against debts surpassing a certain level, the most acute problems of 2024, which led to a decision to stop budgetary-financed aid to Ukraine, are gone.

German security policy is, however, not only a task for Mr Merz and his party. The new government will be a so-called big coalition between the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), which gained 28 per cent in the election, while the Social Democrats (SPD), obtained 16 per cent. The negotiations, which were finalized on April 9, resulted in the CDU holding the ministries of the interior and foreign policy, whereas the

SPD will get the ministries of justice, defence and finance.

New global relations

Russia and Germany no longer maintain the traditional close contacts, but, according to some sources, some gas imports may remain despite German efforts to replace them with other suppliers, like Norway and the US.[25] It is, however, difficult to foresee future development. According to some information, there is a possibility of common Russian-American plans to exploit the situation. In early March, a newspaper reported that the German government was actively exploring options to prevent the relaunch of Nord Stream 2, which it suspected was part of a deal between the US and Russia.[26] This information seems to be confirmed by Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, who on March 26 claimed that resuming Russian energy supplies to Europe was in the interest of Moscow, Washington and other countries. According to him, "There is talk about Nord Stream. It will probably be interesting if the Americans use their influence on Europe and force it not to give up Russian gas".[27] According to *the Financial Times*, Matthias Warnig, the former CEO of Nord Stream 2 and longtime friend of Vladimir Putin, is eager to restart the pipeline and is seeking American investors.[28]

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The question is to what degree Germany can be made, or is willing, to agree to these plans. If such a deal is put on the table after a peace deal has been made with Russia, would sympathies for the old Ostpolitik or business interests lead to renewed work on the Nord Stream? Some German conservatives are discussing the possibility to purchase Russian gas again, but "only after a just and secure peace [with Ukraine] has been reached".[29]

The question is also whether Donald Trump will still maintain a good relationship with Russia, or—if the discussions drag on even longer—will the United States have a president who, like Biden (and previously Trump), would try to prevent it?

The United States, once the guarantor of Germany's security, and the country that made Germany's unification possible, now seems to have abandoned its previous policies, and its tone is condescending or outright hostile.

Despite Merz's and others' aspirations, it is difficult to determine whether independence in this field is possible. Replacement of US strategic weapons is not achievable, at least for a very long time. On the other hand, deterrence is not something that can be measured—only Vladimir Putin himself can tell whether the small number of European nuclear weapons may deter him.

Furthermore, Europe is highly dependent on US technology, which the United States can threaten to withhold for a shorter or longer period. The US will therefore continue to wield influence over Europe and may use this to its advantage. The purpose may, for example, be to put pressure on Europeans to side with the US against China, which would be highly problematic for Germany, considering its large trade with this country. In January 2025, China was the primary import state for Germany.[30]

As regards conventional weapons, the necessary armament is expected to be a problem for Germany, considering the needs for the

future at a time when German infrastructure is in dire need of more funding.

New European relations

While Germany will remain highly dependent on the politics of the global powers, its relationship with individual states in Europe will reflect its own interests and ambitions to a higher degree.

At the moment, France and the UK are uncontestably the two leading states in Europe, individually and collectively. The UK gathers the states of the Coalition of Willing, which

> *Germany's role as one of the three major powers is clearly visible.*

focuses on Ukraine, whereas France engages countries in seeking stronger military independence from the United States. The two have also acted together on a number of occasions, such as when visiting Ukraine on April 5 to plan for a peacekeeping force.[31] Germany has assumed a less prominent role in such contexts, which is to be expected, considering that the focus is now on military issues, in which Germany has hitherto been hesitant to have a leading role, also seen in the ongoing war.

At the same time, Germany's role as one of the three major powers is clearly visible as well. One example is the presence of Germany, France and the UK, together with Ukraine and the United States, in Paris on April 17, at a joint discussion about peace in Ukraine. The same group is to continue with these meetings.[32]

What is seen here is the revival of what was once called the *directoire*, an informal yet powerful cooperation among the three major states in Western Europe. However, while previously smaller European states saw this cooperation in a negative light, since it was perceived to take place at the expense of institutional cooperation, it is now viewed as a way of demonstrating strength and unity towards the US and Russia.

Bilateral relations

France. While Germany's position in Europe can be seen as falling into a familiar pattern, this was not initially the case with the relationship with France. As described above, the traditionally close partnership has been characterized by much tension after the Russian attack, in which both countries saw the other as failing to support Ukraine. For Merz, when elected, it was of the essence to mend the Franco-German relations. For this purpose, he visited Macron four days afterwards for a meeting which, according to reports, was very successful.[33]

The UK had remained an important cooperation partner for Germany, even after this country left the EU, partly within NATO and partly through bilateral cooperation. In November 2024, a major deal, the Trinity Agreement, which includes ground-breaking defence projects across all domains (air, land, sea, space and cyber), was closed.[34] The recent events, such as the UK's closer proximity to EU countries and the signs of US disinterest in Europe, are factors that are likely to draw the two countries even closer together on security matters, even though, as previously, EU-related matters will keep them apart.

Poland has, since the return of the Civic Coalition and Donald Tusk as Prime Minister in late 2023, revived its relations with the EU and a number of states. Furthermore, it has quickly achieved a significant status in Europe, due to financial success while at the same time devoting 4,7 per cent of its GDP

to defence. During the first part of 2025 Poland is also chairing the EU Council. In this role, Poland chaired the meeting of Defence Ministers in Warsaw, which discussed the Commission's major defence package.

The return of Poland is also beneficial for Germany since it means the revival of the Weimar Triangle. The Polish participation has been seen as a way to mend the earlier problematic Franco-German relations. Poland, with its firmly negative view of Russia, may also serve as somewhat of a counterweight to France and Germany if pro-Russian parties become strong in these countries.

Poland, however, has one limitation in its ability to influence others, which is the fact that it is not willing to contribute troops to a European presence in Ukraine. The reason is its geographical closeness to Russia, and therefore the necessity to put emphasis on protecting its own borders.

Remaining questions

One of the main issues related to a more independent Europe is which country will become the military leader of Europe, defined as NATO minus the US. Due to the superior American capability, and thereby its role as the guarantor of the security of other allies, the position of Supreme Allied Commander for Europe (SACEUR) has always been held by a US general. Finding an uncontested European military leader is likely to be difficult, however, considering the fact that no European country is significantly more powerful than the others. An indication that the Americans are considering a change to this rule is that the present SACEUR, General Christopher Cavoli, when testifying in the US Senate, stated that it would be "problematic" if the US steps down from its leadership role commanding NATO forces in Europe.[35]

Which country will become the military leader of Europe, defined as NATO minus the US.

Closely connected to this question is that of nuclear deterrence. Friedrich Merz, already before the elections, stated that Germany would need to look beyond the US to Britain and France for nuclear safeguards, since, under Trump, the US could no longer be relied on. No other politician has, as yet, made any similar declaration, but the idea now receives more serious consideration. France has many times (last time in 2020) floated the idea that its nuclear weapons might have relevance for Europe (while still under French control). The British situation is different since its nuclear weapons, unlike the French ones, are already part of NATO's nuclear umbrella. They are, however, also difficult to separate from the American ones, since the two are technically integrated.[36] Generally in Europe, it may not be uncontroversial to give France and possibly the UK the responsibility for nuclear deterrence, since, of course, it would give these two countries a formal leading position in Europe. Any agreement on nuclear weapons would also need to respect the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For Germany, in particular, this is a very sensitive issue.

The ad hoc groups that dominate the European scene today also constitute leadership groups, but Europe is now in a process of change, and their future is uncertain. The new German Chancellor, like the French, has an intergovernmental outlook, which sim-

plifies this type of cooperation between the two and with the UK, but things may change, and a new order of more institutionalized cooperation may develop.

Institutions may also change. The EU has recently demonstrated its strength. NATO minus the US is at present the focus for European efforts, but is only a possibility, and NATO of 32 still exists. The future rules of all are still to be seen.

Internal factors

As mentioned in the historical overview, Germany's relations with other countries have varied depending on which political party, or parties, were in government. Even if the Chancellor is the most powerful person, the problems of cooperation in the previous government gave ample evidence of the freedom of ministers within a coalition. The German government that will take power in May will therefore reflect both Christian Democratic and Social Democratic interests and ambitions. In addition, the growth of the AfD, which recently ranked as number one with 26 per cent in a poll (in which the CDU got 25 per cent) is a factor to consider.[37]

Another important factor is trade and Germany's dependence on exports and imports. Gas and oil imports have been, and are still, essential issues and where to find reliable and acceptable providers is crucial. The German automobile industry is also of vital significance, and sanctions have had a serious impact on it. As mentioned above, an important question for the future is also how much Germany may be allowed to decide for itself on matters of trade. Nord Stream is an example where Russian-American pressure may be decisive, and so may also US pressure regarding trade with China.

Conclusions

Few periods in time have been as unpredictable as the present one. As these lines are written, the large majority of European states agree on two particular goals: to help Ukraine defend itself, even without US help, and to help European NATO states defend their security, even if they are not supported by the United States. The vast majority of them see Russia as aiming to include Ukraine and other countries in the Russian dominion and to destroy the Western rules-based world.

As described in this article, Germany has undergone many changes over the years. In spite of this, and after almost 80 years and the unification of its western and eastern parts, the same strengths and weaknesses are still reflected in the policies pursued by Germany.

Similarly, Germany's relationships in Europe are not much affected by the recent changes. The UK has come closer through the *directoire* cooperation, similar to the situation before Brexit. Furthermore, France remains a close collaborator – the occasional tiffs between the two have never been stronger than their common interests in continuing cooperation. The main difference is the rise of Poland - in its status in Europe and its importance for Germany.

However, the fragility of Europe today makes all predictions difficult. The rising populism within the countries mentioned above as well as others may lead not only to changes in relations but also to a totally different European policy.

On the global level, things are complicated as well. Russia, while an ideological adversary, was also a close collaborator in trade, in which Germany, after Fukushima, was the dependent party. At present, Russia is a real threat to Ukraine and other European

countries, but Germany still has a strong dependence on oil and gas, and the question has now been posed whether gas will flow again after peace is restored.

The US is no longer the reliable guarantor of security for Germany. Replacing the American role in Europe will be challenging and will involve some hard decisions. Due to the present unreliability of the US, trade relations has already proved to be challenging. Hopes will surely be pinned on the arrival of a new administration in Washington, but regardless of this, Europeans need to protect themselves for the coming four years. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the previous situation will return: new agreements will by then have been made with other partners and can't be torn up. For Germany, like for other European states, the most essential part of a strategy will be to achieve the highest possible European cohesion for continued strength and preserved values.

The author holds a PhD and is a fellow of RSAWS.

Notes

1. In this article the denomination Germany first signifies the western part of the country and after 1990 the whole country. The reason is that the eastern part was essentially dependent on the Soviet Union and did not have an independent policy.
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