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Germany's Role in Europe: **Great Expectations**

Can Germany deliver on the transformative 'Zeitenwende' in foreign and security policy that Europe expects? This analysis examines Chancellor Friedrich Merz's bid to overcome Germany's traditional leadership restraint and position Berlin as a cooperative yet influential force in shaping EU strategy.

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Summary

This European Policy Analysis addresses two central questions: whether Chancellor Friedrich Merz's Black–Red coalition can realize the *Zeitenwende* promised in German foreign and security policy, and whether Germany can assume a more effective leadership role in Europe. Germany has long exhibited a 'leadership avoidance complex', favouring restraint and multilateralism, while the former Chancellor Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* raised expectations but delivered limited change. Merz has pledged to increase defence spending, reform policymaking structures, and rebuild ties with France, Poland, and the UK, with a view to positioning Germany as *primus inter pares* rather than a hegemon.

German leadership is conceptualized in this analysis as a relational process grounded in persuasion and coalition building rather than domination. Germany thus seeks to shape policy outcomes by coordinating with like-minded partners in minilateral forums, and in doing so, Berlin can bridge North–South and East–West divides, and foster consensus while avoiding fears of unilateralism.

The analysis concludes that Germany is developing a relational and cooperative leadership style in EU foreign and security policy; however, domestic political fragmentation, diverse partner expectations, and US unpredictability remain major constraints, and whether Berlin can meet the 'great expectations' placed upon it remains uncertain.

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1. Introduction

Much is expected of Chancellor Friedrich Merz's 'Black-Red' coalition (comprising the CDU/CSU and the SPD), which assumed office on 6 May 2025, and expectations are sky-high that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) will now play a leadership role in European foreign, security, and defence policy, commensurate with its size, economic strength, and central geographical location at the very heart of Europe. 'I know that many of you expect more German leadership than we have seen in the last years,' Merz noted when addressing the European People Party's conference in Valencia in April 2025 just prior to his election as Chancellor. 'You can count on us,' he continued to enthusiastic applause, 'we will be ready to deliver' (Alipour & Ionta, 2025).

Throughout the election campaign, Friedrich Merz emphasized his conviction that Germany must shoulder greater responsibility for European leadership, and he has continued to do so since. This raises two interrelated questions, which this European Policy Analysis addresses. First, is the new German government able to pursue a qualitatively new foreign and security policy suited to an age of intensified great-power rivalry and the uncertainties created by a second Trump presidency? In other words, is it able to deliver on the promise of the *Zeitenwende*, the historical turning point? In his celebrated speech of February 2022, delivered shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the then Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised such a watershed in German foreign and security policy. Yet the incremental and half-hearted adjustments that followed left analysts questioning the extent of real change (Bunde, 2025; Deni et al., 2025; Tallis, 2024; Techau, 2025). Second, can Germany assume a more dynamic and effective leadership role within Europe, and if it does, what form will this leadership take? Can Chancellor Merz and his new coalition government overcome Germany's traditional 'culture of restraint' and 'leadership avoidance complex' (Hyde-Price, 2007: 118) and break clearly from the hesitant and cautious approach of Scholz's fractious traffic light coalition? Many of Berlin's allies and partners are hoping for more resolute German leadership to ensure continued military and financial support for Ukraine, mitigation of transatlantic uncertainty, and revitalization of EU cohesion. Whether Berlin will play a leading role in European diplomacy, shaping developments in Europe rather than simply reacting to them, is the focus of this analysis.

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This empirical study draws on both primary and secondary sources, including interviews with policy practitioners conducted in Berlin in the spring of 2025,¹ and proceeds in six steps. First, we begin by defining the concept of leadership as it is understood and applied here. Second, we provide a historical background to explain why leadership remains a particularly fraught and contested issue in the German case, focusing on what has been called the German 'leadership avoidance complex'. Third, the analysis turns to more recent policy developments, especially under the Merz government, and examines Germany's stated ambition to practise a form of cooperative and collaborative leadership – acting as *primus inter pares* across bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral settings. Fourth, German policy towards Russia is seen as a critical litmus test for Berlin's credibility and capacity to lead within Europe. Fifth, the study explores the constraints on German leadership, paying particular attention to domestic political dynamics. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the overall prospects of Germany meeting the high expectations placed upon it at this pivotal moment in European affairs.

¹ We would like to sincerely thank the following people who were generous with their time in being interviewed in Berlin during the period 4–10 April 2025: Ambassador Dr Thomas Bagger (former State Secretary, Auswärtiges Amt); Minister Counsel Christian Jetzlsperger (Head of Division 200, Auswärtiges Amt); Ambassador Veronika Wand-Danielsson (Swedish Embassy); Ambassador Marika Linntam (Estonian Embassy); Ambassador Alda Vaaga (Latvian Embassy); and Dr Christina Krause (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung).

2. Defining Leadership

Leadership is one of the most frequently invoked but least precisely defined concepts in European politics. In foreign and security policy, it is often conflated with power, yet the two are not synonymous. Power refers to an actor's ability to influence others or shape structures, while leadership describes a *process* in which an actor deliberately guides a group towards shared goals in interaction with others who recognize and accept this role (Aggestam & Johansson, 2017: 1206). Not all power holders are leaders, and not all leaders possess extensive material power (Burns, 1978: 18).

For the purposes of this analysis, leadership is defined as:

A social and relational process in which an actor purposefully seeks to influence and guide collective action towards common objectives, in interaction with followers who recognise and accept this role. (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019: 10)

This definition implies that leadership is relational, issue-specific, context-dependent, and dynamic. It arises within a leader–follower nexus, varies across issue areas and institutional settings, and evolves through learning and adaptation. Changes in leadership often follow crises that reshape the expectations of both the leader and their followers. For Germany, its long-standing self-image as a *civilian power* and *honest broker* has long fostered caution and consensus building (Paterson, 2015), yet external shocks – especially the Ukraine crises of 2014 and 2022 – have prompted expectations for Germany to lead the way in terms of strategic direction and burden sharing.

The academic literature commonly identifies four ideal types of leadership (Aggestam & Johansson, 2017; Parker & Karlsson, 2014; Young, 1991). *Structural leadership* draws on material capabilities and institutional weight, such as Germany's economic strength and growing defence role. *Entrepreneurial leadership* involves coalition building and brokerage in negotiation processes, while *ideational leadership* seeks to shape preferences through ideas – exemplified by Germany's advocacy of European sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Lastly, *directional leadership* relies on leading by example – for instance, by initiating sanctions that others follow. Effective leadership typically combines these different types, adapting to context and audience.

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Within the EU's intergovernmental and consensus-based foreign policy system, leadership by member states often operates through informal means (Aggestam & Johansson, 2017). *Cross-loading* – i.e. horizontal coordination among member states outside formal EU structures – captures this dynamic (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019), enabling agile, informal cooperation that circumvents institutional bottlenecks while remaining anchored in the EU framework.

For Germany, this approach offers a means to exert leadership without overstepping formal competencies or provoking fears of dominance (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). Through minilateral formats, such as the Weimar Triangle, E3, EU5, or Weimar+ (see Section 4), Germany can build consensus, bridge regional divides, and shape EU policy before formal EU deliberation.

In sum, we analyse leadership as an interactive and networked process, arguing that German leadership is less about hegemonic dominance and more about relational influence, strategic coalition building, and the ability to navigate both formal and informal arenas. Germany's leadership potential lies not in unilaterally 'steering' Europe but in animating and connecting the networked diplomacy of a heterogeneous EU – turning structural advantages and relational credibility into effective, legitimate leadership.

3. Germany's Historical 'Leadership Avoidance Complex'

'Berlin has often been willing to pay but reluctant to play the leadership role and tended to focus on geo-economics rather than geopolitics'

Since the traumatic experience of Germany's failed hegemonic ambitions in the first half of the twentieth century, the FRG has traditionally exhibited something of a 'leadership avoidance complex' (Hyde-Price, 2007: 118). Germany, it is argued, became a 'reflexive multilateralist' (Anderson & Goodman, 1993: 60), and successive German governments have preferred *Führung aus der Mitte* – leading from the centre – primarily in concert with France (Paterson, 2011; Bulmer & Paterson, 2013). Berlin has often been willing to pay but reluctant to *play* the leadership role and tended to focus on geo-economics rather than geopolitics (Kundnani, 2014). With the end of the cold war, the FRG settled comfortably into its self-ascribed role as a 'civilian power' (Harnisch & Maull, 2001), focusing on its business interests, soft power, and diplomacy. As German defence expenditure was repeatedly reduced, the Bundeswehr slowly shrank and atrophied. Germany continued as a major arms exporter but otherwise exhibited a 'culture of military restraint'.

This approach to foreign and security policy was deeply rooted in a set of assumptions about the changed nature of international politics and the emergence of a liberal peace order in Europe. Central to this was a belief that globalization had strengthened the need for multilateralism and cooperation through international organizations and regimes, as well as creating the structural preconditions for a rules-based liberal world order (Bagger, 2019; Masala, 2023: 18–19). German foreign policy focused on strengthening the involvement of stakeholders through inclusion and co-option, working with 'rising powers' (what were termed *Gestaltungsmächte*, such as China, Brazil, South Africa, and Japan) to reinforce the existing liberal international order. Its policy towards European security reflected these liberal, inclusive, and multilateralist assumptions. Security, it was argued, could only be built with Russia, not against it. Both Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel sought to build on the legacy of *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade') and deepen economic cooperation, primarily through importing cheap Russian hydrocarbons. They also believed in *Wandel durch Annäherung* ('change through engagement') and focused on diplomatic engagement with the Putin regime and avoiding antagonizing Moscow. They therefore opposed Ukraine's membership of NATO in 2008 and resisted NATO contingency planning for the defence of the Baltic states until pushed to accept it by President Obama. After Russia annexed Crimea and ignited a war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Chancellor Merkel continued to insist that there could be no military solution to the conflict and worked tirelessly to engage Russia diplomatically through the Normandy Format, meanwhile rejecting calls to export weapons to Kiev (Huggler, 2021).

The lack of German leadership was keenly felt across Europe. In 2011, the Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski (now back in the same job) gave a speech in Berlin on the European debt crisis in which he stated: 'I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity.' Coming from a country whose history has given it more reasons than most to fear its powerful western neighbour, this underlined the concerns about German passivity and restraint.

There were, however, indications that this was beginning to change. The Eurozone crisis pushed Germany into a structural leadership role, leading to descriptions of it as a 'reluctant hegemon' – at least as far as its economic and financial interests were concerned (Paterson, 2011). After 2014, there were also growing indications in the German political class and foreign and security policy establishment that the world was changing, and that previous expectations of a Kantian peace in Europe and a liberal world order were misplaced. This emerging German consensus was evident from the 2014 Munich Security Conference, where

a succession of German policymakers referred to the return of geopolitics and great-power rivalry; the weakening of global governance, multilateralism, and international institutions; the contraction of the liberal world order; and the emergence of a more competitive and conflict-prone international system (Hyde-Price, 2015; Interviews, 2025).

Change, however, came slowly. Limited sanctions were introduced, but Chancellor Merkel continued to focus on diplomatic engagement with the Putin regime and persevered with the Nord Stream 2 project (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). Germany was no longer a ‘black hole’ in NATO, but defence expenditure rose only slowly, and German security policy remained characterized by a ‘culture of military restraint’. Merkel recognized that with the Trump presidency, ‘[t]he times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over’ and that ‘[w]e Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands’ (Paravicini, 2017). Nonetheless, German foreign and security policy remained characterized by continuity and cautious, incremental recalibrations, and this was only to change with the watershed of February 2022 and the return of interstate war to Europe, which marked the ‘bookend’ of the period after 9 November 1989 (Interview, 2025).

3.1 The *Zeitenwende*: Expectations and Disappointments

‘The implementation of this ‘revolution’ in German security and defence policy, however, failed to meet many of the expectations it raised.’

Three days after Putin launched his ‘special military operation’, Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave one of the most consequential speeches in the history of the Federal Republic. He announced the *Zeitenwende* – a historical turning point – in Germany’s strategic outlook, which involved bringing an end to the purchase of Russian hydrocarbons, a reaffirmation of Article V to NATO members, and a €100bn special fund (*Sondervermögen*) for rearmament, signalling one of the most significant pivots in German foreign policy since the end of the cold war. Previous assumptions that diplomacy could constrain the Putin regime were discarded, and Germany subsequently became the largest provider of military aid to Ukraine after the US (Gibadło & Tarocinski, 2025).

The implementation of this ‘revolution’ in German security and defence policy, however, failed to meet many of the expectations it raised. Divisions within the increasingly fractious traffic light coalition undermined the new direction of the Scholz government and fostered a sense of strategic ambivalence and caution (Interviews, 2025). Policy implementation proved halting and half-hearted, with procurement delays, legal constraints, and policy ambiguities, which, as we have noted, led some critics to argue that the *Zeitenwende* became more of a branding exercise than a genuine transformational process. The 2023 National Security Strategy underlined the importance of European leadership and singled out France as a key partner for Germany (Schreier, 2023). However, bilateral relations with Paris, Warsaw, and London remained weak, and European allies increasingly criticized Berlin’s lack of resolve and strategic direction, as well as its tendency to defer to the Biden administration – which itself was cautious and ambiguous (Lau, 2024).

It is in this context that the huge expectations facing Chancellor Merz and his ‘Black-Red’ coalition must be understood. The traffic light coalition collapsed at virtually the same time as Donald Trump returned to the White House, leaving a vacuum at the heart of Europe at the very time when transatlantic security relations faced their most severe crisis since the foundation of NATO. During the election campaign, Merz pledged to make Germany a leading power in Europe and to revitalize its frayed relations with key allies, including France, Poland, and the UK. He also underlined the need for Germany to assume greater responsibility for leadership in European security and defence: ‘Everyone expects Germany to take greater responsibility for leadership,’ he noted. ‘I have repeatedly called for

this. Germany is by far the most populous country in Europe. Germany is situated in the geostrategic centre of the European continent. We must fulfil this role' (Thurau, 2025). To a significant extent, this reflects the idea of **structural leadership**, which rests on leveraging material capabilities and institutional position.

Like most other German and European leaders, Merz reacted with shock to the speeches of US Vice President J.D. Vance and other Trump officials at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, which seemed to indicate the end of the shared norms and values that underpinned the transatlantic security community, as well as a weakening of the US security commitment to Europe. 'This is really now the change of an era,' he noted. 'If we don't hear the wake-up call now, it might be too late for the entire European Union' (Bleika, 2025). In remarks made shortly after his election victory in February, he seemed to herald a profound and far-reaching transformation in the foundational assumptions of German security policy: '[I]t is clear,' he argued, 'that the Americans, at least this part of the Americans, this administration, are largely indifferent to the fate of Europe.' Consequently, he went on to commit Germany to working for a stronger and more united Europe as quickly as possible, 'so that, step by step, we can achieve independence from the US' (Rothwell et al., 2025).

4. The Potential for German Leadership in Europe

Chancellor Merz has set himself and his government the most ambitious foreign policy goal in the history of the Federal Republic: assuming a leadership role in a restructured European security architecture so that Europe has the capabilities and collective will to provide for its own security and defence, independently from an increasingly unreliable and isolationist United States (Rothwell, 2025). 'Germany is back,' Merz has declared, but does it have the potential and the political will to make good on this promise?

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Exercising leadership in Europe's heterogeneous and diverse milieu requires a distinctive skill set and disposition, as well as specific capabilities. Two observations are pertinent here. First, whilst Germany, with its population of 84 million, is Europe's *Zentralmacht* (Schwarz, 1994) and its economic powerhouse, it is not strong enough to impose its will on the rest of the continent. As Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger noted back in 1967, a united Germany is 'of a critically large size. It is too big not to have an effect on the balance of power, and too small to be able to hold the balance with the powers around it' (cited in Hyde-Price, 2000: 148). It cannot exercise hegemonic leadership in the same way as the United States does in NATO or Russia does in its 'near abroad'. Both France and the UK are major European powers, and Germany cannot ride roughshod over their interests. Leadership in Europe must of necessity be cooperative and collaborative in character. Germany can be an important voice within a collective leadership – perhaps *primus inter pares* – but leadership in European security and defence will have to be exercised collectively, often in partnership with both Paris and London.

Second, leadership is a relational social role that emerges through interaction between leaders and followers. Unlike domination, it depends on persuasion and the mobilization of shared purposes rather than coercion. Germany – even in partnership with France and the UK – cannot easily impose its will on other middle-sized European powers like Poland, Spain, or Italy, or cohesive groupings of states like the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8). Instead, Germany will need to rely on persuasion – backed up by material incentives including financial support or security guarantees – to create a sense of shared purpose and collective endeavour. The FRG has, for decades, been very effective at doing this given its 'instinctive multilateralism'. It has traditionally exercised leadership through

consensus building, negotiation, and compromise, utilizing entrepreneurial leadership and its structural power to leverage influence. Berlin is therefore potentially well placed to exercise what Lars Klingbeil (Vice Chancellor, finance minister, and SPD leader) has termed ‘cooperative leadership’ – ‘not shirking challenges or confrontation’ but ‘taking others with you’ by avoiding arrogance and ‘acting thoughtfully, with conviction and consistently’ (Klingbeil, 2022).

In the following sections, we will examine how this ‘cooperative leadership’ is enacted in different mini- and multilateral settings. We start by considering the domestic conditions for German leadership, focusing on the institutional configuration, ministerial portfolios, and political dynamics of the new Merz government. We then study Germany’s networking and cross-loading in key bilateral and minilateral contexts before situating the country’s role in multilateral institutions, notably the EU and NATO. The final section analyses Germany’s policy towards Russia as a test of its leadership ambitions.

4.1 ‘Germany Is Back’: the Promise of German Leadership

As we have previously argued, Germany has already embarked – albeit cautiously – on a learning process that has broadened its willingness to articulate and advance its own national and collective interests (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). However, if Merz’s ‘Black-Red’ coalition is to succeed in its European leadership ambitions where Scholz and his traffic light coalition only disappointed, three preconditions must be met: first, there must be a clear sense of strategic direction and purpose; second, the Federal Government must be able to provide cohesive and effective leadership in terms of policy formulation and implementation; and third, Germany’s ambitions to become the backbone of European conventional deterrence must be adequately funded and resourced.

Early indications are encouraging that all three preconditions are being met. Unlike the traffic light coalition, the new ‘Black-Red’ coalition comes to power with a clear understanding of the security challenges facing Germany and Europe, and with a coherent strategy for strengthening deterrence and defence in Europe (Gebauer et al, 2025). German rearmament, Merz has argued, is not only about supporting Ukraine, ‘[i]t’s about ensuring peace in Europe from Russian aggression, which we face here in Germany every day: the threat to our infrastructure, the threat to our data networks, the threat to the data cables under the Baltic Sea’ (Thurau, 2025).

The Federal Government’s potential to provide effective and cohesive leadership also seems promising, and the ‘Black-Red’ coalition is more cohesive than the previous Scholz-led traffic light coalition. The two most important SPD ministers in the government are Lars Klingbeil (Vice Chancellor and finance minister) and Boris Pistorius (continuing as defence minister). Both share similar approaches to Merz on foreign and security policy, and have championed a stronger and more capable Bundeswehr, resolute support for Ukraine, and a German leadership role in European security and defence (Cliffe & Puglierin, 2025). Moreover, for the first time in decades, the Chancellery and the Foreign Office will be held by the same party (the CDU, with Johann Wadephul becoming foreign minister). Usually in German coalitions, the Foreign Office has been headed by the smaller coalition partner, often resulting in competition between the Chancellor and the foreign minister and a degree of foreign policy incoherence. However, with a CDU-led Chancellery and Foreign Office, this rivalry might cease. It will also make it possible to replace the Federal Security Council with a US-style National Security Council, which will be placed in the Chancellery and led by Merz’s close aide Jacob Schrot. Whilst still relatively small, it will

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serve as a hub for forging a more integrated foreign and security policy and coordinating policy amongst different ministries. This is widely seen as a long-overdue reform that will enhance Germany's capacity to provide leadership for European security and defence policy (Interviews, 2025).

German EU policy also promises to be more coordinated and coherent given that the CDU now controls the three ministries primarily responsible for EU policy: the Chancellery, the Foreign Ministry, and the Economy Ministry. Lars Klingbeil of the SPD is Vice Chancellor and runs the Finance Ministry, but the CDU and the Chancellery will be well placed to set the strategic direction for policy and coordinate the key policy files. European policy will be coordinated centrally in the Chancellery on a weekly basis, and if disputes over ministerial responsibility arise (*Ressortkonflikte*), they are to be resolved in the Federal Cabinet. This policymaking procedure is new for Germany and promises to give the country a stronger voice and clearer sense of strategic purpose within the EU (Seidendorf, 2025). In particular, it should end the practice of the 'German vote', whereby Germany would end up abstaining on policy decisions in Brussels because of unresolved interministerial conflicts in Berlin.

Chancellor Merz has also fulfilled the third and final precondition for meeting his ambitious foreign and security policy – adequate funding and resources. In a bold but politically risky move domestically, Merz struck an agreement with the SPD and Greens to reform the constitutionally embedded debt break and create a €500bn special infrastructure investment fund and unlock potentially unlimited defence spending (Ross, 2025). This was done before the new Bundestag – in which the far left and far right will have a blocking minority on constitutional reform – came into office. With this step, the new coalition has underlined its commitment to addressing structural and institutional weaknesses of the Bundeswehr, which has been hollowed out after decades of underfunding and political neglect (Neitzel, 2025). The German defence budget will double by the end of the decade, by which time it is expected that Germany will spend more on defence than the UK and Poland combined. The Bundeswehr is on course to becoming the strongest conventional army in Europe and the bulwark of European conventional deterrence and defence. This will transform the Federal Republic into one of Europe's leading military powers, greatly strengthening its political weight in terms of structural leadership and influence in the European security system.

'The new coalition has thus put in place the three preconditions for a more dynamic and decisive leadership role in Europe: a clear strategy, cohesive political leadership, and adequate funding.'

'Germany is back,' Chancellor Merz declared after striking the deal on the debt break. The new coalition has thus put in place the three preconditions for a more dynamic and decisive leadership role in Europe: a clear strategy, cohesive political leadership, and adequate funding. Merz has clearly indicated his intention to make foreign and security policy his *Chefsache* (top priority), giving special attention to European policy. His intention is to strengthen Germany's bilateral relations in Europe so as to give Berlin a pivotal role in European diplomacy. Germany must change from being a 'sleeping middle-sized power' (*Mittelmacht*) to a leading middle-sized power', he has argued (Gebauer et al., 2025). Reflecting the sense of urgency that has gripped Merz and his allies, the new coalition agreement – entitled 'Responsibility for Germany' (*Verantwortung für Deutschland*) – was negotiated in record time. Introducing the agreement, Merz argued that Germany was currently facing a 'situation of growing geopolitical tensions'. The response of the coalition-in-waiting to these uncertain times, he said, was that 'we want to, and we will, help shape change in the world, for Germany' (Connor & Jones, 2025).

4.2 Reviving the Franco–German Motor

Chancellor Merz's first trips abroad were to Paris and Warsaw, indicating a desire to strengthen the 'Weimar Triangle' and enhance its role as one of Europe's premier minilateral forums. The bilateral relationship with France has long been of critical importance to the Federal Republic: the 2023 National Security Strategy singled out France as Germany's key partner, but under the traffic light coalition, relations deteriorated even further, and it is widely recognized that Scholz was a disappointment to Paris (Arnold & Major, 2024).

The new coalition agreement also emphasizes the 'outstanding importance' of the bilateral relationship with France, underlining its broader significance 'for the whole of Europe'. Merz has promised to reinvigorate the Franco–German 'motor' with new energy and dynamism, and there are now great expectations in Paris for the Merz administration. His pronouncements on Trump and call for European independence were enthusiastically welcomed in France. In a joint letter published on the occasion of Merz's official inaugural visit to Paris on 7 May, the German Chancellor and the French President declared that they had 'agreed on a comprehensive agenda to relaunch our relationship and strengthen Europe' (Macron & Merz, 2025), thereby demonstrating their joint ambitions for directional leadership.

Hammering out the details of such a comprehensive agenda may prove more protracted and difficult than hoped; nonetheless, the prospects are brighter than they have been for many years. The coalition agreement explicitly endorsed President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 concept of European 'strategic sovereignty' to include key technologies, energy, digital platforms, critical infrastructure, and resilience (Seidendorf, 2025; Jansen et al, 2025). There is great potential for strengthening defence–industry cooperation, as well as developing a cross-border electricity infrastructure within the framework of a European Energy Union, including nuclear energy (which is of considerable importance for France). Chancellor Merz has also signalled a desire for closer cooperation with France on nuclear deterrence (Becker & Zand, 2025). With the uncertainty surrounding Trump's commitment to Article V security guarantees, including the US nuclear umbrella, Merz has begun exploring the potential and modalities of extending French nuclear guarantees to Germany. A '3 plus 3' framework has been established – consisting of President Macron and Chancellor Merz as well as their respective foreign and defence ministers – to explore the possibilities of giving France's *force de frappe* a 'European dimension' (Cameron, 2025; Coen et al., 2025).

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The cloud on the horizon is Macron's domestic weakness and his fragile parliamentary support, with the current minority government being weak and unstable and facing major budgetary constraints. New presidential elections will be held in 2027 (without Macron, who is barred from standing for a third term) in the face of a major challenge from Marine Le Pen's National Rally. Chancellor Merz therefore realizes that he has two years to revitalize the Franco–German motor and set the strategic guidelines for the future so that Franco–German cooperation has a momentum that will help it survive the turbulent waters of French domestic politics (De Weck, 2025).

4.3 Renewed Partnership with Poland and the Weimar Triangle

For Germany, the relationship with Poland, which is its largest neighbour in East Central Europe, is also of singular importance. Their bilateral relationship has been historically fraught, and the legacy of successive partitions, wars, and atrocities continues to sour their interactions. Since the end of the cold war, the Federal Republic has therefore seen rapprochement and partnership with Poland as a primary foreign policy goal – similar in historical importance and political symbolism to that with France (Bagger, 2022).

Bilateral relations deteriorated under the previous right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS)-led Polish government, because of both its violation of EU liberal principles and the virulent anti-German foreign policy of the PiS. Since the election of Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his centre-right Civic Platform in the autumn of 2023, relations have steadily improved, but the ambivalence and strategic caution of the Scholz government led to a sense of Polish frustration with Germany – leading in part to a pivot to the more like-minded NB8 countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Lepiarz, 2024).

Merz has been keen to establish cordial and cooperative relations with Poland, and it was the second country he visited after France. Foreign Minister Waidepohl has also spoken of the government's desire to give German-Polish relations a 'new dimension', beginning with a recognition of Nazi crimes in Poland (Von Nahmen, 2025). This includes the construction of a memorial site for the more than five million Polish victims of the Third Reich on the site of the former Kroll Opera House, as well as the establishment of a German-Polish house in Berlin as a place of remembrance and encounter. Germany has also sought to strengthen its military engagement with Poland, recently deploying five Eurofighter Typhoons to Poland during the Russian-Belarus Zapad-25 military exercise – the first deployment of the Luftwaffe on Polish territory (Röpcke, 2025). Germany had previously deployed two of its Patriot air defence batteries to Rzeszów to protect this key hub for aid to Ukraine (Adamowski, 2025).

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However, relations with Poland have been challenging because of a dispute over the border and irregular immigration. As part of his response to challenges from *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), Merz reinforced border controls under the Schengen agreement's 'national emergency' mechanism and turned back migrants arriving irregularly (Bunde & Sus, 2025). One dark cloud on the horizon for Polish-German relations is the narrow victory of the far-right populist Karol Nawrocki in the Polish presidential election, which has created a tense cohabitation between the President and the liberal government of Prime Minister Tusk. It also exposes the divided and contested nature of Polish domestic politics – which is a feature of all European democracies. Tusk may find that his room for manoeuvre in foreign policy is constrained by domestic politics, thereby possibly limiting the potential of the Weimar Triangle and weakening Poland's emerging leadership role in European security and defence (Ruy, 2025).

Improved Polish-German bilateral relations are critical for reviving the Weimar Triangle, which includes France. A revitalized Weimar Triangle is seen as important for coordinating EU policy. It also presents a significant minilateral platform for Germany to exercise collective and cooperative leadership within both the EU and NATO, providing a kernel of European powers spanning East, Centre, and West, and supplying the core grouping for wider coalitions of partners in the 'Weimar+' format (which includes additional major countries such as the UK, Italy, and Spain).

4.4 Beyond Brexit: Reforging Relations with the UK

Germany's relationship with the UK has been called *die Stille Allianz* ('the quiet Alliance') (Kaiser & Roper, 1988). Lacking the flowery political rhetoric or emotional symbolism of Berlin's relations with either France or Poland, it has nevertheless been a close and cooperative partnership, characterized by pragmatism and a shared outlook on NATO, the transatlantic relationship, and the importance of an open, global trading system. Brexit, however, wounded the relationship deeply, leading to an obvious cooling in bilateral relations.

‘This is the first-ever treaty on comprehensive strategic cooperation between the UK and Germany, and thus a highly symbolic milestone in their bilateral relations.’

Over the past year or so, however, this has begun to change. The forging of a new post-Brexit bilateral relationship began under the governments of Olaf Scholz and Rishi Sunak but was given particular emphasis by the new Labour government of Keir Starmer, who viewed warmer relations with Berlin as the key to unlocking a broader reset with the EU. This led to the signing of the Trinity House agreement in October 2024, a ‘first of its kind’ accord that committed the UK and Germany to deepening defence cooperation across all domains (air, land, sea, and cyber) (Ministry of Defence, 2024a). Described as a ‘milestone moment’ and a ‘landmark’ agreement that ‘marks a fundamental shift in the UK’s relationship with Germany and for European security’, it cements deepened cooperation between Europe’s two largest defence spenders and two largest economies, who both lead Forward Land Force battlegroups in the Baltic states (Ministry of Defence, 2024b).

Chancellor Merz has long indicated his desire to develop closer relations with the UK, underlining their shared national interests and the benefits of deepening cooperation for Europe. He has also recognized that a stronger and more self-reliant European defence cannot be built exclusively within the EU but must include the UK. He has therefore spoken of the need to forge a ‘European defence community, which also includes countries that are not members of the European Union’ (Reuters, 2025). In July 2025, this led to the signing of the Kensington Treaty, which consolidates and builds upon the October 2024 Trinity House agreement on defence cooperation (Wright, 2025). This is the first-ever treaty on comprehensive strategic cooperation between the UK and Germany, and thus a highly symbolic milestone in their bilateral relations. The treaty will be implemented through a series of annual action plans and strategic dialogue, and will include deepening military cooperation, closer defence–industry cooperation, and scientific–technological cooperation.

This breakthrough in German–UK bilateral relations facilitates the deepening of trilateral cooperation between Europe’s ‘Big Three’ in the E3 format (France, Germany and the UK). Cooperation among the E3 has long been an important element of European diplomacy, but it has often been stymied by the ‘trilateral asymmetries’ between them, i.e. over the EU, attitudes to NATO and transatlantic relations, nuclear deterrence, economic regulation, and global trade. However, with the rejuvenation of Franco–German relations, the UK–German Kensington Treaty, and the revitalization of the Franco–British ‘entente cordiale’ in the Lancaster House framework, the prospects are very positive for a qualitatively new phase of deepened trilateral cooperation between the three major powers in Europe. If these three core European countries can continue to forge a sense of common purpose and strategic vision, they are well placed to provide effective cooperative leadership for Europe.

4.5 Germany and Minilateral Diplomacy

The proliferation of minilateral forums is one of the distinctive trends in European and global politics (Masala, 2023: 94–98). Minilateralism has long been a feature of European diplomacy, but its importance has grown in recent years. The term ‘minilateralism’ refers to smaller networks of states bound by shared interests, geographical proximity, and common strategic concerns (Hyde-Price, 2025b). They tend to be a more flexible and ad hoc tool for interest aggregation and consensus building than larger, more cumbersome multilateral institutions, which often suffer from ‘institutional friction’, making their decision-making slower and more bureaucratic. Their significance has grown recently because of the deepening sense of existential crisis in Europe caused by Putin’s war and Trump’s erratic and unpredictable behaviour, which has amplified the need for rapid and nimble diplomacy. Flexible and manageable minilateral formats bring together like-minded states (‘coalitions of the willing’) and key European stakeholders to hammer out swift responses to rapidly

‘Germany has made great use of these minilateral ‘coalitions of the willing’ in recent years, and Merz himself seems to have a predilection for such forms of flexible minilateral diplomacy.’

changing developments. Larger and more inclusive multilateral organizations like the EU and NATO retain their central place as the institutional pillars of European order, but they are less well suited to crisis management or the formulations of bold and effective top-down strategies. Minilateral forums thus represent the lifeblood and animating essence of European diplomacy and crisis management, facilitating the more drawn-out process of interest articulation and integration within the EU and NATO by creating building blocks of consensus and compromise, around which others can cluster (Hyde-Price, 2025a).

Germany has made great use of these minilateral ‘coalitions of the willing’ in recent years, and Merz himself seems to have a predilection for such forms of flexible minilateral diplomacy. As the ‘geographical core land of the old continent’, situated ‘between the Alps and North and Baltic Seas, between the Rhine and the Oder’, and with ‘the largest population in the EU and also the strongest economy in the Common Market’ (Fischer, 2025: 211), it is no surprise that Germany sits at the heart of many of these webs of networked minilateral cooperation in Europe. One example is the ‘European Group of five’ (E5), which was initiated by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, and which brings together Europe’s top five defence spenders (Germany, France, the UK, Poland, and Italy). Faced with the prospect of Trump’s re-election, the E5 first met in Berlin on 25 November 2024 to hammer out a joint position on support for Ukraine and a strategy for ‘keeping the transatlantic bond strong, while at the same time significantly increasing the European contribution to deterrence and defence’ (Lin, 2025). Subsequent meetings have been attended or briefed by the NATO Secretary-General, the European Commission President, the European High Representative, and the European Commissioner for Defence, thus linking this core grouping with the twin pillars of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Another example is the ‘Weimar+ group’, which includes the Weimar three (France, Germany and Poland) along with the UK, Italy, and Spain, as well as EU and NATO representatives. Formed in February 2025 as an explicit response to Trump’s peace plan, its primary purpose is to coordinate European policy towards Ukraine and underline the group’s commitment to a ‘just, comprehensive and sustainable peace’. It meets regularly, most recently in London in May, Italy in June, Warsaw in August, and Copenhagen in October 2025. Within the EU, the ‘EU5’ brings together the Weimar three and Italy and Spain, with a focus on building consensus on EU policy. Both these minilateral groupings are important because they include two of the most important southern European countries bordering the Mediterranean, namely Italy and Spain. One of the deepest fractures in European security and defence expenditure within Europe is that between the northern and eastern-central Europeans – who live in the shadow of Russia – and the southwestern/Mediterranean countries, for whom Russia is a more distant and less pressing threat. If Germany is to provide more leadership in European foreign and security policy, it must be able to bridge these competing interests and identify common ground between them – essentially adopting an entrepreneurial leadership style. In this respect, minilateral groupings can serve a vital purpose as a tool for interest articulation and integration between north and south, and east and west.

4.6 Germany’s Evolving Role in Nordic-Baltic Security

For much of the past three decades, Germany has had a low profile in the Nordic-Baltic region, focusing primarily on multilateral forums like the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), but otherwise having a limited security role in the region (Friede & Schaal, 2021). German foreign and security policy has tended to focus on its East-West dimension, and its approach to the Baltic Sea region has tended to be that of a largely passive and reactive player with fragmented and selective contributions to the security of the region (Sprüds & Vizgunova, 2018: 213; Interviews, 2025).

Berlin now regards the Baltic Sea as a key line of confrontation with Russia, prompting a more active role in regional security. Since 2014, Germany has sought to exercise **issue-specific and cooperative leadership**, with the navy carving out responsibility for Baltic maritime security, initiating the Baltic Commanders Conference, and establishing the Combined Task Force Baltic in Rostock (Hyde-Price, 2025b). As Defence Minister Pistorius stressed, the Baltic's security is inseparable from that of Europe, underscoring how Germany's leadership in this region has become central to its broader European commitments (Mohr, 2025b).

Germany also took on responsibility for serving as lead nation in NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Lithuania, and in June 2023, Germany announced it would increase its troops stationed there to brigade strength by the end of 2027, designated as Panzerbrigade 45 (also known as the 'Lithuania Brigade') (Beaver & Lapporte, 2025). The German-led FLF has been described as 'a beacon project of the watershed era in security policy' and will involve the building of the Bundeswehr's first permanent military base abroad. This, the German State Secretary for Defence Nils Hilmer has declared, 'brings the Zeitenwende into life' (Höller, 2025). Chancellor Merz has subsequently underlined the significance of this military commitment, declaring that 'Lithuania's security is our security. The defence of Vilnius is the defence of Berlin'. 'Our shared peace,' he continued, 'knows no geographic limits – it ends where we stop defending it' (LRT, 2025).

In order to facilitate a more coordinated and operationally integrated approach to the defence of the Baltic states, Germany took the initiative with Estonia to introduce the '3+3' format to bring together the defence ministers of the three Baltic states and the FLF framework nations (Germany, Canada, and the UK). This cooperation was given added impetus by the Trinity House agreement and the Northwood Declaration, which committed Germany and the UK enhancing 'the cooperation in the framework of Forward Land Forces and NATO's Advance Plans, in order to support deterrence activities and the ability to defend Allies' territory', in coordination with the 3+3 format (Ministry of Defence, 2024a). This military commitment to the Baltic is further reinforced by German participation in NATO Baltic air policing, and by its role as one of three lead nations, alongside Denmark and Poland, contributing to the corps staff of HQ MNCNE (Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast) in Szczecin (Bundeswehr, 2025).

'As German investment in the Bundeswehr begins to generate new capabilities and assets, its potential for exercising an enhanced leadership role in Nordic-Baltic security will inevitably grow.'

Germany's growing leadership role in Baltic maritime security and its pathbreaking contribution to NATO's deterrence by denial in the Baltic states is complemented by its deepening security and defence-industry cooperation with the Nordic countries. As German investment in the Bundeswehr begins to generate new capabilities and assets, its potential for exercising an enhanced leadership role in Nordic-Baltic security will inevitably grow. This gives the 'Nordic-Baltic Eight' (NB8) the opportunity to both contribute to and shape Germany's emerging leadership role, creating new synergies and strengthening interoperability. The NB8 is another prime example of minilateral networking among regional neighbours with similar approaches to Ukraine, the transatlantic security partnership, and beefing up NATO's European pillar (Hallgren & Rhinard, 2025). The potential of the NB8 has been further enhanced by the recent participation of Poland – the 'Sparta' of East Central Europe – in the NB8 summit in Harpsund, Sweden in December 2024 (which underlined a renewed Polish engagement to the security of the Baltic Sea region), as well as the participation by video link of French President Macron (Lepiarz, 2024). German officials have welcomed the emergence of a more cohesive NB8, which is helping to shift the geostrategic focus towards NATO's north-eastern flank, and operating collectively, the NB8 also have a much greater potential for shaping Germany's evolving leadership role in the region.

4.7 Germany and the EU: Entrepreneurial and Ideational Leadership

Merz's new coalition was eagerly awaited in Brussels. Chancellor Scholz was seen as an obstacle to further integration and enhanced cooperation, at best unengaged and unreliable. Merz has the reputation of being pro-European (his mentor was Wolfgang Schäuble who, together with Karl Lamers, pushed for the adoption of a 'core Europe' in 1994). As we have seen, the Merz administration also promises to provide a more coherent and coordinated procedure for formulating Berlin's *Europapolitik*, hopefully dispensing with the embarrassment of the 'German vote' (Interviews, 2025).

'Merz's government is determined to preserve European values and the EU's rule of law and appears ready to take more effective action against member states – above all, Hungary – that violate EU laws and values.'

The coalition agreement commits the government to an 'effective, coherent and reliable' EU policy in order to 'exploit all possibilities to strengthen the EU's capacity to act and its strategic sovereignty' (Koalitionsvertrag, 2025). It also indicates a resolve to address threats to EU interests and values – both from abroad and from rogue actors within. Merz's government is determined to preserve European values and the EU's rule of law and appears ready to take more effective action against member states – above all, Hungary – that violate EU laws and values. This includes infringement proceedings, freezing EU funds, and utilizing Article 7 procedures in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to suspend voting rights in the Council. Germany is also supportive of EU enlargement but emphasizes that this is to be accompanied by internal reforms, such as an extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the European Council and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as well as a greater use of differentiated integration within a 'Europe of various speeds'. The coalition agreement also advocates a staged accession process and is more amenable toward Ukraine, Moldova, and the six western Balkan countries than either Turkey or Georgia (Jansen et al, 2025).

One problem that initially emerged was whether the decision of the Merz coalition to reform the debt break and establish a €500bn infrastructure investment fund broke the fiscal rules of the EU's Stability and Growth Pact. There were also some concerns that Germany's huge loans could lead to higher interest rates in European financial markets, making it more difficult for other EU member states to finance investment and public expenditure through borrowing. However, Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil argued that the €500bn investment fund should be allowed under the existing exemption clauses and flexibilities, and would moreover lead to more growth, 'and that's also positive for Europe' (Walther, 2025). However, in July, the German government reached an agreement with the European Commission allowing a multi-year fiscal plan for the years 2025–29, promising to curb the level of expenditure after an initial burst of investment, backed by 'credible consolidation measures' (Lunday & von der Burchard, 2025).

In terms of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the coalition agreement commits Germany to playing a 'leading role' within it and calls for the greater use of QMV to make it more effective and contribute to the goal of forging a European Security Union. However, in contrast to France, Germany continues to insist that a strengthening of EU security and defence policy complements NATO's continued role as the bedrock of European deterrence and defence. Unlike France, Germany has never accepted that there is a contradiction between the two. The Merz government has emphasized the importance of strengthening EU–NATO cooperation and its commitment to 'a European Defence Union to strengthen the European pillar of NATO', along with 'a genuine single market for defence equipment with common export rules and close cooperation on planning, development and procurement' (Seidendorf, 2025).

Nonetheless, difficulties may arise that expose the tensions between the two organizations. Tensions already exist between the EU and NATO, given that the Commission wishes to set the template for standardization and rearmament through its EU Capabilities Defence Plan (CDP), thereby trespassing on NATO's Defence Planning Process (NDPP). The Commission is keen to expand the EU's military staff and enlarge its Rapid Development Capacity (RDC). However, the Merz government's position on this is clear: the EU should not seek to duplicate what NATO already does. Merz has also spoken of the need to forge a European Security Community that includes non-EU countries like the UK and Norway, and is keen to include them in defence-industry cooperation. This may create disagreements with France and others, who would prefer EU defence funding to be exclusively available to EU members only. Berlin is also likely to oppose calls for joint borrowing for EU defence spending from countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy, and more generally it has insisted that it will 'continue not to assume liability for the obligations of other member states' (Jansen et al, 2025).

4.8 NATO and Transatlantic Relations: Structural and Directional Leadership

One of the most dramatic shifts in German foreign policy has occurred in response to Trump's return to the White House and his idiosyncratic and unpredictable approach to transatlantic relations. Shortly after his election victory, Friedrich Merz – a lifelong Atlantist and former head of the Atlantik-Brücke, a German organization committed to promoting transatlantic partnership and networking – declared that Europe's 'absolute priority' was to become independent from the United States as soon as possible, no matter what the cost (Wintour, 2025).

Since then, Merz has walked back on this radical step and has sought to foster a close relationship with President Trump. The coalition agreement prepared the ground for this, describing the transatlantic relationship as a 'great success story that should be continued, even under the new conditions'. Merz's first meeting with Trump on 5 June 2025 was seen by many analysts as a success, cementing a degree of common understanding between the two leaders, which bodes well for US-German bilateral cooperation.

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One contributory factor was that Chancellor Merz was able to inform President Trump that his new government would commit to NATO's new goal of spending 5% on security and defence. During his first presidency, Trump focused much of his ire on Angela Merkel's Germany, which he viewed as the epitome of European free-riding and complacency (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019a). A decade or so ago, Germany was viewed as something of a 'black hole' in NATO (Bunde, 2013); more recently, though, Germany has emerged as a much more dynamic and committed alliance member, willing and able to contribute to collective deterrence and defence. In his speech in July 2025 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Germany's accession to NATO, Secretary-General Mark Rutte noted that 'Germany is a driving force in our Alliance', leading the FLF in Lithuania, contributing to maritime security in the Baltic Sea, participating in air patrols over Baltic skies, and being the largest European contributor of military aid to Ukraine. 'As the world becomes more dangerous, and our security is at stake, Germany continues to step up.' Noting the new government's commitment to meeting the NATO goal of 3.5% of GDP for core defence requirements 'not in 2035, but already in 2029', Rutte declared: 'This is remarkable. This is leadership' (Rutte, 2025).

Although Chancellor Merz has struck up a constructive working relationship with Trump, and despite the broadly positive outcome of the recent NATO summit in The Hague (24–25 July 2025), the German government is likely to continue to focus on the long-term strategic goal of a more independent Europe capable of defending itself militarily and furthering its

‘The current policy of the Merz coalition thus appears sufficiently well calibrated to meet the complex challenges of the current conjuncture ...’

collective interests. German policymakers remain acutely worried about the robustness of NATO and the reliability of US security guarantees (Interviews, 2025). They also recognize that Trump is symptomatic of a deeper shift in US grand strategy away from Europe and towards the Asia-Pacific region. However, it will take a decade or more before current procurement and investment plans generate the military capabilities and strategic enablers Europe requires to defend itself. Meanwhile, the outgoing head of Germany’s federal intelligence service (BND) has said that his agency has ‘concrete’ evidence that Russia is planning aggression against NATO territory to test Article 5 security guarantees. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has also said that whilst a Russian attack ‘at the moment’ is not expected, ‘our experts estimate that it could be possible within a period of five to eight years’ – an assessment shared by other intelligence agencies in the Nordic-Baltic region (Alipour, 2025; Burilkov & Wolff, 2025; Jochecová, 2025).

The current policy of the Merz coalition thus appears sufficiently well calibrated to meet the complex challenges of the current conjuncture: cultivating a close and cooperative relationship with the Trump administration and identifying areas for pragmatic transatlantic cooperation, whilst steadily strengthening the European pillar of NATO. Germany will be central to both the recalibration of NATO and the transatlantic partnership as a more balanced and reciprocal relationship, and strengthening Europe’s own political cohesion, military capabilities, and economic competitiveness. The demands on German leadership have never been higher.

4.9 Policy Towards Russia: a Test Case of Entrepreneurial Leadership

One of the critical litmus tests of German leadership in Europe will be whether it is able to broker a new consensus on EU and European policy towards Russia that bridges the divide between countries like the UK, Poland, and the NB8 on the one hand (which live in the shadow of Russia and are confronted by almost constant grey-zone aggression (Ålander & Oksanen, 2025)) and EU members such as Spain, Italy, and Greece on the other (for whom Russia is a more distant and less immediate threat) – as well as the more pro-Putin leaders in Hungary and Slovakia.

The German approach towards Russia changed significantly with the *Zeitenwende* (Interviews, 2025). Prior to that, Germany had broadly pursued a policy of diplomatic engagement and trade with Russia, arguing that European security could only be built with Russia and not against it. This meant that by 2014, Germany was heavily reliant on imports of cheap Russian natural gas – leading to an energy dependence on Russia that continued to grow even after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its clandestine war in eastern Ukraine. Putin, it has been suggested, assumed that Germany’s energy dependence, its influential business lobby, and its deep-seated pacifist instincts would prevent a more robust response to his ‘special military operation’ (Fix & Kapp, 2023).

In this he was wrong. In his *Zeitenwende* speech, Olaf Scholz signalled a dramatic turn in German *Ostpolitik*, cutting ties with Moscow and reaffirming security commitments to the Baltic states and East Central Europeans. Previous assumptions that diplomatic engagement with Moscow would tame or constrain the Putin regime were discarded, and Germany was subsequently to become the largest provider of military aid to Ukraine after the US. Scholz, however, left the door ajar for re-engaging with Moscow diplomatically at a future point in time, creating an element of ambiguity in Germany’s Russian policy (Scholz, 2022).

‘The Merz government, however, is also likely to want to keep its diplomatic options open in terms of re-engaging with Moscow at some point in the future.’

The new ‘Black-Red’ coalition seems inclined to adopt a tougher and more robust approach towards the Putin regime, focusing on strengthening European collective deterrence and defence, and reinforcing European security against Russia – at least for the foreseeable future. In this, Germany will garner support from Poland and the Nordic-Baltic countries, along with the UK; however, this policy will be less enthusiastically embraced by Mediterranean countries, for whom the Russian threat is far away, and which are more concerned about security threats in the Middle East and North Africa – and of course, from pro-Russian governments like Hungary. In forging a new Russian policy, Germany is likely to make extensive use of minilateral formats like the Weimar Triangle, the European three (E3), ‘Weimar+’, the Group of Five (G5), and the EU5 in order to forge a new consensus around which other EU members will be able to coalesce.

The Merz government, however, is also likely to want to keep its diplomatic options open in terms of re-engaging with Moscow at some point in the future. Unlike Poland and the Baltic states, which see Russia primarily as a latent or potential threat, Germany has a more global perspective and a broader set of foreign policy concerns. In the future, Berlin may see Moscow as a necessary interlocutor in addressing problems such as the Iranian or North Korean nuclear programmes, instability in Africa, management of the Arctic and High North, and instability in the Asia-Pacific region. Germany – like its partners in Paris, London, and Washington – has global not just regional interests, and its policy towards Russia will inevitably reflect that. One critical issue here is whether Berlin believes it is still worth adhering to the stipulations of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which sets limits on the permanent basing of ‘substantial combat troops’ in new member states in East Central Europe. Poland, amongst others, has noted that the Putin regime has violated its commitment in the Founding Act to respecting the rules-based order – as it has also violated its security commitments to Ukraine in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum – and that therefore NATO countries should not regard themselves as being bound by the political commitments they made in a very different security context (Dyner et al., 2018). After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, NATO declared that it no longer viewed Russia as a partner and ended its commitment to adhere to the restrictions on new troop deployments along its eastern border. The German government shares this assessment but views the Founding Act as frozen, not formally repudiated. It regards itself as no longer bound by the military restrictions of the agreement, but it does not share the Polish view, for example, that the Founding Act should be formally abandoned. How the Merz government approaches this question will therefore be an important indication of its broader strategy towards Russia. Whatever the outcome, forging a common European policy towards Russia is bound to involve compromises that will leave some countries disgruntled and disappointed.

5. Domestic and External Constraints on German Leadership

The constraints on German leadership are both domestic and external. Domestically, Chancellor Merz’s government will be constrained by coalition politics, the Bundestag, a critical press, and public opinion. The electoral surge of both the far-right AfD and radical left-wing populist parties has resulted in an increasingly fractured and contested domestic political landscape, which means that whatever lingering remnants of the ‘permissive consensus’ on European integration remain are quickly dissipating. Germany’s Europapolitik is now at the centre of the political controversies opened up by the rise of populist movements on the far right and far left. Similarly, whilst rearmament, support for Ukraine, and a robust policy of deterrence towards Russia are currently broadly supported in the Bundestag and by public opinion, this mainstream centrist consensus may become more frayed and fragile. The rise of the AfD is perhaps the most immediate and most

‘Some in the CDU are close to Germany’s powerful business lobby (the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations), who are calling for a resumption of trade with Russia and a reopening of Nord Stream 2.’

serious challenge, as both coalition partners realize they have four years at most to improve economic conditions for ordinary citizens and demonstrate a sense of direction, integrity, and competence. This means that widely shared concerns about immigration, integration, and law and order need to be dealt with promptly and effectively – and above all, they must be seen to be dealt with (Interviews, 2025).

Whilst the core leadership team of the new coalition itself seems cohesive and determined, internal party politics also have the potential to generate friction and disruption. The left wing of the SPD remains vocal and active in its criticism of rearmament and its advocacy of a return to economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement with Putin’s Russia. One prominent example is Ralf Stegner (a member of the Bundestag intelligence committee), who attended a clandestine meeting in Baku with members of the Putin regime (Escritt, 2025). He was also a signatory of a manifesto signed by over a hundred SPD politicians who called for a reversal of the *Zeitenwende*, disarmament, and negotiations with the Putin regime over the creation of a ‘new peace and security order for Europe’ and ‘a gradual return to détente and co-operation’ with Russia (Garbe & Teevs, 2025; Tagesschau, 2025).

The CDU also has its internal critics and dissenters, including Jens Spahn (the head of the CDU/CSU group in the Bundestag) and others critical of the relaxation of fiscal discipline. Some in the CDU are close to Germany’s powerful business lobby (the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations), who are calling for a resumption of trade with Russia and a reopening of Nord Stream 2 (Sullivan, 2025). The CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the CSU, may also become critical of coalition policy, as seen with the ban on exporting weapons to Israel that could be used in Gaza.

There is perhaps a more intangible but nonetheless significant domestic constraint on a more proactive and strategic German foreign policy. Unlike France or the UK, let alone the United States, the Federal Republic has limited experience of playing a proactive leadership role in European or global affairs – particularly in security and defence policy. Indeed, since its establishment in 1949, it has been content with playing, at best, a supportive role – either to Paris or Washington. The presumption of an innate leadership ability is almost part of the DNA and national identity of countries like France, the UK, and the US. Leadership comes naturally to them, and they actively seek it. Not so the Federal Republic. As the German political scientist Herfried Münkler has argued, ‘Germany’s reason of state’ (*Staatsräson*) has been to leave leadership in the EU, for example, to France (Münkler, 2025). Nonetheless, the FRG has a large and professionally competent diplomatic corps, and the broader political class seems cognisant of the historic responsibility for leadership that falls on Germany given the existential challenges facing Europe.

In addition to the challenges from Germany’s fractious domestic political scene, the FRG will inevitably be faced with external constraints. Germany’s partners and allies want different things from the country, and it will be impossible to find compromise solutions that satisfy all parties. Hence, Germany is bound to face criticism from partners who feel that Berlin is not addressing their individual concerns. Berlin must therefore manage divergent expectations from European allies with very different geopolitical and economic interests, and with different political values and priorities – all the while managing sensitive relations with Washington, Kyiv, and Moscow, dealing with the combustible situation in the Middle East, and confronting the challenge of a rising China. Germany, it has been said, has more diplomatic balls to juggle than most (Joffe, in Hyde-Price, 2007: 121). Trump remains the joker in the pack, whose vagaries and unpredictability generate an underlying sense of *angst* across Europe.

In learning to lead, Germany must overcome the old West German tradition of avoiding hard choices and trying to please all its partners – what has been termed *Sowohl als Auch* ('as well as'). Berlin needs to appreciate that leadership does involve hard choices and that it cannot always please all parties. The Merz coalition will also need to strike a balance between a future goals-orientated leadership and maintaining the support of broad coalitions of followers. Too much structural and directional leadership and Germany will be criticized for throwing its weight around; too much compromise and concern with inclusive coalitions and German leadership will be deemed weak and directionless. There is always, and inevitably, a payoff between effective but selective coalitions and inclusive but ineffective ones (Interviews, 2025). Traditionally, German governments have favoured inclusive 'big tent' formats, but, as noted above, the optimal way ahead for Merz may be operating simultaneously across different minilateral formats in distinct policy domains. In this way, effective ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing and able' can be built, which can also serve as advocacy coalitions within larger multilateral institutions like the EU and NATO.

6. Conclusion

The 'German question' has preoccupied successive generations of European diplomats and academics for centuries. Because of its size and central geographical location, Germany has always been the key to European political order, serving as the fulcrum of the European balance of power and the lodestone of its institutional architecture. This study has addressed that question in a contemporary context by asking, first, whether the coalition government under Merz can deliver on the *Zeitenwende*, and second, whether Germany can assume a leadership role within Europe – and, if it decides that it will, what form this leadership will take. Today, however, the question is not how to contain or balance German power but whether Germany can exercise leadership in ways that are both effective and legitimate. Our analysis underscores the notion that leadership in Europe is inherently *relational*. It emerges through interaction between Germany and its partners and is conferred by followers as much as it is claimed by Germany itself. The Merz government has been aware of this, seeking to anchor its policies in cooperative frameworks and to position Germany as potentially *primus inter pares* within Europe rather than as a hegemon.

'Today, however, the question is not how to contain or balance German power but whether Germany can exercise leadership in ways that are both effective and legitimate.'

Equally important is the *context-dependent* character of German leadership. Merz's coalition government operates in a radically altered strategic environment marked by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, a volatile transatlantic relationship, and mounting systemic competition – conditions that both enable and constrain the German government's scope for leadership. Germany's embracing of minilateralism illustrates how context and issues shape leadership strategies. Faced with at times cumbersome EU and NATO decision-making, the German government has increasingly relied on *cross-loading* and on more flexible groupings such as the Weimar Triangle, the E3, and the EU5 to shape consensus and generate momentum.

Leadership in Europe is inherently dynamic, and Germany's trajectory should not be understood as a linear shift from restraint to activism but rather as an iterative process of *role adaptation* and *learning*. As we have argued elsewhere (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019), German foreign policymaking has undergone significant transformation over the past decade in response to a deteriorating security environment. This has involved a gradual move from a relatively diffuse and dispersed form of leadership towards a more proactive and articulated policy stance – one that external partners increasingly expect Germany to assume. The *Zeitenwende* under Chancellor Scholz marked an important moment of declaratory change, while the Merz coalition government appears intent on consolidating

a more robust strategic posture, thereby expanding the repertoire of leadership strategies available, ranging from more structural to more ideational forms. In this sense, the Merz government has partially delivered on the *Zeitenwende*: it has moved beyond declaratory change towards a more coherent strategic posture, though its consolidation remains uneven and constrained by domestic and external pressures. Nevertheless, this remains an ongoing process. Germany continues to test new institutional arrangements, explore novel formats of cooperation, and recalibrate its discourse and practices so as to respond to the shifting expectations of diverse partners.

Turning to the second question, our analysis has highlighted the interplay among different modes of leadership. The Merz government has drawn upon **structural leadership** through its growing economic and military clout, sought to exercise **entrepreneurial leadership** within minilateral forums, deployed **ideational leadership** in framing European sovereignty and cooperative leadership as guiding principles; and sought to practise **directional leadership** by setting examples, from sanctions to Baltic deployments. The emerging picture is that of a government attempting to craft a distinctly German model of leadership – cooperative rather than domineering, embedded in networks rather than unilateral, and attuned to Europe’s pluralism rather than to hierarchical command.

Yet a crucial caveat concerns the domestic political dimension. German foreign policymakers are highly sensitive to shifts in public opinion and the significant winds of change in domestic politics. Merz failed in the last election to win a convincing majority, which resulted in a grand ‘Black-Red’ coalition government. As debates over energy dependence, military spending, and migration have shown, foreign policy leadership can be sharply contested at home. Merz’s critics have accused him of being an *Aussenkanzler* (‘foreign affairs chancellor’), more interested in foreign affairs than in addressing domestic problems, and his approval ratings after his first 100 days in office were lower than those of Olaf Scholz at the same stage in his chancellorship (Moody, 2025). Coalition management, electoral considerations, and the volatile party landscape all place limits on the extent to which German leaders can commit to bold initiatives abroad. Domestic politics thus not only shape the legitimacy of German leadership but can also hamper its consistency and credibility in the eyes of external partners (Interviews, 2025).

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German leadership is therefore likely to remain a relational, pluralistic, and adaptive form of leadership – marked by coalition building, persuasion, and consensus brokering, but now underpinned by a stronger structural foundation and a clearer strategic sense of direction. Whether this evolving model of German leadership will meet the great expectations placed upon it remains uncertain. While the *Zeitenwende* has not yet fulfilled all its transformative ambitions, it has set Germany on a more deliberate and strategic course, and the success of this evolution will matter not only for Germany but for Europe as whole. At a time when the European Union faces mounting geopolitical pressures, and its French counterpart – the traditional twin in the France–Germany engine – is domestically unsettled ahead of presidential elections, Germany’s steadiness and capacity for cooperative leadership will be pivotal. Whether this evolving model can sustain momentum and drive European coherence remains uncertain, but the trajectory suggests that the Federal Republic is learning, adapting, and cautiously growing into its role as a central, stabilizing pillar in a fragile European order.

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