



Germany's Role in a Geopolitically Changed Europe: the Thinking in Berlin

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Summary

As the European continent teeters between a gradual integration of the lands and peoples between Germany and Russia and the potential for a further escalation of the Ukraine war, Germany is reflecting on its role as the West's major European power. Given Germany's economic, political and military weight, what it concludes will have profound implications for the future of Europe.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western complaints have mainly concerned a perceived German unwillingness to assume a role commensurate with the country's size and importance. However, the Ukraine war has propelled Germany into a forward position in territories historically marked by German-Russian rivalry and conflicting internal relationships. Meanwhile, the balance between the two leading continental powers, Germany and France, has changed and needs to be reset.

Finding its footing in this hazy landscape is a daunting task. As Germany gradually defines its positions, and given its weight, it is likely to be as much criticized for its actions as its inactions.

Understanding the content and direction of German policymaking is consequently of great importance for the rest of Europe, and the world beyond. The aim of this text, largely based on interviews with officials of Germany's Federal Government, is to help further this understanding.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

1. Introduction

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine will likely lead to the extension of EU territory further to the east through the gradual absorption of eight new members, including Ukraine, creating a continuous EU border from the Baltic to the Black Sea, back-to-back with the borders of Russia and Belarus. The continent will thus be divided into two systems in conflict. The parallel evolution of gradual integration alongside conflict, be it hot or frozen, will likely characterize the foreseeable future, a reality Europeans will have to live with.

This prospect has provoked a number of questions in the EU's largest and most economically powerful state, Germany.¹ For example: does this mean that Europe's centre of gravity is shifting to the east, as is sometimes stated? What will Germany's role be in a geopolitically changed Europe? How do Germans perceive themselves? These and other soul-searching questions are currently being asked in the German Federal Government with opinions differing between individuals and ministries.

Some answers have been provided in Germany's first National Security Strategy,² published in June this year. In this strategy, the Federal Government asserts Germany's responsibility – as the most populous country and the largest economy at the heart of Europe – for ensuring peace, security and stability. While welcomed in many European quarters as a first step towards a clarification on Germany's role, an external, and sometimes anxious, audience awaits further answers to questions of great importance for Europe's future.

German hesitance can in part be attributed to a traditional, post-war reluctance to assume a more pronounced leadership role in Europe, but also to the immense complexities involved in imagining the future of a continent at war, with eight Eastern European countries hoping to join the EU. While a Franco-German understanding remains a prerequisite for major European decisions, it is

thought to no longer be enough to automatically carry the continent's south and north. Multiple formations and a gradual process is therefore the preferred way to proceed, in the view of policymakers in Berlin.

Playing a principal organizing role, albeit within a Western context, in the ongoing historic transformation of Europe will require a highly skilled decision- and policymaking process on the part of Germany. An intense reflection phase regarding the challenges is under way in the Federal Government.

The aim of this text is to reflect German official and unofficial thinking on a number of important issues related to Germany's future role in a geopolitically changed Europe, with an emphasis on security matters and an institutional focus on the EU. Understanding the way German thinking evolves in times of historic transformations is of utmost importance. This analysis hopes to contribute to such an understanding.

The analysis is to a considerable extent based on informal interviews with officials of the German Federal Government conducted in May 2023.³ The generosity of German decision makers, who shared their reflections on Germany's role in a geopolitically changed Europe, greatly contributed to the task.

Views described in the paper do not necessarily represent a cohesive official German position, but rather reflect the thinking among centrally placed policymakers, as well as recent official statements of German positions. It first discusses Germany's political and military role in Eastern Europe and then proceeds to describe how Germany intends to navigate a more heterogeneous Europe. It then accounts for the effect of this changing context on the Franco-German relationship, and ends with some conclusions on Germany's role in Europe's new geopolitical context.

¹ The author apologizes for the gross oversimplification of the two categories 'Germany' and 'Russia', given their differing configurations over time.

² German Federal Government, Berlin (June 2023). [*Robust. Resilient. Sustainable: Integrated Security for Germany National Security Strategy*](#).

³ Interviews will in the following be referenced as '...in the view of Berlin...', '... according to Berlin...' etc. The author is fully responsible for the way these views are presented and for eventual misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The Swedish Embassy in Berlin played a valuable role in facilitating the interviews.

2. Is Europe's Centre of Gravity Shifting to the East?

On 14 June 2023 the German Federal Government formulated its first national security strategy. The Strategy states that Germany assumes its responsibilities in awareness of its history and that it is grateful for the reconciliations with its neighbours. As such, the declaration confirms post-war German reconciliation with countries which were the victims of Nazi-German aggression.

But is there also a need to reassure the Central and Eastern Europeans of Germany's commitment to the region in view of the more recent past, considering the country's perceived attentiveness towards Russian sensitivities and a slow start in providing military support to Ukraine? One Berlin official recognized that Germany's Russia policy has been shaped by guilt over the Second World War at the expense of awareness of the suffering of Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland and Ukraine. Their fate has, however, now come to the fore in German policy responses. Furthermore, as the Berlin official noted, Germany is situated in the middle of Europe – at the cross-roads of Central and Eastern Europe – and has itself been divided and occupied and can therefore understand the many different positions. Navigating these fraught waters is, however, not without its complications.

As regards the question of a Europe's centre of gravity shifting to the east,⁴ opinion in Berlin is already formed: if there is a shift, it is one of attention, not of gravity, at least if 'centre' is understood as 'power'. The 'big four' member states – Germany, France, Spain, Italy – account for two thirds of EU GDP and Eastern European countries only one tenth, one points out. To this can be added that Germany's commitment to spend 2% of its GDP, or €75.5 billion, on defence as of 2024 will place Germany among the world's

top five military spenders, if compared with data from 2022.⁵ The special defence fund of €100 billion will help fill the gap between baseline spending of 1.4% and the new 2%. It will be used to smoothen out differences between outlays over various fiscal years and to avoid the loss of unused resources at the end of the fiscal year.⁶ Poland's valiant decision to spend 4% on defence corresponds, in absolute terms, to only around a third of German expenditure.⁷

2.1 Eastern Leadership

The ability to lead is an issue that raises further questions in Berlin. German policymakers ask themselves whether Poland and Hungary intend to steer the EU, and if so how. Are they in favour of deeper integration (or do they rather need to be more integrated themselves)? Negative answers to these questions preclude a leadership role, in the view of some in Berlin.

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Furthermore, there is no cohesive 'East'. Poland certainly aspires to a leadership role in the east, arguing that they have always been right regarding Russia and therefore should have been listened to.⁸ But while Poland may have been right in its reading of Russian intentions, that does not automatically translate into leadership, notes one Berlin observer. Will Poland have followers in an Eastern Europe characterized by grey zones? The Baltic states for example, have their own orientation. The future political direction of Slovakia is uncertain, and so on, according to reasoning in Berlin.

⁴ Prochwicz-Jazowska, Marta and Weber, Gesine (2023). ['Europe's Centre of Gravity has not \(yet\) shifted to the East'](#), *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, April 2023.

⁵ Nan Tian et al. (2023). [SIPRI Factsheet. Trends in world military expenditures 2022](#). Stockholm: SIPRI.

⁶ As explained by Dr Tobias Lindner Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office of Germany in the IISS webinar on Germany's first National Security Strategy, 14 June 2023. <https://www.iiss.org/events/2023/062/germanys-first-national-security-strategy/>

⁷ Rough calculation made by the author.

⁸ Buras, Piotr (2023). ['East Side Story: Poland's new role in the European Union'](#). Warsaw: European Council on Foreign relations, ECFR.

And with regard to Ukraine, that country will have to decide for itself whether it wants to have a strong partner such as Poland; close to it, and one that has indeed been pivotal for Ukraine's resistance, but which is also prone to the misreading of history and to domestic turbulence, as the controversy over the grain deal revealed.⁹ Or does Ukraine instead prefer a strong neighbour such as Germany a little further away? A neighbour whose support for Ukraine's EU-bid will be essential.

While these rhetorical questions remain to be answered, they lay bare the central role played by the German-Polish relationship in stabilizing a geo-politically transformed Europe. The unity found in supporting Ukraine is occasionally marred by tensions rooted in a past marked by conflict. Poland last year filed a €1.3 trillion claim against Germany for reparations to compensate for damages and losses inflicted by the Nazis during the Second World War. German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock recognizes Germany's historical responsibility but states from the perspective of the German government the issue of reparations is closed.¹⁰

2.2 Germany's future military posture in the east

In Berlin's view, the end of the Cold War meant that Germany was transformed from a front state into a 'rear area' of Western defence of Eastern Europe, the hinterland of the Baltics, offering strategic depth to the central front. It functions as a 'spider' of logistics and a transit area for the reinforcement of forces from the UK and the US to the Eastern front, pretty much like Sweden, according to one in Berlin.

Germany intends, according to its National Security Strategy, to meet its obligations as the logistical hub of the Alliance, expand its military presence in allied territory and place it on a more permanent basis, and to strengthen the Bundeswehr

and make it a cornerstone of conventional defence in Europe. The role of logistical hub will require investment in logistical support, healthcare, traffic routing and the protection of allies while they are in Germany. The Federal Government will work with the Länder in establishing necessary infrastructure and legal framework, and support initiatives in NATO and the EU aimed at fostering military mobility.¹¹

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The initial allied response to the invasion of Ukraine consisted, in the view of some in Berlin, of tokens of solidarity with Eastern European countries. Many NATO members promised a lot but will now have to deliver as the Alliance fleshes out its plans for the territorial defence of the continent. Germany will focus its forces in Eastern Europe on Lithuania where it already leads a multinational battalion (on a rotational basis) in the framework of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, eFP, in Eastern Europe. These battlegroups were deployed in 2017 in the Baltic states and Poland in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. As a response to the Russian invasion of 2022, a brigade of some 3–5,000 troops stationed in Germany was made ready to be deployed in 10 days as part of NATO's Enhanced Vigilance Activities, eVA. However, Lithuania deemed the arrangement unsatisfactory and requested the permanent stationing of the troops on its soil.

2.3 Defending every inch

The atrocities committed by Russian troops in Bucha led NATO to declare, at its Madrid Summit 2022, that every inch of allied territory should

⁹ Barber, Tony (2023). 'Clouds gather over support for Ukraine. Politicians and public opinion in parts of central and eastern Europe have doubts about Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the war'. *Financial Times. Europe Express*. 15 July.

¹⁰ Minder, Raphael and Pitel, Laura (2023). 'Poland and Germany: the feud at the heart of Europe'. *Financial Times*, 2 May.

Minder, Raphael and Pitel, Laura (2023). 'Germany and Poland haggle over tank repair hub for Ukraine'. *Financial Times*. 3 July.

¹¹ The EU has allocated €1.5 billion of its budget to Military Mobility in cooperation with NATO.

be defended. This was as a reversal of previous thinking which assumed that, in the event of an invasion, the territories of the Baltic states would initially be lost to Russia but later retaken. To the Baltic states, such a scenario would equal the destruction of their societies and civilizations. The instability unleashed by Prigozhin's march to Moscow and the successive relocation of Wagner troops to Belarus further compounded anxieties in eastern countries bordering Belarus.

In the lead-up to NATO's Vilnius Summit in July 2023, and as part of strengthening NATO's eastern flank, Germany declared that a German brigade of 4,000 soldiers, with the corresponding materiel and vehicles, would be permanently stationed in Lithuania when the necessary infrastructure had been established.¹² From Berlin's perspective, this is also the best way to defend Germany.

NATO's new plans for the territorial defence of Europe unveiled in Vilnius, aims to create a force of some 300,000 personnel, mostly of European origin. Germany will, as of 2025, provide 30,000 personnel, 85 vessels and aircraft at 30 days' notice to NATO's New Force Model, NFM, that will replace NATO's Response Force, NRF.¹³

In order to support the new German defence effort, the Bundeswehr will expand from today's 183,000 military personnel to 203,000 in 2031. A new Territorial Operational Command has been created with the aim to strengthen homeland security and take on command-and-control functions for forces deployed in Germany. As for many other countries trying to boost their defence in view of a deteriorating security situation, difficulties in recruiting and retaining personnel constitutes a serious limitation, as stated by Eva Högl, Germany's parliamentary commissioner for the armed forces.¹⁴

Observers in Berlin note that Sweden and Germany constitute the two major littoral states of the Baltic Sea, a narrow sea where a military campaign would evolve rapidly. A reason for not dividing the area into several regional commands, but to opt for one, in the view of Berlin. Sweden could, once a member of the Alliance, be a convenient location for a regional, Baltic Head Quarters, an observer in Berlin points out. New member states often get what they ask for.

2.4 Supporting Ukraine

Germany has gradually overcome its initial reluctance to supply Ukraine with defence materiel and is now the second largest supplier after the US. Total bilateral aid amounts to some €5.4 billion, not including Berlin's contribution to the EU's European Peace Facility, EPF, at €4.7 billion. German support is focused on land forces (40 Leopard 1, 30 older Leopard 2 and 40 Marder infantry vehicles), air defence (4 IRIS-T SLM, Patriot systems), artillery (18 howitzers) and ammunitions.¹⁵

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The deliveries are stretching German defence stocks that were not planned for a hot war and they are consuming spare parts from the regular inventory. The German government intends to ramp up the defence industry with the goal, in the Chancellor's words, of becoming more like the car industry, i.e. capable of sustained deliveries.¹⁶ To this end, huge public sums will be spent on procurement to allow the industry to plan for long-term production.

¹² Pitel, Laura and Foy, Henry (2023). ['Germany plans 'permanent' force in Lithuania to strengthen Nato's eastern flank'](#). *Financial Times*. 26 June.

¹³ The International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS (2023). *The Military Balance 2023*. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹⁴ German Bundestag, Berlin 2023. [German Bundestag Printed paper 20/5700 20th electoral term 28 February 2023. Information from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces Annual Report 2022 \(64th Report\)](#).

¹⁵ These are examples of German military support. For a comprehensive and updated overview, see: German Federal Government, Berlin, 2023. [War in Ukraine. Military support for Ukraine](#).

¹⁶ Munich Security Conference 2023, Munich, 17/02/2023 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2023/02/17/amanpour-german-chancellor-olaf-scholz.cnn>

Ukraine will eventually get F-16, and possibly F-18, fighter jets, as allied countries replenish their fleets with newly acquired American F-35s. Germany does not have the F-16 but rather European Tornado aircraft. It will instead focus in the future on the sort of capabilities already delivered: land-based forces, air defence, training cooperation. Rheinmetall is going to build a factory to repair and service tanks in Ukraine in a joint venture with state-owned defence group Ukroboronprom, and a joint Polish-German repair hub for German Leopards is planned for Poland.

Some countries, for example the UK and Poland, might deploy forces to Ukraine after the conclusion of the hot war, but Germany will not, in the view of Berlin. The US will remain committed to Europe, but with a reduced footprint, and in Ukraine, the US is likely to focus on special forces and trainers.

As made clear at NATO's Vilnius Summit, the Alliance will not extend any security guarantees to a non-member at war. Instead, an invitation will be extended when 'Allies agree and conditions are met'.¹⁷ While East European countries, the UK, and France pushed for the word 'invitation' to be included in the communiqué, Washington and Germany led the reluctant camp. Individual countries may extend security assurances in some form, short of NATO's Article V but shaping a network of reinforced protection. The European Union had, at its June summit, concluded that 'Member States stand ready to contribute, together with partners, to future security commitments to Ukraine, which will help Ukraine defend itself in the long term, deter acts of aggression and resist destabilisation efforts. In this regard, they will swiftly consider the modalities of such contribution.'¹⁸ The language and commitment was echoed in the G7 Vilnius communiqué.¹⁹

As noted in Berlin, after all that the European countries have invested, they cannot walk away and turn their backs on Ukraine. 'If Russia moves, so will we.' The Ukraine war has, in the view of some observers, accelerated something that was already

in the making – the decay of the Russian empire. The territory is simply too big, and Russia is losing control over Siberia. This may lead to the relocation of Russia to its heartland. But Russia will not go away, a reality that Europeans will have to live with, one points out in Berlin.

3. Small Steps, Multiple Formations

France is one of few nations mentioned in the National Security Strategy. In it, Germany and France are said to enjoy a close relationship, and to have overcome historical perceptions of enmity, something they owe to European integration, a process deemed indispensable.

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How to proceed with Franco-German cooperation in the new geopolitical context is, however, a matter of discussion in the German Federal Government. The presentation of a common Franco-German European vision has been proposed as a way of initiating a broader European debate. The suggestion was, however, met by the rhetorical question of what such a vision should include, with so many complicated issues pending clarification, not least in the Federal Government itself. Furthermore, while an agreement between the two remains essential to forge common European positions, France and Germany can no longer automatically carry the south and the north. Today, there are many different groups with different opinions within the EU. If, for example, Chancellor Olaf Scholz proposes deeper integration, half of the member states disagree. Imagining a deepening integration in an EU with 35 members complicates the issue further. So, it is better to proceed in smaller steps and multiple formations, concludes one official in Berlin.

¹⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO (2023). '[Vilnius Summit Communiqué. Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023](#)'.

¹⁸ European Council, Brussels (2023). '[European Council conclusions, 29-30 June 2023](#)'.

¹⁹ European Council (2023). '[G7: Joint declaration of support for Ukraine](#)'.

An example of this is the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting, QMV, suggested by France and Germany as a way of overcoming hurdles in a future, more heterogeneous EU. The idea is currently being discussed with different member states in the hope of reaching agreement at some point. On 12 June 2023, seven member states proposed constructive abstention as a way of practicing QMV, a solution that would forego the need for treaty change.²⁰ Another example was the declaration in June 2023 by the so called ‘Weimar Triangle’, comprising Germany, France and Poland, manifesting their close cooperation and declaring a steadfast support of Ukraine in view of the Russian aggression.²¹

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One way to solve the conundrum of enlarging the EU without paralyzing the organization could be, in the view of German policymakers, for groups of member states to go further, leading to genuine differentiation. For some in Berlin, many of the valid proposals can be found already in the so called Schäuble-Lamers paper ‘The Future of Europe’, published in 1994.²² The paper argues, for example, that a stronger communitarisation of monetary and financial policy is necessary as the core of integration. Countries willing to agree to a binding set of rules for the purpose of disciplining budgetary policies and stabilizing the common currency could move ahead.

Imagining a future EU with 35 members requires creative thinking in the Federal Government.²³ Examples of questions raised by observers are: should a wide economic zone be created, without Schengen or the euro? Should more money be invested to pull new members up, or instead should standards be lowered and a special group created that they could join? Muddling through is, however, not realistic according to Berlin. Western Balkan countries are fed up with that. The need to reform cohesion and agricultural funds is obvious. And how shall imperial over-stretch be avoided? For the time being there is no agreement on many of these thorny issues within the Federal Government itself. Agreeing with France under these circumstances is complicated indeed.

Nevertheless, and in spite of all the challenges, it is important to remember, as an official pointed out in Berlin, that on the most important question of all – Ukraine – unity has been found among Europeans.

3.1 Realigning France and Germany in a new context

While Franco-German disagreements exist,²⁴ they are often exaggerated by the media, in Berlin’s view. This was, for example, the case with the Chancellor’s speech in the European Parliament in May 2023 when he chided ‘anyone who nostalgically clings to a dream of European dominance, who serves up fantasies of their nation being a major power’ as being ‘stuck in the past.’²⁵ The statement was interpreted in the media as a rebuke of French grandstanding. To Berlin, this is an example of overinterpretation by media, looking for drama in the Franco-German relationship.

There are certainly issues to be discussed between the two, such as different views on the energy

²⁰ Baerbock, Annalena; Lahib, Hadja; Asselborn, Jean; Hoekstra, Wopke; Aureescu, Bogdan; Fajon, Tanja; Albares Bueno, José Manuel (2023). ‘[It’s time for majority decision-making in foreign policy](#)’. *Politico*, 12 June.

²¹ Dubois, Laura (2023). Weimar revisited. *Europe Express, Financial Times*, 26 June.

²² Schäuble, Wolfgang; Lamers, Karl (1994). *Reflections on European policy/Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik*. Berlin: CSU/CDU.

²³ Some proposals were put forward in the Chancellor Scholz’s [speech at the Charles University in Prague](#), Monday on 29 August 2022.

²⁴ For a background on the Franco-German relationship and the EU, see Engberg, Katarina, ‘[The Franco-German dialogue on the future of the EU](#)’. 2019:3epa. Stockholm: SIEPS.

²⁵ German Federal Government. ‘[Address by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany as part of the European Parliament’s series of plenary debates “This is Europe”](#)’.

transition, with France looking for ways of financing nuclear energy while Germany has closed down its nuclear plants. And Germany stunned other member states with its proposal to prolong the lease of life of the combustion engine, albeit fuelled by renewables – a concession to the liberal FDP, trailing in the polls.

This German initiative has not helped convince smaller member states about the need for German leadership. It is recognized in Berlin that this could prompt responses such as: ‘if the big [member states] can do such things, why should we be disciplined and stick to agreements?’. Massive German state aid during the covid pandemic further alienated countries in the south. However, it later turned out that the sum was proportionate to German GDP. And if Germany’s economy declines, all of Europe’s will. But Germany definitely needs to get better at communicating, concludes Berlin.

Another bone of contention is opposing views on the proper way to reform EU economic governance in the form of the Stability and Growth Pact, with France and Germany acting their traditional expansive and frugal roles. German finance minister Christian Lindner’s stark remarks on the matter echo traditional German views, reinforced by the need to raise FDP’s profile in German politics.²⁶

3.2 Franco-German defence cooperation

In a speech to Bundestag on 27 February 2022, the German Chancellor proclaimed a ‘Zeitenwende’, or watershed. How this will be translated into concrete defence policy weighs heavily on the Franco-German relationship. In Paris’s view the procurement of American and Israeli defence materiel reduces resources available for European projects. Germany’s launch of ‘European Sky Shield’ air defence initiative, largely based on American and Israeli technology, led France to allegedly cancel a joint cabinet meeting between the

two countries in October 2022. France later called a conference of its own concerning air defence strategy, including the role of nuclear weapons, of which France produces its own.²⁷

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At the 60th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty on Franco-German friendship in Paris in January 2023 the two sides tried to get their act together. A Franco-German cabinet retreat is planned for the autumn, aiming to tighten common positions.²⁸ The French President’s visit to the Chancellor’s home in Potsdam in June marked the resumption of Franco-German dialogue. The aim was to restart the Aachen-project²⁹ and to coordinate positions in view of the important upcoming summits of the EU in June and NATO in July in Vilnius, with Ukraine’s relations to the two organizations figuring high on the agenda.

The German decision to procure American F-35 fighter jets dealt a blow to Franco-German defence cooperation, some observe in Berlin. The F-35 is not only a plane but a system that will precondition the choice of software. FCAS, the Franco-German-Spanish cooperation regarding the next generation (2040) fighter jets, risks being reduced to an ‘add-on’ to the F-35. A considerable proportion of the new money allocated to defence has been consumed by purchases in the US and Israel, which in turn affects Franco-German defence cooperation negatively. The Franco-German defence dialogue continues, but there are few solutions to be offered to practical problems, one in Berlin noted.

²⁶ Chazan, Guy and Fleming, Sam (2023). ‘[Germany warns of stalemate on EU fiscal rules reform](#)’. *Financial Times*, 9 June.

²⁷ Abboud, Leila, Pitel, Laura and Foy, Henry (2023). ‘[France summons allies in challenge to German-led defence plan](#)’. *Financial Times*, 18 June.

²⁸ Paris: Élysée, 22 January 2023. ‘[French-German Declaration](#)’.

²⁹ On 22 January 2019, the German Chancellor and French President signed the [Aachen Treaty](#) in the German city of Aachen, or Aix-la-Chapelle in French. The Aachen Treaty updates the Élysée Treaty signed in 1963, with the purpose of solidifying reconciliation between the wartime enemies (West) Germany and France.

Germany has announced its withdrawal from the UN's MINUSMA operation in Mali, the last large out-of-area operation of the German armed forces. The infrastructure and enablers are needed for the eastern front. Germany planned instead to engage in a new training mission in Niger since it was deemed important for Europeans not to leave a vacuum in Africa to be filled by other actors such as Russia. An anti-French mood has been building in Africa and while the participation of some European nations in the new mission was welcomed by African authorities, France's was not. While this is not of German doing, the situation has irked the French, according to Berlin. The military coup in Niger put an end to the plans and the EU has cancelled its security cooperation with the regime in Niger.

3.3 French activism in the east

Is there a need, in view of Germany's historic past and current reinforced military position in Eastern Europe, to reassure the French about German intentions? No, there is no such need, according to one in Berlin. France itself has changed and the French are now very active in Eastern Europe. France led the deployment of NATO's Response Force (NRF) to Romania in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is now teaming up with Romania.

France has to some extent outflanked a more cautious Germany in its wooing of Eastern Europe, until recently wary of French intentions regarding their bids for EU membership and French remark, at the beginning of the Ukraine war, which drew parallels to the First World War and asserted the need not to humiliate Russia. In his GLOBESEC speech in May 2023, the French President acknowledged that France had been perceived as 'arrogant, or faraway from, or not interested in' Eastern Europe.³⁰ He stated that the Western Balkan countries, Moldova and Ukraine should become members of the EU, called for solid security guarantees to Ukraine and its inclusion in a credible security architecture.

To France, the combination of French diplomatic clout and proactive diplomacy with German power is a way of getting things done. But while there may be a recognition in Berlin of the desirability

to launch some sort of Franco-German initiative, there is also the realization that the window of opportunity for doing so may soon be closing as elections to the European Parliament and a new Commission in 2024 will consume much of the political energy in the final months of 2023.

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Furthermore, if Marine Le Pen wins the French presidential election in 2027, this could cause the first serious disarray in Franco-German relations. Anti-German sentiment would be part of her campaign. For Berlin, this is a dangerous prospect indeed.

4. Conclusions

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Germany's partners and allies have asked for more pronounced German leadership. Germany, constrained by the taboos and inhibitions left by the Second World War, has hesitated to step out in the limelight. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed Germany to the forefront of western political and military responses. In this new role, it ventures into territories historically squeezed by German-Russian power struggles. Here, many of Europe's major battlefields can be found, nations have suffered huge human losses and borders have been changed multiple times, including Germany's.

This time Germany finds itself firmly anchored in a western and European context that will condition the answers to be found to a situation teetering between the western integration of all of Eastern Europe and the risk of further escalation of the war. Still, much of the burden and responsibility will fall on Germany, given its weight and geographical position, that has conditioned much of Europe's history. Eastern demands for Germany to step forward and assume a greater role is at times mixed with resentment of having suffered as much at the hands of Germany as of Russia.

³⁰ Paris: Élysée, 31 May 2023. ['Closing speech by the President of the French Republic'](#).

Germany's more comfortable post-Cold War position as a rear area of Western defence will now be mixed with forward and permanent military positions in areas contiguous with the Belarusian and Russian borders, or more specifically, that of Kaliningrad, formerly Prussian Königsberg, transferred to the Soviet Union after the Second World War. The Bundeswehr, underinvested in for decades, will be transformed into a cornerstone of western defence, placing Germany fifth in the world in terms of defence spending.

The potential integration into the EU of most of Eastern Europe will transform the western, and in particularly European, context in which Germany itself operates. The EU at 35 will likely be differentiated, and more of a political than a transfer union, given that most of its prospective new members will be net receivers from the EU's budget.

Germany has, according to its National Security Strategy, overcome historic perceptions of enmity with France. However, Berlin realizes that while agreements between the two are still essential for European integration, they will no longer be enough to carry the EU's south and north. Proceeding gradually in multiple formations is therefore considered to be a fruitful form of policymaking. Convincing domestic opinion that the integration of Eastern Europe states is worth the price will be another daunting task for politicians, and not only in Germany.

In this more heterogeneous Europe, policy answers are likely to be found step-by-step rather than through bold strikes of grand strategy. The new National Security Strategy testifies to the nature of

the task, in careful phrases: 'As the most populous country and the largest economy in the heart of Europe, Germany bears special responsibility for peace, security and stability [...]. We also assume this responsibility in awareness of our history. That is why we are grateful for the reconciliation with our European neighbours [...]'.

In assuming its decisive role and gradually elaborating its positions, and in view of the sensitivities described above, Germany will probably have to live with the fact that it often will 'be damned if it does, damned if it doesn't'.

'Germany will probably have to live with the fact that it often will "be damned if it does, damned if it doesn't".'

Pondering the consequences of a geopolitically transformed Europe, and with limited certainty of the ultimate nature of the change, today consumes much intellectual energy in Europe and beyond. Trying to ascertain the role of a pivotal and centrally placed country such as Germany adds to the complexity. Still, this is what policymakers in Berlin are busy doing. Given the importance of the exercise, the outside world will anxiously follow the elaboration of answers which will have significant implications for the rest of Europe as well as for Germany itself.

As for the centre of gravity of Europe, it has probably moved somewhat to the northeast, from approximately Strasbourg to Potsdam, currently the home of the German Chancellor.