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# **Bundeswehr: From *Zeitenwende* to *Epochenbruch***

Johanna MÖHRING



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Cover: The Bundeswehr commemorates soldiers killed in combat with a memorial march.

Arrival of the procession at the Bendler Block - Berlin, Germany, August 22, 2024

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# Abstract

The *Zeitenwende* (historic turning point) announced by Olaf Scholz on February 27, 2022, is shifting into high gear. Financially supported by the March 2025 reform of Germany's "debt break" and backed by a broad political and societal consensus to strengthen and modernize the Bundeswehr, Germany's military capabilities are set to rapidly increase over the coming years. Expected to assume a central role in the defense of the European continent in the context of changing transatlantic relations, Berlin's military-political position on the continent is being radically transformed. Implementing Germany's long-term strategic preference of organizing its defense efforts through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in conjunction with defense industrial projects in which German industry takes center-stage, will change long-established equilibria with important consequences not only for Franco-German relations.

Ifri's 2023 study "*Zeitenwende: The Bundeswehr's Paradigm Shift*" by Léo Péria-Peigné and Élie Tenenbaum identified three challenges for the German armed forces: poor system availability due to accumulated maintenance debt and inadequate implementation processes, human resources lagging behind recruitment goals, and a strategic culture struggling with the Bundeswehr's mission as a credible deterrent force. On all three fronts, there have been substantial changes.

The ongoing organizational feat of re-founding a credible German force as NATO's European conventional backbone is happening under conditions of international and domestic uncertainty. Both Europe and Germany appear structurally dependent, slow to rise to the manifold challenges pertaining to becoming more autonomous, and unsure of themselves and hence vulnerable to disruption, not in the least in relation to the United States. Do the German authorities, members of the military and the German population have the mettle to tackle these challenges? The Merz government has declared that the defense of Europe and the strengthening of the German armed forces are its top political priorities. For the first time in the Bundeswehr's history, an armored brigade will be permanently stationed abroad, in Lithuania, to be tripled in strength in case of conflict. Significantly, a new voluntary military service for young people voted in December 2025 to reach NATO capability targets is gaining traction among 16- to 29-year-olds, and the number of Germans under the age of 50 willing to defend their country in an emergency is rising.

Yet many hurdles remain. Bringing the Bundeswehr's organization and personnel in line with its mission of national and alliance defense will require not only considerable financial resources, but sustained inter-ministerial engagement, competing for political and societal attention. Given the hybrid nature of threats facing Europe and Germany, crucial defense areas fall outside of the remit of the defense ministry. To implement a "whole of government, whole of society" approach foreseen in German NATO planning, a switch from peace-time to war-time mentality still needs to happen. And last but not least, a rearming Germany will need tremendous diplomatic skills to manage key relationships and strategic dependencies. The ongoing Bundeswehr reform will lead to shifts in the European power balance, thrusting Germany into a defense leadership role for which it is not yet ready.

# Résumé

La *Zeitenwende* (« changement d'époque ») annoncée par Olaf Scholz le 27 février 2022 passe à la vitesse supérieure. Soutenues financièrement par la réforme constitutionnelle du « frein à la dette » de mars 2025 et cautionnées par un large consensus politique et sociétal en faveur du renforcement et de la modernisation de la Bundeswehr, les capacités militaires de l'Allemagne devraient augmenter rapidement au cours des prochaines années. Appelée à jouer un rôle central dans la défense du continent européen sur fond de relations transatlantiques en plein bouleversement, la position allemande en matière politique et militaire traverse une profonde mutation. En mettant en œuvre sa stratégie à long terme, qui consiste à organiser ses efforts de défense dans le cadre de l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique nord (OTAN) de concert avec des projets industriels de défense dans lesquels sa propre industrie occupera une place centrale, l'Allemagne s'apprête à modifier des équilibres établis de longue date, avec des conséquences considérables qui iront bien au-delà des relations franco-allemandes.

Une étude publiée par l'Ifri en 2023, intitulée « *Zeitenwende* : la Bundeswehr face au changement d'ère » et rédigée par Léo Péria-Peigné et Élie Tenenbaum, identifiait trois défis pour les forces armées allemandes : une faible disponibilité des systèmes due à un retard accumulé dans la maintenance et à des processus de mise en œuvre inadéquats, des ressources humaines en deçà des objectifs de recrutement et, enfin, une culture stratégique en contradiction avec la mission de la Bundeswehr en tant que force militaire crédible. Sur ces trois fronts, des changements importants ont eu lieu.

Les efforts remarquables actuellement déployés par l'Allemagne pour refonder une armée crédible en tant que pilier conventionnel européen de l'OTAN se déroulent dans un contexte d'incertitude internationale et nationale. L'Europe et l'Allemagne semblent structurellement dépendantes, lentes à relever les multiples défis liés à l'autonomie, indécises et donc vulnérables aux perturbations, notamment celles provenant des États-Unis. En Allemagne, autorités, armée et population sauront-elles faire preuve du courage et de la persévérance nécessaires ? Le gouvernement Merz a qualifié la défense de l'Europe et le renforcement de l'armée allemande de priorité politique absolue. Pour la première fois dans l'histoire de la Bundeswehr, une brigade blindée sera stationnée en permanence à l'étranger, en Lituanie, et ses effectifs seront triplés en cas de conflit. Il est significatif que le nouveau service militaire volontaire pour les jeunes, adopté en décembre 2025 pour atteindre les objectifs de capacité fixés par

l'OTAN, gagne en popularité auprès des 16-29 ans, et que le nombre d'Allemands de moins de 50 ans prêts à défendre leur pays en cas de besoin soit en augmentation.

Cependant, de nombreux obstacles subsistent. L'alignement de la Bundeswehr et de son personnel sur sa mission de défense de l'Allemagne et de l'Alliance nécessitera non seulement des ressources financières considérables, mais aussi un engagement interministériel soutenu. Compte tenu de la nature hybride des menaces auxquelles sont confrontées l'Europe et l'Allemagne, des domaines cruciaux de la défense ne relèvent pas de la compétence du ministère de la Défense. Si l'Allemagne entend mettre en œuvre l'approche impliquant l'ensemble du gouvernement et l'ensemble de la société (« *whole of government, whole of society* ») prévue dans sa planification de défense dans le cadre de l'OTAN, il lui faut passer d'une mentalité de temps de paix à une mentalité de temps de guerre. Enfin, son réarmement exigera des compétences diplomatiques considérables pour gérer les relations avec des partenaires clés et les dépendances stratégiques. Tout porte à croire que la réforme en cours de la Bundeswehr modifiera l'équilibre des pouvoirs en Europe, propulsant l'Allemagne dans un rôle de chef de file en matière de défense pour lequel elle n'est pas encore prête.

# Table of contents

<b>CONTEXT OF GERMANY'S DEFENSE TRANSFORMATION: GEOPOLITICAL UPHEAVAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Rough geopolitical winds driving Germany's defense transformation...	9
Historical parallels and echoes: from Bundeswehr 1.0 to Bundeswehr 3.0 .....	12
<b>MEANS OF GERMANY'S DEFENSE TRANSFORMATION: GOVERNANCE, RESOURCES, ATTITUDES.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Structures and legal frameworks underpinning Bundeswehr 3.0.....	16
Financial, human and material resources for the Bundeswehr 3.0....	21
<i>Kriegstüchtigkeit</i> : German attitude and combat readiness .....	28
<b>CONCLUSION: CONSEQUENCES OF GERMANY'S DEFENSE TRANSFORMATION: NEW BARGAINS, NEW EQUILIBRIUM? .....</b>	<b>34</b>

# Context of Germany's defense transformation: geopolitical upheaval and historical experience

“That is why I speak of a double epochal shift (*Epochenbruch*) –Russia's war of aggression and the US break with its values– that is what marks the end of this long twentieth century”.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal President of Germany, 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2, Bundestag, May 8, 2025.<sup>1</sup>

## Rough geopolitical winds driving Germany's defense transformation

Since the end of the Cold War, the security situation in Europe has never been more tense. Continuing its military onslaught on Ukraine, Russia is putting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastern flank under increasing pressure. Germany and other NATO and European Union (EU) allies are witnessing increased hybrid attacks such as sabotage of undersea cables, drone espionage activities over military installations, and cyberattacks on public institutions and the defense industry. European countries remain ill-prepared for the transactional power politics of hostile empires confronting them, among them their erstwhile protector, the United States. Just like its European peers, Germany is slow to deal with geopolitical irrelevance by increasing its economic and technological competitiveness and by achieving much-needed political coherence, whether at the national or the European level. The triple shock of steeply risen energy prices caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese competition in industrial sectors in which Germany had traditionally enjoyed primacy, and US tariffs on German exports is causing a feeling of economic doom and gloom despite a comparatively positive fiscal outlook.<sup>2</sup>

Germany's internal and external divisions are skillfully exploited by its adversaries. On the domestic scene, the extreme-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has the official support of the Trump

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1. Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “We Are All Children Of 8<sup>th</sup> May”, Speech at the Bundestag, Berlin, May 8, 2025.

2. A. Tooze, “Polygloom – What's Wrong With Germany?”, Chartbook 418, December 4, 2025, available at: <https://adamtooze.substack.com>.

administration, is now the second strongest party in Germany, making it a credible possibility that it will gain power or co-form a government at the Länder level.<sup>3</sup> In their push for an end to military support for Ukraine and against migration, they are supported by forces on the extreme left, such as the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW, the “Reason and Justice” party), albeit with differing views on strengthening the Bundeswehr.<sup>4</sup> Internationally, transatlantic relations, which have been central to West- and re-united Germany’s strategic identity and international anchoring, are undergoing an epochal transformation from cooperative to antagonistic, with still unforeseen consequences. Although trust in the US as a NATO partner has suffered greatly, Germany, along with most of Europe, is trying to keep the United States close. The US is still seen as indispensable for the defense of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

How quickly NATO is expected to switch from traditional burden-sharing to burden-shifting, with the Trump administration’s push for Europe to take on greater defense responsibilities, remains debated and a source of anxiety. The latest US National Security strategy, published on December 5, 2025, focuses on American primacy anchored in the Western hemisphere, toning down a confrontational course with China and aiming for “strategic stability” in Europe without mentioning Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine – in fact not referring to Russia at all.<sup>6</sup> Under the heading “Promoting European Greatness”, Western European countries are portrayed as tolerating uncontrolled mass migration and as stifling political opposition, and hence in need of regime change. While a US partnership with European allies is expressly valued, it is supposed to shift to economic and technological co-operation, “consolidating our alliance system into an economic group”.<sup>7</sup>

Civilizational commentary applauded by the Kremlin aside, there are continuities with past American administrations who have been very vocal about burden-sharing. NATO continues to enjoy strong support among Republicans and US Democrats. Congress’s 2026 National Defense Authorization Act forbids the current US troop levels in Europe of 85,000 to drop below 76,000 without thorough assessments establishing that these cuts have been agreed with allies and would not hamper US and European

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3. In 2026, five Bundesländer – Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern – will go to the polls, influencing the distribution of political power at the Bundesrat and the government’s ability to adopt legislation. Next federal elections are scheduled for 2029.

4. Missing the Bundestag by just 9,529 votes in 2025, the BSW remains a disruptive force in East German politics.

5. “Baromètre de l’opinion publique européenne : Trump et l’accord commercial avec l’Union,” *Le Grand Continent*, September 2025.

6. “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, The White House, November 2025.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

security.<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, the Trump administration seems intent on honoring an agreement concluded under its predecessor to deploy ground-launched medium-range missiles in Germany able to reach targets deep inside Russia, starting in 2026. Regardless, the upcoming 2026 US Global Force Posture Review is expected to announce US troop cuts, with some expecting a reduction reaching 50% over the coming four years.<sup>9</sup>

The US is also sending conflicting messages as to how Europe is expected to deal with existing or impending capability gaps. At the Berlin Security Conference in November 2025, US ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker stressed that Washington would like to see Europe's military capabilities equaling those of the US. He also expressed his wish for Germany to be able, in time, to take over NATO's top military position, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).<sup>10</sup> Yet, at a NATO meeting of defense ministers in early December 2025, Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau criticized European representatives for cutting US firms out of the ongoing European defense build-up.<sup>11</sup>

In this transition period, much depends on the ability of the Europeans (and Canadians) to stay united and to moderate potential American animosity. Among possible scenarios, the best outcome would be a strong European pillar of NATO/"European NATO" militarily supported by the US while Europeans build up missing capabilities.<sup>12</sup> As unpleasant as this may sound, without Donald Trump's thuggish approach, NATO allies might not have increased their defense spending as vigorously. Almost all of them are reaching 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) for the first time, a goal formally agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014, if not earlier.<sup>13</sup>

At the June 2025 The Hague Summit, allies decided to boost defense expenditure to 5% of GDP over the next ten years, 3.5% to be invested in defense and another 1.5% in defense-related infrastructure and activities. In addition to compensating for the future reduction (or possible absence) of US strategic enablers in the realm of intelligence, surveillance, target

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8. "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026", US House Committee on Armed Services, December 7, 2025, p. 988.

9. At a Pentagon meeting in early December 2025, European counterparts were told that Europeans would have to take over most of NATO's conventional defense capabilities by 2027. See G. Slattery and H. Pamuk, "Exclusive: US Sets 2027 Deadline For Europe-Led NATO Defense, Officials Say", Reuters, December 6, 2025, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

10. J. Urbancik and S. Murray, "US Ambassador Suggests Germany Take NATO's Top Military Role In Future", *Euronews*, November 26, 2025, available at: [www.euronews.com](http://www.euronews.com).

11. V. Jack, "Top US Official Berates Europe Over Cutting American Industry Out Of Defense Buildup", *Politico*, December 3, 2025, available at: [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

12. Olivier Schmitt devises four possible pathways based on levels of European cohesion and US hostility, respectively: "Independent Europe", "European NATO", "Warsaw Pact" and "European torpor". O. Schmitt, "Défense de l'Europe: la nouvelle crise des fondements", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 90, No. 3, Ifri, 2025, pp. 77-89.

13. The original 2% goal dates from the 2006 Riga NATO summit. The Wales Summit gave allies 10 years to fulfill this defense pledge.

acquisition, reconnaissance and air transport, European allies should take on more command positions within NATO and gain greater experience in leading operations, including potentially outside a NATO framework. In all of these efforts, German engagement will be of central importance.

## Historical parallels and echoes: from Bundeswehr 1.0 to Bundeswehr 3.0

Germany's CDU-SPD (Christian Democratic Union-Social Democratic Party) government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz, in office since May 2025, considers NATO to be indispensable, sees Germany as the central hub of NATO in Europe, reaffirms Germany's contribution to nuclear sharing within NATO, and wants to strengthen NATO's European pillar.<sup>14</sup> The monumental tasks at hand and the difficulties ahead are not without echoes from the past. In fact, the armed forces of the Federal Republic are in the middle of their third fundamental transformation, each shaped by Germany's contribution to and membership in the Atlantic alliance.

The first is, of course, the founding of the Bundeswehr in May 1955 – the name “Bundeswehr” only became official on April 1, 1956–, in a tense Cold War context, with German rearmament and German NATO membership facing strong domestic opposition. To alleviate fears of German militarism while building the strongest conventional force in Western Europe to fulfil NATO's defense obligations, West Germany adopted a political position of military restraint and a unique model of military identity tied to respect of core constitutional values. The *Wehrverfassung*, the constitutional and legal framework governing Germany's system of defense, of 22 March 1956 broke with Germany's military past by establishing a democratic army subject to the rule of law and remains a pillar of German military law to this day. During the Cold War, the *Bundeswehr 1.0 NATO Forward Defense* (a mass, conscription-based force) would have borne the brunt of a Warsaw Pact onslaught, together with pre-positioned allied formations as part of the “layer cake” defense. West and East Germany would have been most likely obliterated by nuclear strikes in the event of armed confrontation. At its peak in the 1980s, the Bundeswehr reached 500,000 active troops, and West German defense expenditure routinely amounted to 3% of GDP.

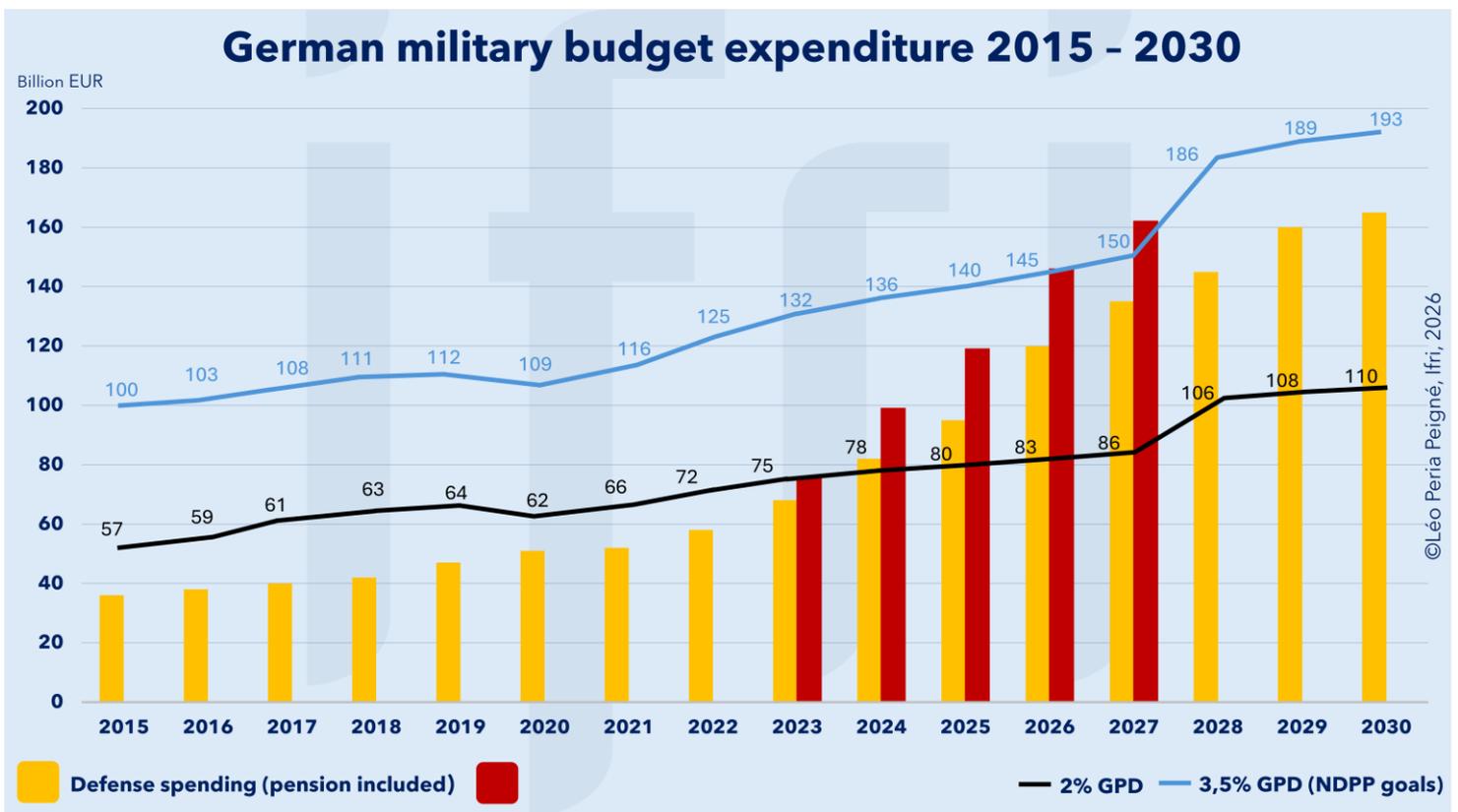
The experience of the Nationale Volksarmee (National People's Army, NVA) of the German Democratic Republic constitutes another, less-known chapter in Germany's armed forces after 1945. The NVA, whose Soviet

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14. “Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. Verantwortung für Deutschland. 21. Legislaturperiode des Deutschen Bundestages” [Coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD. Responsibility for Germany. 21st legislative period of the German Bundestag], May 5, 2025.

structures and military culture were diametrically opposed to its West German counterpart, existed from 1956 to 1990. The NVA was disbanded before reunification. A small share of its personnel – around 20,000, and only below the ranks of lieutenant colonel and senior non-commissioned officer – was absorbed into the Bundeswehr, while most equipment was sold or destroyed and many military installations were closed. Former NVA members were not allowed to retain their military titles and received only minimal pension rights, which caused considerable bitterness. In parallel to its West German “twin”, the NVA had been integrated into the Warsaw Pact Treaty organization under Soviet control and domination.<sup>15</sup>

**Graph 1: from Bundeswehr 1.0 to 3.0**



Sources: World Bank; DG Tresor; NATO Annual Expenditure Reports; IFO Institut. Graph realized by Ifri, 2026.

The Bundeswehr’s second incarnation, *NATO Out of Area* from 1990 onwards, forced the German armed forces and German society to move considerably out of their comfort zone. First, by accepting UN/NATO/EU-mandated peace-keeping/peace-enforcement and training missions outside of NATO territory, some in areas where the Wehrmacht had rampaged; then, by taking on stabilization and reconstruction tasks in Afghanistan and beyond, which put Bundeswehr soldiers into harm’s way in a counter-

15. For a historic perspective on NVA during the Cold War, see: B. Schaefer, “The GDR in the Warsaw Pact”, Woodrow Wilson International Center, October 28, 2016.

insurgency context.<sup>16</sup> On July 12, 1994, the German constitutional court ruled that out-of-area interventions were compatible with Article 87a of the German constitution, provided that the Bundestag gave its prior approval. The ruling opened the door for the Bundeswehr, previously largely restricted to defending German territory, to participate in international missions, marking a historic shift in Germany's post-WWII security policy. The *Parlamentsbeteiligungsgesetz*, the law governing the procedural specifics, was enacted on March 18, 2005. Conscription was paused in 2011, with the aim of transforming the Bundeswehr into a professional force.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-1990s, troop levels fell to 370,000, to reach roughly 178,000 in 2014, and defense expenditures dropped from 2.5% to below 1.5% of GDP over the same period.

*Bundeswehr 3.0 NATO Allied Hub* marks the return to the Bundeswehr's roots of *Landesverteidigung/ Bündnisverteidigung* (LV/BV) – national and alliance defense – to counter Russian bellicose expansionism. At the 2014 NATO Wales Summit, Germany introduced the Framework Nations concept to organize continental defense efforts. The 2018 *Konzeption der Bundeswehr*, and its derived capability profile, formally responds to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its fueling of a secessionist war in eastern Ukraine, starting in 2014. Germany's 2023 security strategy and its defense policy guidelines outline the *Zeitenwende's* (historical turning point) defense and security demands caused by Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>18</sup> For the German armed forces, this means "readiness to fight with the expectation of success in high-intensity combat",<sup>19</sup> in conjunction with its immediate neighbors and NATO partners, such as Poland. Yet as crises, conflicts and regional tensions in Africa, the Middle East, the Arctic and Indo-Pacific continue to influence Europe's security environment, Germany's military engagement will have to go beyond national and Alliance defense.

Versions 1.0 and 2.0 each took about twenty years to implement, the Bundeswehr lagging behind NATO promises, with considerable capability shortcomings in terms of men and equipment for long stretches of time.<sup>20</sup> It

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16. The Bundeswehr served from 2001 to 2021 in Afghanistan; from 2001 onwards as part of the International Security Assistance Force, and subsequently for the NATO Resolute Support mission from 2015 to 2021.

17. France followed a similar path, phasing out conscription in 1996. A form of voluntary military service is to be brought back, starting in summer 2026.

18. See "Konzeption der Bundeswehr" [Concept of the Bundeswehr], Federal Ministry of Defense, July 2018. See also Germany's 2023 national security strategy: "Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland. Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie" [Defensive. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated security for Germany. National Security Strategy], Bundesregierung, June 2023; and the 2023 defense policy guidelines "Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien" [Defense Policy Guidelines], Federal Ministry of Defense, November 9, 2023.

19. "Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien" [Defense Policy Guidelines], Federal Ministry of Defense, November 9, 2023, p. 9.

20. See S. Neitzel, *Die Bundeswehr. Von der Wiederbewaffnung bis zur Zeitenwende* [The Bundeswehr: from rearmament to *Zeitenwende*], München: C.H.Beck, 2025.

would be prudent not to expect the current reshaping to go faster or smoother – this despite Russia already probing Germany and its allies through hybrid means.<sup>21</sup> From difficulties with recruitment, housing, training, and military capabilities, *3.0 NATO Allied hub* shares a lot of challenges with *1.0 NATO Forward defense*. What is notably different is Germany's new geographical and functional position. It is no longer a frontline state. However, the historic memory of what it would have meant to be a battlefield state is one factor motivating Germany's decision to permanently station an armored brigade in Lithuania, the 45<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade.

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21. S. Siebold, "German General Says Russia Could Launch Limited Attack On NATO Any Time", Reuters, November 7, 2025, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

# Means of Germany's defense transformation: governance, resources, attitudes

## Structures and legal frameworks underpinning Bundeswehr 3.0

The first phase of building Bundeswehr 3.0 has been ongoing since 2018, driven by a set of relatively familiar political and military objectives, and implemented by existing structures. Efforts gathered speed due to Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequently voted €100 billion *Sondervermögen* (special fund) was used to alleviate some of the most urgent capability needs. However, the arrival of the *Zeitenwende* – bringing significant funding and a sharply increased tempo – has already placed considerable strain on the existing military-administrative framework. Beyond the provision of additional financial means and personnel, the current phase will require continuous adaptation and structural reform, while simultaneously managing day-to-day tasks related to national and collective defense.

### ***Bundeswehr and BMVg***

The Osnabrück Decree, signed by German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) on April 30, 2024, refashioned the top-level structure of the Federal Defense Ministry (*Bundesministerium der Verteidigung*, BMVg), as well as the command structure of the German armed forces.<sup>22</sup> The fourth such restructuring in its history, it is intended to strengthen the Bundeswehr's ability to defend Germany and its NATO allies. The current reform establishes four branches of the armed forces: Army, Navy, Air Force and a new Cyber Force, raising protection against cyber-attacks and the digitalization of the Bundeswehr to the status of an individual branch of the armed forces.

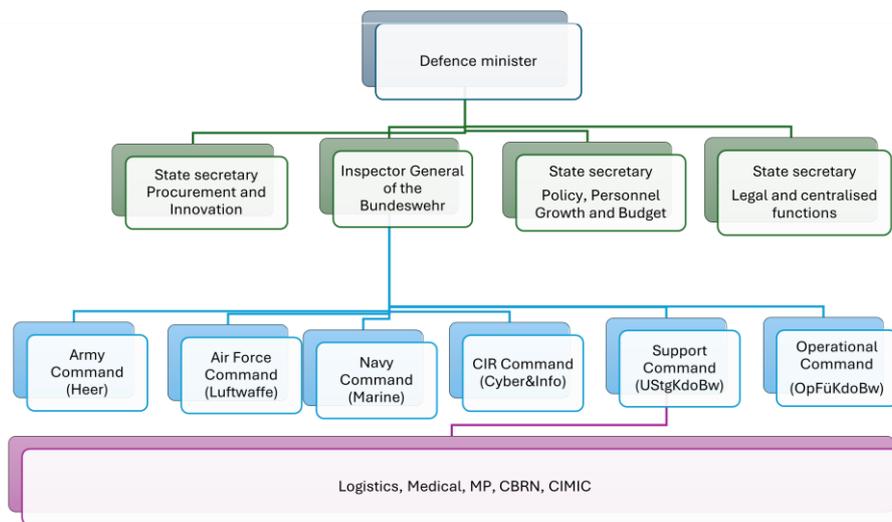
The decree also brought about the merger of two operational commands (Territorial Command for Domestic Operations and Operations Command for Foreign Missions). The Bundeswehr's resulting new Operational Command (*Operatives Führungskommando*, OpFüKdoBw) was put into service in October 2024. It is the point of contact for NATO, as

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22. "Osnabrücker Erlass" [Osnabrück Decree], Federal Minister of Defense, April 30, 2024.

well as for the police and civil protection forces, centralizing information on threats as well as the capacity to respond. In addition, a new Support Command was established that regroups medical services, logistics, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) defense, military police (MP), civil-military co-operation (CIMIC) and certain central administrative services into a single unit to which all branches of the armed forces are supposed to have access. Below the minister, three state secretaries are managing critical functions at the BMVg.<sup>23</sup>

**Graph 2: Schematic command structure German Ministry of Defense and Bundeswehr (as of May 2024)**



Graph from the author.

If the 2024 reform was criticized as too timid, at this year's Bundeswehr conference Boris Pistorius announced further transformations, starting in 2026.<sup>24</sup> By April next year, state secretaries Nils Hilmer (Functional strand: Policy, growth, and budget), Jens Plötner (Functional strand: Procurement and innovation) and Jan Stöß (Functional strand: Legal issues and centralized functions) are tasked with submitting drafts for comprehensive structural adjustments, touching on ministerial organization, procurement and personnel. By the same deadline, state secretary Jan Stöß has been tasked with developing proposals to reduce bureaucracy and modernize the ministry. Furthermore, in spring 2026, the *Generalinspekteur* (GI), General Carsten Breuer, the highest-ranking active-duty military officer in the German armed forces, is to present the Bundeswehr's first military strategy, based on which a new capability

23. See "Organisationsplan BMVg – Stand: 15. Januar 2026" [Organisational chart of the Federal Ministry of Defense – as of 15 January 2026], Federal Ministry of Defense.

24. "Rede des Bundesministers der Verteidigung Boris Pistorius zum Abschluss der Bundeswehrtagung 2025" [Speech by Federal Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius at the conclusion of the 2025 Bundeswehr Conference], Federal Ministry of Defense, November 7, 2025.

profile is to be developed. Finally, state secretary Nils Hilmer and General Breuer are to present a defense plan for the armed forces, the first one since the Cold War.

The ministerial leadership has shown a preference for placing key elements of planning into civilian hands, as well as expressing the wish to foster a culture of pragmatism that rewards experimentation. However, a central *Planungs-* und *Führungsstab* (Planning and management staff), bringing together horizontal functional strands within the ministry on the one hand and, on the other, vertical lines reaching down from the ministry and the GI into the branches of the armed forces, appears to be absent.

A May 2025 report of the Federal Court of Auditors singled out the armed forces and the federal defense administration for their inability to use allocated funds in a targeted and economical manner, pointing out that the danger of wasteful spending remained high.<sup>25</sup> The report also warned that the Bundeswehr had too many officers and that the administration dealt with too many tasks unrelated to defense. Whether new ministerial structures and newly implemented plans will stand the test of these especially trying times remains to be seen. Given the sums earmarked for defense (see *Financial, human and material resources for the Bundeswehr 3.0*) and the high-risk geopolitical situation, there is considerable political pressure to deliver results.

### ***A “reforming” procurement and innovation system for Germany’s armed forces***

Over the last decade, Germany’s military procurement has been severely deficient, earning the Bundeswehr the unflattering moniker of “heap of scrap”. While Germany’s cash-strapped armed forces had to cope with large amounts of non-operational weapon systems, the Ministry of Defense (run by the CDU up to 2021) incurred excess expenditure due to unfulfilled defense deals and steep consultancy fees for contracts awarded without competitive tendering.<sup>26</sup> Armament projects accumulated cost-overruns and missed deadlines. German defense procurement acquired a reputation for lengthy and cumbersome procedures, favoring “gold-plated solutions”: highly specific and sophisticated technical requirements that are costly and difficult to implement.

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25. “Handlungsbedarf bei der Bundeswehr. Wiederausrichtung auf Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung erfordert verantwortungsvolle Mittelverwendung und Kurskorrektur bei Organisation und Personal” [Action needed in the German Armed Forces. Reorientation towards national and alliance defense requires responsible use of resources and a change of course in terms of organisation and personnel], Bundesrechnungshof, May 27, 2025.

26. T. Wieder, “Allemagne : l’affaire des consultants’ secoue le ministère de la Défense”, *Le Monde*, January 31, 2019, available at: [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

In his speech at the 2025 Bundeswehr conference, despite a rather rocky relationship in the past, Boris Pistorius praised the employees of the Federal Office of Bundeswehr equipment, information technology and in-service support of the Bundeswehr (BAAINBw) for stepping up to the *Zeitenwende* challenge. But as German procurement has been jolted from “no money but a lot of time” to a situation of “no time but a lot of money”, it appears imperative not only to optimize procedures but also to transform employees’ approach – toward accepting perhaps less-than-perfect yet speedily available solutions. Given the tempo of change, it is clear that technology development can no longer be managed over decades. To make matters even more challenging, procurement has not only to meet current capability targets but also foresee battlefield needs in the near and medium-term future, all the while balancing the need for innovation, combat resilience and the goal of lowering strategic dependencies.

By May 2026, State Secretary Jens Plötner, responsible for procurement and innovation, will have to present a method of reorganizing the BAAINBw, enabling it to handle larger order volumes and attract much-needed skilled personnel. The Federal Office of the Bundeswehr plans to open additional locations outside Koblenz. The adoption of a revised version of the 2022 *Bundeswehr Planungs- und Beschaffungsbeschleunigungsgesetz* (Planning and Procurement Acceleration Act), with comprehensive new simplifications in public procurement law, was voted in February 2026. Modifications range from simplified direct awards and the possibility of agreeing advance payments to clarifying interoperability requirements in joint procurement with Germany's partners.<sup>27</sup>

To create strategic effects on the battlefield, innovation is needed – and also in technology and armament. Innovation centers for defense equipment are to be opened throughout the country, such as one for maritime technology in northern Germany in 2026. In addition, the share of research and development in the defense budget is set to increase. One of the lessons of Ukraine’s war against Russia is the centrality of a continuously adapting capability planning and development system, factoring in manufacturing and supply chains. Part of the reorganization at the BMVg is aimed at increasing innovation capacity, linking it directly to civilian-managed planning.

The Bundeswehr’s *Generalinspekteur* has the difficult task of aligning two possibly conflicting defense visions, incarnated by the generals under his command in the respective branches of the armed forces. While the individual commander-in-chief focuses on immediate defense needs – making his troops fighting-fit for 2029, or possibly for the immediate future

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27. For more details, see: “Bundeswehr-Beschaffung: Die wichtigsten Änderungen” [Bundeswehr Procurement: the most important changes], Federal Ministry of Defense, July 23, 2025.

–, the respective deputy inspector is looking at innovation, at how the armed forces should be equipped to carry the day in 2035 and beyond.

### **Nationaler Sicherheitsrat: *defense as a "whole of government" task***

As a response to the increasing number of security crises and threats in recent years, in August 2025 the German government established the *Nationale Sicherheitsrat* (NSR, National Security Council) to pool ministerial internal, external, economic and digital security expertise.<sup>28</sup> Since its creation, the NSR has functioned as a permanent cabinet committee of the German federal government, serving as the central body for decision-making on overarching matters of national security. It replaced the informal *Sicherheitskabinett*, the Security Cabinet that brought together cabinet members of relevant ministries to discuss matters of external and internal security on a needs basis. It also takes on decisions pertaining to armament exports. The Federal Security Council, which had been advising the government on security policy issues, particularly related to defense, disarmament and arms control, was disbanded on January 1, 2026.

Permanent members of the NSR are the federal chancellor, the head of the federal chancellery, and the ministers for foreign affairs; defense; the interior; finance; justice and consumer protection; economic affairs and energy; development co-operation; and digital and state modernization. The Bundeswehr's *Generalinspekteur* and the presidents of the intelligence services, the federal criminal police and the federal police, as well as the head of the governmental press and information office, also participate in the meetings. Depending on the topic to be discussed, other members of the government or representatives of the Länder may be consulted, as well as representatives of other states, the European Union, NATO or other international organizations. In addition, recognized experts may be invited to NSR sessions.

The NSR differs from similar US or UK institutions to the extent that it is adapted to the German constitutional system, which distributes security competencies between the federal and Länder levels. The present structure has been designed in such a way that it can evolve over the coming years, perhaps taking on an overall governance role, thus alleviating the Federal Ministry of the Interior from many coordinating responsibilities. Interestingly, Sweden has opted for the creation of a designated minister integrating both homeland and defense aspects of security.

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28. "Im Kabinett beschlossen. Deutschland bekommt einen Nationalen Sicherheitsrat" [Decided by the cabinet: Germany to get a National Security Council], Federal Government of Germany, August 27, 2025.

## Financial, human and material resources for the Bundeswehr 3.0

As the Bundeswehr 1.0 did in its initial decade of existence, the German armed forces face the mammoth task of rapidly scaling up personnel, armament and infrastructure, in order to meet NATO targets. A continuously evolving and adapting Bundeswehr growth plan foresees roughly three time periods: “Fight tonight”, 2029, and 2035+. If initially the emphasis is on closing the most urgent gaps in personnel and material, operating with full equipment as well as a phase of growth and innovation are objectives for later stages.

If financial resources due to new government debt and EU allowances appear plentiful, personnel growth is set to test political and societal readiness to honor Germany’s role as a European security provider. The purchase of defense equipment to fulfil NATO capability requirements cannot escape the conundrums of availability vs. strategic dependencies, as well as procuring for current vs. future warfare. Given Germany’s financial firepower and weight within the Alliance, Germany’s purchasing decisions are bound to significantly influence Europe’s defense capabilities.

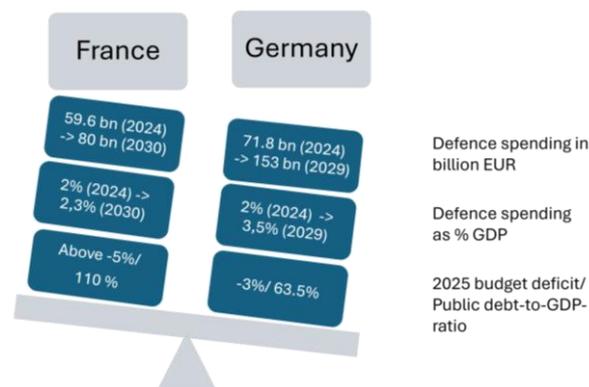
### ***German and European financial frameworks driving defense transformation***

On March 18, 2025, the Bundestag approved several amendments to the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), enabling the federal and state governments to incur several hundred billion euros in new debt for defense, as well as for investments in infrastructure and climate protection. Under the 2025 arrangement, defense spending over 1% of GDP will be exempt from the so-called debt break that curtails government debt, and a second special fund of over €500 billion for infrastructure will be set up.

The Bundeswehr *Sondervermögen* of €100 billion, voted in 2022 after the shock of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, will be spent by 2027. It allowed Germany to reach the 2% GDP defense expenditure goal for the very first time in 2024, reclaiming some of its eroded credibility within the Alliance. But it is the epochal break of the US veering off its transatlantic course which impelled a large part of the political spectrum, supported by public opinion, to go against German fiscal instincts and put defense spending on a growth path, to levels last routinely seen during Cold War times. This marks a return to adequate long-term funding from the federal budget for the Bundeswehr, which will have transformative consequences, especially given that no other EU country is currently able to invest similar sums.

In 2025, the defense budget will reach €86.4 billion, €14.6 billion more than in 2024. €82.7 billion is budgeted for 2026, around €93 billion in 2027, €136 billion in 2028 and around €153 billion in 2029, representing 3.5% of GDP.<sup>29</sup> By 2029, Germany is thus expected to meet the 2025 The Hague NATO summit defense expenditure and investment goals. For comparison, France plans to spend about €80 billion on defense in 2030, 2.3% of GDP, under the 2024–2030 Military Programming Law.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to Germany, French spending numbers include military pensions, thus decreasing available financial resources for defense. With debt levels of 115% of GDP and a budget deficit of 5%, France can only envy Germany's relative fiscal freedom, with German gross public debt standing at 64% and its deficit at 3% in 2025.

**Graph 3: French and German defense spending and fiscal leeway**



Graph from the author.

As Germany's defense spending is propelled forward by tectonic geopolitical shifts, these are also operating at the European level. In March 2025, the EU Commission presented its ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030.<sup>31</sup> To strengthen pan-European defense capabilities, the Commission is exempting defense spending from Stability and Growth Pact debt and deficit limits. As well, the Security Action for Europe program provides up to €150 billion in low-interest loans for member states to buy defense equipment. Given the Bundeswehr's role as "anchor army" for partner nations under NATO's Framework Nations concept, these latest European defense initiatives provide a strong financial boost for European and therefore German defense, and the defense industry.

29. R. Buchsteiner and C. Lunday, "Germany Pledges To Hit 3.5 Percent Defense Spending Target By 2029", *Politico*, June 23, 2025, available at: [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

30. "How To Finance French Rearmament And Other Priorities By 2030?", *Flash Note*, No. 2, Haut Commissariat au Plan – France Stratégie, May 2025.

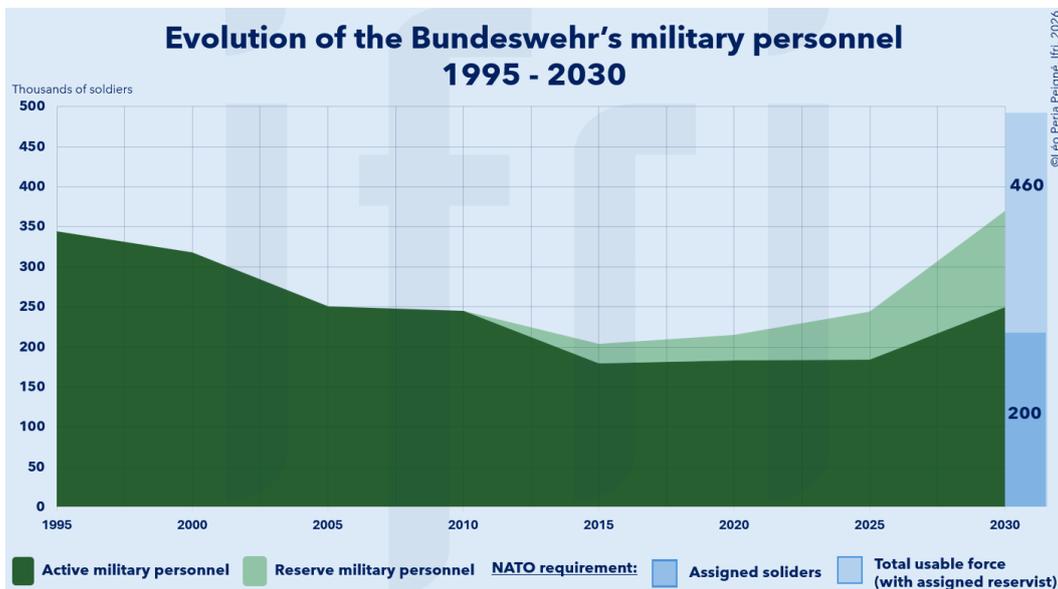
31. "European Commission, Acting On Defense To Protect Europeans", European Commission, available at: <https://commission.europa.eu>.

## Aufwuchs of human resources: the Bundeswehr’s strategic goal and greatest challenge

For years, the German armed forces have been operating below their budgeted-for strength levels, with the Bundeswehr compensating for recruitment shortfalls with extended staff retention. In October 2025, there were around 195,000 positions available for 184,242 active soldiers, composed of professional and temporary soldiers, as well as volunteers performing military service. The rise from fewer than 182,000 active soldiers in September 2025 to the Bundeswehr’s highest staffing levels since 2021 is above all due to an increase in volunteers.<sup>32</sup> The coming months will reveal whether this was a one-off or the start of a trend.

Out of 184,242 active soldiers in October, 59,010 were career military personnel, 113,170 were on fixed-term contracts, and 12,062 were volunteers performing military service. There are currently 25,259 female soldiers, making up more than 13% of the German armed forces, with roughly half serving in the support services and a fifth in the army.<sup>33</sup> (Critics point out that personnel numbers can be deceptive and do not necessarily equal operational readiness.)

**Graph 4: Evolution of the Bundeswehr’s military personnel (1995-2030)**



Sources: Statista; Deutscher Bundestag Wissenschaftliche Dienste Report; 2025 Staff Review (Bundeswehr); Annual report of the German Armed Forces Commissioner on the reserve forces. Graph realized by Ifri, 2026.

32. T. Wiegold, “Personalstärke Oktober 2025: Sprung auf mehr als 184.000 – Größte Bundeswehr seit Juli 2021 (NEUFASSUNG mit korrekten Frauen-Zahlen)” [Personnel Strength In October 2025: Jump To More Than 184,000 – Largest Bundeswehr Since July 2021 (REVISED VERSION With Correct Figures For Women)], Augen Geradeaus, December 5, 2025, available at: <https://augengeradeaus.net/>.

33. *Ibid.*

NATO planning for Germany dictates a target of roughly 460,000 personnel by 2029, divided into some 260,000 active troops and around 200,000 reservists.<sup>34</sup> In November 2025, the then Commander-in-Chief of the German army, General Mais, stressed the need for 45,000 more active troops by 2029. Meeting the NATO 2025 The Hague summit goals would require an additional 45,000 active troops by 2035. Next to honoring obligations to Germany's allies and building reserves for a potential war of attrition, General Mais also called for some 10,000 extra troops to bolster homeland defense, which is drawn from the Bundeswehr territorial reserve.<sup>35</sup>

To reach these ambitious troop goals, policymakers and the military are counting on the increased (financial) attractiveness of the voluntary military service, on the possibility of reintroducing conscription, if need be, and on the activation of the reserves.

After much haggling and coalition infighting at the end of 2025, both chambers of the German legislature approved a law modernizing military service and introducing conscription if necessary.<sup>36</sup> From January 1 onwards, all 18-year-old Germans will be contacted by mail and encouraged to do voluntary (also non-military) service. All will receive a medical questionnaire that men must, and women can, answer. Should biannually reviewed recruitment goals reported to the Bundestag by the Ministry of Defense prove insufficient, a lottery-based conscription system could kick in. The Defense Minister hopes that mandatory service will not be needed to manage personnel growth over time, pointing to recent positive recruitment figures. Others are more skeptical. The Military Service Modernization Act constitutes nevertheless a watershed moment: for the first time since conscription was suspended in 2011, military planners will have a system of military registration at their disposal, providing improved visibility.

Getting the necessary infrastructure and personnel ready for training, as well as medical and security checks, health coverage and housing of volunteers, will be a big challenge. The army command estimates that, from 2027 onwards, additional infrastructure and training capacities will have to be provided, so as not to compromise operational readiness.<sup>37</sup> In the past, the Bundeswehr has been able to retain 25% of short-term recruits for

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34. M. F. Harsch, "From Restraint to Readiness? Germany Considers Conscription", *War on the Rocks*, December 30, 2025, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

35. S. Siebold, "Exclusive: Germany's Army Needs to Double in Size, Commander Says", Reuters, September 11, 2025, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

36. "Gesetz zur Modernisierung des Wehrdienstes (Wehrdienst-Modernisierungsgesetz – WDMoDG)" [Act On The Modernisation Of Military Service (Military Service Modernisation Act – WDMoDG)], *Bundesgesetzblatt*, December 29, 2025.

37. Generalleutnant Alfons Mais, "Es ist noch nicht alles so, wie es sein wollte. Aber es wird" [Not everything is as it should be yet. But it will be], The German Armed Forces Association, October 29, 2025, available at: [www.dbwv.de](http://www.dbwv.de).

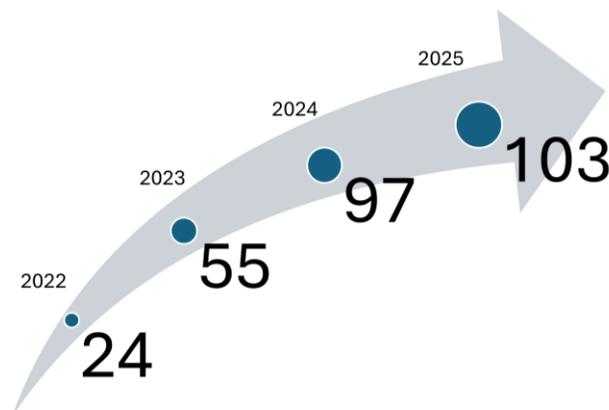
longer service periods; investing in volunteers could therefore translate into a larger active component of the armed forces.

Crucially, military service is expected to increase the vitally important stock of reservists. The reserve allows for troop growth, operational readiness and endurance across the entire Bundeswehr spectrum, partly by releasing active soldiers to take up combat duty. It also provides a crucial civil-military link. Currently, the Bundeswehr has a planned standing reserve of 60,000 reservists, with the ability until 2030 to draw 100,000 additional reservists from the pool of 900,000 former soldiers below the age of 65 who have left the service.

### ***New kit for the troops: material resources***

In 2025, the Bundeswehr received 149 new product deliveries in the shape of vehicles, communications and IT systems, as well as personal equipment for soldiers. The majority, with 81 procurement projects, went to the Army, followed by the Air Force with 27, Cyber and Information with 21, and 7 to the Navy. In addition, 103 new proposals worth €25 million each were passed through parliament and commissioned – a steady increase from 24 in 2022, 55 in 2023 and 97 in 2024.<sup>38</sup>

**Graph 5: Parliamentary passage of military procurement projects (€25 million each)**



Source: Bundeswehr, December 2025. Graph from the author.

The Army (*Heer*), with 63,618 active soldiers, is the main force of the Bundeswehr. On April 1, 2025, a fourth *Heimatschutzdivision* (HSchDiv) for homeland defense was added to its three existing divisions. In order to become once again the backbone of NATO's conventional force, the *Heer*

38. "Bilanz 2025. Ausrüstung die wirkt – Beschaffung der Bundeswehr 2025 im Überblick" [2025 review: Effective equipment – an overview of Bundeswehr procurement in 2025], Die Bundeswehr, December 23, 2025.

must not only field new armored and mechanized brigades; it must also equip its units to operate in a drone- and missile-saturated low-level airspace, which currently makes combined-arms mechanized warfare particularly challenging. On the homefront, the protection of critical infrastructure, military equipment and troops will also require a strong drone focus. In 2025, the Bundeswehr reported that 200 new *Puma* armored personnel carriers had been delivered to the troops, with 50 more to arrive next year. Between 2027 and 2030, 123 new *Leopard 2 A8* main battle tanks and 1500 *GTK Boxer* armored vehicles should enter service, adding to the existing fleet of about 380 *Leopard 2 A6* and *A7* heavy tanks and more than 300 *Puma* infantry fighting vehicles.

On the collaborative armament front, the *Main Ground Combat System* developed together with France is increasingly under pressure, and a new *Leopard 2A-RC 3.0* demonstrator is currently undergoing testing. The demonstrator could possibly act as a starting point for the *Main Armoured Tank of Europe* project, coordinated by Rheinmetall and KNDS Deutschland and funded by the European Defense Fund, currently involving 12 European countries.<sup>39</sup>

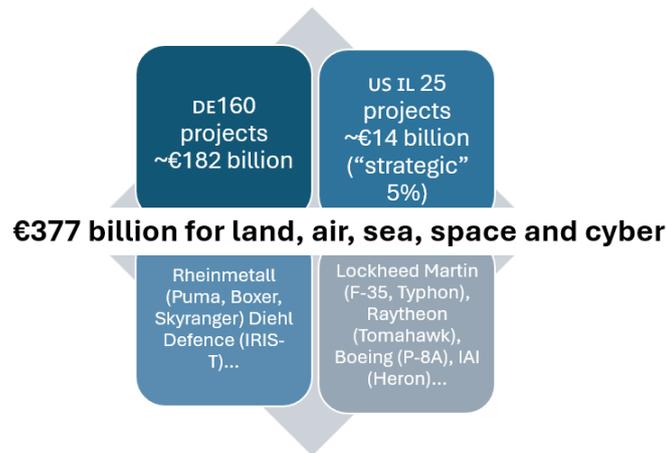
Since the *Zeitenwende*, the Air Force (*Luftwaffe*), with 28,280 active soldiers, has been procuring very costly American systems, notably the nuclear-capable *F-35*, which is vital to ensuring Germany's continued participation in NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. Despite the *Epochenbruch*, this trend is set to continue. The *Luftwaffe*, for example, is developing a stealth combat drone with the United States that could operate alongside the *F-35*, as well as the European *Eurofighter Typhoon*,<sup>40</sup> in apparent competition with several European drone initiatives, including those under the *Future Combat Air System (FCAS)*. In 2025, when the next development phase of the Franco-German-Spanish FCAS project – including a “remote carrier” combat drone – was expected to be greenlit, progress appeared to stall due to workshare disputes between French and German industrial partners.<sup>41</sup>

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39. “Un second proto qui en dit long!”, *Blablachars*, August 12, 2025, available at: <https://blablachars.blogspot.com>.

40. “Airbus To Team With US Kratos Defense, Deploying German Mission System”, Press release, Airbus, July 16, 2025, available at: [www.airbus.com](http://www.airbus.com).

41. J. Möhring, “Troubled Twins: The FCAS and MGCS Weapon Systems and Franco-German Co-operation”, *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, December 2023.

**Graph 6: Planned German military procurement to date**

*Graph from the author.*

In the realm of air defense, beyond the *Arrow 3* and *4* (Israeli-American), *Patriot* (US) and *IRIS-T SLM/SLX* (German) batteries earmarked for the European Sky Shield Initiative, Berlin is reportedly considering the acquisition of 500 to 600 Rheinmetall short-range *Skyranger 30* systems designed to intercept attack drones, cruise missiles and stray munitions.

The Navy is the Bundeswehr's third biggest component, with 15,601 active soldiers. Its core mission remains securing the northern flank of the Alliance. The Deutsche Marine is set to double in size by 2035, with new *Type 126* frigates kitted with *IRIS-T SLM*, *Type 127* air defense frigates equipped with the US *Aegis combat system*, as well as with six submarines *212CD* co-produced with Norway that are to enter into service. Norway and Germany are also jointly developing a supersonic long-range guided missile for their frigates, the *3SM Tyrfing*. The Deutsche Marine very much counts on improving combat efficiency with the help of unmanned surface and submarine systems, such as the *Future Combat Surface Systems* currently being tested. In 2025, the Navy also received two of eight *Boeing P-8A Poseidon* maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft. In January 2026, the Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment, Information Technology and In-Service Support (BAAINBw) confirmed the order of eight American *MQ-9B SeaGuardian* medium-altitude, long-endurance drones to accompany the P-8A, for the eye-watering price of €1.52 billion.

*Cyber- und Informationsraum* (Germany's Cyber and Information Domain Service), with 13,849 active troops, was set up in 2017 and became its own branch in 2024, given its systemic importance. It protects and develops the Bundeswehr's IT systems, defends against cyber-attacks, ensures information security, collects and analyzes data from geoinformation systems for strategic reconnaissance, and trains specialized personnel. As the innovation cycle for IT equipment is only around two

years, planning and procurement processes in the armed forces must become much more flexible to ensure state-of-the-art equipment.

The Bundeswehr's equipment illustrates the nature and direction of Germany's ongoing defense transformation. First, it mirrors Germany's serious efforts to reach NATO defense planning targets, to enable rapid burden-sharing and greater European responsibility. On the one hand, this means plugging urgent capability gaps; on the other, trying to reduce dependency on US assets.

Secondly, it incarnates the physical impossibility of meeting the NATO defense planning goals in the very tight time-frames projected. Indeed, German defense industrial actors such as Rheinmetall, KNDS Deutschland, Diehl, Hensoldt, and ThyssenKrupp are multiplying deals and opening production facilities. But no matter how much money is made available, or how much industrial production is ramped up, neither Europe nor the US alone can build the capabilities needed in such a short period. Each NATO nation is buying as much armament as possible wherever available, with valid concerns regarding interoperability, strategic dependencies and structuring of defense markets being relegated to later.

Thirdly, Germany's military equipment reflects the country's industrial and technological interlinkages with key allies, most importantly the United States and Israel. Such relations have grown over many decades and have outlived serious political crises in the past. In contrast to France, Germany is not looking for autonomy; it is aiming for sovereignty. Whether such subtleties will be able to survive a comprehensive *Epochenbruch* remains to be seen.

## ***Kriegstüchtigkeit*: German attitude and combat readiness**

Does Germany have what it takes to see through its latest defense transformation and to send off its soldiers to fight, and die, if need be? A lot depends on the right mindset. In these challenging times, it is ultimately the members of the Bundeswehr who carry on their shoulders the transformation of their armed forces, and who are preparing their bodies and minds for combat. While their daunting mission is complicated by a multitude of regulations fit for a peacetime context, the German military has the right conceptual tools to function under hostile conditions.

German citizens, in contrast to some of their political personnel, seem to be under no illusions regarding the European security environment and the shifting nature of international politics. Yet the Bundeswehr remains at heart still a domestic political issue, not a tool for projecting power. An indicator as to whether Germany's strategic culture is evolving will be the number of Germans ready to serve not only their country, but also in defense of other European democracies.

Lastly, whether Germany is combat-ready is already being tested every day. As NATO's rear in case of an armed confrontation with Russia, the country is under great pressure to speedily create the conditions to continue functioning under conditions of crisis and war.

### ***Bundeswehr soldiers and employees: Performing "superhuman" feats under difficult conditions***

Grappling simultaneously with personnel growth, operational readiness (including an unprecedented, potentially risky deployment), and homeland security is a tall order. In recent years, the realities of contemporary conventional warfare have become very concrete for members of the Bundeswehr. Yet many of today's defense challenges lie in regulatory hurdles, for example from planning and construction law, health and safety, and environmental regulation, turning even normal military routines into "superhuman" feats.

For Germany's defense transformation to succeed, the armed forces and administrations will have to switch to a culture of speed, simplification, delegation, acceptance of error and confidence.

#### **The deployment of a Bundeswehr armored brigade in Lithuania**

Officially known as *Panzerbrigade 45 'Lithuania'*, the Bundeswehr's Lithuania Brigade is making history as the first German combat brigade to be permanently stationed abroad. Formally commissioned on April 1, 2025, it is expected to number around 4,800 soldiers and 200 civilian employees.

The brigade, a central element of NATO's forward defense, is intended to strengthen deterrence and defense capabilities in the Baltic region. It is a sign of Germany's solidarity with its Baltic partners and its willingness to defend the Alliance's territory.

In February 2026, brigade headquarters at Rukla and initial units on site will be joined by two German battalions (*Panzergranadierbataillon 122* and *Panzerbataillon 203*) and the Multinational Battlegroup Lithuania, to be placed under the brigade's command. Full deployment to Lithuania will be completed by 2027, with most troops based at Rukla (near Kaunas) and Rūdninkai (south of Vilnius).

Fortunately, the Bundeswehr has time-tested resources it can fall back on: the concepts of *Führen mit Auftrag* and *Innere Führung*. *Führen mit Auftrag* (mission command) delegates responsibility to subsidiary ranks of the military hierarchy. Based on trust and professional competence, setting the objective rather than necessarily defining the way to get there, it allows for individually tailored solutions. *Innere Führung* (inner leadership)

establishes the primacy of politics over the military and attempts to reconcile the duties of soldiers with individual rights guaranteed under the German constitution. It also provides for autonomous decision-making in cases where it is not possible to communicate with the military hierarchy. In this transition phase, and in the face of possible military confrontation, both concepts could strengthen the Bundeswehr's effectiveness and cohesion.

### ***German society and the Bundeswehr: strong trust, but little appetite for long-term engagement and European leadership***

How do German citizens view their armed forces and the environment in which they operate? According to the latest public opinion poll on security and defense policy run yearly by the Centre for Military History and Social Sciences of the German Armed Forces, two-thirds of respondents – a majority across all political groups – see Russia as a threat to Germany's security, citing notably fear of cyberattacks and of Russian rearmament. While US military protection is still deemed essential, only 41% consider the US to be a reliable partner, a drop of more than 20 percentage points from last year. The Bundeswehr appears as a highly trusted institution.

An absolute majority of men and a relative majority of women are in favor of a new military service that should apply equally to young men and women. In the 20-40 age group alone, 54% of men and 23% of women express their personal willingness to defend their country. But this does not translate into a wish to permanently engage: the acceptance of temporary military service is significantly greater among young people than their interest in a career as a professional or temporary soldier.<sup>42</sup>

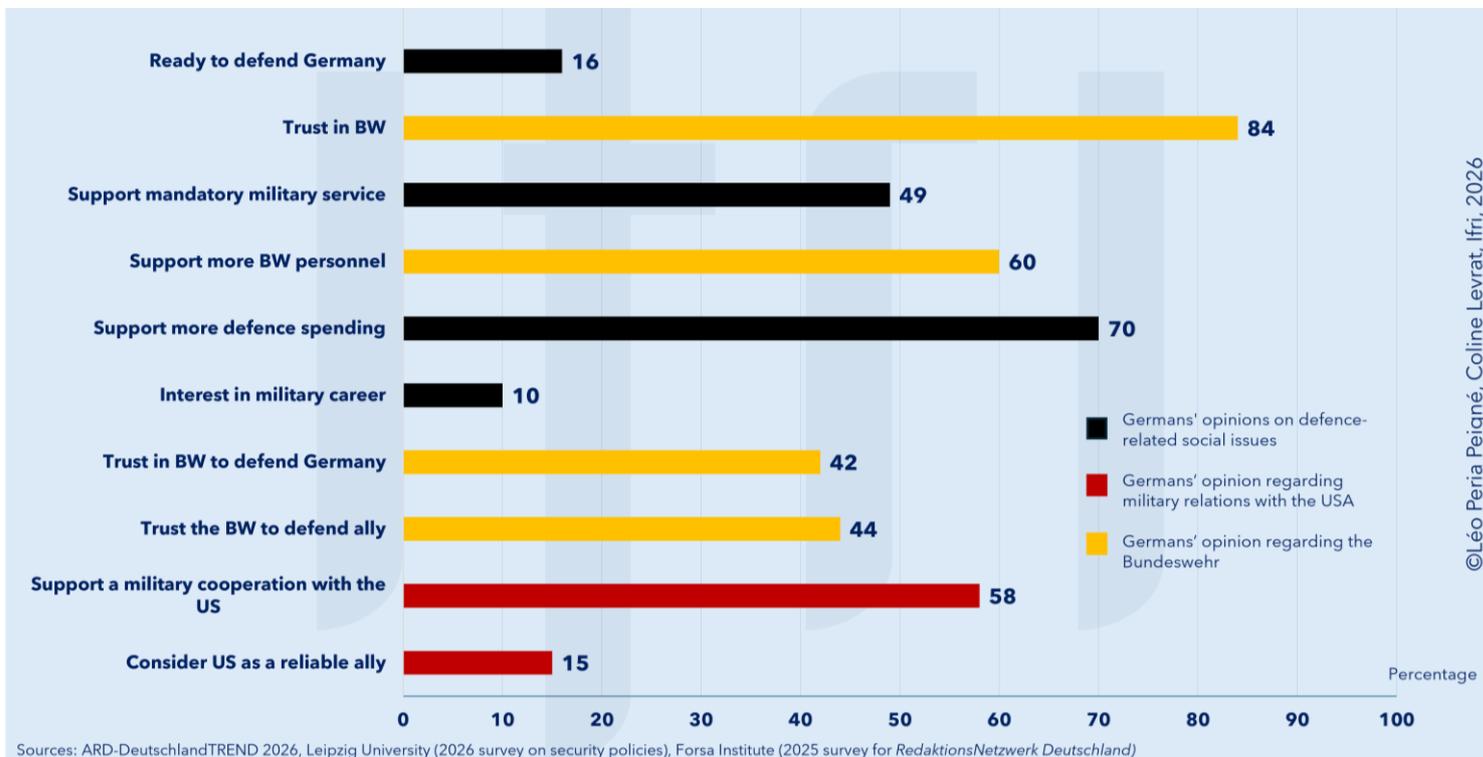
An additional poll, conducted on behalf of the Körber Foundation in September 2025, sheds further important light on Germany's defense mood: a clear majority, 61%, of those interviewed, rejected a military leadership role in Europe. At 75%, rejection was particularly high in eastern Germany, while in the west it stood at 58%. But 72% of respondents considered it fundamentally correct for Germany to double its defense spending over the next ten years.<sup>43</sup>

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42. "Deutschland in der militärischen Führungsrolle? Forschungsbericht 139. Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2025" [Germany in a military leadership role? Research Report 139. Security and defense policy opinion in the Federal Republic of Germany in 2025], ZMSBw, September 2025.

43. "The Berlin Pulse 2025/2026. Adapting To The End of Certainties", Körber Foundation, November 2025.

**Graph 7: German public opinion and the Bundeswehr (yearly ZMSBw survey, spring 2025)**



Sources: ARD-DeutschlandTREND 2026, Leipzig University (2026 survey on security policies), Forsa Institute (2025 survey for RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland)

Sources: ARD-DeutschlandTREND 2026; Leipzig University (2026 study on security policies); Institut Forsa (2025 study for RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland). Graph realized by Ifri, 2026.

In contrast to the 1950s, one then hotly debated issue, namely the fear of resurgent German militarism and Nazism, of hosting a “state within a state” hostile to democracy, seems to have all but disappeared. This is notable as the Bundeswehr has been rocked by a series of scandals, starting in 2017, involving extreme-right activism,<sup>44</sup> the most recent one making headlines at the end of December 2025.<sup>45</sup> In 2024, the *Extremism Prevention Service of the Militärische Abschirmdienst*<sup>46</sup> (MAD, Military Counterintelligence Service) documented 875 cases of right-wing extremism (75% of all suspected extremism cases) in the ranks of the Bundeswehr, up from 776 cases in 2023.<sup>47</sup> In this context, criticism by

44. Following the discovery in 2017 of Franco A., a German officer posing as asylum seeker planning to commit “false flag” attacks, in 2020, investigators identified a right-wing network that included members and former members of the elite Kommando Spezial Kräfte troops.

45. In December 2025, another scandal broke, this time mixing Nazi ideology, drug use and sexism, so far involving 55 members of the 26th Paratrooper regiment. See P. Cartens and R. Golub, “Hitlergrüsse und Frauenhass. Ermittlungen bei den Fallschirmjägern” [Hitler salutes and misogyny. Investigations among the paratroopers], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 29, 2025, available at: <https://www.faz.net>.

46. The MAD (military counter-intelligence service) is a civilian office that acts on behalf of the Ministry of Defense in the fight against espionage and extremism.

47. “Extremismusbericht der Bundeswehr 2024” [Bundeswehr Extremism Report 2024], Federal Ministry of Defense, September 2025.

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American intelligence services of their German counterparts for monitoring extreme-right activities in German society seems particularly concerning.<sup>48</sup> One hope invested in the modernized military service is to make the Bundeswehr more broadly representative of German society.

### ***Test case OPLAN DEU: Rising to the challenge of comprehensive defense***

To fulfill its key role within the NATO alliance, Germany will need to adopt a comprehensive understanding of defense, in which the federal state, the Länder and communes, economic actors and civil society jointly share responsibility. This “whole of government, whole of society” approach<sup>49</sup> would reflect a considerable cultural change, although in many ways it would be familiar to those who experienced Bundeswehr 1.0, or who simply lived during the times of East-West confrontation.

During the Cold War, West Germany prepared for possible conflict with the USSR with the help of detailed defense plans, called Operation Plan Germany (OPLAN DEU), the last of which dates from 1989. Such plans established responsibilities and tasks for a wide variety of actors in the case of a Soviet attack. Much has changed, especially in terms of technological developments such as information and communication technology, cyber and drones. Modern armed forces even more critically depend on a functioning industry and operational civilian infrastructure. But to produce a new OPLAN DEU matching the new security situation, German authorities used old defense plans as a starting point.

Under a 1200-page classified scenario reported by the *Wall Street Journal* in November 2025, 800,000 NATO soldiers would be deployed to Germany, arriving at German airports or ports of the Alliance, and needing accommodation and possibly medical care before leaving for the front.<sup>50</sup> Military equipment and ammunition would mainly arrive by sea and would need to be unloaded as quickly as possible at Germany’s ports, to be maintained and repaired before being dispatched to the front by railway.

Such complex logistics would mobilize the armed forces, including the German-led NATO Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm coordinating national NATO defense plans, police, border guards, fire brigades, civil protection, the Red Cross, as well as the private sector, among others Deutsche Telekom, the port of Hamburg, Deutsche Bahn, and

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48. L. Monfregola, “Entre Trump et l’AFD. La géopolitique des espions s’installe en Allemagne”, *Le Grand Continent*, November 30, 2025, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

49. “Operations Plan for Germany. A whole-of-government and whole-of-society task”, Bundeswehr Joint Forces Command, April 2025.

50. B. Benoit, “Germany’s Secret Plan for War With Russia”, *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2025, available at: [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com).

energy suppliers, all coordinated by federal states and local authorities.<sup>51</sup> Judging from experience with various natural disasters in recent years, there is room for improvement when it comes to communication and coordination among the many actors involved. An uptick in hybrid activities on land, in the air, at sea and in cyberspace is driving the point home that Europe and Germany are not at peace anymore.

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51. A. S. Kühne, “So hilft die Industrie im Kriegsfall” [How Industry Helps in Times of War], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 10, 2025, available at: [www.faz.net](http://www.faz.net).

# Conclusion

## Consequences of Germany's defense transformation: new bargains, new equilibrium?

Still reeling under the *Zeitenwende* caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Germany and Europe find themselves confronted with an *Epochenbruch*, an epochal break. The US, if not leaving the transatlantic community outright – for example, by threatening an ally with territorial annexation, or by musing about UK and French nuclear weapons as security risks<sup>52</sup> – is at least strongly encouraging Europeans and Canadians to fend for themselves. Enormous military dependencies on NATO's "first among equals" remain, not least in the nuclear realm. Managing the transition of the most successful alliance in history, possibly salvaging a working transatlantic defense link, is a daunting endeavor. In this transformative moment, Germany, one of Europe's central political players and its biggest economy, carries an enormous responsibility.

Helped by German financial firepower, the Bundeswehr, albeit facing tremendous challenges, is shaping up into NATO's conventional backbone and the core force of NATO's European pillar. Over the coming years, the German military is set to spend €377 billion on more than 320 weapons programs across all domains. Most of these procurement projects will be taken on by German and, to a lesser extent, European firms. A mere 5%, but among these the most strategically important projects, will go to US suppliers.<sup>53</sup> While Germany's defense industry and those of its partners is booming, Franco-German defense industrial lighthouse projects such as the *Main Ground Combat System* and the *Future Combat Air System* seem to be in the doldrums, threatened by obsolescence and industrial antagonisms.

With its functional and geographic position within NATO, its equipment orders, and its choice of strategic partners, Germany's ongoing defense transformation has the potential to reshape the European defense industry and influence Europe's medium- to long-term defense capabilities.

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52. M. Lund Nielsen, "Europe's 'Destructive Moral Ideas' Could Jeopardise Nuclear Powers, JD Vance Says", *Euractiv*, December 26, 2025, available at: [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com).

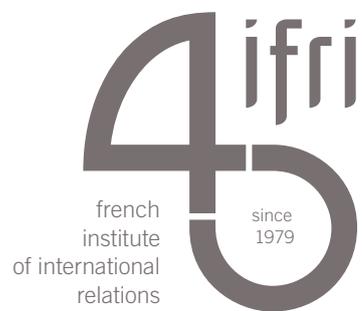
53. C. Lunday, "Germany's New €377 Billion Military Wish List", *Politico*, October 27, 2025, available at: [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

In the past, Germany has mostly been recognized for its economic weight. Now, it is thrust into a leading military-industrial role, along with its leading role in supporting Ukraine. This could upend Europe's longstanding power distribution, in which France has traditionally played a central defense role. It is still unclear how Germany would use its additional political prowess in conjunction with its partners and how it would convince its public of the merits of taking on more defense responsibilities. Under these circumstances, diplomatic skills and political creativity are key to hammering out new arrangements, and finding credible conventional and nuclear formulas to keep the European continent safe. Alongside Franco-German relations, flexible co-operation formats – such as the E3, which brings together France, the United Kingdom and Germany, and can be expanded to include Poland and Italy – are gaining importance, complementing NATO and the EU.

Bundeswehr 3.0 is of systemic importance to Europe's security. With Russia and the United States having jolted the European security order, Europe is now searching for a new equilibrium in which each country must find its place.

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