

# HOLDING THE CENTER

As Donald Trump Wavers on NATO, the Alliance's Future  
May Depend on Germany

*By Tobias Bunde*

Germany has been the leading political and economic power in the European Union for the last several years. Major policy responses to the euro crisis or the refugee crisis have been largely shaped by Berlin. This is not surprising, given that the country is a stable democracy and the leading economy in the eurozone while many of its most important partners have been struggling politically and economically. Rather astonishing is a more recent development: Germany is also assuming a crucial military role within the new strategic posture of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On the Eastern flank, Germany has, after initial reluctance, played an important role. It helped set up the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), agreed upon at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, and offered to lead a multinational NATO battalion in Lithuania as part of the “enhanced forward presence,” established at the NATO Warsaw Summit in 2016. Germany is now also leading the way in putting to work the Framework Nations Concept, which it proposed years ago, by offering partner countries to integrate units of their armed forces into German command structures on the division level.

Taken together, these changes essentially reveal, at least for some well-versed observers, that the Bundeswehr is turning into Europe’s “anchor army,” or the “backbone for the Alliance’s military reorganization.” These developments indeed signal an important change in the German role within NATO and represent the beginning of an ongoing adaption to the changing strategic environment. An increasingly revisionist Russia, the specter of a disintegrating European Union (EU), a nationalist United States of America under President Donald Trump, and illiberal political forces within the countries of the transatlantic security

▷ German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen aboard the *FGS Bonn* in the Aegean Sea, April 20, 2016. *John MacDougall/Reuters*



community force German elites to reconsider their foreign policy outlook. As the principle foundations of Germany's foreign policy are under pressure, there is increasing awareness and readiness in Berlin to step up.

Those who see a new military giant in the making, however, are mistaken. Even if the German strategic culture is slowly evolving, the country is, for various reasons, neither able nor willing to become Europe's major military power. In the years to come, its leaders will have to walk a thin line. On the one hand, they have to deal with a population that has been accustomed to a low-threat security environment and is skeptical of increased defense spending and military engagement. On the other hand, they have to respond to American calls for increased German defense spending if they do not want to endanger the future vitality of NATO.

### **“Strategic Black Hole”**

Only a couple of years ago, many domestic and international analysts worried about the German role in NATO. They complained not only about a lack of commitment of the German government to NATO operations, but also a lack of strategic input coming from Berlin. For years, Germany was a prime target of those allies who warned that NATO could become a “two-tiered alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not,” as former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it in 2008. Although other countries had caveats for their military forces in Afghanistan as well, Germany was often seen as the main culprit and the alliance's prime free rider.

When the German government abstained in the 2011 United Nations Security Council vote authorizing NATO military intervention in Libya and withdrew German ships in the Mediterranean from NATO command, some worried about the future direction of German foreign policy and whether it might seek a more independent role and chart a course different from that of its most important Western partners. For some, Germany had even become “NATO's lost nation.” As the British strategic analyst Julian Lindley-French summarized a discussion at Wilton Park in 2010, he wrote: “Germany is a strategic ‘black hole’ in the heart of the alliance. In the absence of a Germany willing to fulfill its role as a leader of the European pillar of the alliance, NATO is weakened to the extent that the burden on and consequence of American leadership will remain overwhelming. This imbalance undermines the functioning of the alliance as an effective political forum.”

A closer analysis of NATO's development since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, reveals that Germany often defined the red lines of the alliance's transformation. Instead of offering their own visions, a series of German governments mainly put forward what NATO could not or should not do. Germany opposed both the vision of a “global NATO,” an interventionist alliance able and willing to engage in



theaters throughout the world, and the vision of a regional alliance that would return to its roots and focus on territorial defense against Russia. Yet, it did not really offer a vision of its own, often to the dismay of its allies and also to many Germans. Writing in *Der Spiegel* in 2010, a group of former German officials bluntly stated: “In Germany, there is no significant discussion about the future of NATO, its self-image, its strategy for the future, and the question of how Russia can be included. Berlin is not showing any opinion leadership, nor is it spurring international debate. This has been a disappointment for other members of the alliance, who are asking themselves whether the Germans are afraid of the debate or are simply no longer capable of contributing to it in a forward-looking way.” NATO, it seemed at the time, was not vital to German security anymore.

Against the background of growing international and domestic criticism, the strategic community in Germany launched various efforts to make the case for a stronger German role in foreign and security policy. Many experts shared the view that the country was punching far below its weight and that this situation was not sustainable in the long run. One such initiative was a working group put together by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, which presented a report in 2013 that summarized a newly emerging consensus among the strategic community in Berlin. Specifically, the authors stressed that “Germany must use its increased influence to contribute to shaping the future of the alliance.” In a similar vein, at the Munich Security Conference in 2014, German President Joachim Gauck delivered what will likely be remembered as his most important speech. Arguing that “change is gradually gnawing away at German certainties,” Gauck made a forceful plea for Germany to “take more resolute steps to preserve and help shape the order based on the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations.” Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier echoed the president’s call in their speeches at the same venue. Steinmeier even employed specific adjectives that Gauck had used the day before: “Germany must be ready for earlier, more decisive, and more substantive engagement in the foreign and security policy sphere.” Some observers later described the thrust of this concerted effort as the new Munich Consensus.

### Concrete Policy Initiatives

Few had thought at the time that the Munich Consensus was to be tested almost immediately. Only a few weeks after the Munich conference, Russian forces entered Ukrainian territory. In mid-March, the Russian government annexed Crimea. The initial reaction from Berlin was cautious. Yet, the continuous escalation in Eastern Ukraine convinced the German government that Moscow was unwilling to negotiate

a peaceful solution and that the Russian government's actions presented a full-blown assault on the principles of the European security order that needed to be defended. After the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over Ukraine reportedly by pro-Russian insurgents, killing nearly three hundred civilians, the German government changed gears and became one of the leading advocates of economic sanctions against Russia. Although the German government opposed the delivery of defensive weapons to the Ukrainian government, fearing that this would only add fuel to the fire, it went along with the new focus on reassurance for those allies who felt particularly threatened by Moscow. The so-called Wales Package included more exercises across the alliance and the establishment of the VJTF. At the same time, Berlin insisted on the need to respect the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, a political document that established common principles for the relationship between the alliance and Russia and included the promise by NATO to “carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”

While most Central and Eastern European (CEE) governments argued that Russia had violated almost every main principle of the Founding Act and thus could not expect NATO to stick to it, Germany in particular maintained that the alliance should continue to respect its commitments and avoid a tit for tat demonstrating that the alliance's behavior was different from Russia's and that a return to the principles was its goal. In particular, Germany and a number of other countries opposed the establishment of new NATO bases and permanent stationing of troops on the Eastern flank.

On the diplomatic front, however, German Chancellor Angela Merkel became the principal negotiator on Ukraine. Given that the United States did not insist on a leadership role in the negotiations and was willing to let Berlin take the lead for pragmatic reasons, the German government together with its French partners was basically in charge of the West's Ukraine diplomacy within the so-called Normandy format, which brought together France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. They were at least able to forge a peace agreement that has not broken down completely (although it is continuously violated and its provisions are still far from being implemented fully).

Due to the continuing deterioration in the European security environment, more and more politicians in NATO called for additional steps going beyond the Wales Package of 2014. In the run-up to the Warsaw Summit, the Obama administration made clear that it expected Germany to be among the lead nations in what came to be known as the “enhanced forward presence” of the alliance in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, underlining the collective defense commitment laid down in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, NATO's so-called musketeer clause—“an attack against

one ally is considered as an attack against all allies.” In early 2017, the Bundeswehr deployed their first batch of soldiers and heavy equipment to Rukla, Lithuania, where it leads one of the four multinational battalions (the other three battalions in Estonia, Latvia, and Poland are led by the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, respectively). This military contribution also made possible a diplomatic success for Berlin because NATO also decided to renew its efforts to convene with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council. German politicians had long called for renewed dialogue but faced opposition from the CEE countries who felt dialogue was largely meaningless without Russia willing to engage constructively. By upping its military commitment to its allies, Berlin could further its diplomatic goals and strengthen NATO’s efforts to reengage with Russia. The new NATO compromise essentially read: as much defense as necessary, as much dialogue as possible.

Moreover, the Framework Nations Concept, which was initially derided by some when it was first presented by the German government in 2013, is taking shape. Based on the realization that the various national armed forces of the European countries are too small to field the necessary forces, this concept designates so-called framework nations making their structures available for others who are willing to contribute to a certain mission but would be unable to do so without a larger nation leading the effort. After the Dutch who have two armored brigades under German command, the Czech Republic and Romania recently signed an agreement expressing their readiness to link parts of their armed forces to the Bundeswehr. It is the bottom-up answer to the top-down vision of a “European Army.” Christian Mölling, a defense expert at the German Council on Foreign Relations, even proposed to create a new division with the explicit aim of offering an opportunity for smaller states to contribute to it. Such a decision would indeed turn the Bundeswehr into the backbone of a European army. But bold proposals are almost certain to incite domestic resistance.

### **In Search of Domestic Consensus**

Most of Germany’s ongoing strategic adaptation takes place without much public attention. On the one hand, this is not particularly surprising. Much of the issues are technical, and a lot of the change is incremental. The small islands of cooperation (or even integration) between European militaries are clearly not as exciting as talk of a European army. Yet, taken together, they signal a new phase in European defense. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the German government avoids offensively communicating and justifying the significant changes in the Bundeswehr’s strategic posture. For a long time, Defense Minister von der Leyen was the only prominent politician making an effort to explain the Bundeswehr deployment to Lithuania. Others, such as former Foreign Minister Steinmeier, instead voiced concerns across the alliance when he warned of “loud

saber-rattling and war cries” in the run-up to the Warsaw Summit because he felt that NATO’s response risked a “focus exclusively on military aspects.” While stressing her support for the mission, Chancellor Merkel has not shown any eagerness to make the case for the new posture in a major speech or even an interview. This is dangerous in the long run: in 2015, a Pew Research poll found that 58 percent of Germans said that the Bundeswehr should not be sent to defend its allies if there was a violent conflict with Russia. This undermines the credibility of deterrence, and makes an escalation more likely. The lack of strategic communication is even more striking given that there is a historical precedent that could help to explain what Germany is doing: its own history. In essence, German soldiers are now doing what Allied soldiers did for West Germany at the height of the Cold War when the West German government also insisted on the presence of their allies at the intra-German border. But the reluctance to address and debate the Bundeswehr’s engagement in Lithuania is just one example of a rather shaky new consensus. Large parts of the German population remain highly skeptical when issues of military power are debated. This makes a stronger German role in European defense a tough sell for politicians, and a potential campaign issue.

Most recently, the 2 percent goal of NATO has become a major issue in the German debate. As the allies agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014, they would aim at spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense within a decade. Trump’s repeated calls for stronger allied contributions to NATO, combined with thinly veiled threats regarding the future U.S. commitment to the organization, shed additional light on the large gap between Germany’s commitments and its actual spending levels. Yet, the new German foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, raised doubts about the German commitment to the 2 percent goal. On a visit to Tallinn, Gabriel conceded that “Germany needs to do more, no question about it,” but also stressed that it was “completely unrealistic to raise expectations in Germany or among our partners that we will add 30 billion euros to our defense spending over the next eight years.” Gabriel and other German critics of the 2 percent goal put forward various arguments. Some hold that an increase in military spending is ill-advised in general and would signal a dangerous militarization. They would rather increase German spending on development assistance and conflict prevention. Others maintain that the NATO goalpost is not a helpful target. Pointing to allies such as Greece that have long spent more than 2 percent of its GDP on defense but have not contributed much to NATO operations, they argue that focusing on output instead of input would be key. Some also criticize the significant waste of resources for national capabilities. Finally, others even claim that Germany spending about 60 billion euros on its military would be unacceptable to its partners with memories of the Third Reich. As Gabriel put it: “We also have to consider whether Europe wants a Germany that invests 60 billion euros a year in

the German Army. . . . This would be military supremacy in Europe, and I think our neighbors would not like to see that.”

While these arguments are not without merit, they need to be seen in perspective. First of all, increasing defense spending does not have to come at the expense of civilian foreign policy instruments. Rather, more engagement is needed here as well. In the late 1980s, West Germany spent about a quarter of its budget on foreign policy broadly defined. Today, Germany spends just about 15 percent. And while some foreign policy challenges indeed call for nonmilitary answers, one must not ignore that some of the most pressing issues cannot be addressed without military power either. Even if they do not like it, Europeans have to deal with the fact that other actors are ready to use military force to reach their political goals. Being prepared and able to respond may eventually make the use of force less likely.

It is true that greater efforts at pooling and sharing military equipment in Europe may indeed save taxpayers' money in the long run and that additional money would have to be spent smartly. According to a McKinsey & Company analysis for the Munich Security Report 2017, European nations could save up to 30 percent of its annual European defense investment if they decided to streamline procurement. Yet, there is no ignoring the fact that European militaries have amassed significant capability gaps that require additional spending (even if jointly). It is hardly imaginable how the increasing demand for European military contributions in and beyond Europe can be met with the current set of forces. This is true for the increased commitments to collective defense and deterrence on NATO's Eastern flank, contributions to the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups, or efforts to support EU or UN peacekeeping and training missions in Africa. Germany, as NATO's second biggest economic power, has to do its share.

In addition, the claim that Germany's partners would be wary of a stronger German military is far-fetched and not a convincing argument to oppose NATO's 2 percent goal. Germany's partners have consistently argued for increased German defense spending. They fear a strong Germany within NATO far less than a weak Germany that does not provide its share to the alliance's collective defense. Moreover, a strong commitment of Germany to the institutional framework of NATO is the best insurance policy against military nationalization.

### **Trump versus NATO**

No one expects Germany to reach the 2 percent goal within a few years. But increasing its efforts to spend more on military capabilities may be the price the country has to pay in order to uphold NATO, the crucial framework for German defense. Germany has not only a responsibility but also a strong strategic interest in strengthening



NATO. Moreover, the German government has supported the NATO decision to raise defense spending to 2 percent and even reaffirmed it in the most recent German defense strategy, the Weißbuch 2016. From this point of view, questioning Germany's commitment to the 2 percent goal comes at the worst of times as Donald Trump and his team have made clear that they expect a marked increase in defense spending lest the United States would "moderate its commitment" to the alliance, as U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis put it.

If the current or any future U.S. government really decided to "moderate its commitment" to European defense, German policy makers would face a completely different situation. Not only would they have to spend much more on defense, without the U.S. commitment to NATO as an extra-European balancer, worries about German dominance in Europe would be much more acute. Against this background, German politicians would do well to do more to make NATO fit for the future. While recent changes point to a stronger German role within the alliance, progress is slow and based on a rather shaky domestic consensus. The alliance will not be able to fulfill its tasks without leadership from Europe's richest economy. German contributions are, again, crucial for NATO's collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. The center must hold if NATO is not to fold.