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Germany's Transatlantic Relations after the *Zeitenwende*: Continuity and Change under the Scholz and Merz Administra- tions

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Germany's transatlantic policy in the aftermath of the *Zeitenwende* (turning point), widely regarded as a truly historic turning point, focusing on developments under the Scholz and Merz administrations. It argues that while the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a major shift in German security policy, subsequent changes in the transatlantic environment—particularly renewed U.S. pressure for greater European burden-sharing—have further accelerated structural adjustments in Germany's defense posture.

The analysis traces how shifts in the transatlantic environment have interacted with domestic institutional and fiscal changes in Germany, developments in NATO and EU defence cooperation, and evolving public perceptions of the United States. It demonstrates that rising defence expenditures and Europe's expanding role in supporting Ukraine reflect a broader structural shift in the distribution of responsibilities within the transatlantic alliance. At the same time, survey data show that while many Germans remain cautious about openly assuming a leading role in European military affairs, perceptions of the United States have deteriorated and support for increased defence spending has grown. This points to a broader societal reassessment of the transatlantic relationship.

The paper concludes that recent developments should not be interpreted as a weakening of the alliance but as part of a longer historical pattern of recalibration. A more capable and strategically autonomous Europe may ultimately contribute to a more balanced and sustainable transatlantic partnership.

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, the United States has remained Germany's most important partner in foreign and security policy. West Germany's rearmament and accession to NATO in 1955 marked a decisive turning point for the Western alliance during the Cold War. While the strength and nature of the transatlantic relationship have evolved over time—from debates within Germany between Gaullist Europeanists and Atlanticists, to the pursuit of *Ostpolitik* (Eastern Policy), large-scale peace movements opposing nuclear

deployments, and sharp disagreements during the Iraq War—Germany’s fundamental orientation toward the United States has remained largely consistent. Following German reunification in 1990, the territory of the former East Germany was incorporated into NATO, and unified Germany consolidated its role within the alliance as a key U.S. partner in Central Europe.

In recent years, however, the strategic environment has changed dramatically. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the return of the Trump administration have introduced new uncertainties for Berlin regarding European security and the future of the transatlantic partnership. In response, Germany has been compelled to reassess its foreign and defense policies, as well as its relationship with the United States—most notably through Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s declaration of a *Zeitenwende* (turning point) in February 2022.¹ Under the Merz administration, Berlin has further expanded defense spending and strengthened cooperation with European partners.

Among experts, many point to a transformation of the transatlantic relationship, with some even suggesting what has been termed the “death of the West.”² Indeed, public opinion data indicate a significant shift in German perceptions of the United States and the transatlantic partnership. According to a recent survey, the share of respondents who believe Germany should cooperate as closely as possible with the United States has declined markedly—from 77 percent in 2000 to 62 percent in 2020, and to just 34 percent as of March 2026.³ Yet does this mean that the transatlantic relationship is truly approaching its end?

This paper argues that recent developments do not signify a departure from the transatlantic alliance, but rather a redefinition of its internal balance. To explore this argument, it examines Germany’s foreign and defense policy since the *Zeitenwende*, with particular

¹ The Federal Government, Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

² For example, see Mark Leonard, “The united West is dead,” *POLITICO*, January 15, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-united-west-is-dead/>.

³ Die Deutschen wenden sich von den USA ab, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2. März 2026, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/allensbach-umfrage-die-deutschen-wenden-sich-von-den-usa-ab-accg-110846014.html>. This represents an unprecedentedly low level compared with previous years, including during the first Trump administration. Related surveys show that a clear majority of respondents express concern about the reliability of the United States as a NATO ally and about the overall trajectory of bilateral relations. A substantial majority also view transatlantic relations as strained, while only a minority identify the United States as Germany’s most important external partner. See also infratest dimap, ARD-DeutschlandTREND Januar 2026, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2026/januar/>; Körber-Stiftung, The Berlin Pulse 2025/26: Adapting to the End of Certainties, <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/the-berlin-pulse/2025-26/>.

attention to transatlantic relations under the Scholz administration (December 2021–May 2025) and the Merz administration (since May 2025). By analyzing key speeches, strategic documents, defense spending decisions, and public opinion trends, the paper aims to identify both continuity and change in Germany’s approach toward the United States. It concludes by assessing the implications of these developments for the future of U.S.–German relations and for Germany’s role in the transatlantic security order.

The Scholz Administration and the Ukraine War: A *Zeitenwende*?

The sixteen-year tenure of Chancellor Angela Merkel ended in December 2021, when an unprecedented three-party coalition composed of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) took office under Olaf Scholz. The new government brought together parties with distinct foreign policy traditions, with the Greens’ leadership of the Foreign Ministry in particular raising expectations of a more values-oriented diplomatic posture. Yet less than three months after its inauguration, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered the strategic landscape confronting Berlin.

Prior to the invasion, Germany had been criticized for its cautious stance toward Moscow and its limited military assistance to Kyiv. In late January 2022, Berlin’s decision to supply 5,000 helmets to Ukraine was widely derided as inadequate.⁴ The watershed moment came on 27 February 2022, when Scholz addressed the Bundestag (German parliament) and declared a *Zeitenwende*—a historic turning point in German foreign and security policy. He announced the establishment of a €100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr (German military forces), pledged to meet NATO’s two-percent defense spending benchmark, and expanded military assistance to Ukraine.

Scholz’s declaration of a *Zeitenwende* attracted considerable attention both domestically and internationally. It signaled a departure from Germany’s longstanding postwar caution regarding arms transfers and participation in military operations abroad—an aversion rooted in the memories and legacy of World War II—and was particularly striking given the SPD’s traditionally more accommodating stance toward Russia. In this sense, the announcement carried substantial symbolic and political weight, suggesting a far-reaching reorientation of German security policy.

⁴ Ukrainischer Botschafter kritisiert deutsche Helm-Lieferung als »reine Symbolpolitik«, *Der Spiegel*, 26. Januar 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ukraine-botschafter-kritisiert-deutsche-helm-lieferung-als-reine-symbolpolitik-a-2709273c-788d-43eb-8375-07bddd8b9b3c>.

At the same time, the implementation of the *Zeitenwende* proved gradual and politically contested. Although Germany moved relatively quickly to provide certain forms of military assistance following Russia's invasion,⁵ decisions regarding the provision of heavy weaponry were often taken incrementally and in close coordination with allies, primarily the United States.⁶ Debates over the delivery of Leopard 2 tanks, for example, revealed persistent concerns about escalation, historical responsibility, and alliance cohesion.⁷ Moreover, despite the government's commitment to meeting NATO's two-percent defense spending benchmark, the target was not reached in the immediate aftermath of the *Zeitenwende*.⁸

Over the course of Scholz's tenure, elements of the *Zeitenwende* became gradually embedded in Germany's policy framework. Defense spending increased, long-term procurement projects were initiated, and Germany emerged as one of Ukraine's principal European supporters. Yet the external pressure confronting Berlin—while substantial—did not fundamentally overturn the underlying structural assumptions of Germany's alliance policy. The United States remained firmly committed to European security, and NATO cohesion held. Consequently, policy change unfolded incrementally rather than through abrupt structural rupture.

Overall, the Scholz administration's response to the war in Ukraine combined substantial rhetorical commitments and financial support with enduring political, institutional, and societal constraints. The *Zeitenwende* did not represent a wholesale transformation of

⁵ Berlin schickt Kiew 500 Stinger-Raketen und weitere Waffen, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26. Januar 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/berlin-schickt-ukraine-stinger-raketen-und-weitere-waffen-17836825.html>.

⁶ Public opinion was also divided on the supply of heavy weapons and Leopard Taurus systems. Lieferung schwerer Waffen umstritten, tagesschau, 28. April 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-2991.html>; Deutsche beim Thema "Leopard" gespalten, tagesschau, 19. Januar 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3277.html>; Mehrheit gegen "Taurus"-Lieferung an Ukraine, tagesschau, 18. August 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3390.html>. Regarding the Patriot surface-to-air missile system, it has been confirmed in a joint statement with President Biden that Germany will follow the U.S. in providing it. Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung (BPA), Gemeinsame Presseerklärung im Anschluss an ein Telefonat zwischen dem Präsidenten der Vereinigten Staaten, Joseph R. Biden Jr., und dem Bundeskanzler der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Olaf Scholz, 5. Januar 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/gemeinsame-presseerklaerung-im-anschluss-an-ein-telefonat-zwischen-dem-praesidenten-der-vereinigten-staaten-joseph-r-biden-jr-und-dem-bundeskanzler-der-bundesrepublik-deutschland-olaf-scholz-2156622>.

⁷ Wer will was im Panzer-Streit?, tagesschau, 20. Januar 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/leopard-panzer-debatte-101.html>.

⁸ ifo Institute, Germany's Defense Budget and Special Funds Not Enough to Meet 2 Percent Target in 2024, 9 August 2023, <https://www.ifo.de/en/press-release/2023-08-09/germanys-defense-budget-and-special-funds>.

Germany's transatlantic orientation. Rather, it functioned as a catalytic moment—redefining the boundaries of acceptable security policy and facilitating institutional adaptation within an established alliance-centered framework. In this sense, the period laid important groundwork for subsequent developments, even if it fell short of a structural realignment.⁹

Initiatives under the Merz Administration and Changes in Atlantic Relations

The collapse of the Scholz coalition in late 2024 marked a turning point in German domestic politics. Persistent disagreements over fiscal policy—particularly concerning the financing of defense expenditures and economic stimulus measures—ultimately led the FDP to withdraw from the governing coalition.¹⁰ Early federal elections were held in February 2025, resulting in a victory for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), led by Friedrich Merz, who returned to active politics after nearly two decades. In May 2025, a new grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD took office.¹¹

Even before fully consolidating his government, Merz moved swiftly to reshape Germany's fiscal framework. Less than a month after the election of the 21st Bundestag, the governing majority introduced significant changes: defense expenditures exceeding one percent of GDP were exempted from the constitutional debt brake,¹² federal states were granted greater flexibility in borrowing, and a €500 billion special fund for infrastructure and defense investment was established.¹³ These measures substantially expanded Germany's fiscal capacity, signaling a readiness to align financial instruments with evolving

⁹ The national security strategy announced by the Scholz administration in June 2023 states that strengthening the transatlantic alliance and enhancing the close and trusting partnership with the United States are in Germany's value-based interests. The Federal Government, Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/en.html>.

¹⁰ In particular, the FDP has maintained strict adherence to the “debt brake” (discussed below) as a core party principle, in contrast to the SPD and the CDU/CSU. Jedem Zauber wohnt ein Ende inne, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9. November 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/wie-es-zum-bruch-der-ampel-kam-eine-rekonstruktion-110099710.html>.

¹¹ The new government's coalition agreement clearly states that the transatlantic alliance and close cooperation with the United States are of utmost importance. Verantwortung für Deutschland, Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, 21. Legislaturperiode des Deutschen Bundestages, S. 89, https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag2025_bf.pdf.

¹² As this required an amendment to the Basic Law, the provisions on the debt brake were ultimately revised with the support of the Green Party, following the FDP's exit from the coalition. Deutscher Bundestag, Mehrheit für Reform der Schuldenbremse: 512 Abgeordnete stimmen mit Ja, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw12-de-sondersitzung-1056916>.

¹³ However, because this decision was made by the old parliament before the new one was convened, Merz was criticized for not following proper procedure. Das Glaubwürdigkeitsproblem von CDU-Chef Merz, ZDF, 21. März 2025, <https://www.zdfheute.de/politik/deutschland/merz-cdu-kritik-kanzler->

security and economic demands.

These fiscal reforms must be understood against the backdrop not only of the ongoing war in Ukraine but also of the rapidly changing transatlantic environment. The second Trump administration, which began in early 2025, has introduced renewed uncertainty into transatlantic relations. President Trump had already expressed clear expectations during his first term that European allies should shoulder a greater share of the security burden. Furthermore, remarks by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025—suggesting that the principal threat to European democracy lies within rather than outside¹⁴—were widely interpreted in Europe as a significant departure from established transatlantic rhetoric. Collectively, these signals point not merely to rhetorical pressure, but to the possibility of a substantive recalibration of U.S. strategic commitments.

Confronted with this altered environment, the Merz administration pursued a more assertive European security policy. At the NATO level, allies agreed at the 2025 summit to substantially increase defense-related expenditures, committing to a target of five percent of GDP, encompassing both core military capabilities and broader security-related investments.¹⁵ Germany formally endorsed this objective and incorporated higher defense spending into its medium-term financial planning,¹⁶ thereby signaling that expanded military outlays were to become structurally embedded rather than exceptional measures. In doing so, Berlin positioned itself not merely as a supporter, but as a central advocate of strengthened European defense capabilities within the Alliance.

At the same time, Germany assumed a more proactive role in coordinating Europe's response to the war in Ukraine. As the United States explored the possibility of negotiations with Russia, European leaders—including Merz—sought to ensure that diplomatic initiatives would not come at the expense of sustained military and financial support for Kyiv,

[schuldenbremse-wachlerbetrug-wachlertaeuschung-100.html](#).

¹⁴ Munich Security Conference 2025, Selected Key Speeches, Vol. 2, Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/key-speeches-volume-ii-jd-vance-msc-2025/>.

¹⁵ The Hague Summit Declaration, 25 June 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>. Allies agreed on a target of achieving 5% of GDP for defense and security spending by 2035 (3.5% for defense spending and 1.5% for related spending).

¹⁶ Federal Ministry of Finance, German government intensifies its investment drive: 2026 federal budget and fiscal plan to 2029 adopted, 30 July 2025, <https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/EN/Pressemitteilungen/2025/2025-07-30-government-draft-2026-federal-budget.html>.

for instance securing a seat at the negotiating table between President Trump and President Zelenskyy.¹⁷ Berlin backed additional EU-level macro-financial assistance packages and supported efforts to operationalize the use of frozen Russian sovereign assets for Ukraine's defense and reconstruction.¹⁸ These measures reflected an attempt to institutionalize European support mechanisms and reduce reliance on ad hoc arrangements.

Domestically, the Merz administration initiated institutional reforms aimed at strengthening strategic coordination. The establishment of a National Security Council within the Federal Chancellery¹⁹ and renewed debates over the possible reintroduction of conscription²⁰ reflected a broader effort to embed security policy more firmly within the structures of federal governance. Unlike the early phase of the *Zeitenwende*—when implementation was slowed by fiscal and political constraints—the Merz administration operated with expanded financial flexibility and under heightened external pressure, allowing security policy to assume a more systematic and long-term orientation.

In comparative perspective, policy developments under Merz suggest not merely the continuation of the *Zeitenwende*, but its acceleration under qualitatively different conditions. Whereas the Scholz administration declared a historic turning point within a relatively stable transatlantic framework, the Merz administration has confronted a more volatile strategic environment shaped by renewed U.S. demands and a shift in expectations within NATO. As a result, Germany's recalibration of its defense and alliance policy has assumed a more structural character, positioning Berlin not only as a contributor to the transatlantic partnership, but increasingly as a leading actor in strengthening European security capacity. This evolution reflects a growing recognition in Berlin that sustaining the transatlantic alliance will require greater European capacity for autonomous action amid mounting uncertainty regarding the durability of U.S. strategic commitments.

¹⁷ Zelenskyy enlists top European leaders for Monday's Trump talks, *POLITICO*, 17 August 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-zelenskyy-top-eu-leader-trump-talks-dc-von-der-leyen-merz-macron-stubb/>.

¹⁸ European Council, 18 December 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/12/18/>. Ultimately, however, Merz failed to secure approval from other member states on the use of Russia's frozen assets.

¹⁹ The Federal Government, Germany gets a National Security Council, 27. August 2025, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kabinett-sicherheitsrat-2381492>.

²⁰ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, Stärkung der Verteidigungsbereitschaft: Bundestag beschließt Neuen Wehrdienst, 5. Dezember 2025, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bundestag-beschliesst-neuen-wehrdienst-6048520>.

Shifting Transatlantic Expectations and the Rise of European Strategic Autonomy

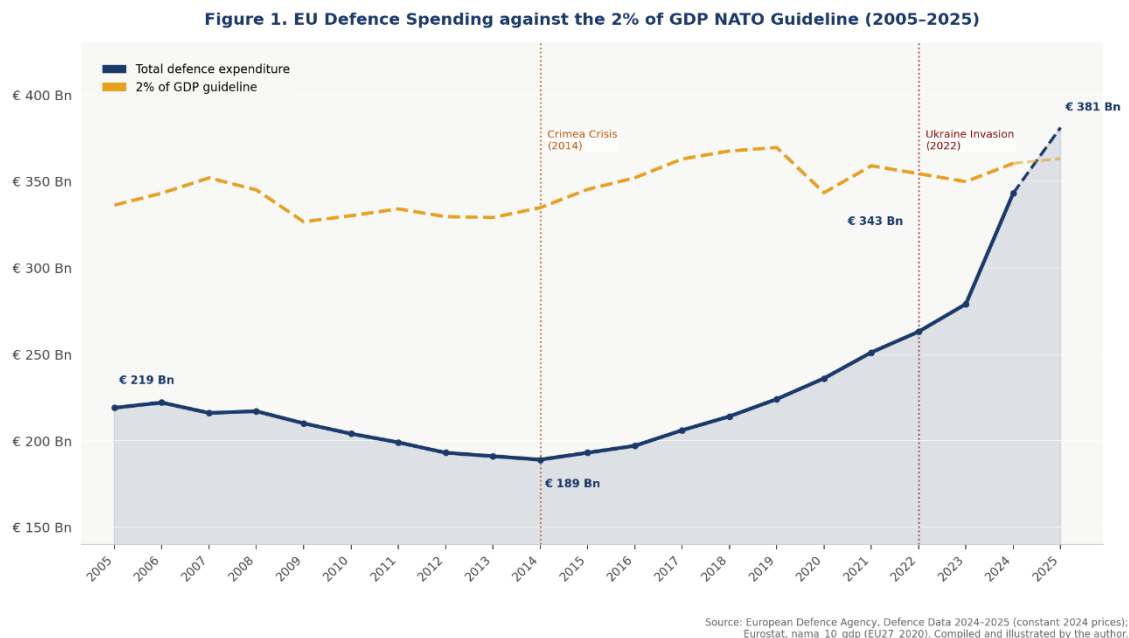
Building on the developments outlined above, the policy direction of the second Trump administration has played a key role in shaping the evolution of transatlantic relations, altering not only the tone of official discourse but also Europe's assumptions about the durability of U.S. strategic commitments. The recalibration of U.S. commitments—combined with the protracted war in Ukraine—has reinforced the perception among European policymakers that greater responsibility for continental security can no longer be deferred.

Importantly, the growing emphasis on European strategic autonomy should not be interpreted solely as a negative consequence of transatlantic friction. Rather, it may be understood as a long-overdue adjustment. For decades, European governments benefited from the stabilizing presence of the United States while underinvesting in their own defense capabilities. The renewed insistence on burden-sharing—however controversial in its articulation—has acted as a catalyst, compelling European states to confront structural deficiencies in military readiness, procurement coordination, and strategic planning. In this sense, shifting transatlantic expectations have functioned as an external stimulus for overdue reform, rather than as a simple rupture in alliance solidarity.

Empirical data illustrate the material dimension of this transformation, both in Germany and across the European Union. Since 2022, defence expenditures in Germany and across the European Union have risen markedly. In Germany, the increase has not only been driven by the €100 billion special fund established under the Scholz administration, but has also been consolidated through structurally higher annual allocations under the Merz administration. The federal defence-related budget for 2026 amounts to approximately €108 billion, and projections suggest that Germany could reach NATO's longer-term benchmark of 3.5 percent of GDP as early as 2029—well ahead of the 2035 horizon discussed within the Alliance.²¹

²¹ Deutschland soll mehr Gewicht in der NATO bekommen, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11. Februar 2026, S. 1.

Across the European Union, aggregate defence spending has followed a similarly upward trajectory. According to data published by the European Parliament and the European Defence Agency,²² total defence expenditure among EU Member States increased from roughly €240 billion in 2022 to more than €320 billion in 2024, reaching around 1.9 percent of EU GDP, with figures for 2025 expected to rise further (See figure 1). A growing number of member states now meet or exceed NATO’s two-percent benchmark and have committed to additional spending increases in line with the targets endorsed at the 2025 NATO summit. These developments suggest that European security policy has moved beyond rhetorical declarations toward sustained fiscal prioritisation.



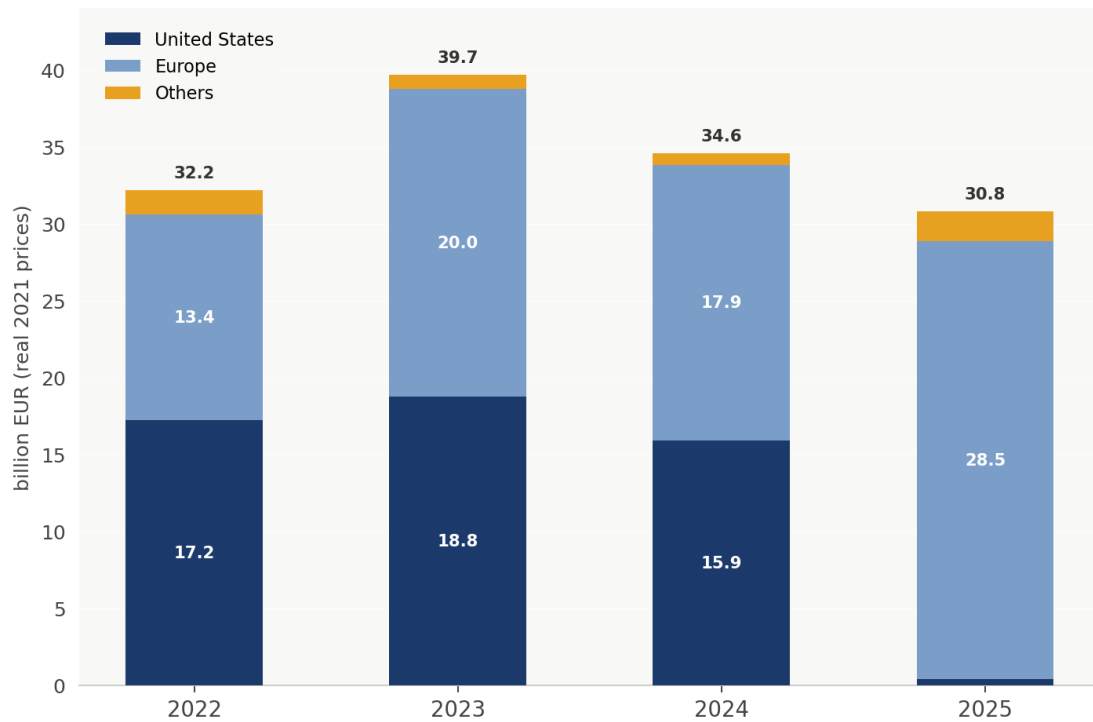
A similar pattern is visible in support for Ukraine. Data from the Kiel Institute’s *Ukraine Support Tracker* indicate that, while the relative share of U.S. assistance declined significantly in 2025, European countries assumed the bulk of financial and military support (See figure 2).²³ In other words, the shift in transatlantic expectations has not merely

²² European Parliament, EU Member State defence expenditure, May 7, 2026, <https://epthinktank.eu/2025/05/07/eu-member-states-defence-budgets/eu-member-state-defence-expenditure/>; European Defence Agency, *Defence data 2024-2025*, European Defence Agency, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2836/3936681>.

²³ Kiel Institute, Ukraine support after 4 years of war: Europe steps up, 11 February 2026, <https://www.kiel-institut.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-after-4-years-of-war-europe-steps-up/>.

generated discourse on “strategic autonomy,” but has translated into measurable reallocations of resources and a more pronounced European role in practice.

Figure 2. Military Aid Allocation to Ukraine by Donor Group (2022–2025)



Note: Europe = EU member states and institutions, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK.
 "Others" = Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan, Türkiye.

Source: Trebesch & Nishikawa (2026), Kiel Policy Brief No. 203; Ukraine Support Tracker Release 27, Kiel Institute. Compiled and illustrated by the author.

These empirical findings are also reflected in German public opinion, where the war in Ukraine is widely regarded as one of the top foreign policy priorities.²⁴ Notably, while many Germans remain cautious about Germany openly assuming a leading role in European military affairs—an attitude rooted in the legacy of World War II—support for increased defense spending has nonetheless grown. This apparent tension points to a gradual shift in Germany’s security outlook. Furthermore, when considered alongside the aforementioned perceptions of the United States, these developments bring into sharper focus two parallel dynamics within German public opinion: a marked erosion of confidence in the United States as a reliable strategic guarantor, alongside growing support for increased defense spending to address Germany’s security challenges. In other words, the

²⁴ Körber-Stiftung, *The Berlin Pulse* 2025/26: *Adapting to the End of Certainties*, <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/the-berlin-pulse/2025-26/>.

push to strengthen defense capabilities is emerging not merely as an elite-driven project, but as a response that resonates with broader societal perceptions of uncertainty in the transatlantic order.

Against this backdrop, the transformation of the security environment since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, together with the return of a more demanding U.S. administration, has fundamentally reshaped Germany's threat perceptions and the underlying premises of its defense policy. Rather than lamenting current uncertainties, Germany and its European partners have the potential to view this moment as an opportunity. By strengthening their own defense capabilities and further integrating Europe's security capacity, they can engage with the United States from a more credible and responsible position. A more capable Europe need not weaken the transatlantic alliance; rather, it may ultimately render it more balanced, sustainable, and resilient—provided that transatlantic coordination is effectively maintained.

Conclusion

Germany's transatlantic policy since the *Zeitenwende* reveals a pattern of calibrated adaptation rather than abrupt rupture. The Scholz administration's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked an important expansion of Germany's financial and military commitments, yet it remained firmly embedded within a stable transatlantic framework characterized by sustained U.S. leadership. The *Zeitenwende* thus functioned less as a structural break than as a catalytic moment that broadened the scope of permissible security policy within Germany's established alliance-centered orientation.

Under the Merz administration, however, the external environment shifted more fundamentally. Renewed uncertainty regarding the durability of U.S. strategic commitments, combined with intensified demands for burden-sharing, accelerated the institutional and fiscal consolidation of Germany's defense posture. What had begun under Scholz as a largely reactive adjustment evolved into a more structural recalibration. Germany increasingly positioned itself not only as a beneficiary of the transatlantic order, but as a co-shaper of European security capacity within it.

The empirical trends examined in this paper—rising defense expenditures across Germany and the European Union, expanded European support for Ukraine, and a measurable decline in public trust in the United States—underscore the depth of this transformation. Yet these developments do not signify a departure from the transatlantic alliance.

Rather, they suggest a redefinition of its internal balance. European strategic autonomy, as it is currently unfolding, does not imply strategic decoupling. Instead, it reflects an effort to sustain alliance cohesion under conditions of diminished certainty regarding American leadership.

Historically, moments of transatlantic tension—from debates over *Ostpolitik* during the Cold War to disagreements surrounding the Iraq War—have periodically generated doubts about the durability of the partnership. In each instance, however, institutional interdependence and shared strategic interests ultimately prevailed. The present phase may represent as a similar inflection point. The long-term resilience of the alliance will likely depend not on the restoration of unquestioned U.S. predominance, but on the emergence of a more capable and self-reliant Europe that can contribute credibly to collective defense.

In this sense, the evolution of Germany’s policy since 2022 reflects both continuity and change. The foundational commitment to the transatlantic partnership endures. What has changed is the recognition that its sustainability now requires greater European responsibility. If successfully managed, this adjustment may ultimately strengthen rather than weaken the transatlantic security order. In this respect, the *Zeitenwende* is best understood not as a departure from Atlanticism, but as an effort to adapt it to a changing strategic and political environment.

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