



GERMANY'S NEW MILITARY STRATEGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Germany’s New Military Strategy and Its Implications” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on July 20, 2026. The symposium highlighted the German government’s new military strategy, titled, “Responsibility for Europe,” and its implications for NATO and extended deterrence. The new strategy reflects a historic shift in Germany’s post-war role, proposing that Germany become “the strongest conventional army in Europe” by 2039 and take the lead in providing conventional military forces as a deterrent to aggression on the continent. It also proposes growth in the size of the Bundeswehr, a more efficient defense procurement process, and a greater focus on territorial defense.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

We have a terrific and truly unique panel of subject matter experts today, who bring a German perspective to this discussion. The recently published unclassified German military strategy, titled, *Responsibility for Europe*, is, as the document states, “the publicly accessible part of the first Bundeswehr Military Strategy and the resulting Plan for the Armed Forces, both approved by the Chief of Defence in April 2026.”¹ But before turning to our panelists, I would like to offer some introductory comments and context in an effort to set the table for today’s discussion.

First, this new German military strategy is an historic break from Germany’s previous approach to military affairs. As the document notes, this is “the first Military Strategy in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany.” It describes the threats, sets priorities, explains how the Bundeswehr will prepare to deter conflicts, and fight if deterrence fails.

It outlines a path for turning the Bundeswehr into “the strongest conventional army in Europe,” enhancing its military capability and establishing “technological superiority.” It is both a strategy and a military capabilities plan, combining both into a single document.

With respect to the threat picture, the document asserts that “Russia is likely to remain the greatest threat to our security,” noting ominously that “Russia is creating the conditions for a military attack on NATO countries” and that Moscow “considers the use of military force as a legitimate instrument to enforce its interests.” It also highlights Russia’s use of sabotage, cyber attacks, disinformation, and espionage.

Importantly, the strategy outlines an “expanded role” for the Bundeswehr, while the German Chief of Defense describes Germany’s intent to “assume a leading role within NATO” as a “paradigm shift.” Moreover, just last week, Franco-German cooperation on nuclear

¹ The full document is available at <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/6093998/678875025812878cfa657f9801f62ffc/dl-gesamtkonzeption-der-verteidigung-eng-data.pdf>.

deterrence issues reached a new level with Germany's participation in an air refueling exercise and a decision by Germany to participate for the first time in a French nuclear exercise later this year, signaling increased cooperation between Paris and Berlin on nuclear deterrence issues and raising concerns that Germany may believe it can no longer rely primarily on the United States as the guarantor of its ultimate security.²

In addition, the strategy concludes that Germany "will systematically take on more conventional strategic responsibility for Europe"—an approach that seems to be in alignment with the Trump Administration's demand that Europeans take the lead in defending their own continent. Indeed, the strategy notes that the Trump Administration has shifted its strategic focus away from Europe and toward other theaters like the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific.

However, there is a fine line between insisting that others assume a greater burden for defending themselves and ensuring that so-called "ironclad" American security guarantees to allies are seen as credible. The issue of allied burden sharing has long been contentious. And President Trump's methodology for achieving a more equitable distribution of defense responsibilities has indeed ruffled many European feathers, but it has achieved notable results. The question is: at what cost to alliance unity and to the credibility of U.S. extended deterrent security guarantees?

Germany's new military strategy also raises several other important questions. For example:

- Will European states now turn increasingly inward and seek to defend themselves without significant American assistance?
- Will Europeans seek to develop a Euro-centric defense posture as a counter to the U.S.-dominated NATO structure?
- What might this mean for the future of NATO?
- Will Germany's drive for conventional military dominance on the continent be welcomed or shunned by its neighbors?
- Will Germany go nuclear?
- Will Germany accept reliance on UK and French nuclear forces as a substitute for the American nuclear umbrella?
- Are we witnessing the beginning of the end of U.S. extended deterrence?

² "Germany, France deepen nuclear deterrence cooperation," Deutsche Presse-Agentur, July 17, 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/politics/articles/germany-france-deepen-nuclear-deterrence-094147287.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAFQtX7Lk9_5vIUx_yF4oktPC5vbBW65KTPDkFJf070js04g_OS3nOAumCi_UXsvQnr-nSxcj3oALxZwhIM1BA_06yhQ6huoJrrx5DRg_4ZkNUKFSeemnPfvncgl97HqpZwXmoDvLZ2JjX9gmCkVcQGGXdt14UD7IVZz06KWEjsB7k; Chris Lunday, Laura Kayali, and Hans Von der Burchard, "German military to join French nuclear exercise for first time," *Politico*, July 16, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-military-to-join-french-nuclear-exercise-for-first-time/>.

These are just some of the questions that I hope we will be able to consider in the course of this discussion. The implications of Germany's new military strategy for NATO and extended deterrence in Europe are, in my view, among the most significant issues to be discussed today.

* * * * *

General (Ret.) Rainer Meyer zum Felde

General (Ret.) Rainer Meyer zum Felde is former Vice President of the German Federal Security Academy, German representative to the NATO Defence Policy and Planning Committee, and Head of Transatlantic Security in the MoD Planning Staff.

Let me focus my remarks on two questions: Where is there *continuity*, and what are the elements of *paradigm change*?

Will Germany stay firmly embedded in the West (or what is left from the concept of the “West”) based on both common values and interests? Yes, clearly yes. Despite nationalistic populists also in Germany, both from the extreme left and extreme right—there is no doubt that the broad majority of Germans will vote for democratic parties which hold the traditional course: NATO for security, EU for prosperity. For Germany to stay firmly embedded, of course these two key institutions must survive and not be destroyed by U.S. politics. If that happened, we Europeans would find ourselves back in the nightmare of the 19th century. This is clearly not what the Germans would want again—to be sandwiched in the centre of this old continent and surrounded by nation states which have been in permanent competition and struggles for dominance. Germany in the centre of Europe, and its historic predecessors have always been part of this unfortunate history, both as an actor or a victim of geopolitics.

After two world wars totally lost, there is no appetite for this perspective. Our core interests are: Sleep well, have a good life, and never be alone—NATO, EU, Alliance solidarity (as Professor Stürmer who died last week, a well known advisor to former Chancellor Hermut Kohl, simply put it). And let me add: We lost these two World Wars primarily against the USA once they intervened decisively with their overwhelming resources in 1917 and in 1943. And we won the Cold War against the Soviet Union primarily because of the Americans who stood from 1955 until 1990 side by side with our own forces in NATO's Forward Defence posture—and they were the only ones among our Western allies who fully supported the reunification of Germany. This historic context, in particular President Kennedy's visit to Berlin (“Ich bin ein Berliner”), President Ronald Reagan's “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” as well as President Bush's and Secretary of State Baker's engagements for a united Germany in NATO in the “2-plus-4” negotiations are still deep in our minds. And this is the reason why the transatlantic bond is so very dear to us and NATO much more than an interests-driven business case.

Accordingly, the Military Strategy several times highlights that the *Bundeswehr will remain an Alliance army*, that it will follow primarily the NATO capability targets and the NATO Planning process overall as its jointly agreed guidelines for defence.

Now, turning to elements of *a paradigm change*:

What has fundamentally changed is, first, our threat perception: Russia, supported by China, North Korea, Iran and its proxies, *is a direct threat for our European security, and will be so for a long time*. Russia is no longer a strategic partner, or only a “potential” threat. We cannot continue with “generic” or “capability based, threat informed” defence planning. The Russian threat for European allies, beyond Ukraine, is real. The issue here is that *this assessment is no longer shared by the current U.S. administration* and no longer reflected in U.S. capstone documents. This has far-reaching consequences: *our strategic centre of gravity in the alliance, i.e., to maintain unity and resolve (as former SACEUR Breedlove put it in 2015), is broken*. And let’s face it: this is more the result of changed attitudes in Washington, which nobody had expected from the leading nation of the alliance, than an achievement of Russia’s diplomatic skills and military power. It is a *self-inflicted failure*, which needs to be repaired and with good will can be fixed.

The second element of a paradigm change is that our *German focus is now on collective defence*, 32 for 32, of the Baltic region and on cooperating with our North-Eastern allies: We are preparing for shoulder-on-shoulder forward defence together with Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Baltic States, Denmark and Poland. Such close cooperation with the so-called Northern Group has not been the case until 2018—in these years relations with Russia had higher priority for Berlin than playing a co-leading role together with the UK in defence of the Baltics or the High North.

The third element of change is that the core task of the Bundeswehr is now again, after two decades of crisis management, *deterrence and defence*. With that we return to the German Armed Forces’ constitutional mission—our Basic Law defines their purpose as: “Armed Forces for defence.” It is a return, because in the two decades from the mid-1990s to 2014 the focus was on international crisis management (i.e., “conflicts of choice”), not any longer on deterrence and defence as in the cold war (i.e., “war of necessity”). I recall that as a result of the U.S. and UK request and advice, we decided to get rid of our quite capable, heavy old Bundeswehr with its 12 divisions, 36 combat brigades and its “total defence” structure, transforming it to a light, agile, deployable, “out of area” posture in order to participate in crisis management abroad on the European periphery. Even in 2014, at the beginning of NATO adaptation, Berlin maintained the idea of two missions of equal importance: a slightly reconstituted Bundeswehr for deterrence and defence, but at the same ready for crisis management as the more likely mission. The latter continued to define the size, capabilities, structures, and processes until 2018.

The Military Strategy now, for the first time, clarifies our priorities: The first priority is on deterrence and defence (and now defines structures, size, and capabilities); the second is crisis management; and the third is on cooperation through partnerships—like in NATO’s Strategic Concept.

Another significant element of change is the *level of ambition*: It is several times clearly stated, that Germany must take on a new *strategic* role within NATO, as a consequence of the U.S. shift in focus to the Indo-Pacific and the U.S. request that the Europeans themselves be primarily responsible for their conventional defence. This U.S. view is accepted as a valid argument, and Germany is ready to take on that responsibility. However, we see it as a burden, not as an opportunity for dominance. We are still concerned about the possible misperception of this new role by our European allies in Paris, London, Warsaw, and Rome. So, the message is “handle with care,” and therefore it is highlighted that we need to develop our new role *jointly*, in a collegial manner. This touches on the old big question of leadership in Europe and how to practice it wisely. This will be a key issue, especially if Europe’s Pax Americana, based on undisputed U.S. leadership, should come to an end.

We must not forget that prior to the U.S. presence in Europe as a European power, we had a history of power struggles between rivals along ethnic, religious, cultural, economic, and nationalistic lines from the end of the Roman Empire until the end of World War II – 15 centuries of war rather than peace in Europe. Whether Europe will remain stable and peaceful without this Pax Americana, and without the presence of the United States as a European power, remains to be seen. Since 1945, the U.S. role in Europe has been more than just about protecting 500 million Europeans against 140 million Russians—it has kept Europe stable and at peace.

Germany’s answer at the level of Grand Strategy is to keep the United States in as long and as far as possible. To achieve this, we must become more European in order to maintain the transatlantic bond with the United States.

What is also a new element of paradigm change in this regard are some points which indicate a new thinking about an “emergency plan,” just in case developments go wrong. For example:

- On nuclear deterrence, we are beginning nuclear talks with President Macron of France, but at this stage, it cannot be more than an early symbolic activity (such as joint air-to air-refuelling of nuclear capable fighter aircraft last week).
- Furthermore, there is a sentence in the strategy about forming a coalition of the willing in case it is needed.
- And last but not least there is an unprecedented paragraph on a national capability to command and control German and allied forces in multidomain operations (should NATO be unable to act).

The most prominent element of paradigm shift is of course the outspoken intent to become *the strongest European army at the conventional level*, by the end of the 2030s. Over decades, the principle has been: “About equal with the Brits and the French,” regarding defence expenditures and, subsequently, forces and capabilities. *This ambition is now significantly different from the past*. From now on, we are spending more on defence than France and the UK together. In the years to come, this huge investment will consequently translate into modern forces and high-quality capabilities—hopefully. It will underpin Germany’s concept at the 2014 Wales summit, to offer itself as a NATO framework nation for

other allies. This was already an important step in the direction which is now described as Germany's new strategic role. However, despite all our efforts, we will not be able to substitute fully for the role of the United States—these are too big shoes to step into. At the strategic nuclear level, Germany desperately needs top cover vis-à-vis Russia and, sooner or later China. This means that while Germany can offer itself as a framework nation for others at the conventional level, it needs support from the United States in some areas, first and foremost—but not only—on nuclear deterrence.

In addition, the German approach to modern and future defence technology, innovation, defence economy, and quality versus mass, shows both continuity and change. We continue to rely upon superior technology and innovation, mostly driven by U.S. or—increasingly—Chinese enterprises such as AI, quantum computing, robotics, data driven digitalization, and space-based reconnaissance and command and control. Of course, we would love to become more sovereign and less dependent on U.S. companies, but in reality, European nations need access to U.S. advanced technologies. It is an important point.

Last but not least again on nuclear deterrence in Europe: *There is simply no credible substitute in Europe for the unique nuclear umbrella that the United States provides for its allies in Europe.* France may be sovereign, but it is neither willing nor in a position to credibly offer an “extended” deterrent for allies. The UK is also a nuclear power, but dependent on nuclear cooperation with the United States. Germany, like others, participates in the nuclear arrangements and primarily for this purpose, we have decided to buy American F-35s and maintain our contribution as a “non-nuclear nation.” We have no other choice—*no one wants the Germans to start looking for a national alternative in the nuclear dimension.*

Hence, whether we like President Trump's and Vice President Vance's views and the MAGA agenda or not—we *do need the transatlantic bond with the United States* and its continued presence as a European power, in essence for three reasons:

- the indispensable U.S. extended nuclear deterrent against Russian coercion;
- the U.S. role in balancing potentially competing European powers; and
- because of superior technologies and innovation in key areas of defence.

What is missing is a concept for total defence, including building resilience and civil defence, against Russia's hybrid warfare. And, also, a concept for scaling up defence industries in peacetime, crisis and war.

Personally, I would only disagree with the Military Strategy on one point: The intended size of 460,000 can only be preliminary. This is included in the wording “at least” 460,000. *I believe we need to go to the legal limits (set by the “2-plus-4” treaty), of 370,000 peacetime strength, and about 1 million in wartime.* This will of course require us to reactivate our well proven conscript system as in the 1980s when the Bundeswehr was at its peak performance. Otherwise, the message to Putin and our allies would be that Germany is not willing to go “all in”—not for supporting Ukraine, and not for collectively defending itself and allies.

To sum up: *This is a good first military strategy* at the second level below a national “grand strategy.” It is a big step forward for Germany. The best news is that this time, we have not only an agreed concept as NATO developed for the summits in 2014 and 2016 –but this time,

Berlin is willing to fully implement these decisions and has underpinned it with unprecedented financial resources.

With the implementation now underway, we can re-start thinking about the old offer by U.S. President George H.W. Bush in 1990 to become a “partner in leadership,” which Chancellor Helmut Kohl at that time could not accept. In the years to come, as far as peace and security in Europe are concerned, Germany may be able to be such a “partner in leadership” for the United States.

Michael Rühle

Michael Rühle is former Head of the Climate and Energy Security Section at NATO.

The new German Military Strategy focuses on Germany’s conventional military ambitions. Only one sentence directly addresses nuclear matters: According to the document, the Bundeswehr “will continue to contribute to NATO’s nuclear deterrence within the scope of nuclear sharing.”³ That’s it.

This lack of detail was to be expected. As a non-nuclear country, Germany’s main contribution to NATO’s deterrence is, by definition, in the conventional realm. According to the Military Strategy, Germany aims to have Europe’s largest army by 2039. The enormous amount of money Germany has borrowed to boost its defense is intended to strengthen its conventional capabilities.

However, the situation for Germany is less straightforward when it comes to nuclear deterrence. There is no doubt that the U.S.-centric option of extended nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing remains Germany’s preferred approach. Nevertheless, doubts about the U.S.’s continued willingness to support its allies, particularly given the dismissive attitudes displayed by President Trump and Secretary of War Hegseth, have sparked a public debate about the need for alternatives to the proverbial U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” Even Chancellor Merz, a traditional Atlanticist, has made statements questioning the U.S. willingness to provide nuclear protection. Consequently, he and many other European leaders accepted French President Macron’s March offer to engage in nuclear dialogue.

Last Friday, at a meeting of the Franco-German Security and Defense Council at a German air base, Merz and Macron agreed that this year, the Bundeswehr would participate for the first time in a nuclear exercise conducted by the French Army.⁴ German soldiers will participate in the exercise’s conventional phase. According to the official statement,

³ Federal Ministry of Defense, *The overall concept of military defence. Military Strategy and Plan for the Armed Forces: Responsibility for Europe*, April 2026, p. 19, para 5.1, <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/6093998/678875025812878cfa657f9801f62ffc/dl-gesamtkonzeption-der-verteidigung-eng-data.pdf>.

⁴ Bundeswehr beteiligt sich erstmals an Nuklearübung der französischen Armee, *Die Welt* (online), July 17, 2026, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article6a5a2bcfc722326276499954/merz-verkuendet-bundeswehr-beteiligt-sich-erstmal-an-nuklearuebung-der-franzoesischen-armee.html>.

deploying French “Rafale” fighter jets to a German airbase “marks the first operational step in Franco-German strategic cooperation.”⁵ The previous day, German and French fighter jets took part in a small exercise to mark the practical start of nuclear cooperation. German Eurofighters were refueled in French airspace by a French tanker aircraft.

Merz emphasized that these steps complement Germany’s participation in NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, and he has every reason to be cautious. After all, this was the last meeting of the Franco-German Security and Defense Council with President Macron. If the French elect a right-wing government next year, defense cooperation with Germany and other European countries will become much more challenging. Overly optimistic rhetoric from the German government about a French “nuclear umbrella” could backfire, as it could lead to accusations that the incumbent French government was selling out national sovereignty. France, which is the only NATO ally that remains outside the Nuclear Planning Group, has made it very clear that it is not ready to provide extended deterrence in the same way the United States does.

In fact, when compared to the traditional U.S.-centric model, all alternatives look weak. A “Europeanized” nuclear deterrent based on the French and possibly British arsenals offers far less in terms of quantity and quality than the U.S.-centered system, which also has the full weight of American conventional power behind it. The European Union cannot develop a common nuclear policy because Austria and Ireland have signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which deems nuclear weapons and deterrence illegal. And if some European nations were to initiate national nuclear programs, mistrust could grow to the point of jeopardizing the entire European project. It is for good reasons, therefore, that the German government has ignored the discussions on a “German bomb,” leaving the issue on the fringe.

In principle, therefore, the logical thing for Germany to do is to continue to bank on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, while continuing the dialogue with France and, possibly, the U.K., on nuclear cooperation. After all, the traditional nuclear cooperation in NATO appears to work very well. Many allies have purchased the F-35, and several allies have changed their constitution to allow for the deployment of nuclear weapons on their soil. Even the U.K. has re-engaged in NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements.

What remains unclear, however, is the role the United States envisages for itself.

The United States is pushing impatiently for a rapid shift in the burden of conventional defense to the Europeans, underscoring these demands with aggressive language, including in official documents. These tactics may be effective in convincing European allies to accelerate their defense transformation. However, this approach is inconsistent with the logic of promising nuclear protection. After all, U.S. extended nuclear deterrence is only credible if Washington considers its allies’ security to be a vital interest. The current narrative from Washington, which also features a worrying indifference toward Ukraine,

⁵ Conclusion of the Franco-German Defence and Security Council, July 17, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/07/17/conclusion-of-the-franco-german-defence-and-security-council-1>.

does not reassure many Europeans that Europe is still of vital interest to the United States.⁶ To put it bluntly, if you indicate that you no longer wish to play a significant role in defending Europe, you will not assume nuclear risks to defend that continent. That is why the “everything must change” narrative on conventional deterrence sits uncomfortably with the “no need for change” narrative in the nuclear realm.

That said, as long as the conventional presence of the United States in Europe does not drop to a mere token presence, one could argue that its nuclear commitment to NATO allies remains credible. Consequently, as long as the United States does not call its “nuclear umbrella” into question, neither will Germany, even though the search for a nuclear “Plan B” will continue.

* * * * *

⁶ A recent survey published by the European Council on Foreign Relations revealed that in all European countries surveyed, only 11 percent of those Europeans polled still regarded the United States as an ally. In Germany, traditionally a very Atlanticist country, only 8 per cent still see the United States as an ally. See Jana Kobzová and Paweł Zerka, “Home alone: Europeans are ready to defend themselves,” *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 10, 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/home-alone-europeans-are-ready-to-defend-themselves/>.