The new German Problem: Germany and its place in Europe

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For more than a century, the 'German Problem' has preoccupied observers of European politics. At its core lies a persistent dilemma for Germans and their neighbours alike: how to accommodate a country whose size, economic and military strength, and central location make it indispensable to Europe's stability, yet whose very power has often provoked fear and resistance among its neighbours. A remark widely attributed to Henry Kissinger captures this paradox: Germany is 'too large for Europe, but too small for the world'[1]—too powerful to be treated as just another European state, yet not powerful enough to dominate the international system on its own. David Calleo conceptualized this problem further,[2] describing Germany as 'not uniquely aggressive, only uniquely inconvenient'.[3] He defined the German Problem as a structural dilemma: Germany's central position, population and economic strength made it too large for Europe's balance of power system to absorb. Germany was not uniquely expansionist—other great powers such as France, Russia, Britain and the United States pursued similar policies—but as a latecomer to the ranks of unified nation-states and encircled by other great powers, German expansion quickly risked upsetting the European balance. How to manage this dilemma was therefore as much a challenge for German policy-makers as for their neighbours. Calleo argued that only the post-1945 settlement produced a workable solution. With the country divided, German power was massively restrained by Cold War dynamics while being constrained under American hegemony, NATO and the European Community (EC). These institutions managed German power, channelled its resources into European reconstruction and institutionalized restraint: German strength became a collective asset for the West rather than a unilateral threat. During the Cold War, the old German Problem

* This study is based on publicly available pre-existing data, as detailed in the footnotes. I would like to thank the editors as well as the three anonymous reviewers for their hugely valuable feedback.

1 The remark is quoted, without a documented source, in Timothy Garton Ash, 'The new German question', *The New York Review of Books*, 15 Aug. 2013. Its underlying idea traces back to Ludwig Dehio's description of post-1871 Germany as too big for a European balance of power yet too small for hegemony (*Gleichgewicht oder Hegemonie*, 1948).

2 David Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*: *Germany and the world order 1870 to the present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990, first publ. in 1978).

3 Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*, p. 206.

International Affairs 102: 5 (2026) 1697–1720; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiag061
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was effectively suspended, as the German question—Germany's division—remained unresolved. With unification in 1990, fears of a re-emergence of the old German Problem briefly resurfaced,[4] but the past three decades have proven those fears to be unfounded: Germany has not sought to reassert itself as Europe's aggressive hegemon; instead, it has continued to live peacefully and cooperatively with its neighbours.

In stark contrast to European attitudes at the beginning of the twentieth century, during the eurozone crisis in 2011 Poland's then foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, issued an extraordinary appeal to Berlin. He urged Germany to assume a more assertive role in steering the European Union through the sovereign debt crisis: 'You have become Europe's indispensable nation. You may not fail to lead.'[5] He was quick to qualify this plea, emphasizing that he was not calling for German domination but for German leadership: 'I fear German power less', he admitted, 'than I am beginning to fear its inactivity'. This striking statement—coming from a representative of a nation that had suffered greatly from German aggression—highlights how expectations of Germany have been transformed. It also raises a set of questions. Is the old German Problem, as formulated by Calleo, still alive? Is it still the most useful way of thinking about Germany's role in Europe and the world? Or has the nature of the problem changed, requiring a new conceptualization?

This article argues for the latter. While Calleo's old German Problem was primarily about restraining a potentially overmighty and overambitious Germany, the new German Problem centres on the opposite difficulty: the serious gap between the expectations of Germany's neighbours for it to shoulder more responsibility and take greater leadership for Europe and its security, and the reluctance of German politicians to comply. The challenge, therefore, is not to restrain German power but to unlock it responsibly. As Europe confronts the return of war, fragmentation, a radically altered transatlantic relationship and the challenge of ongoing Russian aggression, fears about Germany no longer centre on the country being too powerful for Europe but on its reluctance to assume the role that comes with its position as the most central, populous and economically potent European state.[6] The new German Problem is no longer about dominance; it is about leadership. The article's central contribution is to reconceptualize the German Problem not as one rooted in excessive or destabilizing power, but as one of insufficiently mobilized power amid heightened geopolitical challenges and rising expectations from partners.

The article contributes to several bodies of scholarship. Primarily, it seeks to provide new impetus to debates about the 'German Problem'—sometimes also called the 'German question', although for the purpose of this study the

[4] Stephen F. Szabo, 'Parting ways: the German–American relationship after Iraq', in Hanns W. Maull, ed., *Germany's uncertain power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 123.
[5] Radosław Sikorski, 'I fear Germany's power less than her inactivity', *Financial Times*, 28 Nov. 2011.
[6] See for instance Timothy Garton Ash, 'Germany can turbocharge Europe's renewal—if it will only seize this moment', *Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2025.

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latter refers only to matters related to Germany's division during the Cold War—as well as to scholarship on German foreign policy. While literature on the German Problem initially focused on German aggressive policies related to military might, geopolitics and the global order,[7] in recent decades the focus has shifted towards Germany's economic influence, its policy orientation (especially *vis-à-vis* Russia) and 'geo-economics'.[8] This article proposes to bring security back more prominently into this debate—no longer in the shape of aggressive imperialism, but as a much-wanted and often elusive German contribution to European defence and, in effect, strategic autonomy—thereby offering a historically informed assessment of the German Problem's current iteration.

These debates intersect with, and are informed by, broader scholarship on German foreign and security policy. Numerous studies have examined German foreign policy historically,[9] conceptually[10] and in terms of the nature of German power,[11] identifying *leitmotive* such as Germany as a 'civilian power',[12] an 'uncertain power',[13] a geo-economic power[14] or a 'reluctant hegemon'.[15]

[7] Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*; Thomas Banchoff, *The German problem transformed: institutions, politics, and foreign policy, 1945–1995* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Peter Alter, *The German question and Europe: a history* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000); Nicolas Lewkowicz, *The German question and the international order, 1943–48* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[8] Stephen F. Szabo, 'Germany: from civilian power to a geo-economic shaping power', *German Politics and Society* 35: 3, 2017, pp. 38–54, https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2017.350303; Hans Kundnani, *Paradox of German power* (London: Hurst, 2014); Michael Mertes, 'Too big for Europe, too small for the world? The German question reconsidered', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 9: 3, 2015, pp. 363–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2015.1100782. Robert Kagan, 'The new German question: what happens when Europe comes apart?', *Foreign Affairs* 98: 3, 2019, pp. 108–21 sits somewhere in between the two schools; see also Stephen F. Szabo, *Germany, Russia and the rise of geo-economics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and the literature on the nature of German power and leadership cited below.

[9] Gregor Schöllgen, *Deutsche Außenpolitik: von 1815 bis 1945* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013); Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of age: German foreign policy since 1945* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Stephan Bierling, *Vormacht wider Willen: deutsche Außenpolitik von der Wiedervereinigung bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014); Dominik Geppert and Hans Jörg Hennecke, eds, *Interessen, Werte, Verantwortung: deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Nationalstaat, Europa und dem Westen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019).

[10] Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns W. Maull, eds, *Germany as a civilian power? The foreign policy of the Berlin Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Klaus Brummer and Kai Oppermann, *Germany's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War: 'becoming normal?'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Tobias Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis: Germany and the travails of adaptation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27: 4, 2025, pp. 1223–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241311568.

[11] Herfried Münkler, *Macht im Umbruch: Deutschlands Rolle in Europa und die Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2025); Felix Berenskötter and Holger Stritzel, '*Welche Macht darf es denn sein*? Tracing "power" in German foreign policy discourse', *German Politics* 30: 1, 2021, pp. 31–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1631808; Liana Fix, 'The different "shades" of German power: Germany and EU foreign policy during the Ukraine conflict', *German Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 498–515, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1448789.

[12] Harnisch and Maull, *Germany as a civilian power?*

[13] Hanns W. Maull, *Germany's uncertain power: foreign policy of the Berlin Republic*, annotated edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[14] Hans Kundnani, 'Germany as a geo-economic power', *The Washington Quarterly* 34: 3, 2011, pp. 31–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2011.587950.

[15] Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, 'Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon? Of economic strength and political constraints', *Journal of European Public Policy* 20: 10, 2013, pp. 1387–405, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.822824.

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Others have analysed German leadership,[16] Germany's role in Europe,[17] patterns of continuity and change in foreign policy[18] and related shifts in public and elite attitudes.[19] A full engagement with each of these debates lies beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the article draws from and contributes to this broader scholarship through a longer-term assessment of underlying trends in German foreign and security policy—among them anti-militarist or allegedly 'pacifist' strands in Germany's conduct[20]—and it provides impetus for the implementation of the *Zeitenwende* literature and debate[21] under the CDU/CSU–SPD[22] coalition government led by Friedrich Merz since 2025.

Methodologically, the analysis adopts a historically grounded approach that situates contemporary political developments within their broader context and

[16] Magnus G. Schoeller, Emil Wieringa Hildebrand and Olof Karlsson, *Explaining the leadership vacuum: Germany, the completion of the Banking Union and arms deliveries to Ukraine* (Vienna: Centre for European Integration Research, 2024), https://eif.univie.ac.at/downloads/workingpapers/wp2024-01.pdf; Malte Riemann and Georg Löfflmann, eds, *Deutschlands Verteidigungspolitik: nationale Sicherheit nach der Zeitenwende* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2023); Magnus G. Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality: Germany's self-concept in Europe', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1615–34, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad121; Magnus G. Schoeller, *Leadership in the eurozone: the role of Germany and EU institutions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Nicholas Wright, 'No longer the elephant outside the room: why the Ukraine crisis reflects a deeper shift towards German leadership of European foreign policy', *German Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 479–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1458094. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 8 April 2026.)

[17] Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Learning to lead? Germany and the leadership paradox in EU foreign policy', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 8–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1601177; Sebastian Harnisch and Joachim Schild, *Deutsche Außenpolitik und internationale Führung: Ressourcen, Praktiken und Politiken in einer veränderten Europäischen Union* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014); Simon Bulmer, 'Germany, the eurozone crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic: failing forward or moving on?', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 20, 2022, pp. 166–83, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00278-5.

[18] Ian Klinke, 'Dead or dormant? German *Ostpolitik* after Ukraine', *European Journal of International Security* 10: 4, 2025, pp. 495–511, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.58; Bernhard Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention? *Zeitenwende* and the traditional pillars of German foreign policy', *International Affairs* 98: 6, 2022, pp. 1895–913, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac166; Tobias Bunde, 'Lessons (to be) learned? Germany's *Zeitenwende* and European security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43: 3, 2022, pp. 516–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2092820; Jamie Gaskarth and Kai Oppermann, 'Clashing traditions: German foreign policy in a new era', *International Studies Perspectives* 22: 1, 2021, pp. 84–105, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz017.

[19] Maximilian Tkocz and Holger Stritzel, 'Articulating change and responsibility: identity, memory, and the use of historical narratives in German parliamentary debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *German Politics* 34: 1, 2025, pp. 183–206, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2023.2252765; Georg Löfflmann and Malte Riemann, '"If I could turn back time": temporal security narratives, ontological disruption, and Germany's *Zeitenwende*', *European Journal of International Security* 11: 3, 2026, pp. 460–78, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10008.

[20] Frank A. Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*', *Defence & Security Analysis* 41: 3, 2025, pp. 416–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2025.2513782; Molly O'Neal, '*Zeitenwende*, Europe and Germany's culture of restraint', *International Spectator* 59: 2, 2024, pp. 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2331547; Frank A. Stengel, 'Bundeswehr und deutsche Gesellschaft: die Berliner Republik zwischen Militarisierung und Normalisierung', in Riemann and Löfflmann, eds, *Deutschlands Verteidigungspolitik*.

[21] Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?'; Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis'; Patrick A. Mello, *'Zeitenwende*: German foreign policy change in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine', *Politics and Governance*, vol. 12, 2024, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7346; Aylin Matlé, 'Deutschlands Zeitenwende in der Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik: *the good, the bad, and the ambiguous*', *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, vol. 17, 2023, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12399-023-00975-3; Löfflmann and Riemann, '"If I could turn back time"'; Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, 'No *Zeitenwende* (yet): early assessment of German public opinion toward foreign and defense policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 64: 3, 2023, pp. 525–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00463-5.

[22] Germany's fifth 'grand coalition', formed by the Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union with the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

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draws on secondary scholarship as well as primary sources, including statements, speeches and official documents from German policy-makers and their international counterparts. Conceptually, the analysis leans on leadership and its counterpoles—reluctance, hesitation and recalcitrance. The notion of German 'leadership'—or the absence of it—will be woven throughout the article and has itself been the subject of a considerable body of scholarship, as shown above, both in general terms and as applied to the German case. A definition is therefore required, and the working definition used here draws heavily on Magnus G. Schoeller's work.[23] For the purpose of this article, leadership is understood as the capacity and willingness of an actor to shape the direction of a community by initiating and implementing innovative responses to shared problems and exerting decisive influence over collective outcomes. It involves assuming responsibility and brokering among stakeholders, while crucially entailing a readiness to commit disproportionate resources, incur political or material costs and abandon previously held preferences in order to effect change. Importantly for this study, leadership is inherently transformative, orientated towards change and innovation, and distinct from stewardship, which as understood in this article is primarily concerned with preserving existing arrangements.

The counterpoles to leadership in this article are reluctance, hesitation and recalcitrance. Their definitions follow those developed by Sandra Destradi:[24]

> In a nutshell, reluctance … entails two constitutive dimensions: hesitation and recalcitrance. Hesitation refers to the domestic process of policy making, and … in its most visible form, hesitation involves pursuing inconsistent policies, with rapid policy changes and contradictory moves or statements (flip-flopping). Delays to a previously set time frame are also an indicator of hesitation … Recalcitrance … relates to the expectations and requests articulated by international actors. It amounts to a lack of responsiveness and can be operationalized as ignorance or rejection of others' requests, and also, to some extent, as obstructionism of others' initiatives, which can emerge in connection to delays and flip-flopping.[25]

To develop its argument, the article proceeds in three steps. First, it revisits the old German Problem from the nineteenth century through the Cold War and the immediate post-unification era. Second, it examines German foreign and security policy over the past three decades, focusing on Berlin's cautious style of often avoiding greater responsibility and leadership against the backdrop of turbulent and shifting global and European politics. Third, it conceptualizes the new German Problem as a misalignment between expectations, capabilities and willingness. The conclusion summarizes the argument and sketches possible scenarios for how the situation might develop.

[23] See, for instance, Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality', pp. 1624, 1633–4; Schoeller, *Leadership in the eurozone*, chs 2–3.

[24] Sandra Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics: why states fail to act decisively* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023); Sandra Destradi, 'Reluctance in international politics: a conceptualization', *European Journal of International Relations* 23: 2, 2017, pp. 315–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116653665.

[25] Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics*, p. 7.

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The old German Problem

Until the late nineteenth century, 'Germany' was less a unified power than a fragmented political space—more object than subject of European politics. Unification in 1871 changed this abruptly, producing a powerful continental state: militarily victorious, economically dynamic and geopolitically central. The defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War and the proclamation of the German empire created a new actor capable of unsettling the European balance. The first imperial chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, sought to contain these anxieties by presenting Germany as a 'satiated power', renouncing further territorial revisionism and relying on alliance diplomacy to stabilize the European order. His policies meant that for Germany, which was quickly becoming an economic giant, the problem seemed temporarily contained; for its neighbours, however, it remained alive.[26] This mismatch between Germany's growing capabilities and the surrounding order mattered because Germany was, in key respects, a 'late nation'. Its ambitions were not exceptional by great power standards, but its arrival was late: by the 1870s Britain and France had already shaped many of the system's rules and hierarchies. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, that status quo increasingly appeared constraining, and policy shifted from consolidation of German power towards assertion. *Weltpolitik*, naval expansion and a bombastic diplomacy did not amount to a blueprint for European conquest, but they signalled an aspiration to reshape rather than merely inhabit the existing system. The result was renewed alarm among Germany's neighbours and a sharpening of the German Problem as an issue of systemic fit: how a central, rising state would use power in a crowded, security-sensitive environment. The German Problem was thus not only about power, but also about timing and adaptation.[27]

The First World War and Germany's defeat in 1918 transformed rather than resolved this dilemma. The Treaty of Versailles stripped Germany of territory, colonies and military capacity, but thereby strengthened its revisionist incentives. Given the treaty's impositions, German politicians mostly sought change through diplomacy rather than force. That restraint collapsed after 1933. Nazi Germany rejected the postwar settlement and pursued rearmament, territorial expansion and confrontation—culminating in the most violent and destructive manifestation of the German Problem.[28] The Second World War ended this most militarized form of the German Problem, suspending its general iteration through Germany's division. During the Cold War, German power and agency were structurally constrained: divided, occupied and embedded within rival alliance systems, neither German state could aggressively alter the status quo. The central issue for European order was no longer how to contain German

[26] See for instance A. J. P. Taylor, *The struggle for mastery in Europe: 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, first publ. in 1980), ch. 12.

[27] Christopher Clark, *The sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2013); Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*, chs 2 and 3 and pp. 1–6, 206.

[28] See e.g. Marie-Luise Recker, *Die Außenpolitik des dritten Reiches* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010, first publ. in 1985).

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power, but whether—and under what conditions—Germany might one day be reunited. Within this rigid Cold War framework, the German Problem was structurally neutralized. Meanwhile, the Federal Republic emerged as a leading western power: central to European integration, militarily vital to NATO's defence and economically powerful. Its membership in the United Nations, the G7 and the EC both enabled and constrained Bonn's power through multilateralism.[29]

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 abruptly disrupted this status quo. The German question, long relegated to the back-burner of international politics, returned to the forefront—and with it re-emerged the German Problem. For Germany's neighbours, reunification raised old fears: would a larger Germany seek dominance in Europe, or could it be securely anchored in NATO and the EC? For Germans, the challenge was to dispel these concerns. Ultimately, decisive support from George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev made reunification possible.[30] The German question was settled, but the German Problem remained: what role would a reunified and larger Germany play in Europe and the wider world? Once again, Germans and their neighbours had to grapple with the dilemmas of German policy, power and purpose.

Post-Cold-War Germany and the emerging new German Problem

In the years following reunification, fears of a resurgent German Problem soon proved unfounded. While throughout the 1990s German foreign and security policy was characterized by ambiguity, Germany was a status quo power. It struggled to adapt to a world marked by growing instability, the erosion of Cold War bipolarity and mounting demands from the US for greater German contributions to defending the international order.[31] The pattern was clear from the outset. In 1991, during the Gulf War, Germany contributed financially but refrained from deploying combat troops, revealing both the limits of its willingness to project military power and its reluctance to heed American calls for a 'partnership in leadership'.[32] Under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Germany focused above all on unification: integrating the former East Germany and modernizing

[29] Bernhard Blumenau, 'German foreign policy and the "German problem" during and after the Cold War: changes and continuities', in Bernhard Blumenau, Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Barbara Zanchetta, eds, *New perspectives on the end of the Cold War: unexpected transformations?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 98–9; Banchoff, *The German problem transformed*.

[30] See e.g. Frédéric Bozo, Andreas Rödder and Mary Elise Sarotte, eds, *German unification: a multinational history* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); M. E. Sarotte, *1989: The struggle to create post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Andreas Rödder, *Deutschland einig Vaterland: die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009).

[31] See e.g. The American Presidency Project, 'George H. W. Bush: address to the German people on the reunification of Germany', 2 Oct. 1990, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-german-people-the-reunification-germany; Ruth Wittlinger, 'German–American relations since 1990: no future for Germany's past?', American–German Institute, 3 Oct. 2013, https://americangerman.institute/publication/german-american-relations-since-1990-no-future-for-germanys-past.

[32] The American Presidency Project, 'George H. W. Bush: remarks to the citizens in Mainz', 31 May 1989, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-citizens-mainz-federal-republic-germany; Alan Sked, 'Cheap excuses: Germany and the Gulf crisis', *The National Interest*, vol. 24, 1991, pp. 51–60.

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the economy. The mid-1990s saw domestic debates over the permissibility of 'out-of-area' deployments of the Bundeswehr (the German armed forces) but it took a 1994 Constitutional Court ruling to clarify that German troops could be deployed abroad if approved by the Bundestag and mandated by NATO or the UN.[33] Even then, Germany remained recalcitrant, not least because Kohl feared that the German electorate would not support such military engagements.[34] Therefore, German foreign policy continued to be reactive and hesitant to assume responsibility.[35] Berlin's ambition was less to redefine its role than to reap the 'peace dividend'. To many Germans, there was appeal in becoming a 'larger Switzerland': focusing on the economy, welfare and unification while insulating the country from global turbulence. Germany was content with the status quo but unwilling to defend it in crises near and far.[36]

A turning-point came in 1999, under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, when Germany participated militarily in NATO's intervention in Kosovo—its first combat operation since 1945—followed in 2001 by deployment in Afghanistan.[37] Under allied pressure, Germany now sent troops into combat and even assumed 'lead nation' responsibilities in both theatres. Yet casualties soon tested public acceptance. Significant parts of the population remained sceptical, and the legitimacy of such deployments remained contested.[38] This became evident in 2002–2003, when the United States and United Kingdom pressed for military action against Iraq on flawed evidence of weapons of mass destruction.[39] In a rare open rift with Washington, Schröder closed ranks with Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin in rejecting Anglo-American calls for a UN mandate authorizing force. Germany's refusal to participate represented a different kind of leadership—not by supporting military action, but by opposing it—but it was leadership nonetheless.[40]

This rift strained transatlantic relations, but tensions eased after Angela Merkel became chancellor in late 2005. She quickly restored close ties with Washington, and during her chancellorship Germany reverted to hesitant leadership, favouring caution and delay over proactive action on issues such as

[33] Blumenau, 'German foreign policy', pp. 102–3. On the significance of the Court's ruling see, for instance, Anne Peters, 'Between military deployment and democracy: use of force under the German constitution', *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law* 5: 2, 2018, pp. 246–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/20531702.2018.1521066.

[34] See, for instance, *Memorandum: Ihr Gespräch mit dem britischen Premierminister Major, 11.02.1991*, Bundesarchiv (BA), B 136/59744, pp. 24–36. See also, for instance, Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality'; Schoeller, *Leadership in the eurozone*, chs 2–3; *Memorandum: Ihr Gespräch mit dem Generalsekretär der Vereinten Nationen, 12.01.1993, BA, B 136/59731*, pp. 7–15; 'The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] meeting with Secretary General of the United Nations, Dr Boutros-Ghali, on Monday, 11 January 1993', Wilson Center Digital Archive, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/chancellors-helmut-kohls-meeting-secretary-general-united-nations-dr-boutros-ghali-monday.

[35] Kundnani, *Paradox of German power*, pp. 47–8.

[36] Ronald D. Asmus, *German strategy and opinion after the Wall: 1990–1993* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994); Valentina Romei, Sam Fleming and Alan Smith, 'The costly end of Europe's "peace dividend"', *Financial Times*, 16 March 2025.

[37] See for instance Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*'.

[38] Timo Graf, 'Naïve Pazifisten? Die Deutschen und der Krieg in Afghanistan', *Zeitschrift für innere Führung*, no. 1, 2022, pp. 66–7.

[39] *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: executive summary* (London: HM Government, 2016), pp. 40–7.

[40] Blumenau, 'German foreign policy', pp. 103–4.

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the sovereign debt crisis and European integration.[41] Merkel also reverted to a more cautious stance on military deployments abroad, often hesitating over German participation in such missions.[42]

By and large, Merkel provided stewardship of the existing system and rules rather than acting as an outward-looking leader offering new visions or strategies. Germany's hesitation and recalcitrance became a source of growing concern for its partners. As Sikorski lamented in 2011, Germany was indispensable—yet unwilling to live up to its responsibility. During the eurozone crisis, Germany responded only reluctantly and failed to provide unifying leadership.[43] In the 2015 refugee crisis, Germany acted only after the situation had become almost unmanageable. Even then, Merkel's decision to open German borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees was largely unilateral, without consultation with European—or even domestic—partners. The result was consternation among EU allies and rising domestic polarization, rather than continent-wide reforms.[44]

Merkel also had opportunities to project leadership globally. When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, she was the most experienced statesperson of any major western power. Her cautious resistance to Trump's nationalist agenda even led commentators to hail her as 'leader of the free world'.[45] Yet she was never fully prepared to assume such a role openly. Merkel refrained from offering a visible western counterpoint to Trump that might have provided a rallying point for others, signalled resolve to Washington and openly reaffirmed the principles of the liberal international order that his presidency undermined. Instead, caution and a persistent reluctance to embrace open leadership continued to define her approach.

During the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, the European Commission led significant parts of the wider EU response. The decisive political breakthrough on common borrowing, however, came from a Franco-German initiative, subsequently developed by the Commission and negotiated in the European Council. With this, Berlin broke a longstanding taboo by accepting joint EU borrowing through the one-off €750 billion NextGenerationEU package. Still, Germany continued to resist turning this exceptional measure into a permanent EU fiscal competence or a general system of jointly guaranteed eurobonds.[46] Overall,

[41] Szabo, 'Parting ways'; Stefan Kornelius, 'Angela Merkel in power: how influential was the Merkel era?', in Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittlinger, eds, *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[42] Bulmer and Paterson, 'Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon?', p. 1396.

[43] Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics*, pp. 150–4.

[44] Blumenau, 'German foreign policy', pp. 104–7; Matthias Matthijs, 'The three faces of German leadership', *Survival* 58: 2, 2016, pp. 135–54 at p. 150, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1161908; Wulf Reiners and Funda Tekin, 'Taking refuge in leadership? Facilitators and constraints of Germany's influence in EU migration policy and EU–Turkey affairs during the refugee crisis (2015–2016)', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 115–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1566457.

[45] Sunny Hundal, 'Angela Merkel is now the leader of the free world, not Donald Trump', *The Independent*, 19 March 2017.

[46] Hussein Kassim, 'The European Commission and the COVID-19 pandemic: a pluri-institutional approach', *Journal of European Public Policy* 30: 4, 2023, pp. 612–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140821; Bulmer, 'Germany, the Eurozone crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic'.

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the pattern persisted: Germany responded—often hesitantly, recalcitrantly and with delay—but rarely led proactive efforts to implement necessary long-lasting reforms. The reluctance—often rooted in domestic debates[47]—to shoulder responsibility and to provide decisive responses to pressing European and global challenges was at the core of the new post-Cold War German Problem.

German ambiguity, indecision and hesitation found maybe their starkest expression in policy towards Russia and Ukraine. Since Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* in the 1970s, successive governments had pursued *rapprochement* with Moscow—politically and, above all, economically. Over time this became a doctrine of interdependence, epitomized in the formula *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through *rapprochement*) which then became *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade). Germany deepened its industrial and energy ties with Russia, relying heavily on cheap gas and oil.[48] Nord Stream 1, agreed in 2005, and later Nord Stream 2 (2015) symbolized this approach, which prioritized commerce over caution.[49] The underlying belief was that economic integration with the West would gradually liberalize Russia, anchor it in a rules-based international order and bind it peacefully to what Mikhail Gorbachev once described as a 'common European home'.[50] Instead, the opposite occurred. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia grew increasingly authoritarian and aggressive. From the 2008 war in Georgia to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Moscow signalled its determination to violently revise borders. Far from a stabilizer, Russia became a revisionist power.[51] Yet Germany remained slow to adjust its policy towards Russia, clinging to the belief that dialogue and trade could temper Russian ambitions.[52] Germany also failed to adapt to Europe's shifting security landscape. As Russia grew more aggressive, Berlin hesitated to decisively reverse decades of military underinvestment or comprehensively reform a Bundeswehr—and military strategy—that was ill suited to the demands of territorial defence in

[47] See for instance Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, *Germany and the European Union* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), p. 54; Hanno Degner and Dirk Leuffen, 'Crises and responsiveness: analysing German preference formation during the eurozone crisis', *Political Studies Review* 18: 4, 2020, pp. 491–506, https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919864902.

[48] Tuomas Forsberg, 'From *Ostpolitik* to "frostpolitik"? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia', *International Affairs* 92: 1, 2016, pp. 21–42, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12505; Joachim Krause, 'Germany's "Ostpolitik" until Russia's invasion of Ukraine', in Stefan Hansen, Olha Husieva and Kira Frankenthal, *Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: 'Zeitenwende' for German security policy* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023); See also Ian Klinke, "'Aggression in felt slippers": Bahr, Kissinger, and the geopolitics of *Ostpolitik*, 1962–2022', *Global Studies Quarterly* 5: 2, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf041.

[49] Steve Wood, 'Germany and Nord Stream 2: evolution and end of an incongruous policy', *International Politics* 61: 4, 2024, pp. 718–41, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00453-9; Klaus Stratmann, Moritz Koch and Eva Fischer, 'Nord Stream 2: wie die Pipeline Europa spaltet', Handelsblatt, 16 Dec. 2018.

[50] 'Address given by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe', 6 July 1989, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28341-document-21-gorbachevs-address-council-europe-strasbourg-july-6-1989.

[51] Gerlinde Groitl, *Russia, China and the revisionist assault on the western liberal international order* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), ch. 8; Maria Snegovaya and Alexander Lanoszka, 'Reclaiming what is ours: elite continuity and revanchism', *European Journal of International Security* 10:2, 2025, pp. 257–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.28.

[52] Christiane Lemke, 'Revising *Ostpolitik*: implications of the *Zeitenwende* for European and transatlantic relations', *German Politics and Society* 42: 2, 2024, https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2024.420205; Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?', pp. 1905–8.

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the 2020s. Defence spending rose after 2014, yet Germany remained well below NATO's two per cent of GDP target, and substantive reforms proved elusive.[53]

However, the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea was also an example of rare German leadership. Berlin advocated a European double-track strategy, combining sanctions against Russia with ongoing negotiations aimed at finding a solution to the crisis. The ensuing Minsk Process could not ultimately halt Russian aggression, but it did showcase Germany's determination to provide leadership even at a cost to itself, as the sanctions affected its own economy.[54] Yet when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the rupture Berlin proclaimed—the *Zeitenwende*—proved easier to declare than to sustain, and hesitation and recalcitrance soon reasserted themselves. The shock of the 2022 invasion—coinciding with the arrival of a new government after Merkel's 16-year tenure—exposed the collapse of Berlin's post-Cold War Russia policy and, with it, its broader European security strategy. Like Europe as a whole, Germany was unprepared for cascading crises in subsequent years: the return of war to the continent, an expansionist Russia and the potential unravelling of NATO and the rules-based order amid Trump's dismantling of key pillars of liberal multilateralism, particularly in international trade and governance.[55] External shocks were compounded by internal challenges: sluggish growth, polarization and populism, EU structural weaknesses and the accelerating climate emergency. At the centre of this geopolitical maelstrom stood a new German Problem once again laid bare—no longer defined by the pursuit of dominance or aggression, but by caution and hesitation, an unwillingness to shoulder more responsibility, a lack of vision and strategic leadership and a widening dissonance between power and purpose.

The three-party coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals that took office in December 2021 was almost immediately confronted with Europe's gravest crisis since the Cold War: Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz, previously cautious on arms deliveries and recalcitrant about abandoning Nord Stream 2, responded with his *Zeitenwende* speech of 27 February 2022.[56] He announced a turning-point in foreign and security policy, pledging a €100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr, a renewed focus on territorial defence and recognition that deterrence was essential to halt Russian aggression.[57] For the first time in decades, some political consensus

[53] Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?', p. 1910.

[54] Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics*, pp. 117–19, 150–4.

[55] Bunde, 'Lessons (to be) learned?', p. 517; Feride Aslı Ergül Jorgensen and Knud Erik Jørgensen, 'The European Union and the crisis of multilateralism in an era of uncertainty and power politics', *Third World Quarterly* 46: 15, 2025, pp. 1959–78 at p. 1960, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2518319; Habib Badawi and Mohamad Zreik, 'Counting allies' coins: Trump's NATO strategy and its implications for transatlantic relations', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 23: 1, 2025, pp. 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-025-00135-9; Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, '(De)coding "America First": Trump's contestation of international institutions and its consequences', *International Affairs* 102: 1, 2026, pp. 43–62, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf231; Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Trump is overturning the world order that America built', *Wall Street Journal*, 7 March 2025.

[56] Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics*, p. 119, footnote 17; Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis', pp. 1232–4.

[57] Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention?'; Bunde, 'Lessons (to be) learned?'.

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emerged in the Bundestag that a modern military was indispensable to German and European security. But scepticism persisted—both within pockets in parliament and among the public.[58]

The implementation of *Zeitenwende* exposed limits, too. Despite Germany's prominent support for Ukraine, key deliveries—including Leopard tanks—were slow to materialize, and Taurus cruise missiles were stalled completely, with Scholz often acting only after sustained allied pressure.[59] Moreover, the €100 billion fund was insufficient to offset decades of underinvestment while institutional reforms were lagging behind.[60] Meanwhile, the constitutional debt brake—restricting further borrowing—was upheld by the coalition's Liberal partners, creating deep frictions within the government and ultimately contributing to its collapse.[61] More fundamentally, Scholz failed to exercise the political leadership, at home or within Europe, necessary to translate *Zeitenwende* into lasting strategic change. By the time Trump returned to the White House in 2025, Europe's continued dependence on the US highlighted how little had shifted. Germany's dilemma remained one of evident potential but persistent reluctance to lead.[62] In European terms, too, Scholz offered little vision. His 2022 Prague speech, outlining modest security reforms, was left largely unpursued.[63] While the French president, Emmanuel Macron, made intermittent pushes for reform—often bold, but poorly prepared—Scholz represented the opposite: absence from European debates, marked by silence over substance. The dysfunctional Franco-German relationship came to symbolize the problems of European cooperation.[64] Scholz's coalition collapsed in late 2024, plunging the country into snap elections. Thus, with Russia's war in its fourth year and an unpredictable American administration entering office, in early 2025 Germany was consumed by domestic instability. German leadership in Europe, previously already scarce, all but vanished. Scholz, now a lame duck, virtually disappeared from the European stage, as France and Britain sought to coordinate European policies on Ukraine and Trump.[65]

[58] Löfflmann and Riemann, "'If I could turn back time'", pp. 474, 476–8; Christoph O. Meyer, 'The event–agency–structure framework for explaining continuity and change in foreign and defence policy in Europe: the case of Germany prior to and after the *Zeitenwende*', *Defence Studies* 25: 4, 2025, pp. 884–908, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2025.2562979.

[59] Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*', p. 429.

[60] Markus C. Kerber and Naghmeh Reza, 'Die Reform der Rüstungsbeschaffung', *Wirtschaftsdienst* 104: 3, 2024, pp. 200–4, https://doi.org/10.2478/wd-2024-0054; "'100 Milliarden werden nicht reichen'", *Der Spiegel*, 27 Jan. 2023, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/boris-pistorius-100-milliarden-euro-sondervermoegen-fuer-bundeswehr-werden-nicht-reichen-a-3be1b0da-f12a-4da5-ab42-a8e9d29e106a.

[61] Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*', p. 428.

[62] Matlé, 'Deutschlands Zeitenwende in der Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik'; Mello, '*Zeitenwende*'; Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis'.

[63] Bundesregierung, 'Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague', 29 Aug. 2022, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/scholz-speech-prague-charles-university-2080752; Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality', pp. 1631–2.

[64] Anne-Elisabeth Moutet, 'How Macron and Scholz broke the Franco-German alliance at the heart of the EU', *Telegraph*, 24 March 2024.

[65] Jennifer Rankin, 'Will Germany's new government restore its role as a leader of the EU?', *Guardian*, 24 Feb. 2025.

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That said, Scholz's government did achieve what had once seemed impossible: weaning Germany off Russian hydrocarbons with surprising speed, without triggering the collapse of German industry,[66] and it laid the groundwork for a strategic reorientation of German foreign and security policy.[67] Yet the government lacked both the capacity and the political will to fully implement change. In the end, *Zeitenwende* risked becoming *Zeitenwendchen*—a diminished version of the epochal change it had promised.[68] The new German Problem, no longer one of excessive ambition, persisted at a moment when Europe could least afford it. Germany remained hesitant to lead, recalcitrant to meet expectations of assuming more responsibility for European defence, and slow to adapt to the changing international environment.

When Friedrich Merz assumed the chancellorship in May 2025, his start proved unexpectedly turbulent: he initially failed to secure the necessary votes for his election despite the majority commanded by his CDU/CSU–SPD coalition, only succeeding in a second ballot a few hours later.[69] The episode cast an early shadow over his tenure. Yet Merz could also claim an immediate success: even before his formal election, he secured a majority in the outgoing Bundestag to reform the debt brake, thereby paving the way for virtually unlimited defence spending and the creation of a massive €500 billion infrastructure investment fund.[70] The suspension of the debt brake for major sections of the budget removed one of the central obstacles that had paralysed the Scholz government. Another change was evident at once. Merz set out to be a proactive *Außenkanzler* or 'foreign chancellor', determined to reassert Germany's place on the European and global stages. Immediately upon election, he visited Paris and Warsaw to revitalize these relationships. His June 2025 visit to Washington also went comparatively well by the standards of recent transatlantic encounters: Merz managed to establish a working relationship with Donald Trump, allowing ongoing consultation on issues such as Ukraine.[71] Publicly, he declared Germany's willingness to assume greater responsibility and leadership in Europe, and promised to build the Bundeswehr into the strongest conventional army on the continent by the early 2030s.[72] Freed from the shackles of the debt brake, Germany committed itself to reaching NATO's new 3.5 per cent spending target as early as 2029, rather than by 2035 as officially stipulated by NATO.[73] The Bundestag also paved the way for introducing a new

[66] Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis', pp. 1235–6.
[67] Löfflmann and Riemann, "'If I could turn back time'", pp. 471–2, 477–8; Tkocz and Stritzel, 'Articulating change and responsibility'.
[68] See e.g. Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis'; Mello, '*Zeitenwende*'.
[69] 'Erfolg im zweiten Wahlgang: Merz zum Bundeskanzler gewählt', *tagesschau.de*, 6 May 2025.
[70] 'Mehrheit für Reform der Schuldenbremse: 512 Abgeordnete stimmen mit ja', Deutscher Bundestag, 18 March 2025, https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw12-de-sondersitzung-1056916.
[71] Paul Blickle and Fabian Reinbold, 'Wer ist hier der Außenkanzler?', *Die Zeit*, 13 Aug. 2025.
[72] Bundesregierung, 'Historischer NATO-Gipfel: Entscheidungen für Frieden, Sicherheit und Freiheit', 25 June 2025, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/merz-statement-nato-gipfel-2357998.
[73] 'Wehretat: 3,5 Prozent des BIP für Verteidigung bis 2029', ZDFheute, 23 June 2025.

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military service scheme, initially on a voluntary basis.[74] Merz thus emerged as a counterpoint to Scholz: where the latter had been cautious, Merz was direct—at times brusque—but visibly willing to take the initiative. His convening of a European coordination meeting ahead of the Trump–Putin Alaska summit in August 2025 was emblematic.[75] During the subsequent meeting with Trump on 18 August, Merz openly pressed him to make a ceasefire a precondition for peace talks.[76] In rhetoric, style and resolve, Merz confronted the core of the new German Problem: reluctance to assume responsibility and leadership. At the same time, however, it remains to be seen to what extent these declarations will be followed by concrete action, or whether Germany will again fall victim to the patterns Frank Stengel identified in the aftermath of Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech: 'German policy was marked by first rather grandiose declarations regarding both Germany's future role in European defence and Berlin's support for Ukraine, followed by hesitant implementation and half-measures, accompanied by months of hand-wringing and lengthy debates.'[77] Despite his rhetoric, Merz's stance has also been marked by notable occasional hesitation to confront Trump directly, a reluctance that is not unique to him but still risks weakening European cohesion and signals an unwillingness to exercise leadership in this domain. This became evident when Trump's new *National Security Strategy* of December 2025 levelled sharp criticisms at Europe, to which Merz replied with the pointed remark: 'If Europe is of no use to you, then at least make Germany your partner.'[78] Then again, Trump's plans to acquire—potentially even invade—Greenland prompted coordinated resistance from European NATO members. Here, Merz once more assumed a rhetorical leadership position for Germany within Europe, especially in the field of defence but also economically. He contended that the nature of the international system had shifted decisively, remarking: 'This new world of great powers is being built on power, on strength and, when it comes to it, on force. It is not a cosy place.'[79] At the same time, he identified a 'new self-confidence'[80] among Europeans, arguing that they must be prepared to engage in power politics if they are to constitute a united European great power capable of acting at the global level.

Whether this translates into lasting change remains to be seen. Commitment at the top is essential, but it is not enough on its own. To sustain a more ambitious foreign and security policy, Merz will need to secure reliable

[74] Bundesregierung, 'Neuer attraktiver Wehrdienst beschlossen', 19 Dec. 2025, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/neuer-wehrdienst-gesetzentwurf-2381580.

[75] Hans von der Burchard, 'Trump to join European leaders on emergency call before Putin talks', Politico, 11 Aug. 2025.

[76] Peter Pinedo, 'Trump spars with European leader during Ukraine talks over key step to peace', Fox News, 18 Aug. 2025.

[77] Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*', p. 22.

[78] 'Merz kritisiert US-Strategie', *Süddeutsche.de*, 9 Dec. 2025, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/nach-attacke-auf-europa-merz-kritisiert-us-strategie-li.3351900. (Author's translation.)

[79] 'Rede von Bundeskanzler Merz beim World Economic Forum', Davos, 22 Jan. 2026, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeskanzler-merz-beim-world-economic-forum-am-22-januar-2026-in-davos-2403600.

[80] 'Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz', Berlin, 29 Jan. 2026, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/bk-regierungserklaerung-2405056.

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parliamentary majorities and strong domestic support—a task that remains uncertain.[81] One potentially contentious issue is the possible deployment of European ground troops to guarantee any future peace agreement in Ukraine. In all likelihood, German participation would be crucial for such a mission to be viable and credible—particularly if Merz is serious about his ambitions for German responsibility and leadership. Whether he can achieve solid parliamentary and public support for such a deployment will serve as a litmus test for assessing whether the new German Problem has truly begun to be overcome.[82] On the domestic front, his record has already been proving less successful than his foreign policy activism: his coalition faces mounting challenges, and Merz has drawn criticism from within his own party, suggesting that his authority is not beyond challenge.[83] For the new German Problem to be resolved, leadership from the chancellor is indispensable—but it must be followed by action and underpinned by solid political support at home.

Conceptualizing the new German Problem

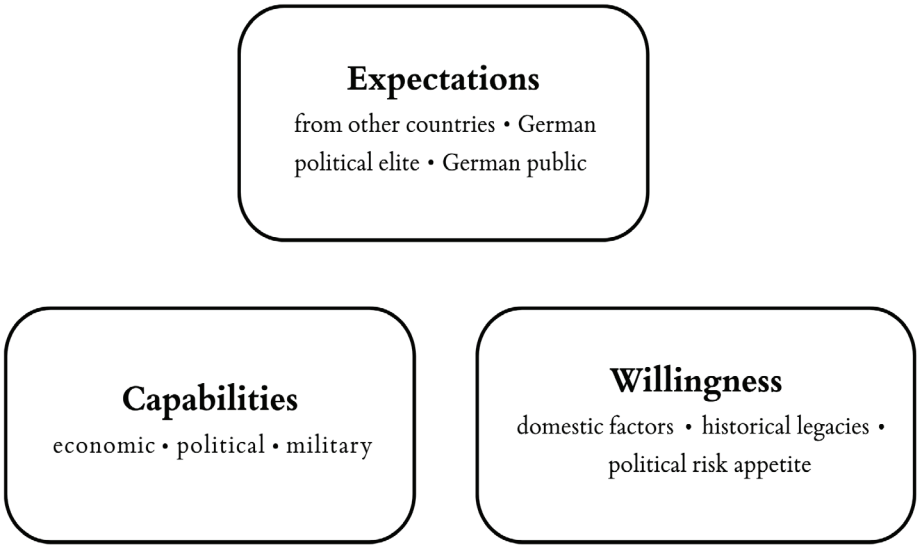
What, then, is the new German Problem? As has been shown, Calleo's old German Problem was about Germany's acceptance of—or challenge to—the status quo: a mismatch between ambition, power and the willingness of Germany's neighbours to accommodate it, which translated into aggression and attempts to overcome the system in order to reshape it in a way more favourable to Germany. With the end of the Second World War, Germany effectively ceased to be a territorially expansionist or aggressive power. Today, Germany supports the status quo and is committed to upholding it. While this is a more comfortable problem to have than an aggressive Germany, it still poses serious challenges for Berlin, its neighbours and Europe's security architecture. Germany is central to Europe's stability and prosperity yet punches below its weight, especially militarily and in leading on new policies.[84] The result is a three-way misalignment: among expectations (from other countries, the German political elite and the German public); capabilities (economic, political and military); and willingness (domestic support, historical legacies and risk appetite). This is the essence of the new German Problem. In a harsher international environment, that gap leaves Europe exposed—whether in deterring Russia, building greater European autonomy, or coordinating China policy

[81] Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality', p. 1617.
[82] Laura Pitel, 'Germany vows support for Kyiv despite unease about boots on the ground', *Financial Times*, 25 Aug. 2025.
[83] Michael Schlieben, 'Merz' Warnung an die SPD', *Die Zeit*, 23 Aug. 2025; Sebastian Lange, 'Kanzler auf Abruf: die Autorität von Friedrich Merz in der CDU erodiert', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 1 Aug. 2026.
[84] John Kampfner, 'Europe is crying out for leadership. After years of drift, Germany is finally ready to answer', *Guardian*, 21 March 2025; Tuomas Iso-Markku and Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, 'Towards German leadership? Germany's evolving role and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 59–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1611782; Schoeller et al., *Explaining the leadership vacuum*, pp. 1184–6; Margit Bussmann, Andris Banka and Christina Stremming, 'How small-state allies perceive Germany', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, vol. 67, 2026, pp. 391–416, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-025-00628-4.

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or global policy issues. Beyond their practical consequences, such failures also send a powerful signal to both adversaries and partners: that Europe lacks unity and resolve. The argument that follows traces each dimension and shows how Germany's reluctance to assume leadership, based on domestic constraints more than material limits, sustains the problem.

Figure 1: The new German Problem



Expectations: the leadership gap

A core aspect of the new German Problem concerns the expectations placed on Germany by its neighbours and partners to provide leadership on pressing issues and to shoulder a greater share of the burden associated with necessary reforms.[85] In practice, this entails increased investment in European defence, a more capable Bundeswehr able to support collective security, and a greater willingness to accept risks—for instance by deploying German forces on NATO's eastern flank.[86] Berlin's reluctance often correlates with an unwillingness to accept the exposure, responsibilities and burdens that such leadership entails, both internationally and domestically.[87] Should Europe seek greater strategic autonomy from the US in matters of defence, Germany will almost certainly be required to assume a larger role in compensating for the gap left by Washington.

Beyond defence, expectations of German leadership span economic governance, geopolitics and long-term conflict management.[88] Partners also expect

[85] Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality', p. 1615; Schoeller et al., *Explaining the leadership vacuum*.
[86] Bussmann et al., 'How small-state allies perceive Germany'.
[87] Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*', pp. 427–8.
[88] Matthijs, 'The three faces of German leadership'; Destradi, *Reluctance in world politics*, pp. 150–4.

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Germany to shoulder more of the fiscal challenges faced by EU members, for example by supporting the mutualization of debt through eurobonds or advancing fiscal integration.[89] In formulating a coherent China policy, Germany would also be expected to take the lead as the EU's largest economy with extensive ties to Beijing, as without German leadership, no unified European approach is likely to emerge.[90] Finally, at some point in the future, when European countries re-engage with Russia, Germany will almost certainly have to play a key role.[91]

These expectations, however, stand in stark contrast to the reluctance of German politicians, over the past three decades, to provide leadership, build domestic majorities for needed changes and assume the burdens that come with it—costs that may include financial commitments, political backlash from global powers such as China or the US, and the risk to German soldiers' lives. When the German government did decide to act, it was usually out of immediate necessity in the face of major crises, such as during the height of the eurozone crisis or the refugee crisis. What this ad hoc leadership often lacked was integration into a broader strategic framework: a long-term vision for structural change, a coherent plan for implementation and the willingness to engage constructively with partners in order to build momentum behind such efforts. One area in which recent German governments have shown greater proactivity—partly because they have encountered a willing counterpart—has been in strengthening cooperation with the UK on security and defence, as well as in wider bilateral relations. The 2024 Trinity House Agreement and 2025 Kensington Treaty provide a robust foundation for deepening this partnership and for contributing to Europe's defence architecture. This matters at a time when other European leaders, notably in France and Poland, face domestic constraints on their capacity to play such a role, while other key states, such as Italy, are governed by far-right parties.[92] German leadership therefore becomes especially important when other European countries are unable or unwilling to provide it.[93]

In this context, a broader trend may be emerging: German governments increasingly seek 'coalitions of the willing' within Europe—though not necessarily confined to the EU—to advance particular policy goals. Alongside the deepening Germany–UK relationship, the German–Italian government

[89] Henry Foy, 'Demands for EU joint debt as leaders seek even more cash for arms', *Financial Times*, 21 March 2025.

[90] Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska, 'The European Union and Germany's role in EU–China policy', in Ciesielska-Klikowska, *Unpacking the complexity of German policy towards China* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).

[91] For context see, for instance, Liana Fix, *Germany's role in European Russia policy: a new German power?* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Klinke, 'Dead or dormant?'; Bunde, '*Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy identity crisis'.

[92] See, for instance, Jannike Wachowiak and Anand Menon, 'A new chapter for UK–German relations', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 30 Sept. 2025, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/new-chapter-uk-german-relations.

[93] Matthijs, 'The three faces of German leadership', pp. 137–8.

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consultations of January 2026 point in the same direction.[94] Germany appears more willing to identify partners proactively for issue-specific cooperation and to look beyond its traditional European co-engine, France, in exercising leadership and generating new initiatives at the European level.

At its core, the new German Problem reflects an absence of strategic, long-term leadership on issues where partners expect Germany to act—leadership matched by planning and resources rather than only declaration. Unlike the old German Problem, this is not about Germany becoming a hegemon. Successful leadership would mean building coalitions and consensus at home and abroad, and embedding changes within multilateral frameworks to ensure buy-in and lasting success rather than imposing a 'German solution'.[95] The flipside is that the lack of German leadership will likely leave Europe struggling to meet the challenges it faces—all the more so when no other actor can step in. In short, expectations of German leadership, particularly in security and defence, have risen faster than Berlin's readiness to meet them.[96] At the elite level, some movement is evident: research indicates that political leaders increasingly acknowledge the need for Germany to take on greater international responsibility and show a corresponding willingness to do so. Yet this is tempered by perceptions that there is limited domestic willingness for such initiatives, which places considerable constraints on their policy choices. This mismatch makes it extremely challenging to formulate and execute coherent leadership strategies for Germany in Europe and perpetuates the new German Problem.[97] Moreover, expectations alone do not determine outcomes; whether Germany can meet these demands depends on the resources, structures and constraints that define its capabilities.

Capabilities: resources, structural dependencies and institutional constraints

Germany, in theory, has a range of instruments at its disposal to shape European and international affairs. It is the world's third-largest national economy in terms of GDP and possesses the financial and economic clout necessary to exert influence.[98] Fiscally, it is in a stronger position than many other western countries, giving it the budgetary headroom to invest in the Bundeswehr and reform it into an effective military—one capable of deterring Russia or other potentially hostile states, and of serving as a pillar of a more autonomous

[94] 'Pressekonferenz von Kanzler Merz und Ministerpräsidentin Meloni', Die Bundesregierung, 23 Jan. 2026, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/merz-meloni-regierungskonsultationen-2403860.

[95] In order to prevent a possible scenario outlined in Liana Fix, 'Europe's next hegemon: the perils of German power', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 Feb. 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/europes-next-hegemon-liana-fix.

[96] Schoeller, 'Leadership aspirations versus reality'.

[97] Löfflmann and Riemann, '"If I could turn back time"'; Dirk Nabers and Frank A. Stengel, 'Crisis and change in post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 66: 1, 2025, pp. 19–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00584-5; Meyer, 'The event–agency–structure framework for explaining continuity and change in foreign and defence policy in Europe'.

[98] World Bank, 'World Bank open data', accessed 1 Sept. 2025, https://data.worldbank.org.

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European defence.[99] Germany is also an established democracy with a relatively stable political system and is strategically located at the heart of Europe.[100] As the continent's most populous nation, it should also have the human resources required for such a role. Yet structural dependencies limit Germany's ability to act. Germany's heavy reliance on imported energy—particularly inexpensive Russian supplies until 2022—became a major vulnerability when those flows were abruptly cut off, placing consumers and businesses under severe strain. It was also a constant source of irritation in Germany's relationship with its eastern partners.[101] Nevertheless, Germany navigated the transition relatively effectively, avoiding a systemic collapse.[102] Its continued dependence on imported hydrocarbons, however, remains a significant structural vulnerability. As one of the world's leading exporters, Germany is acutely sensitive to fluctuations in global demand—whether driven by tariffs, supply-chain disruptions or geopolitical tensions—leaving it open to economic coercion and political pressure.[103]

At the same time, German industry depends heavily on imported resources essential for manufacturing, exposing it to additional risks, for example in the case of rare earths.[104] Squeezed on multiple fronts, German companies are at risk from global turbulence. Any resulting economic shocks could spill over into the domestic job market, creating social and political volatility. Assuming a leadership role in European or global affairs—particularly *vis-à-vis* the US or China—carries significant risks of economic retaliation that could harm German industries and workers, reinforcing the dynamics of the new German Problem by encouraging risk-averse policies. Moreover, decades of deprioritizing defence spending have left Germany with significant vulnerabilities in its ability to defend itself—and Europe—while its continued reliance on US security guarantees and military equipment further constrains its room for manoeuvre.[105] This dependency makes Berlin more risk-averse when advancing European policies that could jeopardize transatlantic relations. These vulnerabilities are most acute in the realm of nuclear deterrence, where Germany relies entirely on US protection. In the field of hybrid threats—particularly regarding

[99] Stefano Rebaudo, 'German Bund anchor can shield euro area from excessive curve steepening', Reuters, 30 May 2025.

[100] Florian Grotz and Wolfgang Schroeder, *The political system of Germany* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 562.

[101] See e.g. Wood, 'Germany and Nord Stream 2'.

[102] Alice Hancock and Shotaro Tani, 'How Europe solved its Russian gas problem', *Financial Times*, 29 April 2024.

[103] See, for instance, Lucio Baccaro and Martin Höpner, 'The political–economic foundations of export-led growth: an analysis of the German case', in Lucio Baccaro, Mark Blyth and Jonas Pontusson, eds, *Diminishing returns: the new politics of growth and stagnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, 'Weaponized interdependence: how global economic networks shape state coercion', *International Security* 44: 1, 2019, pp. 42–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.

[104] Sören Henning et al., *Kritische mineralische Rohstoffe in Deutschland* (Hanover: Bundesanstalt für Geowissenschaften und Rohstoffe, 2024).

[105] See for instance Justin Bronk, *US weapons and European capability gaps*, RUSI, 28 July 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/us-weapons-and-european-capability-gaps; Aylin Matlé, 'German conventional defense capabilities and capacity', in John R. Deni et al., eds, *Assessing the Zeitenwende: implications for Germany, the United States, and transatlantic security* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2025), pp. 35–6.

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critical infrastructure, cybersecurity and the protection of space-based assets such as satellites—Germany has also exhibited significant weaknesses.[106] These gaps could severely limit its freedom of action if exploited by hostile powers seeking to coerce or pressure Berlin.

Beyond material resources, parliamentary control over military deployments—the notion of the '*Parlamentsarmee*'[107]—operates as an institutional constraint on Germany's security capabilities. This increases uncertainty for partners, because commitments can become contingent on shifting coalition politics and parliamentary arithmetic. This feature of Germany's security policy is historically grounded and unlikely to change, and it limits the commitments German leaders can credibly make—for example, regarding the potential deployment of German troops to support or secure a future peace arrangement in Ukraine. Nevertheless, German policy-makers could articulate more clearly their intention to play an active role, including in Ukraine, thereby signalling leadership ambition and willingness while simultaneously building the domestic political majorities required to sustain such commitments. Some small steps towards improvement may lie in the new government's decision to establish a national security council-like entity within the Chancellery.[108] This would allow for centralized and strategic planning of foreign policy—not only for current and acute crises but also for longer-term challenges and strategic solutions. If implemented effectively, this could foster greater coherence and better preparation, paving the way to build the necessary consensus for policy changes and reforms over the medium to long term.[109]

Thus, while Germany possesses substantial resources, institutional and structural constraints limit flexibility, speed and the credibility of its commitments. Even where capabilities exist, the willingness to use them must be mobilized domestically—and this is where the new German Problem becomes most acute.

Willingness: domestic politics, historical legacies and risk appetite

Domestic politics matter. Calleo acknowledged this in his discussion of the old German Problem, and it remains a crucial dimension of the new one.[110] Any political leader can ultimately effect only as much change as they can secure

[106]Francesco Casaril and Letterio Galletta, 'Space cybersecurity governance: assessing policies and frameworks in view of the future European space legislation', *Journal of Cybersecurity* 11: 1, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/cybsec/tyaf013; Federal Ministry of Defence and Federal Foreign Office, *Space safety and security strategy* (Berlin, 2025); Charlotte Marchandise and Martin McKee, 'Europe in a hybrid war: health security as strategic defence', *European Journal of Public Health* 35: 6, 2025, pp. 1074–5, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaf210; Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Aysun Bora, 'Berlin in the dark: a power outage shakes Germany', *Financial Times*, 7 Jan. 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/c91dee2f-7cbd-47e0-bba7-15b8c7e8b83e.

[107]See for instance Wolfgang Wagner, 'The Bundestag as a champion of parliamentary control of military missions', *Sicherheit & Frieden* 35: 2, 2017, pp. 60–5, https://doi.org/10.5771/0175-274X-2017-2-60.

[108]Bundesregierung, 'Im Kabinett beschlossen: Deutschland bekommt einen nationalen Sicherheitsrat', 27 Aug. 2025, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kabinett-sicherheitsrat-2381492.

[109]How successful such an entity will be remains a subject of debate: see Constanze Stelzenmüller, 'Germany's national security council isn't up to the task', *Financial Times*, 28 Aug. 2025.

[110]E.g. in Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*, p. 58.

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political majorities and domestic support for—and Germans tend to be risk-averse.[111] Two aspects of domestic politics are particularly significant for the new German Problem: the structure of the German political system and the growing polarization and rise of the extremes. The German political system is typically based on coalition governments and a culture of consensus, with the Länder (federal states) occasionally exerting influence on foreign policy issues, either directly or indirectly. This requires more internal negotiation and compromise than in countries such as the UK, as the chancellor must convince not only their own party but also coalition partners. Moreover, Germany's federal structure means that elections are held in some part of the country almost every year. This makes decision-making lengthy and often waters down policies to allow all parties to claim some success.[112] For foreign and security policies that require swift action, this can pose serious problems. Moreover, the requirement for the Bundestag to approve military missions abroad, discussed above, can slow down decision-making, creating openings for unrelated issues to be brought into the bargaining.

Another factor with the potential to significantly affect foreign and security policy—and, by extension, the willingness of German politicians to demonstrate European leadership—stems from broader political trends visible across Europe and globally, namely the rise of political fringes and the intensification of political polarization. The growing electoral success of extremist and populist parties—most notably the largely Russophile Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—complicates decision-making. The AfD now holds a significant number of seats in the Bundestag, making it the largest opposition party there, while also constituting a serious political force in several Länder. Its political playbook of offering simplistic (and often impracticable) solutions to complex problems appeals to a significant share of voters.[113] On foreign and security policy, it readily taps into fears among particular constituencies about Germany being drawn into the Ukraine conflict and potentially into a war with Russia, using these to shape policy from the sidelines.[114] Another populist party, although possibly in decline, the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance), forms part of several state governments and is equally opposed to military deployments and generally more pro-Russian than the parties in Germany's political centre.[115] The rise in support for fringe parties—particularly the AfD—and the

[111] Christos Katsioulis et al., *Security radar 2025: Europe—lost in geopolitics* (Vienna: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025), pp. 48–50.

[112] See e.g. Marc Debus, Holger Döring and Alejandro Ecker, 'Germany: from stable coalition camps to new complexity', in Torbjörn Bergman, Hanna Back and Johan Hellström, eds, *Coalition governance in western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[113] Lena Masch et al., 'Shift in public opinion formations on defense, energy, and migration: the case of Russia's war against Ukraine', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 35: 4, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edad038; see also for instance Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Theorizing far-right foreign policy: insights from Germany', *Political Studies* 73: 3, 2024, pp. 1169–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241284195.

[114] Manès Weisskircher, 'Far-right movement-party activism as strategy: Germany's "peace movement" during Russia's war against Ukraine', *Acta Politica* 60: 1, 2025, pp. 118–38, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-024-00378-y.

[115] Hans Pfeifer, 'Russia's best friends in Germany: AfD and BSW', Deutsche Welle, 9 Jan. 2024.

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decline of the traditional *Volksparteien* (people's parties) have made the formation of stable coalitions and governments increasingly difficult. This dynamic forces together coalition partners, at both the Länder and federal levels, whose policy preferences often diverge significantly and who are united primarily by the imperative of preventing an AfD-led government. As a result, these parties face constraints on their willingness to pursue substantial policy change or to accept the political costs of leadership. Any such move risks alienating segments of the electorate and strengthening extremist parties further—a self-reinforcing dynamic.[116] Germany's ability to overcome the new German Problem will thus also depend on the evolution of its domestic political discourse and the survival of populist parties, or in fact the *Volksparteien* as such, and whether they can garner domestic support for more ambitious policies.

Beyond short-term political constraints, willingness is also shaped by deeper historical and ideational legacies that influence domestic decision-making and affect perceptions of acceptable risk in foreign and security policy. The legacy of German aggression during the Third Reich continues to influence not only German policy-makers but also how Germany is perceived abroad, imposing limitations on what the country is willing—or able—to do.[117] The use of military means in foreign policy, in particular, remains shaped by this historical dimension: Germans continue to be uneasy about deploying troops abroad, especially to regions where German forces once acted as aggressors in 1939 or thereafter.[118]

At the same time, in the decades following the Second World War, West German society in particular developed a self-image as a pacifist country, or at least a 'civilian power'.[119] This notion remains deeply ingrained, and it is a flawed one: Germany has been anti-militarist in its foreign and security policy, but never truly pacifist.[120] Nevertheless, this self-image continues to constrain German leadership by narrowing the range of security policies deemed politically legitimate and by raising the domestic costs of policy change.[121] It will have to be addressed if Germany is to overcome its current problem. Some changes in rhetoric are already visible, as the longstanding slogan of 'never again war' was reformulated as 'never again tyranny' in the aftermath of February 2022.[122] Leadership from the government is crucial here, since sustained parliamentary and public backing is what turns policy

[116] See for instance also Nabers and Stengel, 'Crisis and change in post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy'; Michael Angenendt and Simon D. Brause, 'The long way towards polarized pluralism: party and party system change in Germany', in Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister, eds, *Political parties and the crisis of democracy: organization, resilience, and reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[117] However, research also shows that this perception abroad is shifting to one more focused on current issues: see, for instance, Bussmann et al., 'How small-state allies perceive Germany'.

[118] Bussmann et al., 'How small-state allies perceive Germany'.

[119] Harnisch and Maull, *Germany as a civilian power?*; Gaskarth and Oppermann, 'Clashing traditions'; Beverly Crawford and Kim B. Olsen, 'The puzzle of persistence and power: explaining Germany's normative foreign policy', *German Politics* 26: 4, 2017, pp. 591–608, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2017.1364365.

[120] Stengel, 'German "pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*'; Löfflmann and Riemann, '"If I could turn back time"'.

[121] Löfflmann and Riemann, '"If I could turn back time"'.

[122] Tkocz and Stritzel, 'Articulating change and responsibility'.

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shifts into durable commitments—and what reassures Germany's partners that those commitments will hold.

Related to the above is another key aspect: the notion of Germany as not being like any other 'normal' great power. In the old German Problem, this often related to the idea that Germany was a 'belated nation'. When it finally achieved unity in 1871 and was able to shape international affairs more effectively and project power abroad—seeking its own share of the world map—it was not doing anything unusual for a European great power at the time.[123]

In the new German Problem, this corresponding notion of 'lateness' manifests itself in Germany's slowness to adapt to changed circumstances. After the Cold War, it sought to continue policies from that era in a world that had moved on. The result was a mismatch between the expectations of others, the requirements of the European and international systems, and Germany's capabilities and willingness to act.[124] It also produced a Germany that was behaving 'abnormally' for a country of its size and stature. Where other European great powers, such as France or the UK, were willing to act on global crises and assume military responsibilities and burdens, Germany often appeared reluctant to do so.[125] Even where expectations and leadership ambitions are high and capabilities exist, domestic willingness—shaped by political fragmentation, historical legacies and delayed adaptation—remains the binding constraint. Whether Germany can 'normalize' itself in this respect is therefore a litmus test for how long the new German Problem will persist.

Conclusions

Calleo's original German Problem was concerned with a Germany struggling to fit into the existing international order and therefore scheming to overthrow it—harbouring high ambitions and considerable resources that generated fear among its neighbours, policies that twice ended in catastrophe. The new German Problem is, in many ways, the opposite: it concerns a Germany unwilling to live up to its capabilities, shying away from the responsibilities and strategic leadership roles that others expect it to assume. Whereas the old dilemma was that there was 'too much Germany', today the problem is that there is 'not enough Germany' to be seen. This new dilemma stems from the tension between expectations of Germany, its capabilities and its willingness. The result is a persistent reluctance: to exercise consistent leadership in Europe, which requires building majorities and coalitions to sustain initiatives; to accept the costs and consequences that leadership brings; and to overcome the historical legacies, domestic discourses and political mechanisms that favour restraint over initiative. How Germany manages this tension will determine which of several possible scenarios could materialize:

[123] Calleo, *The German problem reconsidered*, p. 206.
[124] Münkler, *Macht im Umbruch*, pp. 308–10.
[125] As seen, for instance, in German policy on Libya: Sarah Brockmeier, 'Germany and the intervention in Libya', *Survival* 55: 6, 2013, pp. 63–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.862937.

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1. Incremental adaptation. The German government continues its slow and cautious path, gradually developing capacities and strategic instruments while working to shift public opinion and political discourse. Leadership would remain cautious, but more resources would be provided to deal with European and global challenges over time. The key question is whether there will be enough time for such gradualism.
2. Strategic assertiveness. The crises of recent years have served as a wake-up call, prompting substantial investment in military capabilities, shifts in public and elite attitudes towards greater responsibility, and a deliberate assumption of leadership among European states. The aim would be to prepare the continent for greater self-reliance in defence as US security guarantees recede.
3. Hegemonic overreach. Germany pushes forward, shaping Europe according to its own designs—the 'German way'—without seeking input or building consensus among partners. This assertive, possibly nationalist, unilateralism risks alienating neighbours, rekindling fears of dominance and, at the extreme, reawakening fears of the old German Problem.
4. Slow decline. Domestic political deadlock prevents bold steps. Even if governments wish to lead, majorities fail to materialize, public scepticism persists and inaction prevails. Germany retreats from leadership roles, particularly if crises temporarily ease and urgency subsides. Europe, left fragmented and unable to provide for its own security, risks becoming the playground of China, Russia and the United States.

Scenarios 3 and 4 represent the most dangerous outcomes; scenarios 1 and 2 are the most desirable. Historically, scenario 1 (incremental adaptation) and scenario 4 (slow decline) may appear the most likely, given Germany's trajectories, cautious traditions and political constraints. For Germany's sake—and for Europe's—one must hope that Germans can once again break with history, live up to the challenges and consign scenarios 3 and 4, along with the old and new German Problems, to the realm of historical 'what ifs' rather than political reality.

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