



Photo: © Cüneyt Karadağ, Anadolu Agency, picture alliance.

[NATO. The Indispensable Alliance](#)

Are We Doing Enough?

German and European Contributions to NATO

Christina Bellmann / Alexander Schuster

2024 has the potential to go down in history as a fateful year for European defence. The election of the 47th US President could have a major impact on the future of NATO. However, Germany and Europe are not simply at the mercy of their fate – they have potential courses of action at their disposal. What specific steps should they take at this point?

The 75-Year-Old Alliance Is at a Crossroads

In its 75th year of existence, NATO faces some major challenges. With its war against Ukraine, Russia is threatening the European security order in a revisionist way that was thought to be consigned to the past. The defence alliance has returned to its core mission: deterrence and the defence of NATO territory against an aggressor state. This has led to a fundamental rethink of German defence policy, as reflected in new strategy documents and in extensive levels of support for Ukraine in its fight against the Russian aggressor.

Continuing to provide this military, financial and humanitarian support is posing increasing challenges for the European and transatlantic partners as Russia's illegal invasion moves into its third year. The US perceives the growing threat from a nuclear and conventionally armed China to be even greater than that posed by the belligerent Russia. That is why the US presidential election later this year and the possibility of an isolationist president hangs like a sword of Damocles over the future of the European security architecture.

In his article in this issue of *International Reports*, Peter Rough describes the domestic political debate in the US on the American commitment to NATO and the potential consequences of a Democratic or Republican presidency. In light of potential shifts in US transatlantic policy, this article poses the question: What do Germans and Europeans need to do in order to keep the US in NATO? And to what extent is this

fundamental rethink actually reflected in consistent security policy action?

The Contribution of the US to European Security

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the armies of individual NATO countries shrank, in some cases drastically, as part of the peace dividend. US troops had been permanently stationed in Europe in varying numbers since the Second World War, but these numbers also decreased, reaching a low point of some 65,000 soldiers in 2018.¹ At its peak in 1957, the figure was 450,000.

With the Russian attack on Ukraine and the activation of NATO defence plans, the mark of 100,000 US soldiers on European soil was exceeded again for the first time in 2022. The largest contingents of this US military presence are located in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Poland.² Since 2017, the US has played a special role in Polish security policy in its function as the eFP³ framework nation of a multinational combat unit.

Not only Poland, but all countries on NATO's eastern flank have received US troop reinforcements. General Christopher G. Cavoli, commander of the US European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of NATO, justified this step by citing the need to deter Russian aggression. In Russia's western military district bordering Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine, Moscow's ground forces would continue to have an advantage over the regional armed forces and NATO forces on the eastern flank.⁴ The Baltic states, in particular, lack strategic depth

for defence, which is why time would be of the essence for NATO reinforcements in the event of a Russian attack.

By way of comparison, reference is often made here to the area of Ukraine currently occupied by Russia – the Baltic region as a whole is the same size as the areas currently being contested. NATO had already adapted its defence strategy accordingly after 2016 and has since secured its eastern flank by increasing its presence in the region. Russia has switched to a war economy. As a result, the defence industry produces far more ammunition than Western supporters can supply to Ukraine. Within NATO, it is assumed that the country would be in a position to launch an attack on a member state in five to eight years; the Baltic states are considered to be one of the most likely targets.

In addition to conventional deterrence, the US acts as a security guarantor by providing nuclear weapons to deter Russia. These and other key military capabilities currently guarantee the security of the European NATO states.

There is consensus that Europeans should finally take care of their own security.

Will the US Scale Back Its Commitment in Europe?

At the beginning of 2024, opinions on the future presence of US troops and US deployment within NATO are wide-ranging. Security experts agree that Donald Trump's election would not bode well for the US commitment to NATO. During his last term of office (2017 to 2021), Trump expressed sceptical or derogatory remarks about European countries free-riding in the defence sector at the expense of the US, and he repeatedly threatened to pull out of NATO if the allies failed to quickly reach the agreed target of two per cent of GDP for defence spending.⁵

In addition to a complete withdrawal from NATO, the concept of a dormant NATO has attracted a great deal of attention. Sumantra Maitra, a British researcher and current editor of *The American Conservative* magazine, describes this in an article for the Center for Renewing America: the US should primarily focus on the international freedom of maritime and trade routes and scale back its air force and naval presence in Europe to a minimum. NATO enlargement must be stopped and all activities that do not fall within the strictly military sphere suspended. This proposal also provides for a substantial withdrawal of military personnel from NATO structures.⁶

Other commentators believe a more moderate scaling back of this US commitment would be possible in the following areas: financial and military support for Ukraine; crisis response capacities for Europe and neighbouring regions (Middle East, Africa); commitments to the countries on NATO's eastern flank; and training and exercises with NATO allies.⁷ There is consensus that China will pose a greater threat to the US in the medium and long term, which is why US forces should be organised accordingly and Europeans should finally take care of their own security.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note a report published in mid-November 2023 on the strategic nuclear orientation of the US, according to which China has increased its nuclear arsenal at an unprecedented and astonishing pace. It stated that the United States would have to prepare for the threat scenario of a tri-polar nuclear world order (US, China, Russia) by 2030, for which it is currently ill-prepared. The report explicitly warns against withdrawing from existing security alliances, as this would directly benefit adversaries and could jeopardise the security and economic prosperity of both the US and its partners.⁸ It remains to be seen whether this warning will be heeded.

Cost-Benefit Analysis of a Withdrawal from Europe

A look at the troop units stationed in Europe shows that a short-term withdrawal would



Unclear picture: Whether Donald Trump will once again be elected US President in November is just as open as the question of his specific policy towards NATO. What is clear, however, is what Germany and Europe can do: invest more in their own defence. Photo: © Matt Rourke, AP, picture alliance.

scarcely increase security in the Indo-Pacific. The light infantry and armoured units deployed in Europe would be of little use in a conflict with China. The US Navy and Air Force would have to shoulder the main burden in an assumed conflict scenario with China.

On the other hand, one argument of those who advocate a pivot away from Europe cannot be dismissed: financial resources are required to develop the capabilities needed in the Indo-Pacific and money could be saved in the longer term by withdrawing from Europe.

What is more, some weapon systems are needed in both regions and this leads to bottlenecks in production. While previous arms deliveries

to Ukraine have largely come from US stocks, future procurement will depend on the ability of US arms manufacturers to deliver orders at speed. The Air Force in particular could be overstretched by the increasing demand in both regions for air refuelling and transport, along with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. In the long term, this would give rise to a conflict between Asian and European requirements.⁹

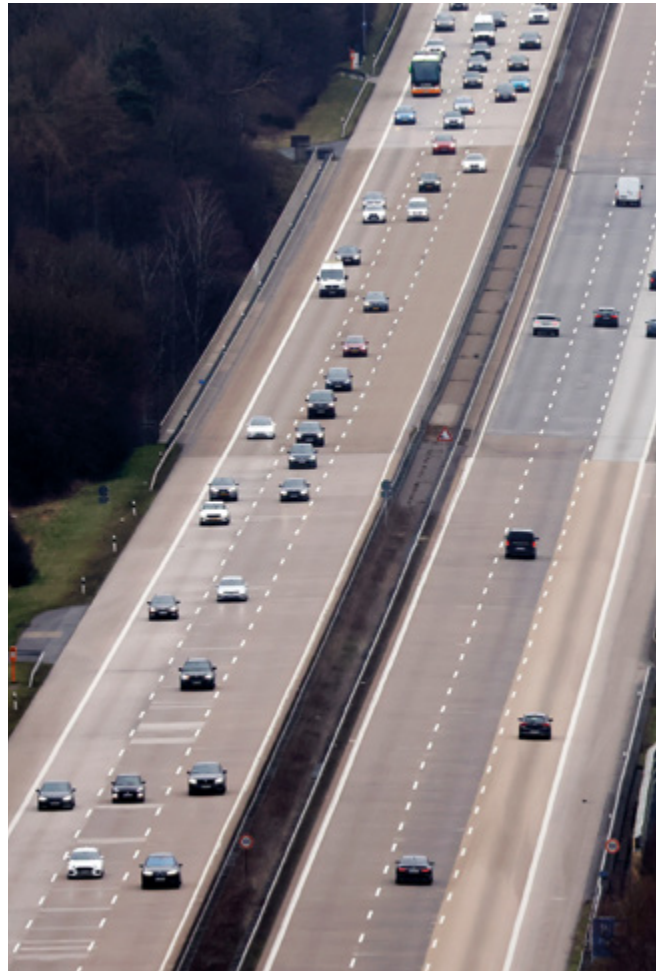
Tasks for Germany and Europe

The 2016 US presidential election, which resulted in a shock win by Donald Trump contrary to the predictions of key commentators, has led many political analysts to be cautious with their

forecasts. The race is still open, and the poll results are merely snapshots. The complex geopolitical situation makes it equally impossible to predict what foreign policy a Republican president would pursue with regard to Europe, which is partly due to the concept of strategic ambiguity. This does not mean that Germany and Europe are unable to do anything on the security front that could have a positive impact on future transatlantic relations. It is no secret that the US expects Europe to do more for its own security: this has been clearly communicated time and again by both Democrats and Republicans alike. It is important to bear in mind that US domestic policy will ultimately have the greatest influence on foreign policy decisions, even with a less isolationist president than Donald Trump.

The top priority must be to ensure sustainable funding for the armed forces.

In March 2023, Germany decided to purchase 35 American F-35s to replace its ageing Tornado fighter jets, in this way underscoring its commitment to the nuclear sharing programme. According to Torben Arnold from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), this will “bring us in line with the cutting edge of capabilities in the NATO alliance”¹⁰ and thus strengthen Germany’s relationship with the US. This is particularly true if the US does indeed decide to focus on the simultaneous nuclear deterrence of China and Russia. It is also important to assuage the concerns of the European partners in the joint Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project – France and Spain – that the purchase of the F-35s will divert financial resources away from the fighter jet component that is to be developed within the air defence system FCAS. Since the question of the delivery system for French nuclear weapons in connection with FCAS has yet to be resolved (let alone a possible German participation in French nuclear capabilities) and certification of aircraft for both American and French nuclear weapons appears even



more uncertain,¹¹ this long-deferred decision to strengthen NATO integration should be welcomed from the German perspective.

Unlike in the English-speaking nations, Germany still lacks a broad-based strategic debate. It is time to connect security and defence issues that have previously been tackled in isolation. Germany has a prominent role to play in European security due to its geographical location, economic strength and population size. The decision to purchase individual modern weapons systems so as to close longstanding capability gaps in the Bundeswehr, is therefore just one element in achieving the goal of a substantial German contribution to European security. The top priority must be to ensure sustainable funding for the armed forces.



Potentially war-deciding: In the event of *casus foederis* under NATO Article 5, the landing troops would have to be transported from the harbours of Western Europe to the east via the German rail and motorway network. Photo: © Christoph Hardt, Panama Pictures, picture alliance.

The special fund actually worsens the regular budget situation of the Bundeswehr.

The Bundeswehr: Tackling Financial and Personnel Shortages

Back in 2014, Berlin promised its NATO allies that it would fulfil the two per cent target from 2024.¹² In view of the security situation, the two per cent mark is a minimum requirement rather than a target. However, Germany is still a long way from achieving this goal. Quite the opposite: the current German government plans to steadily reduce the country's defence budget until 2027. The two per cent target will

only temporarily be achieved with the help of the Bundeswehr special fund.¹³ Yet, the budget problem is not adequately reflected in the political debate. When the special fund expires, Section 14 of the federal budget will have a permanent funding gap of some 40 billion euros when it comes to meeting the two per cent target.¹⁴

Some political parties are calling for the debt brake to be suspended once again as a solution to this budget crisis.¹⁵ This would allow the German government to take on new debt in order to substantially increase the defence budget. However, this remedy should be treated with the utmost caution, as it would severely compromise the government's room for manoeuvre in future budgets. At the same time, expenditure on social security is set to increase. It should also be noted that the first repayments on the crisis loans of 2020 to 2022 will have to be paid from 2028.¹⁶ Additional debt would place a heavy burden on the overall budget in the medium and long term.

The situation looks similar when it comes to the introduction of the special fund for the Bundeswehr. This special fund, which is actually a loan facility, is intended to accelerate the most urgent new acquisitions for the Bundeswehr. However, this will not solve the Gordian knot of the Bundeswehr's underfunding. On the contrary, the special fund actually worsens the regular budget situation of the armed forces. In military terms, the above-mentioned procurement of the F-35 is vital if Germany is to continue fulfilling its obligations under the NATO nuclear sharing programme. However, using the special fund to procure these fighter jets will place a heavy strain on the regular defence budget, as the enormous

cost of maintaining and accommodating this new equipment will have to be met from Section 14 of the federal budget. If the regular defence budget is not substantially increased, procurements made using the special fund will in fact increase rather than relieve the burden on the armed forces over the medium term.

The Bundeswehr's lack of funding thus continues to pose the biggest obstacle to Germany making a substantial contribution to European security. There is an urgent need for a political debate in Germany on how the regular defence budget can be substantially increased in order to meet the target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence. In view of difficulties that are likely to beset the federal budget over the next few years, there is no getting around a clear prioritisation of defence spending at the expense of other policy areas.

The Bundeswehr is desperately searching for ways to attract new recruits.

In addition to the growing funding gap in Section 14 of the federal budget, another issue concerning the armed forces is causing headaches: the shortage of military personnel. The Bundeswehr is currently 20,000 soldiers short of its military staffing target. For years, the Bundeswehr has been desperately searching for ways to attract new recruits. The debate is gathering momentum about whether non-citizens should be recruited and integrated into the Bundeswehr, illustrating the need for the armed forces to quickly find new ways of remedying the personnel shortage.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that personnel planning, which specifies a target strength of around 200,000 soldiers for the Bundeswehr, dates back to times when the main deployment scenario envisaged missions in international crisis management operations. Since the Russian attack on Ukraine, NATO

(and therefore also the Bundeswehr) has mainly been preparing for national and collective defence. These personnel plans are far from adequate for successful deployment in high-intensity combat.

More than Just Material Resources

However, Germany has to go beyond the financial in order to make a substantial contribution to European security within NATO. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 or even earlier, the Eastern European NATO allies have felt directly threatened by Moscow. Russia's aggressive behaviour must be countered by reinforcing the credibility of the promise of protection for all NATO allies. The decision to permanently station a heavy combat brigade of the Bundeswehr in Lithuania is thus very welcome. It sends the right signal to counter the security concerns of our Baltic allies and to underpin Germany's intention of assuming more direct responsibility for European security within the NATO framework. Having said that, the deployment of this brigade presents the Bundeswehr with numerous challenges due to major shortages of personnel and equipment. Nevertheless, with the deployment of the brigade, Berlin is clearly demonstrating that it is prepared to share the burden more fairly within NATO, especially vis-à-vis the United States.

As a NATO framework nation, Germany is also required to provide support for smaller European allies; so it must aim to make the Bundeswehr the backbone of conventional defence in Europe.¹⁷ This is a highly ambitious goal in light of the German armed forces' precarious budgetary situation and the hitherto rather half-hearted efforts to fill gaps left by the transfer of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine. Moreover, Warsaw is currently preparing to fulfil this role in the medium term by announcing a major rearmament programme. Germany must, therefore, join forces with Poland and the other allies in Europe to promote smart, complementary capability planning in order to gain a clear picture of what is required to fulfil its role as a NATO framework nation in Europe.

However, for a meaningful strategic debate, it is important to consider and bring together the areas that have only been touched on so far. The work to be done to enhance our security goes beyond the Bundeswehr. We also have to recognise the huge importance of the German infrastructure. Germany acts as a logistics hub in NATO planning. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that one of Germany's main contributions to the defence of Europe rests on the shoulders of the Deutsche Bahn. In the event of *casus foederis* under NATO Article 5, one of Berlin's key tasks would be to transport our allies' landing troops (especially US troops) from the harbours of Western Europe to the east. Transport would not be carried out exclusively via the rail network; the German motorway network would be required to a similar extent.

The immediate threat from Russia has barely reached Germany.

Credible deterrence against Moscow and other aggressors can only succeed if the resilience of the central infrastructure is secured. This means that, for security policy reasons alone, enormous sums should be spent on expanding and modernising railway lines, bridges and roads in the coming years. Not only to enhance the efficiency of the rail and road network, but also to create urgently needed redundancies in the network so that we are less vulnerable to attacks on our infrastructure in the event of a conflict.

The success of such an enormous national effort relies on broad public support, but this support will only be forthcoming if the public recognises the urgent need to take these steps. The key here is how the German public perceives the threat. Compared to our neighbours in northern and eastern Europe, the immediate threat from Russia has barely reached Germany. This would require much clearer communication about the security situation in Europe on the part of

the German government and an overhaul of its communication with the German public. Since the onset of Moscow's war of aggression against Ukraine, the aim of the current German government has been to shield the population from the political and, above all, economic repercussions by means of various aid packages. But money for this will soon dry up, and it is also not the task of a forward-looking, responsible government. Rather, the task is to make the right, albeit painful, decisions to set the course for a prosperous and, above all, secure future for Germany and Europe.

Europe in NATO

The challenges are similarly great at European level. To strengthen the European pillar within NATO, it is necessary to urgently address the huge shortfalls in equipment and ammunition affecting armies in Europe. Essential for this is jointly coordinated defence planning to enable European capacity building. Here, the role of the EU lies primarily in defence coordination and cooperation. The European allies' individual national budgets for defence, research and development will no longer suffice for going it alone when it comes to arms procurement.

The cost of procuring new weapons systems will continue to rise, while the development cycles in the defence technology sector will become ever shorter. This means that major investments have to be made at ever shorter intervals in order to keep defence technology up to date. The European NATO allies can improve interoperability between the armies of the transatlantic alliance by intensifying cooperation in the defence sector. This is the key to a credible deterrent capability vis-à-vis Moscow and other threats. What is more, improving the interoperability of the armed forces within NATO would significantly reduce the burden on the United States.

The most pressing task at European level is to replenish the material sent to Ukraine, and particularly the dwindling stocks of ammunition. The EU has already taken important steps in this

direction with the two initiatives ASAP (Act in Support for Ammunition Production) and EDIRPA (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act). The European Peace Facility, which can be used to refinance support deliveries from European countries to Ukraine, is an important and effective instrument, too. It is only through this financing that many of the support services to Ukraine are possible in the first place.

The initiatives at European level are a valuable contribution to fairer burden-sharing with the US. Nevertheless, the programmes and initiatives should be given considerably more financial backing. Despite the enormous financial challenges, providing the funds will be the easier task. The political costs of achieving a coherent Europe-wide stance in the face of the current security challenges will be many times higher.

Five Minutes to Twelve

From a European perspective, it must be clear that the US will be less rather than more involved in European defence in the context of NATO in the future. This seems to be a realistic scenario, regardless of the outcome of the US presidential election.

From today's perspective, it is impossible to predict exactly how the US-NATO commitment would be adapted by a future president and whether the Europeans would have any influence at all. But at least a unilateral withdrawal seems to have been prevented by a corresponding amendment to the law by the US Congress in 2023. However, there is much to suggest that Europeans, and Germany, too, will have to follow through on their decade-long pledge to spend at least two per cent of their GDP on defence. This means that, in future, burden-sharing in the continent's defence must be substantially and sustainably guaranteed; this means an increase in defence budgets on the part of those European countries that are currently falling short.

First and foremost, it is Europe's nation states that must deliver, and above all Germany. The

good news is that despite the at times considerable differences in tone, neither the French call for greater European sovereignty nor the *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by Chancellor Scholz are in conflict with the American call for greater burden-sharing. On the contrary, Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine seems to have paved the way for a new reality in transatlantic defence where the NATO Secretary General is not a lone voice in the wilderness with his two per cent mantra. Germany and the EU still have time to set the course for a situation that could even dissuade a Republican President Trump in 2025 from abandoning NATO. But it's five minutes to twelve.

- translated from German -

Christina Bellmann is Policy Advisor for Transatlantic Relations at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Analysis and Consulting Department.

Alexander Schuster is Policy Advisor for European Security at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Analysis and Consulting Department.

- 1 Basu, Zachary 2022: Where 100,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Europe, *Axios*, 22 Mar 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/i5n9> [11 Jan 2024].
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 eFP – Enhanced Forward Presence, agreed in 2016 to secure NATO’s eastern flank.
- 4 Radin, Andrew / Gentile, Gian 2023: Why the United States Still Needs Ground Forces in Europe, *Rand Corporation*, 24 Jul 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/7fnc> [11 Jan 2024].
- 5 Suebsaeng, Asawin / Rawnsley, Adam 2023: Trump Plots to Pull Out of NATO — If He Doesn’t Get His Way, *Rolling Stone*, 23 Oct 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/k606> [11 Jan 2024].
- 6 Maitra, Sumantra 2023: Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO, *Center for Renewing America*, 16 Feb 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/y9vy> [11 Jan 2024].
- 7 Radin / Gentile 2023, n. 4.
- 8 Tirpak, John A. 2023: US Must Modernize Nuclear Posture for Tri-Polar World, *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 16 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/3yca> [13 Mar 2024].
- 9 Ashford, Emma / Shiffrinson, Joshua / Wertheim, Stephen 2023: Europe Must Step Up, *Cato Institute*, 22 May 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/pnmp> [11 Jan 2024].
- 10 Arnold, Torben 2023: Die Entscheidung zum Kauf von F-35-Kampffjets für die Luftwaffe, *SWP-Aktuell 2023/A 23, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, 27 Mar 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/l93z> [11 Jan 2024].
- 11 Vogel, Dominic 2020: Future Combat Air System: Too Big to Fail, *SWP Comment 2021/C 02, SWP*, 8 Jan 2021, in: <https://ogy.de/f3re> [12 Jan 2024].
- 12 *Zeit Online* 2023: Stoltenberg fordert von Deutschland mehr Geld für Verteidigung, 18 May 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/h2tc> [14 Jan 2024].
- 13 Bardt, Hubertus / Christofzik, Désirée I. / Meyer, Dirk et al. 2023: Haushaltspolitik im Zeichen der “Zeitenwende” – auf was müssen wir zugunsten der Verteidigung verzichten?, *ifo Schnelldienst 76: 7, 12 Jul 2023*, pp. 4 f., in: <https://ogy.de/g2ni> [14 Jan 2024].
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 15 Brogsitter, Roana 2023: SPD fordert Aussetzen der Schuldenbremse – FDP weist das zurück, *BR24*, 30 Oct 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/y89b> [14 Jan 2024].
- 16 Christofzik, Désirée I. 2023: Die Zeitenwende im Bundeshaushalt steht noch aus, *ifo Schnelldienst 76: 7, 12 Jul 2023*, pp. 7 f., in: <https://ogy.de/zcez> [14 Jan 2024].
- 17 Wadephul, Johann 2023: Die stärksten konventionellen NATO-Streitkräfte in Europa, in: Lammert, Norbert / Koch, Wolfgang (eds.): *Bundeswehr der Zukunft*, pp.178–189, here: p.178 ff., <https://ogy.de/8h6r> [14 Jan 2024].