

BRIEF

BALTIC PERSPECTIVES ON
GERMANY'S ROLE IN NATO

GERMANY AND BALTIC SECURITY
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The Baltic states want Germany's contribution to NATO's deterrence and defence posture to match its economic strength. They believe that Germany's ability to provide rapid reinforcements for its easternmost allies is key to bolstering NATO's eastern flank. Although there has been progress since 2014, the modernisation of the Bundeswehr continues to be hindered by societal and political constraints, a situation unlikely to improve during the next electoral term. With CDU/CSU no longer in office, political forces opposing larger military spending and nuclear weapons have grown stronger, further complicating defence modernisation efforts. The Baltic states are anxious to see how the new German Government, led by the social democrat Olaf Scholz, will navigate between internal pressures and commitments to NATO.

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BALTIC PERSPECTIVES

Credible NATO deterrence in the Baltic Sea region requires that the Alliance will rapidly reinforce the Baltic states and Poland when needed. Germany has a crucial role to play, both as a provider of forces and as a staging area for operations: NATO military units (including significant elements of the Bundeswehr) will deploy to the Baltic region from and through Germany.¹

For NATO's reinforcement to succeed, it must be able to quickly deploy an initial-entry force into an anti-access/area denial environment, followed by larger combat-ready formations at short notice. The Baltic states expect that the Bundeswehr, together with the US military units deployed in Germany, will be among the lead elements in this vital task. The rapid modernisation of the Bundeswehr is thus crucial

to NATO's deterrence posture on its eastern flank. To achieve this, the Baltic states believe that Germany should continue to increase defence spending. After all, German soldiers serving in NATO's multinational battlegroup in Lithuania are among those that would count on Bundeswehr reinforcements.

The Baltic states also count on Germany to ensure smooth passage through its territory of heavily equipped NATO troops, including from overseas. Upgrading infrastructure, reserving adequate transport capacity, simplifying bureaucratic procedures at state borders, and conducting deployment exercises are among the keys to success.

Further, the Baltic states want Germany to continue, beyond 2025, its operational participation in NATO's nuclear sharing programme, a crucial element of its deterrence and defence posture. German withdrawal from nuclear sharing could have profound adverse effects on NATO's nuclear deterrence, hurting the Baltic states and other Allies.²

Finally, although not directly a NATO issue, the Baltic states believe that any EU role in security and defence should complement the Alliance and not complicate relations with the US—the fundamental security provider for Europe. The Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian defence establishments share the view of many NATO officials that Europe needs more military capabilities, not duplicative structures, and hope that Berlin will recognise these concerns and use its influence in the EU to safeguard the transatlantic link.

THE HOUSE THAT MERKEL BUILT

When Angela Merkel assumed office in 2005, she inherited armed forces that had weakened since reunification.³ Her early policies, including suspending conscription and introducing 'dynamic availability management' contributed to further decline.⁴ It was not until Russia's land grab in Ukraine that the Chancellery sought to increase military spending and to rearm the Bundeswehr, steer its capability profile towards collective defence and enable a more significant contribution to NATO's deterrence and defence efforts.⁵ By the end of 2021, Germany had made impressive progress in its commitments to NATO, but the modernisation of its armed forces has fallen behind.

In 2015, Germany became the first country to lead NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), the spearhead component of the NATO Response Force.⁶ The Bundeswehr repeated this vital task in 2019 and will continue to do so every five years. In 2017, Germany began a significant contribution to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), taking leadership of a multinational battlegroup stationed in Lithuania and providing the largest military force there (around 500 soldiers with heavy equipment). A frequent participant in NATO's Baltic air policing mission, Germany also integrated a deployable air defence command post in the Baltic states as part of its contribution in 2020.⁷ In addition, Berlin has established a maritime staff in Rostock, which will serve as NATO's Baltic Maritime Component Command, and a Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm to enable and sustain reinforcement in peacetime, crisis and conflict.⁸ The Baltic states welcome these efforts as they strengthen NATO's focus on the security issues on the eastern flank.

But perhaps Germany's most important and ambitious commitment to NATO is its initiative to build large military formations around German national units within the Framework Nations Concept (FNC). This includes three divisions built around the German rapid deployment division 'Schnelle Kräfte' and the 1st and the 10th Panzer divisions, able to quickly respond to escalations on NATO's eastern frontier by reinforcing the eFP

battlegroups following the deployment of the VJTF.⁹ The goal is to have one fully manned and equipped brigade for the VJTF by 2023, a second full division by 2027, and all three units ready by 2031. Meanwhile, the concept makes an important contribution to enhancing interoperability among Allies. For example, Lithuania has affiliated its mechanised infantry brigade 'Iron Wolf' to a German Army division "to achieve readiness to act in the composition of a superior military unit ... through training and exercises."¹⁰

Perhaps Germany's most important and ambitious commitment to NATO is the Framework Nations Concept

Germany frames this approach in terms of assuming more responsibility for the European pillar of NATO. The FNC indicates a degree of ambition for regional leadership, but the credibility of German leadership will depend on its ability to reach its own military modernisation targets. Unfortunately, despite the political commitments, the Bundeswehr's modernisation effort is, at the end of Merkel's Chancellorship, behind schedule. Germany will likely fail to prepare a fully equipped brigade to lead the VJTF in 2023, and missing equipment will have to be borrowed from other units. German security experts also believe it is unrealistic to expect three modern divisions by the end of 2031, given the shortages in military personnel and inflexible German public procurement system. The modernisation effort is further hindered by low defence spending. In 2019, Berlin announced that it would miss the 2024 deadline of NATO's Defence Investment Pledge and would aim to reach the 2 % spending target in 2031.¹¹

Even so, German defence spending has increased from €34.7 billion (1.19 % of GDP) in 2014 to an estimated €53.1 billion in 2021 (1.53 % of GDP), overtaking French defence spending in 2019.¹² But these increases have not yet been translated into substantial improvements in the Bundeswehr. Between 2014 and 2020, the active military personnel only increased by roughly 2 000 soldiers while the available reserve fell from 45 000 to 30 050. Some equipment was added, modernised, or replaced with better variants, but the overall quantity of main battle tanks, heavy artillery pieces, armoured personnel carriers, combat aircraft and principal

surface combatants available to the Bundeswehr has decreased.¹³ Significant portions of the Bundeswehr's equipment either remain outdated or not functional.¹⁴

The Bundeswehr might soon struggle to meet older commitments to NATO, including participation in the nuclear sharing programme. The first US nuclear weapons were deployed to Germany in 1955, and Germany currently contributes to NATO's nuclear sharing by hosting US B61 gravity bombs and providing nuclear-capable aircraft.¹⁵ For this arrangement to continue, Germany will need to replace its ageing Tornado jets with a new nuclear-capable platform by 2025.¹⁶ The efforts of former Defence Minister Karrenbauer to finalise the procurement of new aircraft before the September 2021 Bundestag elections ultimately failed due to a combination of external and internal pressures.¹⁷ Her so-called 'bridge solution' to balance political-industrial interests and Germany's commitments to nuclear sharing was opposed by the SPD, leaving her to announce that the final decision would have to be made by the next German government.¹⁸

ALL EYES ON SCHOLZ

Merkel's governments increased Germany's commitment to NATO and started (slowly) strengthening the Bundeswehr. If it is serious about meeting Germany's obligations to European security, the new government will have to take bold and, in many instances, unpopular decisions.

For generations, Germans have been taught of the horrors of the Second World War, but not of the role of the military and nuclear weapons in preventing another war in Europe. Germans believe that conflicts are best solved through multilateral diplomatic efforts and dialogue. But increased defence funding, better ways of attracting new personnel to the military and fundamental procurement reforms are urgently needed in Germany.

Scholz's backing of the procurement of nuclear-capable aircraft would put him into direct conflict with elements of his own party and the Greens

The recent coalition agreement between the SPD, FDP and Greens, however, raises questions about the new government's ability to deliver

on these needs. For example, the agreement promises to provide new dual-capable aircraft for nuclear sharing, even if the language is somewhat ambiguous.¹⁹ However, the coalition partners also explain that their goal is a world free of nuclear weapons and that Germany intends to become an observer state to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.²⁰ The problem here is that Scholz's backing of the procurement of nuclear-capable aircraft would put him into direct conflict with the ideological elements of his own party and the Greens. German public opinion further complicates his position—at least 70% of Germans oppose nuclear weapons. At the same time, if Scholz delays the decision for too long, Germany's Allies will interpret his indecisiveness as silent withdrawal. And if he does withdraw, he will most probably complicate Germany's relations with the US, which would also have unfavourable consequences for the Baltic states.

Meanwhile, the coalition partners have announced that they intend to spend 3% of GDP on defence, development and diplomacy, but do not specify how this figure will be divided.²¹ A recently published plan by the Ministry of Finance suggests that defence expenditure will be reduced to €45.7 billion by 2025, but the MoD estimates that it needs €62 billion by 2025 to meet Germany's defence commitments.²²

The aim to have three modern and fully equipped divisions will likely be a first casualty of the reduced spending, with negative consequences for NATO's deterrence and defence on its eastern flank. German security experts believe that the best Germany can achieve by 2031 is one fully modernised division.

More broadly, while the coalition agreement affirms that NATO is the cornerstone of Germany's security and stresses the importance of the transatlantic partnership, it also declares support for increased European sovereignty, backed up by concrete proposals including reforms in the EU's decision-making and institutions, facilitation of military integration, and creation of joint command structures. Even though it calls for interoperability and complementarity between the command structures and capabilities of the

two institutions, the major problem in Europe is not complementarity between command structures, but lack of capabilities to put under them. This signals a withdrawal from Karrenbauer's vocal opposition to European strategic autonomy – which, on several occasions, she suggested was illusory, and a distraction from concrete tasks such as increasing investment in defence.²³

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

It seems that under its new government, Germany will continue to support NATO's deterrence

and defence efforts on the eastern flank, but its military contribution will be smaller than promised. At the same time, many uncertainties remain. What can the Bundeswehr achieve with less money? What military acquisitions should be prioritised? Will the next Government show the political will to quickly procure new nuclear-capable aircraft? If Germany remains indecisive, how will it affect NATO's nuclear sharing? What does the increased focus on strategic autonomy (or sovereignty) mean for NATO? At this stage, there are more questions than answers.

ENDNOTES

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