FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2026 • VOLUME 105 • NUMBER 2

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"I give you my solemn warning that under the present trend, the next world war is inevitable," declared the French military leader Ferdinand Foch. It was 1921, and Foch, the commander in chief of the Allied armies during World War I, was raising alarms in a speech from New York City. His concern was simple. After defeating Germany, the Allied powers had forced it to disarm with the Treaty of Versailles. But just a couple of years later, they had stopped enforcing the terms of their victory. Berlin, Foch warned, thus could and would rebuild its military. "If the Allies continue their present indifference . . . Germany will surely rise in arms again."

Foch's comments proved prescient. By the late 1930s, Germany had indeed rebuilt its military. It seized Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and then Poland, sparking World War II. When it was again defeated, the Allies were more attentive in their management of the country.

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*Illustration by Nathan St. John*

They occupied and divided it, disbanded its armed forces, and largely abolished its defense industry. When the United States and the Soviet Union allowed West Germany and East Germany, respectively, to reestablish their militaries, it was only under strict oversight. When they allowed the halves to merge, Germany had to limit the size of its armed forces. Even so, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher opposed reunification, fearing it would produce a dangerously powerful country. A bigger Germany, she warned in 1989, "would undermine the stability of the whole international situation and could endanger our security."

Should Germany stay the course, it will be a great military power before 2030.

Today, Foch's and Thatcher's fears seem to belong to ancient history. As Europe has navigated one crisis after another in recent decades—most important, Russia's aggression against Ukraine—the continent's officials have worried not that Berlin might become too strong but that it is far too weak. "I fear German power less than German inaction," declared Radoslaw Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister, in 2011, during Europe's financial crisis. It was a remarkable statement coming from a Polish official, given that Warsaw has traditionally been one of the governments most worried about German power. He is hardly alone: Germany's military must "spend more and produce more," declared NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in 2024.

Now, these leaders are getting what they wanted. After many delays, Germany's *Zeitenwende*—its 2022 promise to become one of Europe's defense leaders—is finally becoming a reality. In 2025, Germany spent more on defense than any other European country in absolute terms. Its military budget today ranks fourth in the world, just after Russia's. Annual military spending is expected to reach $189 billion in 2029, more than triple what it was in 2022. Germany is even considering a return to mandatory conscription if its military, the Bundeswehr, cannot attract enough voluntary recruits. Should the country stay the course, it will again be a great military power before 2030.

People in Europe have largely been happy to see Berlin rebuild its military to defend against Russia. But they should be careful what they wish for. Today's Germany has pledged to use its outsize armed power to help all of Europe. But left unchecked, German military dominance might eventually foster divisions within the continent. France remains

uneasy about the fact that its neighbor is becoming a major military power—as are many people in Poland, despite Sikorski's sentiments. As Berlin ascends, suspicion and mistrust could grow. In the worst-case scenario, competition might return. France, Poland, and other states could attempt to counterbalance Germany, which would divert attention away from Russia and leave Europe divided and vulnerable. France, in particular, may seek to reassert itself as the continent's leading military power and "*grande nation*." This could prompt outright rivalry with Berlin and place Europe at odds with itself.

Such nightmarish outcomes are especially likely if Germany ends up being governed by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is rising in the polls. The intensely nationalistic party has long been critical of the European Union and NATO, and some of its members have made revanchist claims about the territory of neighboring countries. An AfD-controlled Germany might use its power to bully or coerce other countries, leading to tensions and conflict.

Berlin does need to build up its military. The continent is in danger, and no other European government has the fiscal capacity that Germany can bring to bear. But Berlin must recognize the risks that accompany its strengths and restrain German power by embedding its defensive might in more deeply integrated European military structures. Germany's European neighbors, for their part, should make clear what kind of defense integration they would like to see. Otherwise, German rearmament could very well yield a Europe that is more divided, mistrustful, and weaker—exactly the opposite of what Berlin now hopes to achieve.

## TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

For many, it is hard to understand why Germany's rearmament could lead to competition and instability in Europe. All Europeans are familiar, of course, with the country's militaristic history. But in the decades after World War II, Germany integrated both its economy and its defense apparatus deeply into Europe. West Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, firmly rejected the idea of turning his country into an independent military power and advocated integrating the West German armed forces either into a European army or into NATO. After the end of the Cold War, Germany adopted an approach of military restraint and identified itself as a "civilian power"—one that was trustworthy and nonthreatening, even as reunification made it far stronger. As Helmut Kohl, the first leader of reunified Germany, declared in 1989, "Only peace

may come from German soil." The economic and political integration later brought about by the EU created a pan-European identity and fostered a perception that European countries, Germany among them, had shared strategic interests and could thus never return to competition.

And yet, as some realist scholars have argued, rivalry among Europe's countries never really disappeared, and certainly not through the EU alone. It was merely subdued, and largely by NATO and American hegemony. The EU was, and is, primarily an economic organization. Security and defense in Europe were mostly in the hands of NATO and the U.S. military. It was an overbearing U.S. presence, in other words, that ameliorated the European security dilemma that Germany's size and position have traditionally posed—not just the political and economic integration fostered by the EU.

Now that the United States seems to be reducing the attention and resources it has historically committed to Europe, that competition could return. It might start in small and harmless ways. Other European countries are already uneasy about Germany's military buildup and defense spending. Berlin, for example, is planning to spend the lion's share of its defense budget on German defense companies, exploiting an exception to EU competition rules that allows member countries to skip notification and clearance procedures for the public funding of national defense industries when such spending is a matter of essential security interests. This will undermine collaboration and make it difficult for true European defense industrial champions to emerge. It does not help that Germany wants procurement to remain firmly in the hands of national governments and rejects a greater coordinating role for the European Commission. What the continent's defense industry needs is Europeanization and a single market for weaponry, but Berlin's policies are not pushing the sector in this direction.

France, Italy, Sweden, and others have taken advantage of the same EU loophole to build up their defense sectors, and they have military industries big enough to moderate German dominance. But no European country can match Berlin's spending. Germany recently loosened its debt brake to allow for almost unlimited defense expenditures, an option that most European countries—which have larger deficits—don't have. The best solution to this conundrum would be for the European Commission to engage in large-scale joint borrowing for defense. A precedent for doing this already exists: the eurobonds the commission issued during the COVID-19 crisis. Berlin, however, has refused

to allow such a sweeping defense initiative. Instead, it has endorsed only conditional borrowing programs such as EU SAFE, which offers up to $175 billion in cheap loans for collaborative defense projects. These programs (and future ones like them) simply cannot meet the consistent financial demand for capital-intensive defense-industrial endeavors. They are also small compared with Germany's plan to spend more than $750 billion on defense over the next four years.

German policymakers say they do not want to foot the bill for exuberant domestic spending by what they see as fiscally less responsible governments in the EU, especially not when their country's growth is stagnating. But this argument is self-righteous: Berlin's past balanced budgets and economic growth were powered for many years by exports to China and cheap Russian energy, without concern for the political risks of financing Beijing's assertiveness and Moscow's aggression. Germany's position is also shortsighted. It is in Berlin's interest to let other parts of Europe spend liberally on defense without having to cut social welfare. Such cuts, after all, lead to populist backlash, which will undercut unity on Ukraine and defensive efforts against Russia—the very reason more spending is required.

Berlin argues that it is pursuing partnerships with other European governments to ensure that Germany's defense spending benefits the entire neighborhood. In its view, even if domestic firms gain the most from German spending, the cake is big enough for everyone to get a piece. Berlin also sees the stationing of German troops in the Baltic States—and possibly more countries in the future—as enough of a reassurance that it has Europe's best interests in mind and is not just focused on its own rearmament. But offering the continent's other states a piece of the cake is unlikely to stifle their uneasiness about German dominance, particularly against the backdrop of the United States' retreat and uncertainty about NATO. For all the enthusiasm Europeans feel for Germany's defense buildup right now, many are beginning to ask questions about how Berlin plans to embed its military and industrial dominance in Europe. They want to see Germany pulling its weight, not throwing it around.

## MIGHT MAKES FRIGHT

German policymakers are brushing aside such concerns. They argue that Germany's neighbors cannot have both a weak Berlin and a strong one that can defend Europe. Their attitude to European unease seems

to be that because the continent asked for the buildup, it does not get to complain about it.

But this argument will not assuage concerns about German dominance. Paris does not like the idea of Germany being Europe's military powerhouse because it believes that's France's role. It will closely watch for any signs that Germany might aspire to get nuclear weapons—the only remaining domain of French superiority. Some Polish officials fear that a militarily powerful Germany might one day feel free to restore amicable relations with Russia. Poles, and not only those who support the populist Law and Justice party, have also voiced concerns that a dominant Germany will marginalize the role of smaller EU states and could use its power to coerce them.

Analysts who want to understand why Europeans fear German hegemony do not need to look back a century; a decade would suffice. During Europe's 2010s fiscal crisis, several EU countries were drowning in debt and in need of bailouts from the EU. That meant, in practice, getting approval for bailouts from Germany, the biggest and wealthiest eurozone economy. But rather than showing solidarity and using its enormous wealth to generously help these states, Berlin was concerned about fiscal responsibility and imposed harsh austerity measures as part of bailout packages, resulting in double-digit unemployment and protracted misery for debtor countries. The German government was particularly tough on Greece, forcing deep cuts to its social welfare programs and other government services. The country's unemployment rate reached nearly 30 percent in 2013, and by the middle of the decade, its GDP contracted by a quarter. Greeks, in turn, grew to detest Berlin. One famous Greek poster depicted Germany's then chancellor, Angela Merkel, dressed in a Nazi uniform.

If Germany does not take steps to mitigate mistrust and discomfort, competition really could return to Europe. To counterbalance Berlin's military might, Poland, for example, might look to ally itself more closely with the Baltic and Nordic countries and the United Kingdom in the Joint Expeditionary Force. It might also look to join the Nordic-Baltic Eight, a regional cooperation framework among Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. Either way, the result could be the fragmentation of common European defense efforts. Paris, for its part, might be tempted to reassert itself by significantly increasing its defense spending as a way of catching up with, and containing, Germany, despite France's domestic

fiscal troubles. Paris might also seek closer cooperation with London to counterbalance Berlin.

If Europe is divided and destabilized by internal competition, both the EU and NATO might be paralyzed. Russia could sense an opening to test NATO's Article 5 commitment to collective defense, in addition to plowing ahead in Ukraine. China could exploit the continent economically, threatening its industrial strength. Europe would struggle to defend itself, particularly in Washington's absence. And if the United States becomes a hostile power, as its talk of annexing Greenland suggests, it will have an easier time manipulating the continent. A divided Europe, in other words, would become a pawn in the game of the great powers.

## THE RETURN OF REVANCHISM

A militarily dominant Germany could prove particularly dangerous if its centrist domestic leadership starts to lose power—as it just well might. The country is not due to hold national elections for three more years, but the extremist AfD now polls in first place at the national level. It subscribes to a far-right, illiberal, and Euroskeptic ideology. It is Russia-friendly, opposed to supporting Ukraine, and wants to reverse Germany's post-1945 economic and military integration into the EU and NATO, at least in their current form. It sees military power as a tool of national aggrandizement that should be used exclusively to benefit Berlin. It hopes to develop a German defense industry that's entirely autonomous from those of Berlin's traditional allies. If it wins federal power, the AfD will use the German military exactly as Thatcher feared: to project power against Germany's neighbors. In the same way that Washington has made once inconceivable claims on Canada and Greenland, an AfD-led Germany might eventually make claims on French or Polish territory.

Germany's centrist parties are aware of how frightening the AfD is to neighboring countries. They have, accordingly, worked to quarantine it, with the center-right and center-left forming grand coalitions to keep it away from federal authority. But blocking the AfD is becoming harder each year. The party received the second largest number of votes in Germany's 2025 elections. It will likely be emboldened by the 2026 state elections: polls show the party within reach of a majority in Mecklenburg–West Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt. If it wins a plurality of seats in Germany's next national election, the firewall might collapse.

The return of revisionism and revanchism under the AfD would take place gradually, then suddenly. As a first step, Germany's center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union, which for now remains firmly opposed to the AfD, might allow the far-right party to indirectly prop it up as the leader of a conservative minority government. The AfD would then use its newfound prominence to mainstream its ideology. It would also try to take the government hostage, threatening to bring it down if it doesn't pass far-right policies. AfD representatives would push for an end to support for Ukraine, but they could also stoke tensions with Germany's neighbors by making irredentist claims about lands once controlled by Berlin, such as some of the former eastern territories of the German Reich that have been part of Poland (and Russia) since 1945. A conservative minority government would insist that it would collaborate with the AfD only on specific issues and that Germany's main principles in foreign and defense policy would remain unchanged. But the AfD's newfound power would almost certainly cause a huge loss of trust and greater tensions with other European countries.

Germany could emerge as a nationalist, militaristic hegemon in Europe.

In an even more dangerous scenario, the AfD might become an official partner in a coalition government—or even the coalition's leader. It would then push to formally disentangle Germany from Western structures or to weaken them from within. It would, for instance, try to reshape the EU into an illiberal "Europe of Nations" without the euro as a common currency, reversing Germany's integration into the continent. Doing so would weaken the economic ties that have promoted peace for 80 years in Europe, reintroduce countless economic problems, and prompt all kinds of intra-European political fights. The AfD would also likely withdraw from the remaining NATO efforts against Russia, opt for appeasing the Kremlin, and push to withdraw the German brigade from Lithuania. It might also try to have Berlin leave NATO altogether, although if NATO is led by an illiberal United States, it could want to stay. It might blow up cooperation and reconciliation with France and the United Kingdom, including by suspending the newly concluded Treaty of Aachen and the Kensington Treaty, which elevated French-German and British-German security cooperation to new levels. Germany would emerge as a go-it-alone, nationalist, militaristic hegemon in Europe.

In response, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom would almost certainly establish counterbalancing coalitions designed to contain Germany, even if they were also governed by right-wing parties. Other European states might do the same. An AfD-led Germany, meanwhile, would seek out its own alliances—for example, with a Germany-friendly Austria or Hungary. The continent's ability to defend itself against external threats would effectively dissipate. Europeans would be at each other's throats again, exactly what the United States has long sought to prevent.

## GOLDEN HANDCUFFS

There is a way for Berlin to expand its military power without sending Europe back to an era of competition and rivalry—perhaps even if Germany is eventually governed by the AfD. The solution is for the country to accept what the historian Timothy Garton Ash, writing in these pages three decades ago, called "golden handcuffs": restrictions on its sovereignty through greater integration with its European neighbors.

Past German leaders have made this tradeoff. Adenauer integrated West Germany's new Bundeswehr into NATO. To reunify with East Germany, Kohl traded the deutsche mark for the euro, surrendering Berlin's monetary sovereignty. Today's leaders should follow those examples. They can start by accepting large-scale joint European debt for defense and thus allow countries with less fiscal wiggle room than Germany to spend generously on defense without further indebting themselves and risking—as might happen with France—further credit downgrades. Compared with most European countries, the EU's aggregate borrowing costs are low, and as the largest economy in the eurozone, Germany can afford to serve as the guarantor of last resort. Doing so would embed German military and industrial power more thoroughly in Europe by making Berlin take on financial responsibility for the continent's armament. (It might also foster more joint decision-making, since EU states could work together on selecting the defense projects and priorities financed by these eurobonds.)

Germany should also push for the stronger integration of Europe's national defense industries, including by seeking more collaboration on its own projects rather than spending largely on domestic firms. Likewise, Germany should embrace true European defense companies akin to Airbus, which was created as a European aviation consortium to provide an alternative to American manufacturers. All these measures would not only avert fears of a dominant Germany by ensuring that

Berlin's defense base relied on others. It would also provide greater scale and effectiveness in Europe's overall military buildup.

Finally, and most ambitiously, Germany and its European allies should think about deeper military integration. Because the United States has been pulling back, Europe will need to find military formats and structures outside NATO with which to defend itself. And although a European army remains unlikely for the foreseeable future, the continent's countries will have to create larger multinational military formations to deter Russia. (There are already small examples of such attempts, including a French-German brigade and some EU battlegroups, although they have yet to be deployed.) In addition, the continent should establish European command structures that tightly integrate the Bundeswehr with other armed forces and offer an alternative to NATO structures at times of transatlantic tensions. Deeper European military integration would constrain German power by subjecting Germany to collective decision-making. It would even hedge against an AfD-led government by making it virtually impossible to extricate the Bundeswehr from joint initiatives without taking drastic and unpopular measures, such as leaving the EU or other cooperative European institutions. The "coalition of the willing" that various European officials have proposed deploying to Ukraine after a peace settlement could serve as a trial run.

The risk of fracturing the continent ought to give Washington pause about pulling back—and especially about supporting the AfD. If Europe returns to great-power competition, Washington might ultimately have to commit more resources to the continent than it has over the last several decades in order to prevent Europe from descending into conflict. This is precisely the outcome that the White House wants to avoid.

But an unstable and fragmented Europe is by no means guaranteed, even in an era of reduced American involvement. European countries have learned to integrate and cooperate over the last eight decades in ways that past observers would have dismissed as fantasies. In fact, thanks to Russia's invasion, continental concord is higher now than at any point in history. Europe has plenty of ways to avoid a security dilemma centered on a dominant Germany. The brutal pressure from Washington could even further unite the continent and forge a stronger European identity. Such a positive outcome will require restraint, far-sightedness, and luck. But the continent's leaders must work hard to achieve it. The stakes are too high—and the alternative unspeakable.