German Foreign Policy is Becoming More Autonomous

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TEXT

The 2025 German snap elections produced an absolute and a relative victor among parties from Germany's political right and far-right. The CDU claimed a plurality of seats in the Bundestag, putting its leader Friedrich Merz in a strong position to form the next German government, while the far-right AfD polled in second place, receiving its highest share of the vote

since the party's founding. The two parties represent competing visions for Germany's role in international relations and European security.

The CDU appears to increasingly favour a European and plurilateral approach to security, echoing calls from France for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its security. American political interference in the lead-up to the snap elections has served as a catalyst in this shift. The CDU has historically embraced transatlanticism and collaboration with the US inside NATO. In recent days, Merz has argued for Germany to achieve "real independence" from Washington. An increasing divergence in "likemindedness" between American and German political values may be at the root of the German foreign policy establishment reassessing its security relationship with the US.

Germany's close economic, security, and cultural ties with the United States challenge the feasibility of "real independence". In particular, Germany's ability to finance greater defence spending at home and across the European continent faces significant constraints. The nascent vision of a German leader in European security also faces a critical domestic political challenge. CDU voters may defect to the staunchly nationalist and eurosceptic platform of the AfD. Similar concerns have previously led the SPD, a likely coalition partner for the CDU, to weaken its support for Ukraine.

The AfD has emerged as the second winner of the Bundestagswahl. It has seen a dramatic increase in its share of the vote in the last 10 years, progressing from 10.2% in the 2021 federal election to capturing 20.8% of the vote in February. This growth shows increasing support for the right-wing populist trajectory the AfD has pursued since its establishment in 2013. Despite notable remaining differences, the shift in the CDU's foreign policy appears to suggest the formation of a new consensus for the German political right regarding Germany's role in international relations. The AfD and CDU commonly express growing discontent with Germany's alliance system.

While the CDU might have begun changing its transatlanticist foreign policy in response to recent political behaviour by the United States, its actions nevertheless signal that a more autonomous German foreign policy is no longer a fringe political thought. It is quickly becoming axiomatic for the right-wing section of the German political establishment. While the CDU's push for "real independence" from Washington is quite recent, the AfD's party manifesto has been stating the following since 2016:

Germany is becoming increasingly dependent on the protection and support of allies, particularly the United States of America, and cannot represent its own interests adequately. [..] The AfD is committed to the withdrawal of all Allied troops stationed on German soil, and in particular of their nuclear weapons.

Centrist and far-right visions on German foreign policy are converging in their dissatisfaction with Germany's alliance system. At the same time,

they continue to differ fundamentally in content. The CDU advocates for a European and plurilateral vision, while the AfD promotes isolationism and an inward-looking Germany. The results of the 2025 Bundestagswahl suggest that the idea of a more autonomous German foreign policy increasingly resonates with German voters.

Sources

For visualization (election poll results): https://www.reuters.com/graphics/GERMANY-ELECTION/RESULTS/movaynkgova/

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