Germany's New Military Strategy

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In April 2026, the German Defence Ministry published its Overall Concept of Military Defence. The set of two documents – a Military Strategy as well as a Capability Profile for the Armed Forces – expresses the country's strategic reorientation towards Alliance defence and its plans for fulfilling this purpose with military means. In Defence Minister Pistorius' words: 'The Military Strategy outlines our course of action, while the Capability Profile describes the instruments at our disposal.'

The country's first-ever official military strategy assesses Germany's threat environment, the state of current warfare, Germany's goals and a set of strategic priorities to fulfill them. It places NATO defence, readiness, and

deterrence against Russia at the center, while redefining the Bundeswehr as a force built for conventional defence rather than international crisis management – marking a conceptual shift away from its post-Cold War peace paradigm. In all of this, Berlin wants to assume a leadership role for European security by creating the 'strongest conventional army in Europe', codifying an ambition first announced by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz a year before (Politico Europe, 2025). The document makes clear that, in addition to adding credibility to Germany and NATO's deterrence posture towards Russia, this buildup is also to take some of the weight for European defence off the shoulders of the US, candidly acknowledging the latter's disengagement from the European theatre and pivot to the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere as an irreversible fact. To this end, the Capability Profile declares the need for the Bundeswehr to move away from its identity of a 'peacetime army,' stock up on weapons, expand reserves, and increase its personnel from the current 256,000 active and passive-duty personnel in 2026 to at least 460,000 soldiers overall by 2035. Strategically, the Armed Forces are to represent a 'single set of forces" with a 'one-theatre approach,' meaning that soldiers can be deployed in different regions and for different purposes as one uniform force, rather than a set of heterogeneous specialised formations.

Russia is the central reference point throughout both documents, with the strategy's chapter on Germany's threat environment illustrated by a picture of a military parade in Moscow's Red Square. The text describes the Kremlin as the greatest immediate threat to peace and security in Germany and Europe, and it explicitly says the Bundeswehr's core mission is to deter and, in case this fails, defend against a potential Russian attack on NATO territory. That is why the strategy emphasises deterrence first, alliance defence second, and only then other tasks such as crisis management or stabilisation abroad.

The other major message is about Germany's new role within NATO. Berlin says it wants to be a stronger military ally to the United States, help keep NATO effective by making it 'more European,' and act as a centre for cohesion between Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. The permanent deployment of a German brigade in Lithuania is presented as a concrete symbol of this shift, with Berlin expressing the need for permanent presence and operability outside Germany.

What is noteworthy is the repeated assertion in both documents that the Bundeswehr must develop precision deep strike capabilities. Germany, whose deep strike capabilities so far are very reliant on the supply of US tomahawk cruise missiles, has in fact been pursuing greater autonomy in this area for the last few years, as evidenced inter alia by its involvement in the ELSA program to develop long-rance missiles with five other European countries (Eureporter, 2025), or its more recent bid to develop 2,000 km-range missiles together with the UK (UK Government, 2026) (Moscow is about 1,600 km by air from Berlin). These efforts have arguably received

extra urgency through the cancellation of a planned stationing (Reuters, 2026) of a US long-range fire brigade equipped with Tomahawk missiles (Loss, 2026), which was planned for operationalisation in Germany in late 2026.

Disappointment, Praise and Reservations

The reactions to the Overall Concept inside Germany itself were relatively muted, with commentary largely restricted to politicians and security experts. Defence expert Dr Christian Mölling asserts that the documents represent an "evolution, not revolution" of German defence posture (Mölling, 2026), whereas others criticise the lack of a strategy to achieve the desired increase in troop numbers (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2026) or its tame approach to the US disengagement from Europe (Franke, 2026).

In the US itself, meanwhile, the military strategy has been welcomed by key Pentagon officials, with US Undersecretary of Defence Elbridge Colby praising the Strategy as "a clear, credible way forward to NATO 3.0" (Colby, 2026), referring to the idea of an Alliance with more equal burden-sharing, as laid out in the latest US National Defense Strategy, of which Colby was the main architect (Politico Europe, 2026). Colby's praise of the German strategy for leading the country towards "becoming an even stronger military ally to the United States", combined with his vision of an Alliance based on "partnership, not dependency" (Politico Europe, 2026), hails back to the US-German "partnership in leadership" first proposed by George H. W. Bush in 1989, which envisioned Germany as the primary security provider in continental Europe (Bush, 1989). The concept subsequently lost relevance as Germany pursued its 'Civilian Power' identity embedded in the European Union. The recently announced intention to withdraw 5,000 US troops from Germany (Politico, 2026) can be read as either sabotaging that partnership or reinforcing it (by pushing Germany into more self-reliance), depending on one's perspective.

Reactions in Germany's neighbour, Poland, a frontline NATO state with its own military ambitions, fell somewhere between the German domestic criticism and American praise. On the one hand, defence experts expressed scepticism regarding the planned increase in troop numbers and equipment modernisation, pointing to the fact that the Bundeswehr's 45th Panzer Brigade in Lithuania is still operating at less than 50% of planned troop capacity (defence24.pl, 2026). On the other hand, both the documents' clear threat assessment concerning Russia and the ambitions for contributing to European security expressed therein were met with genuine, if moderate, approval. What worries the Polish security and defence establishment is the enthusiastic reaction of the Pentagon and the push for Germany to be their main ally in Europe. To many, this endangers Poland's own ambition to be the United States' primary ally in continental Europe, or, in the words of George W. Bush, for Poland to be the "best friend of the United

States" (Lang, 2003) in Europe. As Marcin Terlikowski of the Polish Institute of International Affairs remarked in response to Colbridge's praise, "We face a tremendous amount of work in Washington. [...] our position as the 'role model Ally' will cease to be unique, as Germany will take it over. We need ideas for a new Polish-American opening" (Terlikowski, 2026). Justyna Gotkowska of the Centre for Eastern Studies OSW qualified that Germany is (only) the logistical hub in the rear of the front, whereas Poland is a frontline state, whose massive and greater military build-up (in relation to population and GDP) does not go unnoticed in Washington (Gotkowska, 2026).

Potentials and Pitfalls

The new German Overall Concept for Military Defence offers both potentials and pitfalls regarding the development of Polish-German relations and their consequences for security in the Eastern Flank for the mid-term future.

On the positive side, the Poles have long lamented Germany's neglect of defence and appeasement concerning Russia. Berlin's announced military buildup and clear threat assessment add credibility to the "Zeitenwende" paradigm shift in German foreign and security policy and thus are conducive to better Polish-German relations. Furthermore, the planned increase in Bundeswehr personnel could directly bolster security at Poland's northern and eastern borders; German soldiers have been helping construct the East Shield border defences since April 2026 (Welt, 2025; Gaszewski, 2025) – if the Bundeswehr scales up its personnel, cooperation could extend from constructing the defences to manning them. Poland's expertise could in turn help Germany reach its troop targets, with the Polish Territorial Defence Force as a possible template for the Bundeswehr to both increase its numbers and reinforce its "Staatsbürger in Uniform" ("citizen in uniform") ideology by creating a large active-duty reserve from the midst of the German public.

On the other hand, the Concept could impede relations between Germany and its eastern neighbour for reasons more political in nature than strategic. As described above, Germany's stated ambition to be the prime US ally and the Pentagon's approval of this vision trigger anxieties of abandonment in the Polish political establishment, as demonstrated not least by Polish President Nawrocki's eagerness to host the 5,000 US troops that the White House wants to withdraw from Germany (Wirtualna Polska, 2026). These mutual ambitions could lead to a competition for the favour of the United States – a risky game, as the recent back-and-forth over a deployment of 4,000 US troops to Poland demonstrated (Wall Street Journal, 2026).

Instead of falling into the trap of competing for US favour, Germany and Poland should combine their forces to work on increasing European strategic autonomy. Berlin's new Military Strategy and Plan for the Armed

Forces demonstrate that it is increasingly aligned in its threat assessment and strategic culture with Warsaw. Poland, in turn, is on its way to becoming a more equal partner to Germany in economic terms, as its recent joining of the G20 demonstrates. Both countries seem to have noticed these new conditions and plan to sign a bilateral defence treaty in June this year (Onet, 2026). Now may be the time for a German-Polish Defence Duo to lead security on NATO's Eastern Flank.

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